Our true feelings about race and identity are revealed in six words. By Michele Norris, WP Columnist, Jan.14, 2024

I have always cringed when the accusations fly about someone allegedly “playing the race card.” It’s usually a proxy for “You’re making me uncomfortable, so please stop talking.” Or a diversionary tactic used to avoid having to speak about race with any kind of precision or specificity. A shorthand for “Just shut up.” And so, in 2010, I flipped the script, turning that accusatory phrase into a prompt to spark conversation. I printed 200 black postcards at my local FedEx Kinko’s on upper Wisconsin Avenue asking people to condense their thoughts on race or cultural identity into one sentence of six words. The front of the cards simply read: *Race. Your thoughts. 6 words. Please send.*

I left the cards everywhere I traveled: in bookstores, in restaurants, at the information kiosks in airports, on the writing desks at all my hotels. Sometimes I snuck them inside airline in-flight magazines or left them at the sugar station at Starbucks. I hoped a few of those postcards would come back, thinking it would be worth the trouble if even a dozen people responded.

Much to my surprise, strangers who stumbled on the cards would follow the instructions and use postage stamps to mail their six-word stories back to me in D.C. Since my parents were both postal workers, this gave me an extra thrill. Here I was, doing my part to support the Postal Service. Who says snail mail is dead? Half a dozen cards arrived within a week, then 12, then 20. Over time, that trickle became a tide. I have received more than 500,000 of these stories — and more arrive every day, though the vast majority of submissions now arrive through a website portal online. They have come from all 50 states and more than 100 countries.

Though limited to six words, the stories are often shocking in their candor and intimacy. They reveal fear, disappointment, regret and resentment. Some are kissed by grace or triumph. A surprising number arrive in the form of a question, which suggests that many people hunger not just for answers but for permission to speak their truths. It was amazing what people could pack into such a small package:

Reason I ended a sweet relationship
Too Black for Black men’s love
Urban living has made me racist
Took 21 years to be Latina
Was considered White until after 9/11
Gay, but at least I’m White
I’m only Asian when it’s convenient

To keep the conversation going, I created a complementary website for the Race Card Project, where people could submit their six-word stories online. Over time we added two words to the submission form: “Anything else?” That changed everything. People

sent in poems, essays, memos and historical documents to explain why they chose their six words. The archive came alive. It became an **international forum** where people could share their own stories but also learn much about life, as if it were lived by someone else.

In the beginning, most of the submissions were anonymous. With time, and much to my surprise, many contributors began signing their names, knowing their stories could be placed on a website for the world to see. They included their contact information and uploaded photos. They explained how they had found the project and offered context about their lives. And despite the alleged toxicity of the subject matter, the tone of most stories was **relaxed and intimate, written as if approaching an old friend**. Their courage and comfort seemed bolstered by knowing they were adding their voice to a great big chorus: Everyone was singing in their own octave, humming their own tune, speaking their own dialect — but doing it together. Sometimes harmonious. Often discordant. Silent no more.

The resulting unique archive provides a window into America's beating heart during a period bookended by the presidencies of Barack Obama and Donald Trump, and then punctuated by a global pandemic, a flash of protests after the police murder of George Floyd, the siege of the Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021, and the reversal of *Roe v. Wade* — certainly one of the most tumultuous eras in modern American history.

Yes, there is a lot of pain and anger and angst and anxiety reflected in the collection. But there is also humor and uplift and, for me, the satisfaction that comes with knowing that I have provided a space for people to share their truths. I've learned much from the stories people have shared and the way those stories are absorbed or interpreted. Readers often have diametrically different reactions or interpretations. Stories familiar to one person are foreign or offensive to someone else. The six words that elicit laughter in some quarters can bring someone else to tears.

It's a more powerful narrative thread than anything I've experienced in more than three decades in journalism. I am constantly awed by the honesty and the enthusiasm and, yes, even the grace contained in the responses. People who disagree nonetheless connect with one another on the website. They spar and argue, and their words are sometimes like poison darts. But they are engaging with one another — often across a chasm of some kind, colliding with another point of view. This is something that is increasingly rare at a time when most of us consume a media diet that affirms or confirms what we already believe.

Over the years, I have often dipped into the inbox to interview people who have shared their stories, and as we close our conversations, there's almost always a gush of relief, joy or profound thanks — even if the story or the memory they shared was steeped in pain or humiliation. People who share their stories feel seen and/or heard. They don't necessarily get validation or empathy or understanding. I have found that few are looking for that. What they want is an on-ramp to discuss topics that are often portrayed

as toxic or taboo. What they also get is an opportunity to learn about someone else's journey.

These stories are powerful in their simplicity. Even if you are offended, surprised, saddened or unmoved, you have glimpsed inside someone else's vulnerability. That is a potent thing. They also, taken together, reveal an obscure truth: People aren't running away from talking about race; a lot of them are desperate to discuss it — and through the prism of personal experience. This mountain of stories offers promise — and caution — about our ability to see eye to eye on race and identity. The chasm can seem wider when you can see the other side and still not find the will or the means to reach it.

It's hard to even say "post-racial" today without a smirk or an eye roll. But in the lead-up to the 2008 election of Obama, that word was everywhere. It was a prayer, a wish, an aspired-to state in which race no longer mattered and racial hierarchies were a thing of the past. It was a rhetorical paean asserting through gauzy language that we had arrived at new cultural terrain. If America, with its tortured history of slavery, internment camps, Native American genocide and institutionalized segregation, had sent a Black man to the White House through the popular vote, could it mean that this country had transcended race? Had we finally found the right ointment to heal our deepest national wound?

The answers now are obvious, and the questions in hindsight were ridiculously naive. Obama marked not the end of racial anxiety but rather the beginning of a thorny new chapter in American history, where the subject of race would be ever more complex. Race is still a tender bruise on our body politic, and if anything, the rise of a Black president and the tanning of America through rapid demographic shifts only intensified the throb. And then, the 2016 election of a president who reveled in division and was — and still is — embraced as a personal hero by even the most ardent white nationalists has further infected a wound that will not heal.

America is not alone in its fight to overcome differences in race and class and color. I have learned that people everywhere divide themselves over dialect, religion, geography, hair texture, access to water, class, caste and skin color. Always skin color and its light-to-dark gradations. People in every corner of the world, from sub-Saharan Africa to the northernmost Nordic countries, are hung up about hue.

The cards have served as invitations into worlds previously unavailable to me — or perhaps to any of us — because many people who submit their stories say they've never shared them with anyone before. Their stories are heartfelt and frank, and they underscore that while America might be far more integrated than it was half a century ago — certainly cause for celebration — our experiences around race and identity are nonetheless more complicated as a result. And they sparked hundreds of conversations that, little by little, help broaden people's understanding about difference and identity. After a White woman in Atlanta wrote, "Educated. Black strangers scare me still," visitors to the website chastised, applauded or even threatened her. But a few

invited her to visit one of several historically Black universities in the area to meet Black people who might chase away her notion that dark skin was inherently dangerous.

A man who tweeted “Purses are clutched when I approach” prompted responses from several women who admitted that they do exactly that. Some, upon reading about the assault on his dignity, pledged to think more about their implicit actions. After lecturing about the Race Card Project in Los Angeles, I was pulled aside by a nattily dressed Korean businessman, who leaned in close to confess that he hates the Asian gangs that occasionally show up on the nightly news in Southern California. He also confided that he secretly respects the young toughs. Deep down, he finds himself quietly rooting for hoodlums who look as if they could be distant members of his family. And, yes, he understands the paradox since he has stood before cameras next to city lawmakers to denounce those Asian gangs as a scourge on society. But here’s what he had never been able to say out loud: Those gang members represent an image of Asian manhood rarely seen in popular culture, where, to his mind, Korean, Chinese, Japanese and South Asian men are too often portrayed as smart — but soft.

When he shared his story, he shook his shoulders and his head in the way one does after downing a brisk drink. “God, that felt good,” he said. “I have been wanting to say that for years.” That whoosh of relief was later echoed by Celeste Green, née Brown, who was cruising through her timeline on Twitter as a young college student one Sunday afternoon in 2012 when she noticed a hashtag conversation around the Race Card Project. Impulsively, she typed, “We aren’t all strong black women.”

It was like throwing new kindling on the fire. The timeline lit up with responses from a diaspora of women and even a few men from Los Angeles to Boston and even as far away as Dublin.

“Isn’t Strong Black Woman a compliment?” “No! It’s strong like oxen. Less than human.” “Like saying it doesn’t matter how we treat them because they will survive.”

“Time to stop putting up walls and be vulnerable.” “Wasn’t the whole feminist movement about being strong? What gives?” “I feel like I’m forced to be strong.” “It makes me sound like a weed, not a flower.”

This work has been full of surprises for me. The narratives that have poured in forced me to reckon with my own assumption about who would participate. As a Black woman conducting an exercise about race, I thought the vast majority of participants would be people of color, and African Americans in particular. But in most of the 14 years that I’ve been doing this work, the majority of the six-word submissions have come from White Americans from all kinds of backgrounds — conservative, liberal, libertarian, left-field and a lot of people who traditionally feel left out of conversations about race. Their stories about the most personal of things — about marriage, renewal, fear, resentment, rejection, frustration, speaking with an accent or living with a memory that aches like a bad tooth — are what have given this project its power and momentum.

Trust me; I understand that a lot of people are sick and tired of conversations about race and identity. But to me, it seems as if America is worn out by a conversation that it has never fully had. The rush to the finish line is understandable. But the folly in that is obvious.

The idea of a “post-racial” America has now been thoroughly debunked. But the Race Card Project reveals one truth that is clearer than ever: If we want to understand how to build a society that celebrates difference — or at least doesn’t hold back individuals or communities because of it — we must interrogate the idea that people don’t want to talk about race or identity. America, after all, is a country that was founded on the principles of equality and freedom while bias and a racialized hierarchy were embedded in our customs, our social order and our laws. The collision of that irony and that reality has produced discord, discomfort and a disinclination to dive into the histories and complexities around race. If anything, this project has reminded me that the things that are not always articulated in public still loom large. When people talk about the “elephant in the room,” the idea is that an invisible beast is sitting silently in some corner. In matters of race, it’s more like that hulking creature is hungry and cranky and careening through the American landscape, uprooting lives and upending our pretensions that ignoring a poisonous problem will allow it to simply fade away.

t’s one thing to be American. The title officially applies to someone who was born in the United States or is a U.S. citizen. But to feel American? That is something entirely different. An awful lot of people who are officially citizens of this country — people who were born here or have the papers or have raised their right hand to take the Oath of Allegiance — don’t feel (and you can insert any number of descriptors here) American. They don’t feel truly American or authentically American or fully accepted as an American in some traditionally narrow sense.

We are a country where legions of people qualify as some kind of hyphenated American, a country of outsiders who made their way here and made a home here. But some of us have had an easier time claiming the demonym on the right side of that hyphen because over time it has come to essentially be the White side. Words carry weight. Perceptions create boundaries that can be almost impenetrable. People not seen as fully American are also presumed to be not fully loyal to America and its ideals — perpetual foreigners in their own country.

The past few years, I have become deeply grateful to have been raised by parents who taught me to love a country even as I disdained its history and discovered its flaws. My father, a veteran and a Black man, had a special relationship to the flag that was perplexing to me as a teenager in the 1970s. He wore clothing emblazoned with red, white and blue and placed little 12-inch flags in the ground between the rosebushes alongside our house around Independence Day. He wore flag pins with pride decades before they became a performative staple of blowhard Fox News pundits. He was born in Birmingham, Ala., and despite all he saw and experienced, he decided to love a country that did not love him back. My mother, someone who has always loved books, is a Black woman who is also patriotic in her own way, surrounding herself with

Americana and filling our house with books about American history — embodying the spirit of Langston Hughes and his poem that so beautifully asserts in its opening line, “I, too, sing America.” I now see that they were practicing a special kind of patriotism, to see America for what it is with all its noxious disappointments and still believe in what it can and should be.

This has come in handy over the past few years as I try to explain to my own kids why it is worth fighting for and defending and, yes, even embracing a country that will most certainly break your heart. Sometime last summer, I encountered a dude at a gas station driving a big, dark pickup truck that had an American flag the size of a large roof tarp flapping in the breeze from a pole hoisted behind the driver’s back window. It was a statement flag, huge and bright, trailing several feet behind him as he pulled into the bay of gas pumps. This was clearly a “This is my country” brand of patriotism. That was evident by the riot of MAGA bumper stickers emblazoned across his truck bed’s door and by the way he glared at other patrons at the station — as if daring them to say something about the rock music blaring from speakers turned on blast.

I generally give folks like this a whole lot of leeway. So often they seem girded for a confrontation, but as I walked by him headed toward the kiosk that housed the cashier behind glass, I gave him a thumbs up and said, “Right on. Go America.” I don’t even know why I did it. “Right on” is such retrograde, stuck-in-the-’70s slang. Who even says that anymore? And “Go America” is just not in my vernacular outside of rooting for Team USA at the Olympics. But in that moment, I wanted him to know that it’s my friggin’ flag, too. So yeah. “Go America!” I said it loud.

He was completely fatootsed. He whipped his head as if knocked back on his heels. Eyebrows up, as if he’d just seen a spaceship fall from the sky. That flag was supposed to be his, not mine to claim. That flag was supposed to serve a gatekeeping function separating him — no, make that elevating him, above and beyond people who didn’t meet his standards of what a true American is supposed to be.

Hughes dreamed of the day when no one would dare tell Black (and Brown) Americans to “eat in the kitchen.” He wrote elegantly of the imagined time when the majority culture would see how beautiful their Black and Brown brothers and sisters were and be ashamed of past bias. Sadly, that’s not the way things work in America. The growth and prosperity of the at-present-minority population can seem just as likely to spark fear and resentment from some White Americans as calls for atonement or apologies for past sins do.

Yet that flag and this country belong to all of us who are citizens of this land. The far right’s aggressive flag-waving is intended to make folks forget that fact. Getting people to concede their rightful claim to the centrality of what should be a collective symbol is a way to lessen the stakeholder status in the soil beneath our feet. Don’t fall for that. The flag is too powerful a symbol to concede. It carries our hopes and disappointments, our blood and our bounty, too. Our pain. Our plunder. Our promise. In her seminal book “The White Album,” Joan Didion said, “A place belongs forever to whoever claims it

hardest, remembers it most obsessively, wrenches it from itself, shapes it, renders it, loves it so radically that he remakes it in his image."

She was talking about California, of course, but I hear the song of America in those words. The song of a people who have refused to be broken by a country that kept them at the margins. The song of a people who lived in or swallowed anger and yet created a culture of joy that flaps like an unfurled flag, slapping against a twisted face of hate. The song of a people oppressed and overlooked who nonetheless created a sumptuous, crazy-sexy-cool culture in their dress, their music, dance, poetry, art, sports, street culture and food.

From barbecue to hip-hop. From Jay-Z to J-Lo. From Beyoncé to Barack and Michelle Obama. From the music that gets people moving on the dance floor at the big family wedding and gets fans fired up in the biggest sports arenas, regardless of location or the color of the crowd. From the players who mesmerize us on the field and on the court. From the clothing and slang that kids emulate and amplify in every corner of the United States, from Appalachia to Alaska. From the K-pop bands whose slick dance moves are clearly inspired by or lifted wholesale from Black street culture, to the long line of White British music superstars (Clapton, Jagger, Bowie, Winehouse, Winwood, Sheeran, Adele) who say their greatest inspiration came from Black blues or soul performers here in America.

It's fair to say that a whole lot of 13-year-olds across this vast planet dream of acquiring even a glimmer of that crazy-sexy-cool magic of a people who created a thundering, definitional culture from the margins of American society — that fresh swagger, that fly strut, that calm under pressure, that ability to shine like the sun on one's own terms. This is the delicious irony of 21st-century America. The rhythms and flavor of its core culture are now defined by the people this country tried to disregard. Black culture is one of America's greatest exports and certainly one of its most profitable.

The people at the margins of a country that did not see them as fully human rendered the culture of that country beautifully and powerfully in their own image. It is just one of many reasons Black people should claim America's symbols for themselves. It's why any ethnic group that has come to this country should do the same, because they all have added something of their rhythms, flavors and traditions to our cultural gumbo.

America is a freight train of a word — a locomotive with many cars and many degrees of class, comfort and service. But all on board, whether they are in first class or steerage, whether stoking coal or secretly scrambling inside a boxcar like a stowaway, are nonetheless fellow travelers. America is yours. Its flags. Its anthems. Its tragedies. Its flaws. Its confounding complexities. The "me" in America includes us, and if we critique or complain, it does not invalidate our deed. As long as we are here, it is ours to claim — and, yes, sometimes to cry over. America has made commendable and incredible progress in matters of race. I never take that for granted, but continued progress will require collective and constant toil. What constitutes progress will not be universally embraced, and there will likely be backsliding and backlash. The endeavor will be

complicated and exhausting, and it is worth every single bit of effort. That should be the message we pass on to the next generation, rather than constantly telling young folks to go forth and magically fix the fractured world we've left behind.

I am not suggesting that we weigh down our young people with worries or throw psychological speed bumps in their path. If you want your young ones to soar, you don't put rocks in their pockets. But a few pearls of wisdom about the complicated road that awaits them might keep them both grounded and girded for the journey ahead. Americans are always messaging that the next generation is going to lead us to some kind of racial nirvana. The idea is that because young people have inherited a more integrated world where they date across color lines, play sports together, listen to each other's music and live more cross-pollinated lives, the path to fixing our racial brokenness will somehow be guaranteed.

However, more than a dozen years of listening to people unburden themselves about race has left me with a clearer sense of the burden passed on to the next generation. The idea that the young people of today will collectively produce a magical balm that heals the nation is flawed. It will not be easy for successive generations to shed all the sticky, icky, coded, embedded, underlying racialized gunk they've inherited from us. We adults should know that, because we are still choking on the racialized smog that has hung in the air since we ourselves were kids.

All this time doing a deep dive into a subject I thought no one wanted to talk about has not necessarily made me a pessimist, but I am more pragmatic now. I spent the first five decades of my life firmly believing that America was automatically destined to become a better, fairer, more egalitarian version of herself. Let me be clear. I still think that is possible. I pray fervently for that outcome. I believe in a better America. But I have removed a key adverb in that sentence. It won't happen automatically. As former attorney general Eric Holder likes to say, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice … only if we reach out and grab it." He's right in amending that famous quote from the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. with an additional eight words. Every successive generation needs to put in the effort to make sure the arc does not twist or torque in another, more menacing direction — a change in trajectory that, it must be said, would suit a certain sector of society just fine.

Instead of telling young people that racism is something that can be fixed or easily eradicated on their watch, perhaps we should be sending a different message. It is quite possible that some form of racism and bias will always be with us, that bias doesn't go away but instead mutates, much like the covid-19 virus that upended all our lives. It is quite likely that racism, bias and prejudice will continue to present in different ways and different forms, on different platforms and with changing targets. With hard work and consistent vigilance, those forces will hopefully be less venomous over time. Maybe less common. Perhaps less consequential. More of a breeze than an upending hurricane. But believing that those forces will altogether disappear over some distant cliff is a bit like believing that the world is flat.

So, what are my six words on race? People naturally ask me that question all the time. When I began this project in 2010, the first thing that spilled onto the page was “Fooled them all. Not done yet.” I’m a brown girl who grew up in Minnesota with a speech impediment as a very young child. A life working as a communicator in the highest perches of journalism was not something that was imagined for me. It’s not that the initial six words no longer apply. Those two short sentences will always describe the arc of my life. But this journey has altered my answer to that question. What six words on race would I offer up today? “Still more work to be done”. END