

Finding Love in a Time of Hate

February 12, 2021

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Presentation for the Relational-Cultural Theory Collective

What an honor it is to be able to talk with all of you today. Like many of you, Relational-Cultural Theory has been at the center of my personal and professional world for many years. I have been a student and practitioner of RCT for over 30 years now. My inclination for my talk today is to present an academic paper, as I always feel compelled to formally give back to RCT and those in this universe as often as I can, with the best quality I can muster. But the thing about RCT is that it was developed and grows on the experience of individuals, groups and communities. And RCT has always been creative in its approach, and open to the styles and varieties of methods in which the work can move forward, both in and out of the traditional academic confines. RCT also, to me, comes with the safety and freedom to do something “different”. It also comes with the responsibility to name one’s experiences, including and especially those related to race and culture, and to try to understand them in the context of the complexity of relationship.

To place culture, alongside connection, at the center of the theory is to break a critical silence... it acknowledges that social and political values inform theories of human psychology, including those that valorize separation and autonomy.

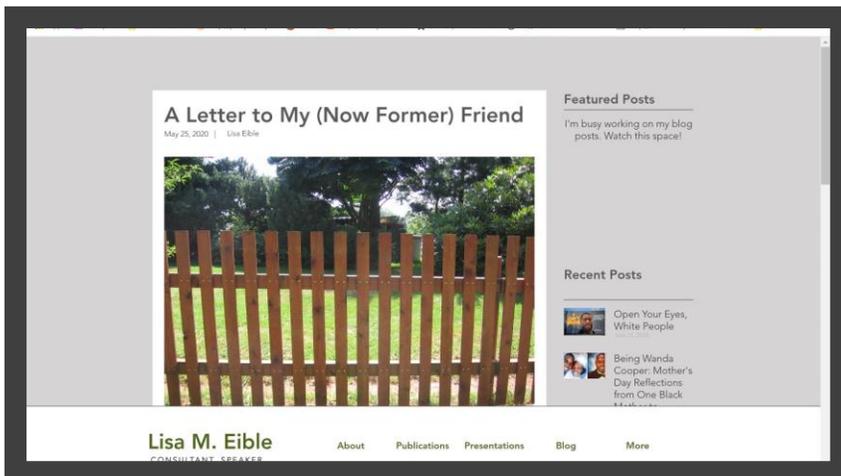
Relational-Cultural Theory does not pretend to be value neutral..... Placing culture at the center of the model, RCT strives to make visible the multi-layered connections that belie the myth of separation

(Miller & Stiver, 1997).

The past five years have been a challenge for all of us RCT folks, because the political is indeed personal, and we have seen affronts on everything we stand for and believe. As the Trump infection spread, it was no longer about our collective good. We learned that Trump was representative of underlying issues which had been festering for some for years. While our family and friends were over the moon about Obama’s presidency, there were many white Americans who, as Ijeoma Oluo writes in “So You Wanna Talk About Race” saw the rise of a person of color as evidence that whites have lost power and status.

During the Trump years, things that we thought were standards and norms were wiped away with a dangerous pen and a foul mouth. The checks and balances we learned in our social studies classes proved non-existent and we all questioned if in fact anything we had learned about democracy was true. While we hopefully are turning a corner, I am not healed from what has happened, and there is daily evidence that all is not well.

During the past few years, like many of you, we began the splintering off of contacts and relationships with many we knew. This photo is a blog post I published last year after I saw a political sign on the lawn of friends of my son, and the feelings of betrayal I experienced.



“Trump supporter” became code for racist to us and we ineptly managed our lives and those of our kids in this strange new world where there were new definitions of who and what was safe that had not previously existed.

Today, I am going to share a chapter in my personal story. Like most, family is the center of one’s world and what hurts one in the family, hurts all. We work together, we laugh together, we suffer together, we struggle together. And we create a set of values together, shaped from who we are and where we came from, and influenced by current context and the maturity of family members.

The story I will share today is about this summer and fall in our home, our family and our community. It is a story of finding love when you look for it, and it is a story of acting in love, even when hate abounds. It is also a story of love prevailing, despite exhaustion, heartache and ongoing race-related micro and macroaggressions.

My story begins my family of origin. While I am white, and my biological connections are white, my family of origin was mixed race with the adoption of my brother from South Korea. There were many things about my

family of origin that made us different from the community around us, one of which was the way we looked. Having a different story from other families set the stage for my career in social work and in my personal life.



This is my husband. As you can probably tell, he is African American. I married Sidney when I was almost 35, so I had waited a long time to find him. Many people ask if there were any “issues” when we married due to our racial differences. To this day, 20 years later, I am not aware of any issues, only the joy that we felt and that others shared with us. I am not naive, nor am I saying that race has not come up in our families over the years. I am only saying that love was at the center of our wedding day and of our lives together.

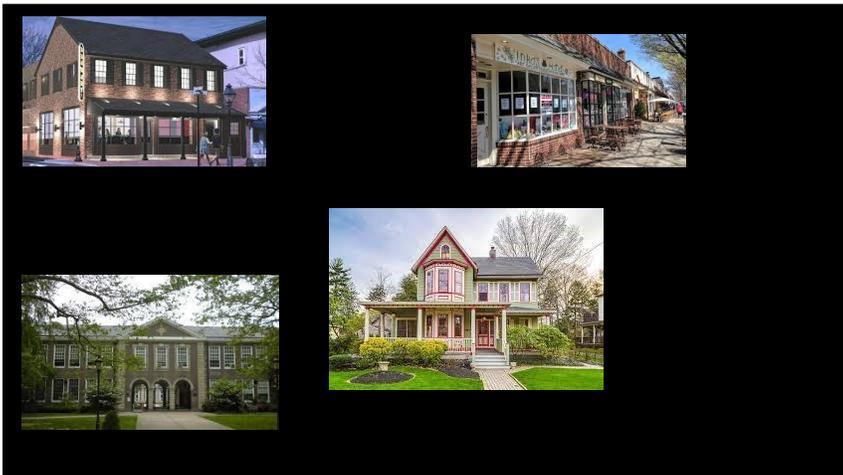
I adore this man. He is the smartest person I know and has been generous beyond measure. He has so many talents and he is an outstanding partner. He has given me two unbelievably amazing children.



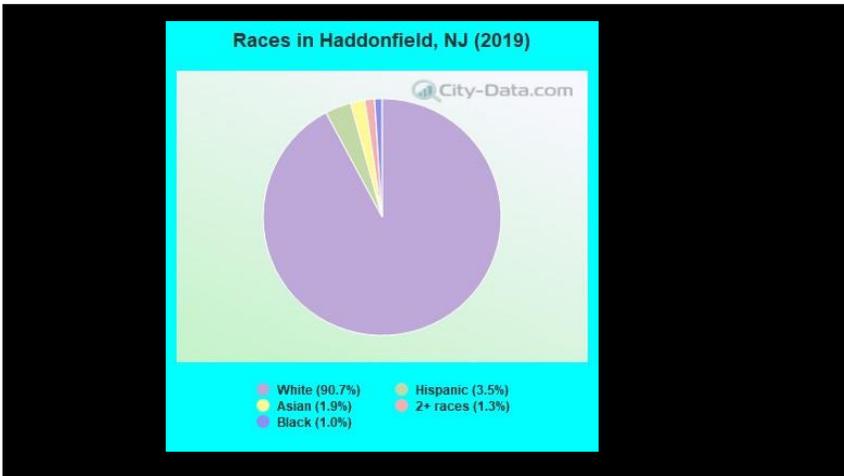
And he has taught me so much about race, and relationship, and finding love, always. But over the past five years, more than once, I have come down the stairs in the morning to find him on the couch, sobbing because

of another murder of black individuals by white police. This is what our family and other families of color wake up to: what happened yesterday and how will I survive today.

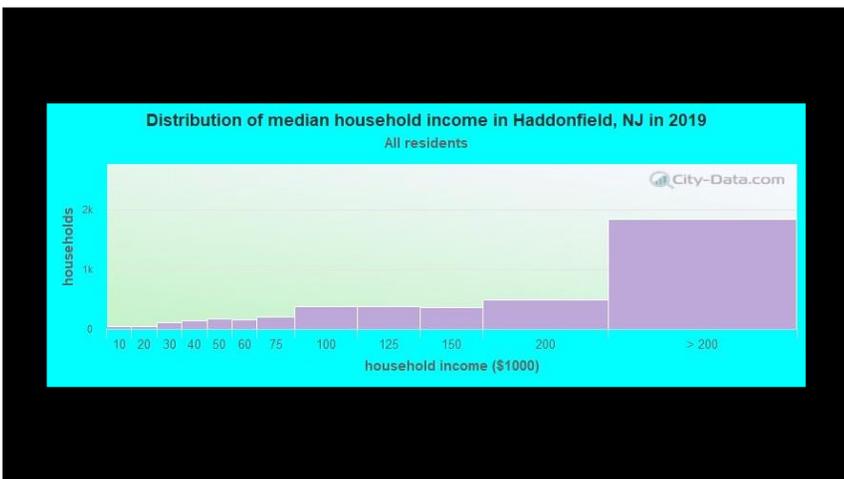
We live in Haddonfield, NJ, outside of Philadelphia. It is a historic town, beautiful year-round, full of old houses and historic buildings, and an awesome downtown full of coffee shops, great shopping and a brewery.



Most people live here because of the beauty and manageability of the town, in addition to outstanding public schools. That is the reason we landed here. In many ways, it is the ideal way to live, the kids walk to school, can go downtown by themselves, and generally is a community where neighbors still know and come together to support families in illness or death. For the first 8 years we lived here, our experience was largely that of families coming together to support their kids, cheer on kids in theater, sports or other endeavors, and supporting families in tragic losses.



You can see from the statistics, that Haddonfield is not representative of the racial makeup, income



or house value of the rest of the nation. And this is where our story gets complicated.

The tragic murders of African Americans and the subsequent protests and momentum of the Black Lives Matter movement were a significant part of our family life and conversations over the past year. When your family is black and you live in an all-White town, these conversations and actions take on a complexity that may not occur in another setting.

The Black Lives Matter movement changed so much in our world. It further defined who were safe people for our family and who were not, it provided a language and understanding around institutional racism that had previously only been discussed publicly in progressive circles. The refusal to back down, despite the pandemic, and the alliance with many white allies was something that we had not personally witnessed before, although of course we are familiar with so many stories of civil rights over the course of our lifetime. We also had not had teenagers, which no matter the topic, changes everything. The voice and the power of

youth in organizing, speaking, thinking, planning and naming has changed so many conversations. Never in my wildest dreams did I ever think the conversations related to race and policing could pivot to policy and funding discussions. Civil rights have had many movements and iterations and for me and my family, this one felt as significant as those we had read about in history books.

This summer, even in Haddonfield, there were Black Lives Matter events.



One such event was organized by local and regional students and was well -attended and led a march through town but ended at the high school.





At this event, like so many across the nation, local students of color told their stories, read their poems, sang, and were, for a moment at least, had their pain held by those who were standing with and beside them.



To watch and witness as a family and to see one's children figuring out their place in all of it is a journey indeed.



How I wish these powerful events were the poignant end to the story. But there was more to come.

In our town, the high school has a series of events each year to generate class spirit. In short, each class in the high school participates in a series of events or competition, culminating in “winners” for each of the events. Like many things this year, COVID impacted the usual events. However, one event, a competition to raise funds for a non-profit organization, remained in place in the fall. The process for selecting an organization is that the student government leaders narrow down options, and then the options are put out to the rest of the class for a vote. The junior class in the high school selected Black Lives Matter – Philly as their organization of choice.



The backlash from some was quick and fierce. Falsehoods about the organization being a political one, lies about the use of BLM funds, and broad-brush strokes regarding the intersection with policing swirled. Some parents revolted and refused to allow their kids to participate in other spirit week activities, believing that it was connected to the fundraiser. The junior class faculty advisor was inundated with calls and emails from angry parents and threats of lawsuits and other action. The student leaders involved received harassment from students and parents and the larger community.

Due to the groundswell, the decision was made by the faculty advisor to add another organization as a second option, to appease the populous. This decision was met with a roar from those who supported the student's initial choice. The school administration and school board became involved and indicated their support for the organization choice of the students and the decision was made to have BLM be the single organization for the junior class fundraising. Local and regional media picked up the story and there were letters to the editor in the local paper. The class was highly successful in the fundraising .

That is the objective story of what occurred. However, behind the story is so much more, and the tale includes darkness and light.



My daughter was involved with all of this drama, as she is a student government leader. But she is also a person of color in a school and in a town where there are not many people of color. She is also a junior and a member of the class at the center of the controversy. She does not yet realize that she is also part of the reason that the class selected BLM as their organization.

Every parent thinks their kids are awesome, of course. But this girl is something special. Black girl magic for sure. She is deep and intuitive and sensitive and secure and confident and insecure and fragile.



Watching your child be at the center of a town-wide issue like this was complicated. Proud of her, of course, but also so very scared for her spirit, as we know how much these issues can take out of a person.

What people outside families of color may not realize are all the ways you have to hold your kids up, talk and keep talking, listen and keep listening and remind them of all the ways they have power.

POWER

"My own working definition of power is the capacity to produce a change...."

This can include even moving one's own thoughts or emotions, sometimes a very powerful act.

It also can include acting to create movement in an interpersonal field as well as acting in larger realms such as economic, social, or political arenas."

(Jean Baker Miller, 1982)

I always think of Jean Baker Miller's definition of power: the capacity to produce change. Those of us in RCT are familiar with thinking about power dynamics and the important differences of power over vs. power with. Racial equity issues are perhaps one of the most important instances of being aware one's power, and white Americans are particularly challenged to understand what power with means in this context. I always note, as you will note here, that Jean's defining of power went on to include the responsibility of power in economic, social, and political arenas.

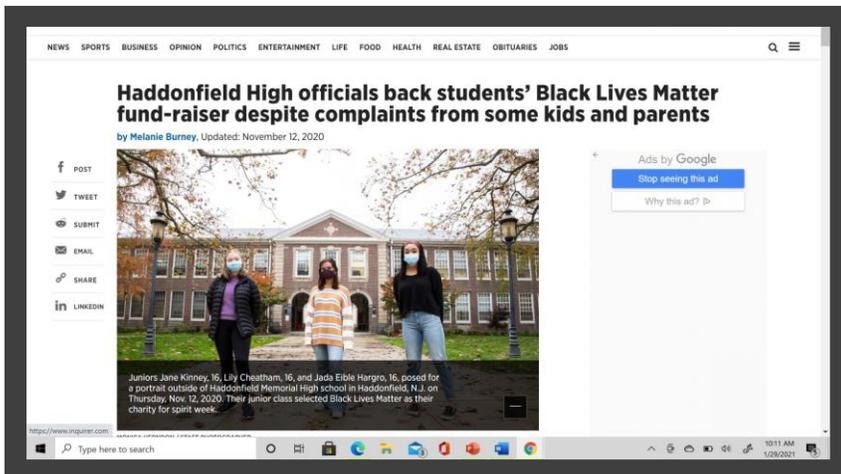
So, in knowing what was occurring, and knowing that those at the center of this race-related drama in our community, my family was challenged to determine what power we had, as well as determining how to use it. Further complicating things is that I am white, with its privileges and responsibilities, including the responsibility to listen carefully and take action to impact system change.

When the backlash to the BLM fundraiser was unfolding, I reached out to the junior class advisor and indicated availability for support and action, if desired. She called me immediately and described what she was facing; the nastiness of some of the parents who were contacting her by phone and email, many times in a threatening manner; a spirit week that was full of drama, discussions with school administration and with other parents; and the expectation that she appear at an upcoming school board meeting. She also took responsibility for the decision to add a second organization, not realizing the offense that would be caused by doing so, but remaining open to feedback and now understanding the pain that was inadvertently caused by such a decision. I listened carefully and reiterated my support and willingness to help.

I then contacted one of my friends who is on the school board.



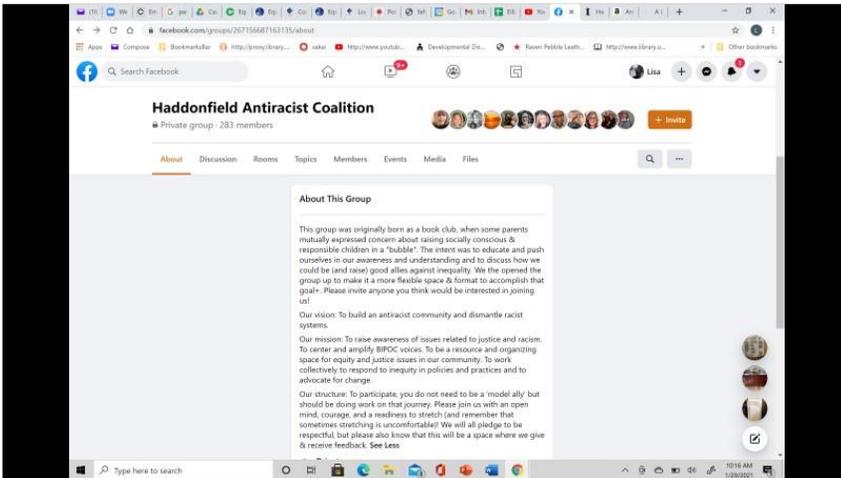
My school board friend was willing to take action in leading a conversation with the board prior to the meeting and a plan was developed for the board to provide a statement of support when the junior class advisor presented her update at the next meeting.



As the school board meetings are actively covered by local and regional media, I knew it was a matter of time before all of this would be in the papers. This photo and article was in the Philadelphia Inquirer. I reached out to a few pockets of students who I knew and we drafted letters in support of the Black Lives Matter choice, and the students collected signatures from their peers. I helped them submit their letters to the local paper, and they were published together; one from students of color in Haddonfield, one from the senior class, one from the peer bias group at the high school, and one from the junior class. Each of the letters was eloquent and spoke to their desire to make a social justice impact.



And my family and I outreached to donors and those who we thought would be interested in the fundraising effort. We drafted summaries and documents for their review. We were able to leverage my husband's volunteer work on a foundation board to a significant donation.



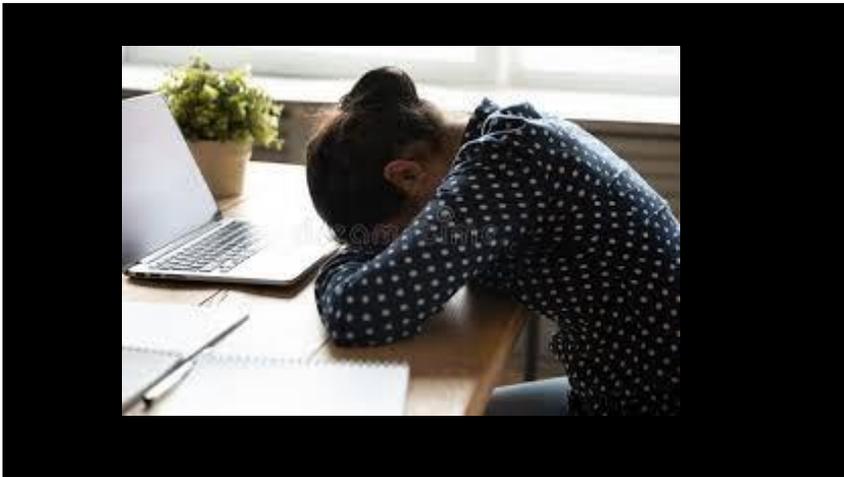
And all along, a Facebook group, the Haddonfield Anti-racism group, which had been hobbling along, exploded with new membership and involved and eloquent members. I made new friends and spoke to many people I never have met and may never meet. And members of this group ran around town picking up checks, wrote additional letters to the editor, and stood firm that power would be claimed differently this round.



Of course, there is hate in this story too.

Those in the community who told or propagated blatant lies, who indicated that the students involved must have been “brainwashed” and worst of all, those who indicated that they believe in social justice, but just not the BLM kind. You know the types I’m talking about. We have seen the same cast playing out on the national stage for the past five years, and we know that they range from the blatantly racist to those who really believe that they are not racist but remain unaware of the intersection between their position and structural racism.

This is not a story of my actions or the actions of my family. It is a story of the complicated web of race-related work. It is the story of using the power you have in alignment with those who are tired. It is also the story of despair; of running out of steam and of just wanting it all to go away.



But along the way, there were pieces of magic, always appearing when you looked for them, appearing when your spirit was defeated. Lawn signs that provided reassurance,



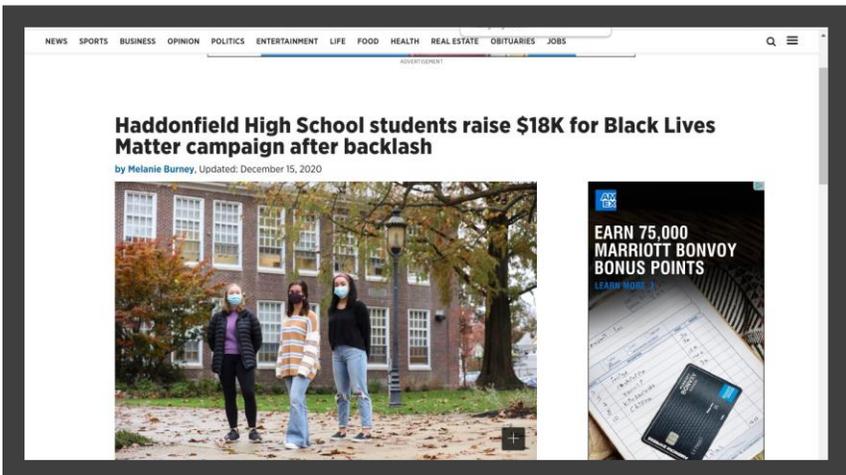
Black students reaching out for help with their college essays, beer deliveries from the in town microbrewery appearing at our door,



and on Christmas eve, a surprise visit and bottle of wine from the beautiful Chung family, who could not have known all we were going through but whose generosity touched us so deeply.



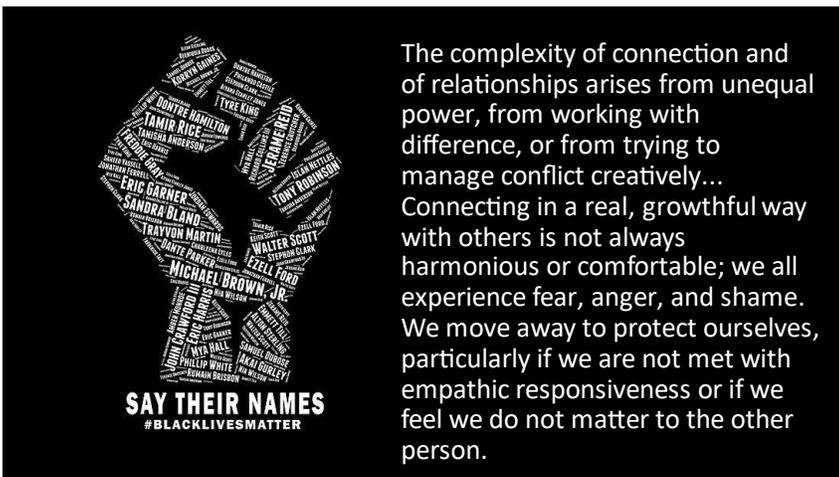
But also, and perhaps most importantly, the community social justice action led by these students made a profound statement.



The fundraiser was the most successful in school history, and donations poured in from around the region and across the nation. These students know their power and perhaps they have learned that there is an invisible net of strong arms holding them up when they are weary.

Before I conclude, I want to bring all of this back to our beloved Relational-Cultural theory.

One of the many ways in which I have fallen in love with RCT is the manner in which culture is firmly centered in the approach. Understanding the impact of culture, the issues of privilege and power and the manner in which these realities become stratified are at the heart of RCT. Further, understanding the complexities and the role of empathy in true relational growth across race and culture are not glossed over lightly – the complexity is named, and a framework is offered for trying to figure it all out.



So, finally, I offer you the encouragement to think about your power in this work. Standing on the sidelines is not an option. When we are overwhelmed by darkness, we might just look more deeply. There just might be little pieces of magic happening in the midst of chaos which can hold light when we have stumbled.

“It is the responsibility, yet the individual choice, of each of us to use the light we have to dispel the work of darkness, because if we do not, the power of falsehood rises. Through our inaction it becomes stronger, and a more potent force. It can even lead to the dimming of the light of all humanity born on this planet. That is why we struggle. That is why we fight to contribute to the confirmation of what is good, to seal our compact with love within our own lives and within our world.”
— **John Lewis, Across That Bridge: A Vision for Change and the Future of America**