I can’t tell you precisely when the quest began, but I can share a moment when the first of a great many veils of blindness and ignorance fell from my vision, illuminating the first small slivers of insight.

It was in the basement of a college dorm in Virginia. I was working as a group leader for an organization called Operating Understanding DC—more often known by its acronym, OUDC—and we were 3 days into a month-long bus journey across the United States. Our travels would take us through some of the most important sites in the history of America’s civil rights struggle: Birmingham and Montgomery, Alabama; Little Rock, Arkansas; and Philadelphia, Mississippi. OUDC brought together a group of 30 teens from the greater Washington, DC, area; half of them were Jewish, half of them were Black, and one or two were both. Together, we would encounter these historic sites and meet some of the courageous individuals who made these towns so significant. As a group, we would engage in an intense, honest, searching dialogue about race and social change that would unfold in an essentially unbroken stream for the entire 30 days.

We were just a couple days into the trip and still early in the process of evolving our group dynamic. The program this evening was a “fishbowl” activity that would be led by OUDC’s remarkable founder, an endlessly colorful and energetic woman named Karen Kalish. She was Jewish, with a soul that burned for racial equality and social justice. It was thanks to her that we were all gathered that evening in the basement lounge of a college dorm in Virginia.
For this fishbowl activity, a group of six Black participants (three young men and three young women) were seated in an inner circle, with the rest of the group arranged in a larger circle surrounding them. Those of us in the outer circle were told to just listen; all the talking would be done by the six Black teens in the inner circle, who were invited to discuss their experiences growing up Black in Washington, DC.

The conversation began with a tone that was light and casual, but it didn’t stay that way for long. In just a few minutes, the conversation entered terrain that I have since come to recognize as a space of sacred truth: a place where one can feel—in one’s innermost heart—that truth is being spoken and that defenses are being lowered as people risk levels of honesty and vulnerability that are almost never revealed in day-to-day life. In that space, real tears began to flow, along with the sort of utterly genuine laughter and joy that emerges spontaneously in moments of authentic human connection. I had explored race in an intellectual way many, many times in the past via books, documentaries, and discussions with others who shared my own background. But it was in this space that I first had a significant, genuine, fully human experience with the “other” and had a flesh-and-blood encounter with all the bitter, painful, difficult truths and all the awe-inspiring resilience and spiritual strength that animated the inner lives of this group of young Black Americans.

The young people told stories of walking into stores and being stopped by store employees who suspected them of shoplifting. There was no ignoring the fact that if they walked into the store with White friends, the White friends were never stopped and questioned. They had stories of being pulled over while driving, even though they were certain they were going no faster than the speed limit to avoid exactly this outcome. They talked about struggling to get the sort of entry-level jobs in retail or restaurants that White friends seemed to land with minimal effort. They shared stories of parents struggling to pay the rent and of how the adults in their lives so often found their
opportunities limited and constrained in a thousand small but significant ways.

In time, the deeper complexities of their experiences began to surface. A light-skinned Black girl noted that she was rarely stopped by store employees, even when she was with darker-skinned Black friends who were stopped. Part of her felt lucky to be able to “pass”—to move through the world enjoying the privileges that come with people simply assuming that she was trustworthy. But that privilege and relative ease of movement came with some heavy baggage. She struggled with guilt every time her darker-skinned friends had to endure some injustice that she had been spared, and she had to deal with Black friends regularly making comments suggesting that she wasn’t “really” Black. To be light-skinned, I learned, was a blessing and a curse in the life of young woman of color.

The fishbowl lasted for at least 2 hours, and as I listened, a whole world of complexity, pain, resilience, and emotional truth about the lived experience of young people of color in America was revealed to me for the first time. And what I remember most about night was the thought that kept running through my head again and again as the discussion unfolded: I had no idea.

I had no idea how frequently people of color encountered discrimination and barriers to opportunity in their lives. I had no idea how much pain these incidents caused. I had no idea that differences in skin color created such social complexities in the lives of kids of color. I had no idea how much strength and wisdom and humor was required to stay healthy and resilient in the face of these relentless challenges. I had no idea how any of this felt, or how any of this worked, or what any of this demanded of these kids, because I had never really had to worry about any of it. I had no idea.

And I was the group leader.

I felt—and I still feel—that I was hired with good reason. Similar to Karen Kalish, I was a Jew with a burning passion for social justice and a deep desire to promote racial equality. I was appalled by America’s history of slavery and viewed leading figures of the civil
rights movement such as Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King Jr. as personal heroes. I had worked extensively with communities of color while participating in a year-long service program in Israel, and later I managed young adults engaged in similar service as a group leader. I even had a remarkable job that allowed me to spend 4 months traveling around America with an Ethiopian Israeli colleague and friend; together, we gave speeches and raised money to support the Ethiopian community in Israel. On my résumé, at least, I was no stranger to matters of race. At the age of 27, I could honestly claim years of involvement in service, youth development, and social justice education. Karen Kalish had every reason to hire me for that job. And yet still: I had no idea.

That night, my hunger to learn more was piqued, and the weeks that followed provided a treasure trove of opportunities for learning, dialogue, and understanding. We had amazing experiences, such as meeting the mother of civil rights worker Andrew Goodman, one of the three young organizers who was killed in 1968 while advocating for voting rights for people of color in Philadelphia, Mississippi. That night, we stayed overnight in the homes of Black residents of Philadelphia who had agreed to host our group. Our host offered to take us on a tour of how it all happened, so we got into his car in the pitch-black Mississippi night and he drove us around: Here was the jail where the three young men were being held, and where they were pulled out of their cell by a White mob; here was spot where they were pulled from the car, beaten, and killed; here was the spot where their bodies were buried. Driving through the thick woods on the darkened back roads of rural Mississippi, it was impossible to not feel a small dose of the terror those three young men must have felt that night, and I was left struggling mightily with the question of how a group of ordinary White people with jobs and families could transform into that kind of rageful, hateful, murderous mob.

While on the bus, we watched Spike Lee’s powerful documentary *Four Little Girls* about the four Black girls killed in the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. The movie
ended just as the bus pulled to a stop . . . in the parking lot of the 16th Street Baptist Church. We walked inside and immediately participated in a panel discussion with community members, including a parent of one of the little girls. Days later we walked across the Edmund Pettis Bridge in Selma, Alabama, Blacks and Jews holding hands, singing “We Shall Overcome.”

It was a remarkable, month-long, encounter with something I can only call the civic sacred. Every day, we met seemingly ordinary men and women who had summoned levels of courage, creativity, and commitment that literally transformed a nation and inspired the world. In confronting some of America’s darkest shadows of hate and intolerance, they had elevated everyday civic spaces—bridges, buses, roads, coffee counters—into sites that properly can be called sacred. Despite—actually because of—all the emotional complexity evoked by confronting this history, it was a wonder to encounter it all and a blessing to experience it as a member of this diverse group of young people.

The conversations begun that night with the fishbowl continued all month long as together we processed each day’s experiences and learned more and more about how we all saw and experienced the world. Despite all my interest in these matters over the years, I realized that I had reached the age of 27 without ever having had the chance to have these kinds of deep, authentic discussions about race with people of color. I remember feeling waves of gratitude at finally having the chance to explore all this with people who didn’t look just like me. It was a peak life experience, and to this day I remain amazed at how rare it is to encounter these spaces of authentic connection and deep dialogue about race with “the other” and how essential they are to achieving a genuine understanding of what is true about race and social change in American civic life today.

I have said that my OUDC experience was not the moment the quest began; I had been passionate about matters of race and social change for years before that remarkable experience. But it was beyond a doubt a pivotal moment in my journey. It was the time
when I saw clearly just how blind I was to how race and social change actually worked. And it was the experience that crystallized the questions that would burn in my soul and animate much of the next decade of my life:

How does this whole thing work? What’s really true about race and social change in America?

Just a few months after completing OUDC, I started graduate school at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Harvard was a remarkable experience. I took classes with titles such as “Education for Social Change,” “Promoting Morality in Children and Adolescents,” “Exercising Leadership, Mobilizing Group Resources,” and “Moral Development.” I was immersed in topics I yearned to learn more about and was privileged to explore it all as part of an extremely diverse student body. Harvard is surely an elite institution, and I have no doubt that a great many students and professors could make compelling arguments about all the ways the school does not adequately confront the realities of issues such as race, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, and more. All I can say is that in my experience, I was pushed, challenged, and transformed by encounters with diverse peers on a nearly daily basis. My studies were so engaging that I knew almost instantly that a one-year master’s program would not be enough; I applied to the doctoral program in human development and psychology and was thrilled when I heard the news that I had been accepted. I now had at least five more years to seek answers to the questions at the heart of my quest.

In those first years of my doctoral studies, the learning was intense and exciting. The professors were experts in their fields, and I was surrounded by hard-working, passionate, inspiring peers eager to dive into debate and dialogue. Despite all I was learning, though, something felt incomplete. In hindsight I realize that I felt a lot like the blind men in the well-known parable of the elephant, although I wasn’t really conscious of the metaphor at the moment.

In that story, one individual touches the animal’s leg and declares that the elephant is like a pillar, another touches the ear and
declares the animal to be like a hand fan, another touches the tail and declares the animal to be like a rope. The blind men descend into a bitter argument about who is right, until a wise man appears and illuminates the truth: They are all correct, but they have all encountered different, limited aspects of what it is in fact a cohesive, larger truth.

So it was with my studies of race and social change. I listened to professors and peers share different insights and perspectives every day, and I realized quickly that it made no sense to assert that their experience was “wrong”; it was their experience, as true to them as my own experience was to myself. But how did all these perspectives on truth fit together?

I knew from personal experience that when it came to matters of race and social change, as a White male I arrived at adulthood blind to how things worked in profound and surprising ways, despite my good intentions and passion for these issues. I knew from many meaningful encounters with people of color that for them, blindness to race was impossible. Race was something they could never escape; they confronted discrimination and felt their “otherness” on a near daily basis. Every day brought a new lesson in the complexity of how race and social change was experienced; Asians, Latinos, Blacks, LGBTQ students, students of mixed ethnicity, as well as atheists and students deeply committed to their faiths all had distinctive stories to share.

I quickly learned that trying to absorb more about any of these issues inevitably opened up entirely new frontiers of complexity. Consider, for example, the effort to gain a deeper understanding of the Asian experience of race and social change in America. It didn’t take long to encounter that there is no single monolithic “Asian” experience; individuals from Japan, China, Vietnam, Cambodia, and other Asian nations have their own identities, their own histories, and their own truths to share. The same goes for Latinos and Blacks; to inquire more deeply into any of these groups is to encounter a vast landscape of subgroups, each with their own
experiences, histories, and traditions. It soon became obvious that it was quite simply impossible to truly understand all of this complexity; the full diversity of humanity is too vast for any one person to grasp. But I could certainly learn to expect that complexity and resist the tendency to think and talk about individuals as representing monolithic groups that have never really existed.

In addition, when I turned my attention from listening to personal narratives to examining the broad sweep of history, a whole new set of questions appeared. Day after day, I heard stories of discrimination and oppression met with resistance, resilience, and a deep commitment to working to create positive change. And it was clear that positive change could and did happen, in dramatic and sudden ways. After decades of Jim Crow segregation in the United States, a powerful civic rights movement emerged and in a few short years created transformational change in America. Similar stories could be found in other nations, such as the movements for Indian independence from Britain and the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa, both of which unfolded in a similar fashion: Decades of grinding oppression and stagnation followed by the rapid coalescing of movements that created transformational change in a relative blink of an eye. How did that happen? What is the connection between myriad experiences of individuals in the system and these large-scale patterns of sudden change? And how should we understand the next stage of the work to be done in these systems after those sudden, dramatic waves of transformation? Once the lunch counters have been desegregated, the lynchings declared illegal, the separate water fountains dismantled, the right to vote secured . . . what’s next?

With each passing semester, I kept encountering powerful truths about something enormous, whole, and interconnected, but no matter how much I learned or how hard I tried, I couldn’t see the full picture. There had to be a way that everything I had every learned about race and social change fit together, but I couldn’t see it, and I had no idea how to figure it out.
That all changed in summer 2002, when I encountered an activity that would alter the course of my doctoral studies and my life in ways I could hardly imagine. I was in my second year of doctoral studies and I was conducting research exploring the theory and practice of youth leadership. I had identified several programs that focused on youth leadership education and was engaged in field research to better understand how those programs conceptualized the work of youth leadership and what tools and methods they used to teach it. At that time I visited a program called Camp Anytown, run by an organization called the National Conference for Community and Justice (NCCJ). There, I encountered the exercise that is at the heart of this book.

As explained in the introduction, Camp Anytown is a week-long youth leadership experience that focuses on teaching young people about diversity and social justice. It occurs in multiple states across the country each year, and each program brings together an extremely diverse group of 30 to 50 high school students for 5 days of intense residential programming. Over the course of the week, participants engage in deep conversations about “isms” such as racism, sexism, ageism, and more in activities and sessions led by experienced educators.

Although the whole program is powerful, it was an activity often run on the last day that stopped me in my tracks, transformed the focus of my academic studies, and led ultimately to this book. Here’s what I encountered:

It was Friday morning, and the day began—as had every other day—with participants gathering in a circle outside the dining hall before breakfast. Usually, the circle involved a brief check-in to see how everyone was feeling, a few cheers to get everyone’s energy flowing and then some announcements about the day’s agenda before the group moved into the dining hall for some breakfast.

This morning, though, something different happened. Instead of announcements, the program staff members instructed participants to separate into groups: Whites, Asians, Jews, LGBTQ, Latinos,
Blacks. This arrangement was not meant to merely put individuals into similar groups, separated from others who are not like them; it was also very intentionally a hierarchical system in which the White group was granted considerable privilege and opportunity, and each group lower on the hierarchy encountered fewer opportunities and greater discrimination. Within moments, the unified circle was transformed into a cluster of small groups representing a segregated, hierarchical, and deeply unjust system with a social architecture that looked like this:

![Social Hierarchy Diagram](image)

To everyone’s surprise, the staff members then handed out a set of arm bands to each group, each with a different symbol clearly identifying every individual as a member of a particular group. The staff members then issued a chilling set of commands:

*You must stay with your group. You are not to talk to members of other groups. You are not to make eye contact with members of other groups.*

Then, the staff members explained that it was time for breakfast. The White group was invited into the dining hall first, and they were allowed to eat whatever they wanted, go back for seconds, and sit comfortably at a large table at the front of the hall. One by one, the next lower group in the hierarchy was sent in, and each was provided
with fewer food options and less comfortable seating arrangements. The Black group was last to enter, and they got one meager serving of food and no table at all; they spent breakfast conspicuously sitting on the floor in the back of the hall.

Despite the awkward discomfort of the obviously unfair circumstances, breakfast concluded without incident and the groups were then sent to different activities. The White kids got to go to an air-conditioned room to watch TV and play video games, the Asians were given a math assignment to complete, the LGBTQ group was told to literally stand in a broom closet, the Latino group was required to wash the dishes from breakfast, and the Black group was tasked with sweeping and mopping the dining hall.

At Camp Anytown, this was called the “Separation Exercise.” Coming at the conclusion of an intense week of exploring various isms, it was a provocative attempt to simulate a rigidly segregated, hierarchical, unjust social system. The true purpose of the exercise, however, was to give participants a chance to challenge these unjust norms and transform this social system.

And over the course of the next 3 hours, that was exactly what happened. After more than 90 minutes of stasis and calm, participants began to challenge the status quo; eventually, some seemingly minor act of disobedience triggered a massive wave of change that transformed the entire system in just a few moments. In a process that was clearly not being directed or controlled by any staff member, a subset of participants self-organized into a nonviolent protest movement that set out to engage and unite the other participants. After stepping back and allowing events to unfold with minimal involvement for nearly another hour, the staff members finally ended the exercise at lunchtime. Participants grabbed some food and then gathered together for a long, emotional, and cathartic debrief of the experience.

In my role as researcher, I observed the events of this simulation with amazement. Although the Separation Exercise lasted only about 3 hours, it simulated a dramatic transformation process. Somewhere
between breakfast and lunch, this segregated social system transformed into something very different, and the process unfolded in ways that were at times stunningly similar to real-life events of the civil rights era.

Watching the activity that morning, I realized that Camp Anytown’s Separation Exercise was essentially a civil rights movement in a petri dish. Here, amidst the buildings and fields of a rustic New England summer camp, I had stumbled on an opportunity to get a glimpse of the whole elephant: the blindness of the privileged, the anger of the oppressed, the impersonal unfairness of an unjust system, the frustration of individuals with complex identities forced to conform to simple, stereotypical social roles, the long period of seemingly inalterable stasis, the intense pressures to merely obey and conform, the courage of resisters, and the sudden, remarkable wave of transformational change unleashed by a seemingly insignificant act.

All of this—all of it—was present in an activity that was observable, replicable, and researchable. I was struck—gobsmacked is a better term—by the opportunity inherent in this exercise. What if we could explore what was true about race and social change using the methods of social science? What if we could investigate these matters that so bitterly divide our nation with rigorous empirical research? What lessons might we learn? What perspectives might we gain? What higher levels of consciousness about these matters might we achieve?

I recognized immediately that the potential to learn from this exercise was enormous, but the endeavor raised troubling ethical questions. As we will learn in Chapter 2, this exercise extends a long line of classic social psychology experiments, such as the obedience experiments of Stanley Milgram and the Stanford Prison Experiment by Philip Zimbardo. Although these experiments have become widely known, this type of research essentially never occurs anymore because of very appropriate concerns about the ethics of causing this much emotional distress and discomfort for participants.
There is no way that a grad student studying at any university today would have been able to get approval to design and implement this kind of provocative research activity. In this case, I was able to make the completely honest claim that in researching these exercises at Camp Anytown, we would not be asking the participants to do anything that they would not already be doing as participants in the program. We were just going to observe events as they happened and distribute a brief survey that merely added a few minutes to the extensive reflection time that always followed the activity. The Harvard Institutional Review Board (IRB) found this argument compelling and gave me the green light to go ahead with the research.

Of course, the deeper ethical issues here were not resolved through attaining IRB approval. This exercise involves taking adolescents who are at a developmentally sensitive stage of life and immersing them in a simulation the re-creates some of the most painful and unjust dynamics of the real world. There is every reason to believe that some of these participants have already been traumatized in the real world in some way by discrimination based on their race, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, or some other aspect of their identity, and this exercise has a very real potential to traumatize those kids further. Could any learning be worth the risk of causing this kind of emotional distress in young adult participants?

It’s a very real question that I sought to keep in my consciousness at every point in this research. Clearly, the fact that I chose to move forward with the research and this book demonstrates where I landed on this issue. It is my belief that the answer is yes; the benefits of this activity outweigh the risks, and I arrived at this decision through two distinct ways of thinking about these ethical issues.

First, the NCCJ and Camp Anytown have been around for more than 50 years. After decades of programming that has engaged tens of thousands of participants, criticism of the experience by program alumni is so minimal as to be essentially nonexistent. These programs
are run by experienced and compassionate educators, and they engage young adults who have proactively enrolled in a program designed to address issues of social justice and social change. I saw with my own eyes how the emotionally distressing Separation Activity was followed by a long (often 2 hours or more), cathartic processing session. In those discussions, I watched as participants were able to make meaning of their experiences, gain empathy for the experiences of peers, achieve important insights into the nature of these kinds of systems of privilege and oppression, and arrive at a place of insight, healing, empowerment, and genuine community. I have no doubt that for the vast majority of participants, the experience of this activity developed them into stronger and more empowered citizens possessed with a deeper understanding and higher consciousness of matters that are absolutely central to the future of American democracy.

Now here is a second—and more challenging—response to the question of whether the benefits of this exercise outweigh the ethical concerns: Quite simply, I recognize that there is no way that I can fully address or minimize the ethical concerns evoked by this exercise. Can I provide rigorous evidence that none of the participants in these activities were damaged or wounded by the experience? Unfortunately, I cannot. Am I troubled by the ethics of causing this degree of emotional distress in young people for an educational exercise? Yes, I am. Do I encourage other educators or activists to go out and replicate this activity because of the powerful learning it has the potential to produce? I definitely do not.

And yet, I know this: The simple truth is that the reason this exercise triggers ethical concerns is that it so directly simulates dynamics of privilege and oppression in the real world. NCCJ and Camp Anytown did not invent systemic racism; the organization aspires to transform it by educating kids to truly understand it out of a belief that we cannot effectively change systems that we do not fully understand, so they have designed and implemented an activity to help participants understand how these systems work. And in my
heart of hearts, I could not construct any argument as valid to convince myself that I could avert my gaze from the discomfort evoked by this simulated microcosm while still witnessing fully, honestly, and courageously the full truth of these systems in the real world. Readers may encounter these facts and arrive at a different decision, but this line of thinking led me to a place where I felt not just willing, but compelled to move forward with this research.

By the time I had watched the emotional 2-hour debrief that followed the exercise, I had decided to make this activity the focus of my doctoral research. For years, I had been on a personal quest to understand what is true about race and social change in America; suddenly and unexpectedly, I had stumbled on an opportunity to explore my deepest questions using the tools and methods of social science. The next 3 years of my life were spent developing a rigorous research methodology, observing three more of these Separation Exercises, and then analyzing the findings that emerged from across the multiple observations. In that time, the scientific inquiry and my own personal quest blended into one integrated and all-consuming endeavor.

Because we were able to study multiple Separation Exercises using a comprehensive research methodology involving observation of the whole system and questionnaires for every individual in the system, this research enabled us to bring a high level of empirical rigor to the effort to understand the complex phenomenon of social change. Essentially, we could zoom in to investigate the inner lives and experiences of individuals immersed in these systems while simultaneously zooming out to obtain a bird’s-eye perspective on the large-scale change process occurring at the level of the whole system. It was an intellectual and an emotional challenge to confront everything happening at the macro and micro levels of the system, but this was the ultimate goal and promise of researching the whole elephant. The result is an expansive perspective—intimately personal and vastly large-scale—that illuminates the phenomena of race and social change in surprising and important ways.
I discovered that it is not really possible to fully understand the
dynamics that unfolded in those Separation Exercises without
engaging with the relatively new science of complex systems, so I
immersed myself in the study of interdependence, nonlinearity,
development toward complexity, and fractals. Although scholars
in fields such as economics, biology, environmental science, and
finance had been exploring these matters for years, empirical
research into how these dynamics related to matters of race and
social change was scarce. But the effort to bridge these fields proved
to be valuable: After years of being overwhelmed by the complexity
of all that went into matters of race and social change, an elegant
simplicity hidden underneath it popped sharply into focus.

When I finally finished my doctorate in 2005, I felt as though I
had completed my quest: I had found a way to explore race and social
change in a rigorous and empirical way, and as a result I had arrived at
a much deeper level of personal understanding about how all of this
works in a comprehensive, integrated manner. I would never claim
that with this research I had figured it all out, but I did and still do
believe this project represents a meaningful contribution to our
national dialogue about these matters that is grounded in empiricism,
data, and research. If my quest was driven by a need to understand
what is true about race and social change, I could surely look in the
mirror and tell myself honestly that I had explored those questions
with depth, rigor, and sustained commitment, and I had arrived at
useful, meaningful insights.

After years spent on research, reading, and writing, it was clear to
me that I wanted to go beyond thinking about these topics. Fortu-
nately, it didn’t take long after graduation before an opportunity
appeared to engage in a practical and constructive effort to advance
the causes of racial equality, harmony, and positive social change in
real-world ways. In what was surely one of the most fortuitous events
in my life, I had brief informational interview at a Boston-based
organization called City Year, and soon after that I found myself with
a job there. City Year is an organization that engages young adults of
all backgrounds in a year of full-time national service. It was founded by Michael Brown and Alan Khazei, two remarkable social entrepreneurs who met as freshman roommates at Harvard. By the time I began working there the organization was 18 years old and had already grown and expanded in remarkable ways. It was just in the earliest stages of pivoting to its current ambitious focus on leveraging young adults engaged in national service to address America’s high school drop-out crisis.

Since its founding, City Year has believed that national service could complete the civil rights movement. In his book *Big Citizenship*, City Year cofounder Alan Khazei (2010) states:

> National service would help complete America’s mission written into our Constitution—“to form a more perfect union.” It would bind the country together, hand-in-hand with military service, around the idea of service to the nation. It could help heal America’s racial and class divides by uniting people from diverse backgrounds for a cause larger than themselves. The Civil Rights movement of the 1960s changed the laws of America, but it did not entirely change people’s hearts and minds. That best happens through shared service experiences, working together for the common good, and voluntary comprehensive national service is perhaps the best way to complete the Civil Rights movement in our country; a country that by 2050 will have no majority race. (p. 34)

My encounter with City Year and the idea of national service have quite simply changed my life. My years with this organization have only deepened my belief in the unique power that national service has to promote racial equality and to heal and strengthen the civic life of our nation. For that reason, this book will end with a call to action to make a year of national service a ubiquitous experience in the passage to adulthood for all Americans. I’ll have a lot more to
say about this in the final chapter of this book, because the institution of national service provides powerful answers to a whole host of questions raised by this inquiry into what is true about race and social change. After years spent studying these matters, it was a remarkable blessing to become part of an organization that is working on such a powerful, practical, constructive, and large-scale effort to strategically promote social change, racial equality, and civic engagement.

Over the course of the last decade of my life spent working at City Year, all that thinking and research I did about race and social change for my dissertation has informed my work on a daily basis. But the substance and full breadth of this research has for the most part gone unshared. In recent months, I have decided that needs to change as a series of shocking and deeply troubling events have brought the pain, anger, and injustice of race to the forefront of our national consciousness once again.

As a nation, we have witnessed the killing of Trevon Martin, an unarmed 17-year-old Black in Florida. Eric Garner, an unarmed 43-year-old Black and father of six died after being suffocated by police in an incident captured clearly on video. Michael Brown, an unarmed 18-year-old Black died after being shot 12 times by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri. Tamir Rice, a 12-year-old Black was shot and killed in Cleveland, Ohio, by a police officer who thought that the toy gun Tamir was playing with was real. We’ve witnessed the emergence of Black Lives Matter, a modern movement for racial justice that has gained strength and urgency with every killing and every announcement that the police officers involved in these shootings would not be indicted.

And still the headlines keep coming. In South Carolina, 50-year-old Black man Walter Scott was shot in the back by a police officer as he tried to run away. Video of the incident made it clear that police officer shot and killed an unarmed Black man with no provocation. Also in South Carolina, nine congregants at the historic Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston were gunned down by a twisted White supremacist in the middle of a bible study
group. Over the course of the 2016 presidential election season, we have seen multiple cases of Black and Brown citizens being beaten and harassed at political rallies for Donald Trump, who as of this writing is our president-elect. On July 5, 2016, 37-year-old father of five Alton Sterling was shot and killed by two White police officers; video of the incident made it clear that Sterling was already pinned to the ground and was unable to resist at the time he was shot. The very next day, another video surfaced of the moment when 32-year-old Philando Castile was killed by police officers in St. Paul, Minnesota, when he was clearly complying with police requests to raise his arms over his head. The day after that, a Black man named Micah Javier Johnson killed five police officers and wounded nine others in an act of revenge at the end of what had been an otherwise peaceful Black Lives Matter protest.

Individually, any one of these incidents would be painful to confront and should rightfully challenge us all to think deeply about the work yet to be done to advance the cause of racial justice and equality in this nation. Taken as a whole, this long list of events surely represents a wake-up call for America.

As I have watched these events unfold, I have felt an overwhelming mix of pain, fear, and sadness. I love this country, and seeing so clearly that we are still so very far away from living up to our own espoused ideal of providing liberty and justice for all of our citizens breaks my heart. But I have also found that these events have evoked in me a firm resolve to try to contribute in some meaningful way to creating positive change. In this moment that is so heavy with sorrow and so ripe with possibility, I refuse to be a bystander. This is why I have now—10 years after graduating—decided to publish these insights as a book in the hopes that it finds an audience and contributes to our national discussion of these important matters in productive and meaningful ways.