

Guide 3: Clint Smith and his book *How the Word is Passed*

Clint's words are from a discussion he had with Brene Brown in her podcast, *Unlocking Us*

- 1. CS:** The central animating framework or notion around how the world moves in my life: you can have two young people who are born into fundamentally different circumstances, who work equally as hard. And if one person is born into a set of circumstances in which they are born into a community that, over the course of generations, have become saturated with poverty and violence, for a range of different reasons, tied to a history of public policy decisions. And then you have another young person who grows up in a community where they feel safe, where they feel loved, where they feel affirmed, where they have all the resources, and social and economic capital they need. It's not a question of who works harder or who doesn't work harder. It's a question of who has been afforded the resources and capital that will put their lives on a certain trajectory. And so I think witnessing the sort of landscape of public education in New Orleans, and then going to this very fancy private school in Texas helped me experience and understand that first-hand in a way that I think I only would have understood in the abstract, otherwise.
- 2. CS:** And so I started teaching in prisons in Massachusetts, and I've been teaching in prisons and jails ever since. And that was also a really transformative moment for me because you're just like, "Oh, these are people. These are people who were born into a set of circumstances that many of us could just never imagine." And again, going back to the beginning of what I'm realizing is now a long story, it's the arbitrary nature of birth and circumstance. The people that I've spent time with and met in prison, the vast, vast, vast majority of them have been born into poverty and born into community saturated with poverty and violence in ways that I became acutely aware of. Had I grown up in those similar circumstances, I would have almost certainly been in the same conditions that they were.
- 3. CS:** And it was just a really important and profound reminder that what happens to us, certainly, we have free will, certainly, we have agency, certainly, we are people who make decisions in the world that we are responsible for. And also all of that agency and all of those decisions are animated by things that happened a long time before us, and that had nothing to do with us. And I think that that has stayed with me in everything I do. And so then, spent the last six years in grad school, graduated in 2020, married in the suburbs of Maryland, got two small kids, and just finished a book called *How the Word is Passed*.
- 4. CS:** *If we don't understand the connection between circumstances and our lived lives we end up sitting here having conversations about: If people are living in poverty, is it their fault, or is it not their fault? That are deeply ahistorical and that are blaming people for circumstances that are reflective of things that they had nothing to do with. And that shapes our political discourse and our policy discourse and the material conditions of people's lives every day.*

5. **CS:** And I was watching these statues come down in my home town, and I started thinking about what it meant that I grew up in this majority Black city in which there were more homages and more iconography dedicated to enslavers, rather than enslaved people. What did it mean that on the way to school, I had to go down Robert E. Lee Boulevard? What did it mean that to get to the grocery store, I had to go down Jefferson Davis Highway? What did it mean that my middle school was named after a Confederate leader? What does it mean that my parents live on a street today named after somebody who owned 150 enslaved people? What does it mean that tens of thousands of Black children, hundreds of thousands of Black children over the years went to a school named after somebody who was a supporter of the Confederacy and a staunch segregationist? What does it mean that one of the plantations I went to on school field trips didn't say anything about... Didn't say the word "slavery."
6. **CS:** And so I started really reflecting back on my own childhood and how I was surrounded by this Confederate iconography and symbols and memorials and iconography dedicated to people who enslaved human beings, and thinking about what the implications of that were. Because we know that symbols and names and monuments and memorials, they're not just symbols.
7. There's a Southern Poverty Law Center study from, I think 2018, that showed that only 8% of US high school seniors at the time were able to identify slavery as the central cause of the Civil War, 8%. The other 92% thought it was a whole range of things, but only 8% were able to identify slavery as the central cause of the Civil War. And I remember reading this survey and seeing myself in it, because I grew up in Louisiana surrounded by Confederate iconography everywhere I looked. In my Louisiana history class, in my American History class, never having been taught, what should be one of the first things said when teaching about American history in this country is that, for example, the Confederacy was a treasonous army that fought a war predicated on maintaining and expanding the institution of slavery. And the insidiousness of white supremacy and systemic racism and the Lost Cause is that it turns that statement, it transforms it from an empirical one to an ideological one.
8. **CS:** So part of the project of the Daughters of the Confederacy following the Civil War, of the Lost Cause that would go on to misrepresent what the war was fought over, and the sort of larger history of white supremacy in this country is that it attempts to turn empirical statements into ideological ones and political ones. So a statement like, "The Confederacy was a treasonous army predicated on maintaining and expanding the institution of slavery." Suddenly, that becomes a statement that is reflective of an ideological disposition, rather than one that is actually grounded in empirical evidence and supported by primary source documents. Because we don't have to look very hard to understand why the Confederacy seceded from the Union because they said it for themselves. In 1861, they all had these declarations of secession at these secession conventions where a state like Mississippi in 1861 says that, "Our interests are

thoroughly aligned with the institution of slavery, the greatest material good in the world.” So they were not at all vague about why they were leaving the Union.

9. **CS:** So one of the places that I go, and I write about it in the book, is Blandford Cemetery, which is one of the largest Confederate cemeteries in the country. And I go there and spend the day with the sons of Confederate veterans, so these sort of Neo-Confederates and Confederate Reenactors. And what became clear to me in my conversations with these people is that for them, history is not a matter of fact. It is not a matter of what can be proved empirically. It is not a matter of primary source evidence. It’s a story. It’s a story that they have been told. It is a story that they tell. It is an heirloom. It is a eulogy. It is something that allows them to situate themselves and their family and their family’s history in a way that gives them a sense of value, purpose, and understanding of who they are and who they want to be.

10. **CS:** And for many of these folks, no amount of evidence that you present to them is going to change their mind because the way that they move through the world, it’s not based on evidence. It’s based on something that’s much more deeply emotionally embedded into how they understand themselves as part of this larger and longer lineage. And that was really clarifying for me, and it helped me understand that for some people... I think there are many people in this country who just don’t know, there’s a lot of information, and I include myself in that for such a long time. There’s so much about the history of this country that we’re just never made aware of in school. And I believe that when folks are presented with that information, it has the potential to have a transformative impact on how they understand the world and hopefully, move through the world. And there are other groups of people who are operating in epistemologically different universe in which the notions of truth and fact just don’t... There’s no Venn Diagram.

Discussion Questions

(1-3) Smith says: “It is a question of who has been afforded the resources and capital that will put their lives on a certain trajectory.” What are the circumstances of your life? How did your upbringing shape you? Do you have friends with whom the resources and capital were different?

Smith has an “aha” moment teaching in prison. Kendi talks about having racist ideas when he started writing *Stamped*. How are these moments similar and have you experienced them yourself?

In paragraph 4, Clint Smith sums up what he is getting at in the first 3 paragraphs. How does this play out in your life? Are you able to have conversations with people furthering anti-racist ideas from this conclusion?

What do you think are the roles that symbols play in racism, gender discrimination and other ways that we keep groups of people silent, apart or dis-empowered? What symbols do you see

in your own life that live below your consciousness most of the time, but need to be called out? (paragraph 6)

They say history is written by the victorious. How do we justify what we all learn in our history books about slavery and the Civil War? (7, 8)

In *Stamped*, Kendi points out that Great Britain was advocating for the end of slavery at the same time that we were writing the Declaration of Independence. The “all men are created equal” story we learn about in our history books which has us emancipating ourselves from the British Crown has another side that most of us did not learn. The colonists wanted to preserve slavery. Sit with that a minute, what are the feelings it invokes for you?

Story and Fact. In paragraphs 10 and 11 Clint Smith talks about people he meets at a Confederate Cemetery. He points out the difference between fact and story. Kendi’s book is full of historical facts that are not taught in American History. What role do you think story has played in your beliefs about white and black people? Can you give an example of things you learned as a child?

We are living now with a large population of people who live from story and not from historical fact, what ways can you resource yourself to become an active anti-racist?