



KARYN SHANKS MD

Heart, Hope, Healing

We are our narratives: from medicine to white supremacy

BY KARYN SHANKS MD | JUNE 15, 2020



Dear One,

You know me as a physician and scholar of the cultural narratives that define what medicine is today. I'm fascinated by how the way medicine is practiced in America is profoundly influenced by dominant narratives about science, the human body, disease, gender, sexuality, race, and what we believe about our futures.

I've come to realize that it's *all* narrative. Everything we think we know is narrative. Our personal stories always reflect the larger stories of our families, communities, institutions, and world that become intermingled with our lived experiences and learning.

Our narratives are not meant to become fixed, rather they are ripe for growth and change when necessary. Always ripe for scrutiny. How does the narrative serve us? How does it serve *all* of us? How does it cause harm?

The spotlight lately has been on two dominant narratives of our culture. The first is the narrative that drives our understanding and response to the global pandemic of COVID-19. *The virus is the enemy. Our only hope is to socially isolate and create a trajectory of dominion over the virus.* I've written about this and will continue to teach the science that encourages us to widen our lens of scrutiny so we can understand the many other variables involved in the pandemic. It's a story of hope and personal responsibility that we can actually heal our planet and ourselves.

Another dominant cultural narrative is hitting us between the eyes right now following the recent brutal murders of at least 3 black people in America: white supremacy. This narrative is alive and well and powerful in America and underpins everything about us, from our personal identities to how our institutions respond to our needs.

The former is my wheelhouse. And it's helped me understand the idea of narratives as how our brains work to package the learning and "data" of our lives. How our narratives permeate every fiber and cell of our beings. How they even change our genetic expression to be passed on to the next generation. How everything we think we know and believe—especially the unconscious stuff—is narrative and calls for scrutiny. This knowledge has helped me readily shift my focus to the cultural narrative of white supremacy that exists not just in our everyday lives, our communities, in our institutions, and in medicine (including in the current pandemic), but also *in me as a white person.*

I'm not a scholar of white supremacy in America but I'm on the journey now. And I see how closely connected it is to how we view the current pandemic, how we care for ourselves, how we care for our planet, how we care for one another, and all the infinitesimal ways we seek to control every aspect of our world to our own whims and devices without consideration of others or the consequences.

I want to learn and I'm listening vigorously and intently. To that end, rather than discuss answers with you—because I don't have answers—I'm sharing resources. There are an overwhelming number of teachers, books, and courses out there on the subject of white supremacy (black people have been trying so hard for so long—shit, we should all be so pissed!). I've chosen just a few resources to dive into right now that have spoken to me or come highly recommended from someone I trust. Note, you'll have to be satisfied with kindle versions of many of the books because they are all sold out! Yay! You'll also need to come to these resources humble and ready to listen and learn. Unpending unconscious narratives is not for sissies.

Here's what I'm reading right now:

[**Me and White Supremacy: Combat Racism, Change the World, and Become a Good Ancestor**](#) by Layla F. Saad. This is a workbook. She describes step-by-step the ways people (especially white people) participate and perpetuate the cultural narratives of white supremacy, then guides us through a journaling process with pointed reflective questions.

Excellent!

[Beloved](#) by Toni Morrison. How did this one get by me? Haunting and gorgeous.

[My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies](#) by Resmaa Menakem, MSW. He examines the damage associated with the generational anguish of white supremacy and how it becomes embedded in our bodies through collective trauma for all involved. He offers a step by step body-centered process for healing. He talks about the epigenetic changes that occur as a result of trauma that forces white supremacy into the next generation and makes it a physical part of our reality, as well as our hope for growth and change.

My new teacher:

[Rachel E. Cargle](#). She delivers clear no-holds-bar conversations about white supremacy, as well as instructions for how we each can create tangible, meaningful change, through her [The Great Unlearn](#) curated platform.

Our Call is to Wake Up

We need to wake up to the fact that we operate on narratives—some chosen, others inherited, many soaked in from the culture all around us.

And we are responsible. For ourselves. For our own minds. For using our minds to create a better world.

I hope you will join me in listening and learning. I'm not here to tell you how to do that or what actions you should take going forward. I trust you to trust your own wisdom about what that should be.

Scrutinizing our own narratives and reimagining them in ways that hold more grace and love is the most powerful beginning I can imagine. That alone will lead to cataclysmic changes that will be unstoppable.

Talk to me.

Love,

Karyn

KARYN SHANKS MD

Karyn Shanks, MD, is a physician who lives and practices in Iowa City. Her work is inspired by the science of Functional Medicine, body-mind principles, and wisdom gleaned from the transformational journeys of thousands of clients over her twenty-five-year career. Her work honors each individual and the power of their stories, their inner wisdom, and innate healing potential. She believes that the bones of healing are in what we do for ourselves. She is the author of *Liftoff*, a manual of energy recovery and healing through essential self-care practices.

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