

STUDY ON WHITE PEOPLE

The Reminiscences of

Carolyn [Marie] Ogrosky

INCITE

Columbia University

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## PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Carolyn [Marie] Ogrosky conducted by Whitney Dow on December 16<sup>th</sup>, 2017. This interview is part of the Study on White People.

The reader is asked to bear in mind that they are reading a verbatim transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose.

ATC

Session #1 (video)

Interviewee: Carolyn [Marie] Ogrosky

Location: Richmond, VA

Interviewer: Whitney Dow

Date: December 16<sup>th</sup>, 2017

Ogrosky: [17:05:48] —sense.

Q: Yes. No, I have three daughters, and I live with four women and a female dog, yes.

Ogrosky: [17:05:54] I have four men and a male dog.

Q: There you go. We're sort of mirror opposites of each other.

Ogrosky: [17:05:59] Yes.

Q: How old are your kids?

Ogrosky: [17:06:01] I have an eleven-year-old son, and a just-turned-four, and two-and-a-half.

Q: Nice. That's good spacing.

Ogrosky: [17:06:08] Yes. The spacing wasn't necessarily intentional in any of those, but that's how it worked out.

Q: It never is.

Ogrosky: [17:06:14] For some people, it is. We did not have that particular gift of spacing on purpose.

Q: Nice. Yes, that's good.

[INTERRUPTION]

Q: So, can you tell me your name, where you're from, and a little about yourself?

Ogrosky: [17:06:56] Sure. My name is Carolyn [Marie] Ogrosky, and I was born in New Jersey. Raised in New York—actually about an hour of the north of New York City—and have been in Richmond [Virginia] for a year and a half but also did a stint about nine years ago where I was here for a lot longer.

Q: I heard you just did the study yesterday or two days ago?

Ogrosky: [17:07:19] I think it was Thursday, yes.

Q: And so, what compelled you to take the study, and get involved, and get in touch with us?

Ogrosky: [17:07:25] So, I have a friend online who posted that he had filled out the survey and was encouraging his white friends to think about doing it. And I thought, “I’ll fill it out and see what it’s all about.” I filled it out and got an email back, I think, within twenty-four hours that you were looking for people to interview.

Q: Nice. What brought you to Richmond?

Ogrosky: [17:07:46] Most recently, I was brought to Richmond with my husband’s job. Originally, I came to Richmond to go to the University of Richmond back in 1997.

Q: And you went for four years here and did your grad school here as well, it sounds—

Ogrosky: [17:07:58] Well, I did four years undergrad and then I stayed. I actually worked down in Creighton Court, which is one of the housing projects here in the east end of Richmond. Did that for a year and a half and then came on staff within National Christian Ministry [phonetic] that’s on college campuses all around the country, and actually the world, and did that for thirteen years. But I was only in Richmond until 2009, so about twelve years.

Q: Wow.

Ogrosky: [17:08:20] Yes.

Q: Can you tell me a little bit about how would you describe your identity, or rank the hierarchy of your identity? I mean, you're—

Ogrosky: [17:08:34] Can you clarify that?

Q: —look like, you know, your gender, your race, your job, you're a mother, you're a this, you're a that. When you think of yourself, sort of, in order of—what is the way that you think of yourself?

Ogrosky: [17:08:46] Okay. So when I think about myself and how I would categorize or give a hierarchy to how I identify, I would say primarily I think of myself as a woman first.

Secondarily, I would think of myself as a white woman, and then I think, currently, the roles that I play—the strongest or the most relentless role I currently play is a mother, and so probably those three, but also a wife in there. I have a strong marriage and take that really seriously. So those are probably the four strongest things that I think of when I think of myself.

Q: Do you think that being white or being a woman has had a bigger impact on your life?

Ogrosky: [17:09:20] That's a—okay. [Laughs] Do I think being white or being a woman has had a bigger impact on my life? That's a really good question. I don't know how to separate those two experiences, particularly in America given what I've learned about white women, and our history, and the ways that we relate to the conversation of race in America. I would say until I

was about twenty-three, I would have said woman, and probably in the last sixteen or so years, I might say white in answer to that question.

Q: When you say, you know, “I’m a woman, I’m a white woman,” what is it that makes you white?

Ogrosky: [17:10:01] That’s a great question. My understanding of race is that it’s a social construct that came out of a lot of history of people of European descent wanting to colonize, wanting to justify slavery, genocide, all these different things. And so, they, sort of, needed a social hierarchy to do those things.

And when I think about being white, I think of it as, yes, I’m of European descent. I’m kind of a mixed mutt, eastern European, southern European mostly. But in America, I’m white. Nobody asks me if I’m from Italy or from Ireland. We might get into that eventually, but they just—they see me and they think, “That’s a white person,” and all that comes along with that with the history, and the benefits, and the privileges, even though my family has only been here since the nineteen-teens.

Q: And so when you talk about the benefits, what benefits do you get from being white?

Ogrosky: [17:10:53] I get the benefit of the doubt, I believe, in a lot of conversations and a lot of situations. I get the benefit of the fact that my ancestors could buy houses when a lot of other people weren’t allowed to purchase houses at the time. They were not discriminated against with

unfair lending policies. They were not discriminated against about where they could live. They were not discriminated against in the GI Bill [Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944]. My grandfathers were both soldiers in World War II.

So, I think of the privileges that have been passed down to me, wealth came out of those privileges. I was born to parents who could afford to go to college. I was sent to college, a lot of privileges that were just given to me. I have not had to pay back student loans. Some of that is whiteness, some of that is class. But yes, I just think that when it comes down to it, I believe in my interactions with most of society, people don't necessarily doubt anything that I say. They don't necessarily doubt the stories that I tell. I don't fear the police. I don't fear calling them and asking for them for help. I believe they'll believe what I say to them. Yes. So, I think, I have the privilege of being believed. My experience is believed and that I'm not necessarily treated differently because of my whiteness when I interact with somebody.

Q: Are you happy you're white?

Ogrosky: [17:12:19] [Laughs] Am I happier white? I have literally never thought of that— thought about that question. I don't know how to answer that. I know through my friendships with my friends of color that I have been spared a lot of challenges because of that. But I don't know that I've ever thought, "Am I happier being white?"

Q: But I didn't [unclear]. I said, are you happy you are white?

Ogrosky: [17:12:52] Oh, I'm sorry.

Q: I'm sorry. No, I'm sorry. I—

Ogrosky: [17:12:53] I misunderstood you.

Q: I'm a mumbler.

Ogrosky: [17:12:54] No, no, that's okay. Am I happy I am white? I am happy I am who I am because that's who I am, and if whiteness is part of that then sure, I guess, I'm happy I'm white.

[Laughs]

Q: Are there any drawbacks to being white?

Ogrosky: [17:13:09] Are there drawbacks to being white? I think the drawbacks to being white are, honestly, in when I'm interacting with somebody for the first time who maybe is not white, I know that there are barriers that we have to cross in trust with one another. That's not their fault. I think it's just a product of our history. It's a product of maybe the interactions they've had with prior interactions with white people. So, I think, the drawback is just that I have inherited a legacy in our country that is maybe based on genocide, based on the intentional enslavement of people, based on white people maybe not getting it right a lot of the time in our history. Not that they always got it wrong, but maybe that's a drawback to being white is that you inherit those things even if maybe you didn't participate in those things.

Q: And what is your relationship to that legacy?

Ogrosky: [17:14:02] That's—

Q: Personally?

Ogrosky: [17:14:04] My relationship to that complicated legacy is interesting, and it's changed a lot in my life. I didn't even think about it, probably even give it one thought until college. And throughout college and after college when I really started to develop relationships with, deep relationships with friends of color, and I had to think about that I had to go through those motions of dealing with guilt, dealing with shame, dealing with frustration, dealing with anger. I went through a period where I just didn't want to be around white people because I was so mad, and I was very graceless, I would say, during that period of my life. I didn't understand why people didn't understand.

At this point, I think of it more as a burden of education. That I just want other people to understand what whiteness means in America. I want them to understand what it means for them as they raise their white children in America and how that looks different for them than it does for my black friends raising their black children. And I think about it, too, a lot. I have one white son and two black sons, and so I have to think about how I'm raising them and what I'm teaching them as a white parent. And what my black friends are saying with their black sons, and learn from them, and be able to say those things. But say them not necessarily out of experience but

just out of trust of my friends, and these things that I'm learning and I need to teach them. And so it's a complicated relationship. One that respects that it's a really challenging conversation but that also I want to have it.

Q: What do you credit with your, sort of, awakening in or when you were in college?

Ogrosky: [17:15:42] That's a great question. What do I credit with my awakening to this conversation is I actually studied abroad for a semester in London, England. I studied in the East End of London at Queen Mary [and] Westfield College, which I think has changed name since then. It was in 1999, in the fall of 1999. What I learned when I got there is that I was actually a minority. Everywhere I looked, there was a huge Southeast Asian population in East London, and even a religious minority. Our campus was very largely Muslim, and that was a first time for me that I have really been around very many Muslim people.

And I ended up living in a flat with four other people, one who's from Denmark, two were men from England, and that was also the first time I had lived in a cross-gender setting. The college that I went to had only female dorms and only male dorms at the time. And then one of my other flatmates was an Ethiopian British woman, so she was of Ethiopian descent but had been raised in England.

And it was the first time I thought, "I'm white." I really hadn't thought about it. It wasn't something I had to think about it. I grew up in a very white town. It was a very predominantly immigrant town. A lot of my friends, their parents didn't necessarily even speak English. They

spoke Italian. But it was white as far as America's concerned, and I didn't have any significant relationships with people of color until that time that I lived in London. And it was during that time, I joined a church when I was there in East End. It had an African pastor, I think a German worship leader. It was just an international church.

And when I came back from that time and was back at the University of Richmond, which is a pretty segregated campus, there certainly was in the late '90s. The church that I had been going to, at the time, was predominantly white. I just felt uncomfortable all of a sudden in those spaces, and so I began to seek more diverse spaces, a more diverse church, opportunities to serve in communities in Richmond that maybe didn't look as white and rich as the West End did, which is where the University of Richmond is. And so, I think those three months abroad really sparked something and then coming back, and leaning into the discomfort of the life that I had led up to that point, and wanting something different was a changing point for me.

Q: So it sounds like faith is important for you?

Ogrosky: [17:17:54] Faith is very important to me.

Q: [unclear] for a part of your life?

Ogrosky: [17:17:57] Yes.

Q: Now, when you say that you worked, are you in the ministry or just in the—are you in the church, doing what?

Ogrosky: [17:18:04] Yes. Faith is a very important part of my life. I grew up in the Christian faith. I don't necessarily consider myself one particular denomination of Christianity. I've been in all sorts. I've been in Baptist churches, Presbyterian churches. My extended family is Catholic. I'm currently in a nondenominational church on the Southside of Richmond, and I was in the ministry for thirteen years with a—or an interdenominational Christian fellowship that's on campuses all over the United States and the world. And currently, I'm involved in a church but no longer in a vocational ministry.

Q: How did faith intersect with this sort of understanding of race both pre-this awakening and post-?

Ogrosky: [17:18:54] How did my faith intersect with my awakening both before and after it happened? It didn't intersect at all before it happened. There was nothing about the way I was raised to believe in God, the way I was raised to express my faith, that even asked questions about my identity as a white person, even asked questions about the inequalities that I might have seen in the spaces around me. Those were just two totally separate things, not even slightly interested in one another.

As I mentioned before, my awakening happened when I was living abroad and part of that was being involved in an international church, and so they embraced diversity. They celebrated

diversity. They encouraged people to tell their stories to think about why it was beautiful that the pastor came from Cameroon, and the worship pastor came from Germany. And what different things that they had learned in their faith traditions, and how did those encourage one another? How did they both bring things to the table?

And so, when I came back, I was asking those questions when I was looking for a new faith community. I actually ultimately ended up joining an inner-city church down in that, the Creighton Court, the area that I worked with after college—or the area of Richmond I worked in after college. I joined this church, and I was one of three white people.

The first Sunday that I visited, the church was predominantly black, and I wasn't sure I would ever come back. I just thought, "I'm going to try, try this place, see what happens," and I was really embraced by people. They invited me to stay, and they invited me to sing in the music team. And even that very first Sunday actually, the pastor—it was kind of a harrowing experience for me as a person who had grown up in churches that were very structured. They were singing this song and over and over, and I didn't know the song, but I had shut my eyes and was just listening and enjoying the music. It was in the gospel tradition, which was totally new to me at that point.

And at some point, I heard—this was also new to me. There was a woman pastor leading the music, and she said out loud into her microphone, "You look like somebody who wants to worship." And I'm just sitting there with my eyes closed, worshipping, enjoying, and she said it a few times until finally the person that was standing next to me, who I didn't know, poked me in

the shoulder and said, “She’s talking to you.” And so, I opened my eyes, and I looked at her, and I said, “Me?” And she said, “You look like somebody,” and I was like, “Yes,” and I already felt conspicuous because I knew that I was one of just very few white people in the room. And she said, “Why don’t you come on up and lead with us this morning?”

I’ve never still been able to figure out why I said yes. But I got up, and I walked up, and she handed me a microphone, and I sang when I could and ended up back that Thursday night for practice for the next Sunday, and that ended up being my community the next two-and-a-half years until I moved. It’s why I ended up working there after college. And those relationships were really powerful in helping inform the beginning of my journey of understanding my own whiteness with those cross-cultural relationships. And doing ministry together, learning new ways of singing, learning new ways of preaching, learning new ways of friendship, learning to understand what it meant that a lot of these people in the church had grown in the projects, which is a place I had never been before and didn’t really understand other than what I would see in the news. And so, my faith very much intersected with that awakening and continues to intersect with that awakening.

Q: Do you engage other white people about this issue?

Ogrosky: [17:22:08] I absolutely engage other white people about this issue as often as possible.

Q: And how does that go?

Ogrosky: [17:22:15] How does that go? It really depends on the person. In my experience, some white people just have no language for these conversations, and so if they ask me about something and I say, “Well, actually, I was thinking about how it’s the anniversary of Trayvon [Benjamin] Martin’s death, and how sad that is. And how that affects how I think about my boys and how we’ll talk about the police when they’re a little bit older.” Some people will go, “Oh, yes, I remember that,” or “Let’s talk about that.” And some people will go, “Oh, okay,” and just kind of move on, and either ask me a different question or kind of shut the conversation down. But it’s not a conversation I’m not willing to have. And I think a lot of people have just sort of realized we’re either going to talk about this or we’re just not really going to talk very much.

That can be really uncomfortable sometimes, and I know I’ve made people uncomfortable. Sometimes, I think it’s been a good discomfort, and probably sometimes, I’ve been a little bit of a bull in a China shop, as they put it. Probably the earlier years when I was not yet understanding, maybe, the nuances of helping people slowly become aware of who they are.

Q: How did you come to have multiple races within your family?

Ogrosky: [17:23:29] How did I come to have multiple races within my family? So that awakening that happened in college continued. I worked down in the inner city for a while. I had a lot of cross-cultural friendships. I came on staff with InterVarsity [Christian Fellowship/USA], which was having a lot of these conversations. They were very intentional in having a lot of people in the very highest levels of leadership that were of Asian descent, black descent. They had women, they had men. And so these conversations were happening on the national level.

They were happening in our staff teams, and they were encouraging us to have them with our students.

And so, I was having those conversations at the University of Richmond with my students. I ended becoming the director of the gospel choir while I was there as well, and so I was also mentoring a lot of black students on campus, having those conversations. And during the course of that, I just had some really deep friendships grow—friendships that I still have to this day.

And the ways that they helped me understand who I was. The things that I had been given. The ways that they shared their own stories with me, their deep pain. The ways we had to battle through some of those really tough moments in friendship when I was really uncomfortable or really angry or did not appreciate being called out—those things really changed me.

And so, as my husband and I, we had one biological child. We struggled with infertility for a while, but we had always talked about adopting at some point. We hadn't really thought about, would we adopt transracially, would we adopt a white child. But as we were talking, and we were thinking about the spaces that we moved in, the friendships that we had, we thought maybe we were suited to be a transracial adoptive family because we already have a lot of relationships in place. Our children would have mirrors. We're already committed to being at churches that are diverse. We're committed to living in neighborhoods and schools that are diverse. And maybe we could be a multiethnic family with some measure of success, because that's really a challenging thing to do.

Q: Is this, sort of, of your journey, or also is this more your journey than your husband's journey? Is this something that you're doing together? You know, it sounds like this is a big thing. This is a path you're on and then to bring children into it that are—so how has that worked between the two of you?

Ogrosky: [17:25:39] Right. Has this been my own, my journey alone, or my journey with my husband, or his journey? That's a great question. I would say that my journey started a lot younger than his did. He actually had a lot more diverse friendships growing up than I did, but it's not something they necessarily talked about a lot when they were teenagers. He grew up in Northern Virginia. And, you know, even in our wedding, his best man was of Nigerian descent and one of his other groomsmen is a Korean man. I didn't have any diversity in the women that were standing up with me because I was just really building these relationships. So, he's been probably on the journey of having cross-cultural friendships longer. But in terms of having really meaningful conversations and thinking about how it intersects with his faith, that probably didn't happen until we were really dating and getting married. And in those early years of our marriage and asking questions, figuring out where we were going to go to church, where we're going to live, which relationships we're really going to put effort and time into that we had.

And so, I would say that we've simultaneously grown next to one another. You know, pursued different avenues but also at the same time, we always come back and talk about the things that we're learning. We talk about things. We do things together. For instance, just this past fall, we led a group at our church called Be the Bridge, which is actually a national movement. It's not a church, but it's a para-church kind of nonprofit organization. And they're encouraging churches

to have conversations with people of different backgrounds in the same room about all of this, about privilege, about white supremacy, about the history of racism in the church, all of those conversations. And so, we actually co-led a group with a black couple in our church this past fall together, and that was really a lot of fun. It was challenging to lead, but it was also really fun to get to do that together. Yes.

Q: What have you learned? How did your understanding shift? It seems like you used sort of the series of, I would say, plateaus [unclear] —events that, like, pushed you forward in your understanding and in your relationship to this subject. How did adopting two African American children change your understanding of this?

Ogrosky: [17:28:00] Adopting two black sons has made a big difference in our life. I would never have adopted them if I didn't believe that we were already having these conversations, if we weren't already committed to these conversations. I don't think your first black friend should be your kid, [laughter] which is, unfortunately, the case for some white adoptive parents. Having these two sons though made everything much more personal for me, at least in terms of my understanding of what the black experience is in America. Because I can confer a little bit of my privilege on to them when they're young, but that only lasts so long.

And so, I've had to think really hard about the school-to-prison pipeline. I've had to think really hard about whether my sons will be seen as older than they really are by society, which research that I've read has said that they will just be seen as older. And one of my sons is actually already very large for his age. He just turned four last week, but he's wearing size eight clothes. He's got

this very grab-life, you know, just live-life-to-the-fullest sort of personality. And so when we go places, I almost wish that I could put a little sign on his forehead that says, “I’m only four, cut me some slack,” because we just kind of make a scene wherever we go. Sometimes it’s a good one. Sometimes it’s a bad one. But I know that society will give him less grace than maybe they would have my white son when he was four years old if he has a meltdown in public.

And so raising them and becoming a multi-racial family, I just—the emotions of that are so much more heightened than they would be if I was just talking about, “Hey, I’m white, and I have black friends, and I understand your experience, or I don’t understand it but I’m trying to understand your experience.” But there are things now that keep me up at night—things that I think about. You know, will I let him wear hoodies when he’s a teenager? Will I let him drive past the time that it’s dark? And these are questions we’ll have to figure out—my husband and I—well before they hit that age because, well, they’re both pretty tall. I’m guessing that it will be just in another few years before he starts being treated no longer as cute but maybe more a little threatening.

Q: And how has this been for your biological son?

Ogrosky: [17:30:11] That’s a really good question. My biological son is—he’s a delight. I don’t know how else to describe him. He’s one of those kids who cares about everybody around him. He just wants to know everybody around him has friends. He wants to know that everybody around him is treated equally. He was born with this deep sensitivity and this way of making people feel included, and so it’s been interesting to watch him. From a young age, he makes

friends across all backgrounds. He's always had friends of color. We started talking about things early because kids ask questions, and we would just answer them. You know, "Why does my friend Emery have a different color skin than I have?" "Let's talk about that."

And so, before we brought his brothers home, we said to him, "You know, it's very possible that your brothers or sisters, whoever is going to come home, will not actually look like our family." We talked about that. We talked about what that would mean. We talked about that there might be things in their experience that will be different from his experience. He's only seven at the time, so developmentally appropriate conversations. But the older he's getting, and the more he's actually seen some of his friends experience prejudice even in elementary school, the more he's, sort of, growing into this fiercely protective, "No one is ever going to say anything like that to my brothers."

And so, we talk a lot about being a voice for justice. We talk about being willing to have those conversations if his white friends say something. You know, "What could you say if they say something negative about a person of color or negative about a girl?" We just have those conversations pretty regularly in our house. He reads a lot of books with diverse casts. We try to watch movies with a diverse casts. His current favorite movie is *Hidden Figures* actually. He's a science geek. He loved that movie. And so, it's affected him in that I think he is probably much more aware of a lot of racial issues than I would say the average eleven-year-old, but I don't think that's a bad thing.

[INTERRUPTION]

Q: Sorry.

Ogrosky: No, it's alright. It's probably my Italian hands, [Laughter] batting at it accidentally. Sorry, I'll try to keep them in my lap.

Q: No, you're good. You're a really great speaker. Where was I? So, you know, you were saying are you happy you're white, you're saying you're happy. How attached do you feel to your identity, your white identity? Is it something that you feel really strongly about?

Ogrosky: [17:34:50] I do feel strongly about my white identity, and I think that comes from actually having been raised in the colorblind generation and being told not to notice it, not to talk about it. It doesn't mean anything. It's all just our hearts, and we're all the same. And while I understand and agree with that truth, that yes, we all have the equal worth, I do believe that we're just afforded different experiences based on who we are.

And so, I am who I am because I was a white woman growing up in New York, and I can't divorce myself from that reality. And so I think being unhappy with that won't do me any good. I think to have a voice and to use the privilege that I've been given, to use that voice is a great responsibility, and I take that really seriously. And I know that I have a certain type of voice because I'm a white person. That some people will listen to me because I'm white than they might not have listened to a friend of mine because she was black. I want to use my voice for

good, and so I do think that I am very attached to this point to my identity. Not in some sort of weird supremacy pride thing but just in this is who I am. I'm not ashamed of who I am, and if I say I'm ashamed of who I am, I don't bring anything good to the table in helping us have better conversations.

Q: It's funny because I think—I don't know if you ever went through that period of time. A lot of people sort of go through this or engage, they start feeling guilty about being white and not wanting to be white and sort of reject it. Did you go through that at all?

Ogrosky: [17:36:17] I definitely went through that period of time where I felt really guilty and really ashamed of my whiteness. I remember saying to a friend of mine, "I don't want to have any power. I don't want to inherit all of these things. It doesn't seem fair." And she looked me in the eyes. This is a black friend of mine. She looked me in the eye, she said, "You have to use what you've been given." Shame and guilt don't do a thing to change the country that we live in. And every time I'm tempted to feel that way and tempted to be frustrated about the inequalities—which it's okay to be frustrated about these things—I just have a voice in my head saying, "You are a white woman. Be a white woman and use the voice you've been given." She's like, "And maybe someday, because you're doing that, I'll have an equal voice to what you have." That really changed my perspective in that moment of guilt and shame where I could have just said, "I'm out. I'm just out of the conversation. I'm too uncomfortable with these emotions."

Q: What's your family like? How have they been? Because I'm guessing that it's been occasionally discussed within your family, your parents. How have they responded to all this?

Ogrosky: [17:37:24] This has been a very interesting conversation in our family, especially during the last year and a half with the political climate. I don't know if it's okay to bring politics into the conversation, but it seems all related to me. My parents are Republicans. They have been as far as I can remember back. I'm an independent. I try to vote for who I think is going to do the most good for the most people. It's, sort of, my mentality at this point.

I didn't believe that Donald [J.] Trump was that person for our country, and I believe that he would especially be harmful to my black children and chose not to vote for him. My parents chose to vote for him. That brought up some very interesting conversations with my mother. My father is not great at engaging face-to-face, challenging conversations. He will more likely dissolve into either emotions or he just shuts it down. And so, we can write things to each other or maybe occasionally try to talk about it.

My mother was very willing to read articles. She's actually made a really big effort to understand representation. You know, she buys my children books with black characters. She really thinks about those things, and she says that it just made her think a lot more about the experience of black people in America. At the same time, she did say to me recently, "You know, a lot of white men really feel like they're the most oppressed group of people in America." And I said, "Do you believe that's true?" And she said, "Well, I think they've got a point," and I said, "Okay. I'm going to send you some more things to read. Let's talk about that." I said, "You know, Mom,

equality feels a lot like oppression when you've only ever had power," and she was like, "I'm going to think about that." [Laughs] I said, "That's great." And so, I think the thing is they're willing to engage it.

At the very bottom line is they love my sons, and they, from day one, have loved them just as intensely, just as unconditionally as they loved their biological grandson. And so for me, that's all I need right now. As they get older, and they have more questions, and we're talking about things, there's going to be some hard conversations to have with my family. You know, I don't know if they'll say, you know, "Hey, Nana, did you vote for Trump? How could you do that?" I don't know if they'll say things like that. I don't know how history is going to remember this period.

My eleven-year-old asked her, and he wasn't pleased with her answer because I let him listen to some of the speeches and he was really unimpressed. And, "How could we—isn't our president supposed to be a role model?" "Yes, honey, he is." "I don't want to really watch him." "I understand." So, there were some hard conversations I think I had, but I would say that they're both in a posture of they love their grandsons so fiercely that they're willing to learn and willing to have the conversations. But they grew up in the civil rights era. They saw a lot of strife. They saw a lot of conversations not go well.

You know, MLK is remembered so fondly by so many people now that would probably not have supported him back in the day, and I think they, sort of, say similar things. I'm like, "Well, I don't think your parents were big fans." My grandparents were very overtly racist in the ways

that they talked. And so, I think my parents responded to all that in the tumultuous '60s by saying, "Well, we just won't talk about it because that's why it's a problem," and that's why we didn't really talk about it growing up. But they're saying now, "Maybe we do need to talk about this."

I think my dad a little bit buys into the whole "race wasn't a problem until [Barack Hussein] Obama was the president, that brought racism back," so we've had to have a few conversations. Like, "No, Dad, people just finally felt willing to maybe admit that it was still a problem a little more than they had been before that. And that people who didn't like that we had a black president became much more overtly willing to share their own racism at that point." So, you know, we have a lot of conversations. Some go well, some go very poorly, but we have them.

[INTERRUPTION]

Q: Do you think that you have—adopting two black sons changed your parents' view of the world?

Ogrosky: [17:42:01] I do think that adopting two black sons has changed my parents' view of the world. My father actually was the most vocally against us adopting transracially, and he said, "It's not because I'm a racist." He said it's, "I believe that your family will have more trouble in our country if you have black sons. I believe they won't be treated as well," so I think he

understood that there is racism. I don't think he would ever claim that there's not racism. But I do think that conversations maybe he had never had are happening now because we have adopted them and even conversations politically for him. Maybe he's asking some deeper questions about only watching Fox News maybe not being the best decision ever. Maybe expanding a little and hearing multiple viewpoints and things is a good thing.

Q: Do you think that there's a white culture?

Ogrosky: [17:42:53] I think there are some things that are probably white culture. And then I also think that there are things that are based maybe on where you live as a white person because I believe that—you know, I was raised in the northeast in New York, and I think my culture was very, very influenced by Italian American culture, Irish American culture. Those were the predominant ethnic backgrounds of the white people that I knew and myself as well.

But as I've lived in the South, I meet a lot of white people, and they say things, and I'm like, "I don't even know what you're talking about." Like, "How? What? You've never had Duke's Mayonnaise?" I'm like, "What's Duke's Mayonnaise? I don't even—" And they're so appalled because that's just white. That's their culture, and I'm learning that there are some big differences between white Southern culture and some big differences between maybe New England white culture, California.

But I also think there are somethings that maybe across the board can be said of a lot of white people. Patriotism possibly, maybe you know, even just the reactions to the [Colin] Kaepernick

protests over the last year. A lot of white people really can't bear the idea that there might possibly be negative sides to our history. That there might possibly be a protest that would possibly disrespect the flag, and that's just what—not even what it was about but it really brought, I think, to the forefront this just massive American white culture that reverences the purity of our history, the beauty of the flag, the possible disrespect of the military, even though if you read the stories behind it, it was actually a military guy who helped Kaepernick make the decision to kneel, but a lot of people didn't know that. And so I do think there are some overarching white cultural elements that most [unclear] people just think are American, and we wouldn't necessarily think of them as white.

Q: And how do you feel being in Richmond sort of the, you know, the capital of the Confederacy, especially with all the monuments thing going on. How are you going to talk to your sons about this history when you go down Monument Avenue and you see these things?

Ogrosky: [17:45:06] I remember the first time I ever drove down Monument Avenue as a college student from the North. I had learned the Civil War a certain way in the North, and I remember driving down Monument Avenue and saying, you know, asking the people that I was riding with, "What are these monuments? Like who are these people in the middle of the street that we keep driving around these roundabouts?" And the few that were from the South—because actually the University of Richmond has a lot of Northern students—said, "Oh, those are Confederate monuments. That's, you know, Robert E. Lee, or that's [Thomas] 'Stonewall' Jackson." You know, "Oh, okay, well, they lost, why are there monuments to them?" "Well, you know," and we kind of started having those conversations.

I came in those conversations to learn that the Civil War was really taught very differently in Virginia than it was in New York. My father-in-law told me he was taught it as the War of Northern Aggression growing up in Virginia in the '50s and '60s, you know, a hundred years later it was still characterized that way.

It was really interesting timing for us to move back right before these monument debates had started. Because we actually lived in Wisconsin for three years when my husband was doing his postdoc and just came back to Virginia about a year and a half ago, which was when a lot of things really started to ramp up with the monument debate—when New Orleans started to talk about theirs, took theirs down. And the Richmond conversation is still very much happening right now. There have been a lot of fears of, you know, Unite the Right or the same things that happened in Charlottesville happening here. We did have a rally. It turned out to kind of be nothing. Not a lot of people showed up for it, thankfully.

But when I drive around Richmond, especially with my oldest right now, we'll point those things out and say, "You know, that's a monument to Robert E. Lee or 'Stonewall' Jackson, and do you know who he is?" And he's learning the Civil War a little bit in school at this point. And we'll talk about maybe that monuments to people who maybe aren't worth sort of reverencing maybe have a better place in a museum than they do in the middle of our city, taking up so much of our space, and for people to have to see when they drive anywhere really. But we'll also go drive down and maybe do the [Richmond] Slave Trail together when he's a little bit older. And certainly, when my younger sons are older, we'll do that too. And so, I hope that living in a place

that has so much rich history—good and bad—will just enable us to even have better conversations than we already do.

Q: In having these conversations, was there anything specific that you thought you really wanted to talk about in a conversation like this?

Ogrosky: [17:47:47] Today?

Q: Yes. That you're hoping we would talk about?

Ogrosky: [17:47:52] I don't know that I had any idea what kind of questions you were going to ask. I think I wondered just because I know how the news paints evangelical Christians, especially in terms of racism, in terms of support for Donald Trump, in terms of the recent brouhaha over Roy [Stewart] Moore. I think, I wondered, if there would be questions about would I consider myself that at this point, a white evangelical? How do I feel about that? But it's okay that that didn't come up. I just wondered if it might pick my brain a little.

Q: Do you consider yourself an evangelical?

Ogrosky: [17:48:26] [Laughs] I didn't probably know that term. I probably did not know the term evangelical until I was in college and joined InterVarsity, which considers itself an evangelical, interdenominational group. I think as I read it today, I and a lot of friends that I have currently feel uncomfortable with the term, mostly because of how it has a really negative

connotation in our country at this point. We know that a lot of people feel betrayed by white evangelicals in the recent votes. A lot of people that I knew who share my same faith background were really, really relieved when Roy Moore did not get elected this past week. But if you read the news, we should be angry.

And so, I think, it's one of those points where you say, okay, maybe in practice and the way the Bible would say it, maybe I am. But in terms of the way America has defined it, I probably would not want to use that term right now because I wouldn't necessarily want to be associated with what that term has come to mean in America.

Q: Well, it's still pretty incredible the numbers, and he was still seventy percent. The bill voted. Seventy percent of white people voted for Roy Moore.

Ogrosky: [17:49:35] Yes. Yes. Most white women voted for him. Most—

Q: White men.

Ogrosky: —white men voted for him, and it was very clear that most black men and most black women did not vote for him. I think it was ninety-seven percent of black women came out and did not vote for him. And I'm grateful for them and their willingness to say, "No, we don't want an accused pedophile who also believes that every amendment past the Tenth doesn't belong in our constitution in the Senate. We don't want him there." And so, I'm grateful for that. Yes, I'm grateful for that, and it's hard—as someone who would have said she is an evangelical Christian

and still firmly says, “I’m a Christian”—to know that a lot of people think I probably would have voted for him. Or probably would have thought that I’d vote for Trump if I had not been so vocal about not voting for Trump. [Laughs]

Q: Do you think that you’re ever discriminated against because you’re a Christian?

Ogrosky: [17:50:35] I have never personally felt discriminated against as a Christian. I haven’t felt that, I think, ever once in my life other than the one time I—I have one memory in college in a—I took a class on world religions because I thought I would just love to learn, this sounds really neat. And I was actually told by the teacher that she had no respect for anybody who called themselves a Christian, and so she would have trouble—how did she put it? It was a long time ago. It’s my freshman year, first semester, which is probably not a wise decision by anybody to take world religions your first semester of college. But she said she basically believed anybody who was a Christian was not intelligent, and so she was going to take that into account when she, you know, looked at the work that I submitted.

So, I felt in that moment that maybe being a Christian was not an asset in that class. [Laughs] I still worked really hard and tried to engage things, and, I think, I ultimately made it out with an okay grade. And it’s nothing that marked me or really changed the course of my life. It’s probably the closest I’ve ever come to feeling discriminated against for my—but I wouldn’t even—I wouldn’t have called it discrimination. And I think she just maybe had had some bad experiences and had some strong opinions, and it was one person. Maybe she was a little prejudiced against Christians.

Q: Is faith suited or not suited to being a vehicle for deconstructing white supremacy?

Ogrosky: [17:52:04] I think faith is uniquely suited for being a vehicle for deconstructing white supremacy. If people really read their Bible, the scriptures that talk about oppression, that talk about fighting injustice, that talk about God's deep hatred of injustice, about speaking up for the poor, about treating people with kindness and respect. I mean there are so many more scriptures about that than about half the things people are shouting about in the streets. And so, honestly, I think if I believe what I believe—which is you know, God has made everyone beautiful in his image—then that is one hundred percent the argument for why white supremacy is actually evil. I believe it's as anti-God as you can be as white supremacy. I can't understand how somebody could believe in the God that I know or the God that I believe in, who could read the same scriptures that I've read since I could read and believe that there's any possible room for white supremacy. I just don't believe it.

Q: But how does that live alongside of, "it's God's will? You know, let go, let God," how would that [unclear] that he has a plan and that that plan has put white people in the superior position?

Ogrosky: [17:53:20] I have heard the argument that we should just let things happen or that, hey, God brought Christianity to America because we, you know, killed all the Native Americans, and I just don't buy it. I don't buy it based on what I've read in the scriptures. I think evil can happen even though God is good.

I don't think God founded America, which someone said to me recently. A person said, a white male said, "I believe God founded America. I believe that even though we've broken our promises to Native Americans, even though some things have been bad that, ultimately, it's been good," and I just looked at him. I said, "I just don't agree. I just think the Scriptures are really, really clear about God not being on the side of evil, or injustice, or murder or all of those things. And so how could that possibly be true?" And he didn't really have a helpful response to that question. We just had to kind of agree to disagree about that.

But, you know, MLK believed it. A lot of freedom fighters over the years have believed that the scriptures actually compel us to action. They compel us to not remaining silent. They compel us to having hard conversations, to doing the hard work of repentance, of reconciliation with people, of rooting out the—I guess the Bible probably called it the thorns or the evil that's still in the church and saying, "This is not who God is, so we want it out. We want to be a better representation of who he is."

Q: What narrative can you offer, when you're asking people to essentially give up something? What narrative can you offer people that's enticing to say that, "You know, you should engage this. You should think about"—you know, whether it's your mother, or your father, or people that you're talking about. Like, how do you bring people to this and say, "You're going to"—because I think that in reality, when you confront this, there's a lot of navigation of loss.

Ogrosky: [17:55:24] Yes. Having these conversations is extremely difficult, and if people want to engage this topic and engage it in a real way, they have to understand coming into it that their

life will probably have to change. And you can't tell somebody that right off the bat because that's terrifying. And so, what I've learned over the years is that I can only be myself. I can only share my own stories. I can't necessarily present this as "this is what you have to believe and this is absolutely true."

But I can say, "Here's who I was and here's who I've become, and those things happened because I asked these questions and because I had these friends who challenged me, who loved me enough to tell me the truth." Because I believe true friendship, we don't do each other any favors by lying to one another—we don't do each other any favors by saying, "I just support you unequivocally." No. My friend said, "You've got some privilege, honey, you got to use it right now." And if they hadn't said that, I don't know who I would be at the age of thirty-nine. I just don't know. Would I still be essentially colorblind and raising my kids that way in an increasingly fractured society? Possibly, I don't know.

And so when I invite people into those conversations, I generally try to say, "This is going to be really hard. I just want you to try to stay. Just try to stay. Like, if you're panicking, let's talk about it. If you're feeling really defensive or angry, let's just talk about it." The worst thing they can do is just go home, and stew over it, and get angry, and throw things. I mean if they need to throw things, that's constructive sometimes. But when we did this conversation at our church this past fall, I—the first three or four times we met and we met every week for three months on Wednesday nights. I said, "I'm going to ask you again, please stay. Please come back. If you really panic over something you hear tonight, let's talk. Let's grab coffee."

You know, it was done within the context of our church, so we would pray together. The leaders and I would say to them, “If you’re really struggling, like, we’d love to meet with you. We’d love to talk about why we believe this is true. We would love to pray with you or for you if you’re really struggling. But let’s just stay in it for the sake of believing that we are all brothers and sisters.” We want to fight for that to be true and we want to fight for the church to be actually the safest place for people to have these conversations. It should not be a place where people can’t talk about this, but for most churches it is.

Q: So, tell me the narrative that you offer. What is the narrative of whiteness that you can offer people? What is that story that we can tell ourselves about ourselves and feel that we’re just or feel—what is the story you tell yourself? Maybe the question is what is—how has this benefited you? And what have you gained and what have you lost?

Ogrosky: [17:58:34] In these conversations or just—

Q: By going on this journey.

Ogrosky: [17:58:37] By going on this journey.

Q: By going from this person at twenty-one or twenty-three, to this person who’s thirty-nine and gone through these huge self-examinations, and learning, and reading, and reflecting, and taking action in different ways. Yes. What has it meant for you? What have you gotten out of it, and what have you lost?

Ogrosky: [17:59:03] Yes. Let me just think for a second how to answer that. That's a really good question. Occasionally, I will tell my husband, "I sometimes wish I didn't know." When I think about this journey, I sometimes wish I didn't know the stories that my black friends have told me about their interactions with police, or about the first time they were called the N-word. I wish I could un-feel the helplessness, the anger, the frustration, the shame, the guilt, because it would make my life easier. At least, I perceive that it could make my life easier if I didn't know those things.

But at the end of the day, I am more human because I know these things. I am less isolated. I am less insular. I make more decisions based on the greater good. Maybe to talk about, you know, Harry Potter for a second, because my eleven-year-old is in Harry Potter heaven right now.

Q: I didn't think evangelicals were allowed to read Harry Potter.

Ogrosky: [18:00:14] Oh, yes, we are. [Laughter] At least, the evangelical circles I run in actually think Harry Potter is one of the most powerful stories out there, and we're all reading it with our kids. So, again, there's that media that tells you what evangelicals believe and then there's really—

Q: What they believe—

Ogrosky: [18:00:29]—really all the people that I seem to know—most of whom don't really fit into those categories very well. But I think the media does it all sort of ways. They paint a certain picture, sometimes well and sometimes not.

So, the narrative, I think, that I have come out of this with is that by knowing more people, by knowing more people with different stories, with different backgrounds, with different faith backgrounds, with different ethnic backgrounds, with different Christmas traditions, with different musical traditions, faith tradition, and even how they express their same belief in Christianity, has made me a richer person. My view always come back to my faith. I had this one view of who God was growing up. And getting to be with all these different people who have different views and expressed it differently in different ways has made that picture of who he is bigger to me. And it's a picture that is just beautiful and is expressed in all of these different people together.

And I think when I'm only around other white people all the time, we're just missing something. There's just less of the story being told of our humanity, and for me, that's been life-changing. It's harder because I feel angrier more often than I might have felt, but when I hear my mother say something like, "Well, a lot of white men feel like they're the most oppressed group," I think, "Well, no." Maybe I would have felt really mad about that. Maybe I would have agreed and have been really angry about what was happening to white people in America. I don't know. I don't feel that because I don't agree with that particular perspective. I don't think white men are the most oppressed group in America.

But the narrative for me and as I invite friends into the conversation is just I mean the more people and the more experiences, the more hard things that we can work at, work through together, just the richer we become as people, as individuals, and as communities. And so, I'm sad that people are afraid of these conversations sometimes because they're really hard, but I think they also just make us better humans, better parents. I think I'm a better spouse. I think I'm a better friend than I probably once was. I think I listen better than I used to.

I think I'm quicker to hear a story and not have to read my own experience into it, but just say, "That's awful. I'm really sorry that happened to you. I have nothing to compare that to." And just be able to hear, that, and listen to it, and then be that person's friend in person, you know, not just through social media but actually face to face with other humans like it's meant to be.

So, yes, I think this may be a roundabout way of answering your question of what's my narrative and what have I lost or what have I gained? I think I've gained much more than I lost. I'm not even sure that loss is even an appropriate word. And maybe I've lost ignorance. Maybe I've lost the ability to comfortably stay quiet. Maybe I've lost a picture of what I might have thought America was. But if I love my country and want to have it be a better place for my sons than it has been for my peers, I'm glad that I know enough to want that now. Sorry, that was really disjointed. [Laughs]

Q: No, it was not, not disjointed at all. I mean, I think, that that's something that I think a lot about is I think a lot about narrative and a lot about the narrative of white people. What we're seeing in Charlottesville about different white people trying to drive the narrative, take control of

the narrative whether you're a white nationalist, or you're antifa, whether you're Christian, whether—

Ogrosky: [18:04:22] Right.

Q: That what are you—when you have these conversations with people, you're asking them to create a new narrative for themselves.

Ogrosky: [18:04:33] Yes.

Q: I feel like there's, like, a lot of trauma around—

Ogrosky: [18:04:40] I agree.

Q: —engaging that. And, you know, when you think about if you're a black American or [unclear] you're on this voyage from oppression to freedom, but what's the trajectory? What's the narrative when you're here? Are you saying, “Now come with me, will we”—will we dive down to meet people, or come with me, we're all moving on up and people are going to pull people with us? I think it's really where people are struggling so much with this conversation and then it's changed so much.

You started earlier, but when I started this project four or five years ago, that nobody was really talking about it in a public way, and I think that the ground has shifted so dramatically.

Ogrosky: [18:05:30] I think it has, yes.

Q: And that's why you're having such this insane pushback, as well as a push forward.

Ogrosky: [18:05:37] Yes, well and I think, you know, Charlottesville was really interesting because my husband and I had been meeting with this couple at our church planning for this group to go forward in the fall, and we started talking about a year ago and then Charlottesville happened. We already had planned. We were going to do this. We already had picked a time and a place, and we were ready to go. And so, we knew that Charlottesville could either kind of make or break whether people were willing to come. People didn't know about it, and so we kept getting this question, "Are you just doing this because of Charlottesville? Are you just asking us to have this conversation because Charlottesville happened?" Pretty much just white people asked us that question. None of the black people who came asked if it was about Charlottesville.

I believe for most of them and this—okay, I shouldn't say I believe. Most of them said, "We've been waiting for this conversation to happen for a long time. We're glad the church is finally willing to talk about it." You know, our pastor got up front, and he actually made a plug for the group, because of Charlottesville, and I don't know that he would have made an explicit plug. There are so many things going on. They don't usually plug one group on a Sunday morning. But he got up and he made this very impassioned—he put up images from that day, called them out, and said they were evil. And said, "We're having this group. It's not in response to this. It

was already in place, and if you have questions or emotions, if you want to talk about this, or anything else, this is the place to go.”

And so, we were really grateful that we had already been talking about those things. And the impetus for those conversations in our church had been a lot of the police shootings. And the fact that people didn’t have a way to handle or talk about it, and the church was continually not handling it right. A number of the black members of the church had said, “We have got to be proactive and start finding ways for people to have a language to have these conversations so the next time this happens—and there will be a next time—we can talk about it productively with each other instead of avoiding each other’s eyes on Sunday morning.”

And so, I do think that just the last, you know, four or five years with just high-profile police questions, the national climate, Obama’s election, Trump’s election. There’s sort of this unique opportunity to say, “If you want to have the conversation, let’s have it. But maybe don’t run from it. Maybe don’t only hear it from the places you’ve always heard it. Maybe be willing to hear some other voices, too, in your life that might have other things to say.”

Q: Well, thank you. This has been a really nice conversation. It’s great to meet you.

Ogrosky: [18:08:11] I enjoyed it too.

Q: Thank you. I had no idea. It was nice [unclear] because when you sit down, I have no idea what’s going to be on the other side of the mirror. [Unclear]

Ogrosky: [18:08:19] You're taking a risk. [Laughs]

Q: Right, right. So, I think, you do as well. You don't know what's going to be here so—

Ogrosky: [18:08:24] That's true.

Q: —I really appreciate it. What we're going to do now is just take some stills of you. So this is—

Ogrosky: [18:08:27] Okay.

Q: Just look at the camera, and we're going to—this is the hardest part of the interview.

Ogrosky: [Laughs]

Q: Just relax your face.

Ogrosky: [18:08:35] Okay.

Q: You can smile.

Ogrosky: [18:08:54] Okay. I'm like trying not to smile because you said relax your face, so. But I feel like I need to laugh.

Q: You can laugh.

Ogrosky: [Laughs]

Q: You have a very nice smile, so.

Ogrosky: [18:09:06] Oh, thank you.

Q: Okay, good. Now totally relax your face.

Ogrosky: [18:09:15] Oh. [Laughter]

Q: Okay.

Ogrosky: [18:09:27] [Laughs] Sorry, I don't know what makes me laugh.

Q: I think we got it. Right?

M1: I think we got it.

Q: Okay.

Ogrosky: [18:09:31] Do you have what you need?

M1: Yes.

Ogrosky: [18:09:32] I don't know why that makes me laugh.

[END OF INTERVIEW]