**EPISODE 1270**

> *"***CH:** *The stronger that somebody believes in meritocracy, the more likely they are to engage in discriminatory and biased behavior. And I will explain why this is. It is because if you were to believe that people earn their success just through their own merits and hard work, then you would also have to believe that white men are better than everybody else."*

[INTRODUCTION]

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**FT:** welcome to So Money, everybody. Thanks for joining me. I'm your host, Farnoosh Torabi. As Thanksgiving approaches, our families, our friends will be gathering. Topics will be discussed at dinner. If you're like me and you'd like to go immediately to the most uncomfortable of topics, I think you'll appreciate the advice and insights from our guest today.

Celeste Headlee is the author of the forthcoming book *Speaking Of Race: Why Everybody Needs to Talk About Racism and How to Do It*. It goes on sale November 2nd. Celeste is a self-described light-skinned black Jew who has had to defend or define her race since childhood. In her career, she's made it a priority to talk about race proactively. But what she discovered is that those exchanges have rarely been productive. While many say they want to talk about race, the reality is they want to talk about race with people who agree with them.

Now, using science research and her own lived experience, speaking of race provides insight and advice for how to have meaningful and impactful conversations about this crucial subject. This is the book if you've been trying to have that debate and argue with your friends and have gotten nowhere or for those of us who've stopped talking to a neighbor or, like I mentioned earlier, are dreading the holiday dinners.

 

In our conversation, Celeste and I discussed the importance of connecting the dots between privilege and wealth, how to actually ask questions about race without sticking your foot in your mouth, the role of social media in furthering discussions about race, plus some of my curiosities about my own race. Here's Celeste Headlee.

[INTERVIEW]

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**FT:** Celeste Headlee, welcome to So Money.

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**CH:** It's great to be here.

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**FT:** Congratulations on your forthcoming book. It is a topic that makes a lot of people uncomfortable, which I always say is a great discussion for a book.

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**CH:** Exactly.

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**FT:** *Speaking of Race* is the title. *Why Everybody Needs to Talk About Racism and How to Do It.* This is like two books in one, the why part and the how part. This is uncomfortable. As we're heading towards Thanksgiving, I can only imagine the types of conversations that families and friends may be having or won't be having. Why did you want to write this book, this particular direction of the book that we need to talk about this? Some people think the solution is to not talk about it because that's how they keep the piece.

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**CH:** Yeah. Interestingly enough, I did not want to write about this. When the George Floyd protest started, my editor from HarperCollins sent an email saying, “You know whose voice we really need on this. It's yours. You should write about this.” I said, “No, thank you,” because writing about race is fraught, right? I mean, it's difficult for a person of color because there's always the chance that you're going to never – Once you begin writing about race, you will write about nothing else.

Also, the people who I most need to reach are the people who are going to get the maddest about whatever it is that I have to say. So when I finally was – As I watched the protests and the discussion about the protests progress, I realized I actually did have something to contribute here which is that there's a lot of books on talking about race, and they're all super useful and important. But they're mostly talking about context and history, right? What is white privilege, inequity, where you see it, and how we got here?

But the one thing I have that people haven't really written about yet is step by step walking through this conversation, why it's so difficult, why people tend to feel either angry or defensive, and how you get past that. So when you talk about those different things of why and how, you have to do the why first, or people won't – You have to impress upon them that avoiding this conversation is not in their best interest.

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**FT:** How do you prepare for these conversations though? I'd imagine that before you open your mouth, you might want to read a couple things. You might want to educate yourself, at least so that you're coming from a place of some understanding or understanding other person's perspective. I mean, do you recommend that even or do you just think talking about it is the way through?

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**CH:** It depends on the conversation, right? If you are – I want absolutely everyone, and especially white people, to be interrupting microaggressions anywhere and everywhere, anytime that they happen. I don't want a white person to ever let a microaggression reach a period to interrupt them every single time.

For that conversation, don't worry about your homework. Make that very personal. Don't put it off on the perhaps absent colored people, colored people, and say, “Oh, don't say that. One of our black colleagues might get offended.” No, you say, “That bothers me that I'm upset if you say something like that, and here's why I'm upset by it. So I know you're not that kind of person. I know you try to be fair and equitable, so I just want to point out that that was wrong.” So the interrupting microaggressions, you can do that all times, anytime.

For these longer conversations, if you have a question and so often people do, they'll see something on social media and they'll say, “Why are people getting upset about this,” right? I remember a woman at one of my work came up and said, “Why are why are black people defending sagging jeans?” For that, I said, “You know what? You can Google that. I'm not your Google. Look it up.”

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**FT:** This is a classic example of somebody talking about race or asking a question about race and it going a little south. So that's exactly what people are afraid of, and so talk to that a little bit. Talk to that piece of it because this is – It happens all the time, and we know it's going to happen, and we just – It freezes us up.

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**CH:** I mean, one of the big things is that we go into these conversations with either an unclear goal or our goal is not attainable. In other words, a lot of people go into these conversations trying to convince the other person of something or change their mind or educate them. I mean, speaking scientifically, there's no evidence that you're going to change anybody's mind or even educate them over the course of a conversation.

Science or scientific research will show you that human beings take a lot of benefit, both psychological and physiological, from every kind of conversation, except if someone is hostile, or they're offering you advice or help. Even if you've asked for the advice, human beings don't like being told we're wrong or being told what to do. So we have to let go of that type of goal that's only going to frustrate you. So before you have this conversation, why do you want to have it?

If the goal is curiosity, that's a great goal, absolutely. But don't use a person of color as your Google. Do the basic research yourself. All you have to do is do a quick Internet search to get just the basics of it, and then you'll have more nuanced questions. Then you say, “Hey, I looked this up about sagging jeans, and there's something I don't understand. Is it okay if I ask you?” That's the other thing that's really important is consent. Make sure because it's possible.

I don't know how often that you can end up in these conversations. I’m imagining most people of color do end up being in this role of kind of talking people through stuff. But sometimes, you're just not – You don't have the energy for it, and that should be okay for you to say.

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**FT:** So what is the actual – I know your book has a lot of examples, specific dialogue. In that case, in getting that permission, what do you ask ahead of time?

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**CH:** You just say, “Hey, I have a question about blah, blah, blah, blah. Is it okay? May I ask you about this? Do you have a moment to tell me about it?” You can let them know, “I looked this up, and it gave me more questions,” and be prepared for them to say, “I don't feel like it right now.” You have to – In the book, there's a lot of sort of mental exercises you can do to prepare yourself for a few things, prepare yourself for finding out you're wrong about something, prepare yourself for the defensiveness you might feel over the course of

these conversations. But the other one is to sort of prepare yourself for someone saying no, and that has to be okay.

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**FT:** I want to get to talking about race in the context of money and wealth. But before that, there are many ways to have these conversations one-on-one versus in the public social media. I find that social media can be a pretty terrifying place for a lot of reasons. But when you're talking about something that's such a hot button issue like politics or gender or race, maybe not the best place sometimes. How can we – But I understand that it can be a tool for change, obviously. It has proven that it's powerful when used correctly. How do we leverage social media? How do we make social media a better place to have these conversations? How do we do it?

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**CH:** Okay, so you don't. You can't have a conversation over social media. When it is used well, it's used for information sharing. Like I can put an article out there and say, “Here's what I think about this,” and I'm just saying, “Here's my opinion.” But I'm not going to get into a back and forth about it because that conversation is not going to go well, period, paragraph, right? That's not my opinion. That's not me giving you my gut. We actually can watch the brain while it's engaging with social media, as opposed to engaging in a conversation between two people like you and I are having now, and we know they're not the same.

So do not try to have a nuanced conversation over social media. Social media is a great place to make connections, find other people who have common interests, set up events, pass along information, but it is not a great place for any kind of actual authentic communication. It’s interesting you're talking about the difference between the one-on-one conversations and the public sphere, and one place where we're really avoiding these conversations is in the workplace.

Managers get so afraid that talking about this stuff is going to cause problems. They're not in all taking into account how damaging it is when the issue of race becomes an undiscussable. When these things are in everybody's mind but they don't feel it safe or it's worth it to bring it up in the workplace. That actually causes all kinds of problems in an organization. So one whole chapter is sort of focused on that, helping managers get over the fear of people talking about this at work and how to get through it in a healthy way.

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**FT:** Well, we live in a racist country. We can say that now and we're still hearing about universities declining very important speakers like Nikole Hannah-Jones, for example. I'm following this online about how she was invited to speak at a school, and then the school backed out. I'm sure you saw that and the school saying, “We think this is an important conversation for our students but we're worried about the external community and their reaction.” What is going on there?

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**CH:** This is all risk assessment, right? I mean, this is in the end where instead of being educators, we're being liability attorneys, right? We're sort of calculating what's our fault. This is a defensive position, which is so common, and it's not just at universities, right? It's at organizations and businesses also where something's too volatile to touch. We don't want to be connected to that.

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**FT:** Because what's at stake, money?

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**CH:** In the end, it's money, yeah. I mean, a university is afraid that their alumni will – Although we're seeing with Nikole Hannah-Jones, there's a huge number of alums who are really ticked off that she was disinvited to Middlesex school, but they're afraid that they're

going to lose the support of their alumni. They're afraid that they're going to lose the support of corporations, that theirs will be a toxic brand.

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**FT:** So we live in a racist country and a capitalist country. That's a tricky ground to be talking – No, I'm not saying it's tricky but I'm saying –

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**CH:** It is tricky.

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**FT:** Examples, right, of where you have conflicting forces. You want to talk about race but you're worried about losing. I mean, it shouldn't matter, but you will lose money because it is – We live in the United States. How do you reconcile those two things?

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**CH:** Like what – yeah. So it is tricky, and that's partly because capitalism in the United States is inextricably linked and was built on slavery, right? Whether it was black chattel slavery or whether you're talking about the Asian American immigrants who built the railroad or – Everywhere you look, you're looking at capitalism, capitalist profits being built on underpaid and abused labor.

We have to be honest about that, and then you have to ask yourself as a business is what is the point of my business, right? What is the point? Like why am I in business? Is it just to go higher in the Dow Jones? Is it just to be able to give bigger profits to my shareholders? Or is there a reason for someone to be in business, period, and is that reason to be an effective and a positive force in the world around us? Even if you're selling toilet bowl scrubbers, you can be a positive force in the world, yeah.

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**FT:** Yeah. It reminds me when I see things like, “Well, if we,” I’m using air quotes, “do the right thing, that's going to hurt profits.” I’m like, “Well, you have a bad business plan. What are you going to do if we give people more money? And if you raise the minimum wage, profits will shrink. Well then you need to change your business plan so that you can afford that and maybe not afford some other things.”

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**CH:** Right, exactly. Like is your business so fragile that treating people properly would make it collapse? In which case, you need to go back to the drawing board literally and figure out why your business is not a good business. It absolutely stuns me how often people lose sight of the bigger picture, and they're just focused on these day-to-day little tiny – Whether they won or lost at the end of the day, right? Like, “Was I a winner today or was I a loser just today?” They lose sight of like, “What are you doing here? What's your purpose in life? How would you explain this to your grandkids if they asked you, were you a good person or a bad person? How do you tally that?”

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**FT:** Sticking with money on a more personal level, I think what the events of the last couple of years have really encouraged people to do, myself included, is to acknowledge more of your privilege, and that includes the color of your skin, the community you were raised in, the economics that you had growing up as contributors to your success, your financial success. What more can we do on that front, as far as connecting the dots between race and financial success? Should this be a bigger part of our narratives right off the bat? When do we start having these conversations? When do they become relevant or are they always relevant?

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**CH:** They are always relevant. I will say this that we know that the stronger that somebody believes in meritocracy, the more likely they are to engage in discriminatory and biased behavior. I will explain why this is. It is because if you were to believe that people earn their success just through their own merits and hard work, then you would also have to believe that white men are better than everybody else. There's no other explanation. Like if it is true that it is hard work and smarts and gumption that gets people to success, then you would have to also believe that white men are just inherently better than everybody else.

That's not true, which means we don't live in a meritocracy, which means all of us have to understand, even me, and I am black and Jewish and female and a single mother for most of my adult life. Even I have had privileges that have given me a leg up in life and I absolutely acknowledge that and that it has nothing to do with how hard I've worked. I've worked my butt off. All it means is that if my circumstances were different, it would have been harder. That's what that means.

The black side of my family has college degrees going back just after the Civil War ended. That's an incredible advantage that so many people didn't have. If that were different, it would have been harder for me. That's all that privilege means. But if you are going to function in the world and especially an organization in a way where you're actually getting the best out of your team, where you are actually promoting talent and putting people into the right jobs and gathering the ideas and the innovation that you want out of your team, then you have to understand that this person's success, their road, pathway to success may not look like yours. They may not check all those boxes that you checked. Actually, it doesn't really mean all that much of anything.

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**FT:** This gets us a little bit off track, but you are an expert on so many things. On the topic of equity in places like school and work, what works? We're hearing about some schools, for example, saying, "We don't want SAT scores anymore because we realize this is sort of a rigged game." It is. But you see these sort of like specific examples of companies or institutions or universities making specific steps to address the equity gap, and they're controversial. If you are that minority who studied really hard for the SAT and wants that to

show for something, now it's too late. So it's like – But obviously, we have to over correct, right? I think that's true. But what do you think – What more would you like to see on those fronts or what's working?

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**CH:** I would really like to see the people who do the evaluations of students be as diverse as possible and include people who didn't go to college. I would like to see people reach out to the – Oftentimes, they'll reach out to the alumni to do those interviews of prospective students, especially in the elite institutions. But, again, those people are going to be mostly – That's the way unconscious bias works, right? We're not conscious of it. So whether they're aware or they're not, they're going to be seeking out people who are similar to themselves because that's what they have in mind of like, "This is someone who does well in this university, me and my friends." So I would really like the number of people doing those sort of interviews to expand.

Some of the stuff is already happening, this outreach to communities that are underserved by universities. But I would also like to lower the bar for universities. In other words, does it really have to be that if you're unsure, if no one in your family has ever been to a university, that the only thing you can do is register for 20 hours of classes and give your $75,000 or 40,000 or however much it is, and that's it? It's all or nothing. Is there an intermediary step where we can let people stick their toe in where it lowers the stakes, where it's not quite so expensive? It's not this masked vast investment. Then students can try this and say, "Hey, this is for me or it's not. I never thought of myself as a college student but I'm doing really well." We can give them this sort of entry that's of a lower stakes than –

Look, I **[inaudible 00:21:54]** University of Michigan. It was expensive as hell.

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**FT:** Oh, my gosh. That's state school, right?

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**CH:** I know.

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**FT:** But where does that leave everybody else? When you're filling out college applications in the ‘90s, as I did, it's like what's your identity, and then it was six boxes. You're like, White, Hispanic, non-Hispanic.” I just picked other and wrote in Middle Eastern because I don't – That’s not even a race, but like I don't know if I'm white because everyone I know who's white is not like me. But I just felt like there wasn't a box for me, and there still isn't.

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**CH:** Yeah, the same thing for me. It's like for a very, very long time, and I was filling out those college apps in the mid-‘80s. But like when I was growing up, it was you were either black or white. Like now, some places will have multi-racial or they'd have that other, right? I would usually fill that in, but there – It’s so odd when you get in even to the science of it, the fact that this is all made up, like it's all made up. So the fact that we tie ourselves into knots over this kind of stuff, instead of just assuming that everyone's going to have their own individual story and won't it be a great journey to figure out what that story is, rather than trying to slap you into a box. Middle Eastern is a place on the map.

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**FT:** Right. It's a geography.

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**CH:** I know.

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**FT:** Maybe your book should have been called *Speaking of Race: Why Everybody Needs to Talk About This Made Up Thing.*

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**CH:** I know.

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**FT:** And how to do it.

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**CH:** This delusion we're all sharing right now. Exactly.

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**FT:** That's been my biggest light bulb moment in this last 30 minutes is just that remembering like, “It's all made up.”

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**CH:** Yeah, race is real only because racism is real. If you take away racism, it disappears. It’s not a thing, yeah.

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**FT:** Shifting gears a little bit to talk about your own personal conversations that you've had over the years about race very personal to you is defining and defending your race. You’re a light-skinned black Jew, as you describe. Race is sometimes not something that we can see or we think we're seeing, right? I’m looking at you right now. I wouldn't be able to say definitively what race you are. How did those conversations go for you as a kid and advice for others who may feel –

I’m raising my hand because I also feel like I'm a little like I don't know where I stand. I'm Iranian-American. My brother is shades darker than me. He has a different experience through life. Some people think I’m a person of color. Some people think I'm white. I kind of like go, “Okay, whatever you want to see me as because I don't –” That hasn't been a big part of my journey where I feel I've been given or not given opportunities because, oh, who knows. I mean, this is like –

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**CH:** Yeah. There's no way to know –

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**FT:** I have no idea, but it hasn't –

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**CH:** Definitely have been given or not given opportunities because of your gender. You know that for sure.

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**FT:** Right, for sure. So I feel like I have more of an attachment to my gender as a part of the why of my narrative of myself. But anyway, all this to say that even in your own skin, sometimes you have a hard time defining where you are on the race spectrum.

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**CH:** Yeah. I mean, I'm basically the same color as like Colin Powell. A lot of people think I'm Dominican frankly and start speaking to me in very rapid Spanish.

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**FT:** I've gotten that too.

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**CH:** I don't know that I handled it all that well growing up. Race was a huge part of my upbringing, and that's partly because at the time when my grandparents were getting married and all that, if a white person married a black man, they were going to be raised by black people. Like the white people head for the hills. They want no part of that in general. So my grandparents lived in a neighborhood in LA that was mostly black, and that's who raised me. That's who I was around. My grandfather was the dean of African-American composers. Like race was – It was not just a huge part of my growing up but it was a point of pride for me. Like I would never in a million years have wanted people to think I was trying to pass ever. That would feel like a horrible betrayal of my ancestors.

But growing up, I usually stayed silent, right? When people would say kind of racist things, I just kept my mouth shut. It wasn't until I was in college that I really started to protest and speak up when people said things. The thing of it is it's odd for people who are ambiguously raised that the thing about being black is once you identify yourself as black, for most white people, that's it. Like they see you as black forever. Like there's no going back on that, regardless of how fair-skinned I was.

So I just had to take a stand and say, "Well, the option of trying to pretend I'm white is not an option. And so therefore, take it or leave it. This is my identity," and I began to speak up when people would say things like that. It's interesting to me that sometimes when people would say the wrong thing, which happens all the time, and I would say, "Whoa, that bothers me. I'm descended from slaves. You can't say that," they would feel angry at me. Like I tricked them into saying this racist thing by I'm not – Like I'm supposed to have a t-shirt that says, "Watch what you say. I'm black," all the time. They'll get mad that they somehow got hoodwinked into saying something racist. Race is so weird.

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**FT:** Oh, man. Oh, man. I don't know. I mean, it's the irony in that. They probably wouldn't think they were being racist in that moment.

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**CH:** No. I mean, the whole thing all the way down the line –

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**FT:** But we only thought you were white, so we could say it to you. But it doesn't matter who you're saying it to.

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**CH:** Yeah. They're like, "Oh, god. I thought you were on my team." It turns out you're playing for the other side. You're –

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**FT:** Where do we even go from here? Oh, my gosh. This has been a really great conversation, I have to say. I'm not editing any of this, even though I have stepped on my words many times. I will say that last summer when we ran during the George Floyd protests, we dedicated an entire month to this podcast, just talking about race and money and talking to black leaders in all facets of life. I was a little nervous because I thought, "Well, I don't – What if I say something dumb? What if I say something offensive?" I thought, "Who cares about me? This isn't about me." That's how I got over it. I thought, "You know what? Let me take a bullet. Let me like be embarrassed or hurt or feel awkward because who cares?"

This is not about me. If that's what I have to go through to bring out this important information, I'm willing to do that. I think I did okay, but those were my issues, and I think that's also why people don't talk about race.

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**CH:** I think so too. But like one of my chapters I start by saying there's two kinds of people in the world. There's those who have said the wrong thing about race and those who will. Like it doesn't matter who you are, and this is one of the things I try to be super honest about in the book is the times when I've said the wrong thing, when I've used the word gypsy or Eskimo or I said paddy wagon, which has a very racialized history as well. Even I say the wrong thing all the time because race is individual to people and cultures, and there's no way you can be an expert in all of it.

So we have to allow people to mess up, and allow them to redeem themselves and learn and be curious. If we make this a sort of sink or swim type of thing, as soon as you say the wrong thing, you're a racist, we're in for trouble.

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**FT:** Celeste Headlee, thanks so much for all of your work and this great book. We cannot thank you enough. Speaking of race, I think it's an important book for now and always, why everybody needs to talk about racism and how to do it. Congrats.

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**CH:** Thank you. Thanks for having me on.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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**FT:** Thank you to Celeste for joining us. Her book, again, is called *Speaking Of Race: Why Everybody Needs to Talk About Racism and How to Do It*. It's on sale November 2nd. I hope you'll check it out. See you back here on Wednesday. I hope your day is So Money.

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