

# HOW TO HUMAN

THREE WAYS  
TO SHARE LIFE  
BEYOND WHAT  
DISTRACTS,  
DIVIDES, AND  
DISCONNECTS US



**CARLOS WHITTAKER**

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WATERBROOK

## HOW TO HUMAN

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## INTRODUCTION

It was 1985. I was in fifth grade and wore a parted Afro that would have made Arnold from *Diff'rent Strokes* jealous. I remember all my friends wanted to touch it. And I remember that not being weird.

I mean, who could blame them? Such a soft, perfectly round Afro. After all, I was the only friend in my friend group who had a perfectly rounded sphere on my head. All my other friends were White. They didn't have hair like mine. I secretly wished I had their hair, but I don't remember the girl I had a crush on at the time, Amber, touching *their* hair. She only touched mine, so at least that was a plus.

My barber was a guy by the name of Curtis. Curtis cut hair at Northlake Mall in Decatur, Georgia. I don't remember much about him other than the fact that he smelled so good. Like, almost *too* good, if that makes sense. Man, he smelled good. The whole barbershop smelled like Curtis. My mom didn't think it smelled good, but I did. Curtis smelled like what a third-grade boy thought a man should smell like. That smell always meant that my baby 'fro was about to get sculpted, and it wouldn't take Curtis long. Probably only about ten minutes,

but I loved those ten minutes.

Curtis would wrap my neck in a towel and sweep that plastic cape up into the wind from the corner fan, letting it cover me. I loved the way the cape sounded like a whip cracking when it opened and the way it would slowly settle down against me like a parachute landing. It felt so majestic. He would spin me in the chair toward the mirror and start the trimmer. I'd close my eyes and almost fall asleep every time. *Amazing*.\*

So, I'm sitting there one day getting my hair cut with my eyes closed. Curtis was talking to my mom about some boring grown-up stuff. Suddenly we heard shouting coming from outside the shop. It wasn't shouting like *angry* shouting. It was different. Scarier. It was a woman, whose shouting was getting louder. Nobody shouted back at her—somehow that was scariest of all.

As the trimmer buzzed past my left ear, I opened my eyes. I'll never forget what I saw. A man came running past the front window of the shop. Running so fast. He was carrying a kid who was even younger than me, probably just four or five years old. The kid wasn't screaming, but he was bouncing with every step the man took as he sprinted past the front window. The man wasn't screaming, but the woman's screams were getting even louder—the lady who was chasing him.

And then *whoosh!*

Another person went sprinting by the door. Then another and another. Now more people were screaming, not just the woman. Then, in what seemed like slow motion, Curtis dropped his clippers on the ground and sprinted out the door.

\* Being totally transparent here, and seeing that I am completely lacking the ability to grow *any* hair at this point in my life, I'm enjoying *way* too much this opportunity to reminisce about when I actually could get a haircut. (Is it still that good, guys?)

He'd been halfway from the front of my 'fro to the back when he dropped them, still switched on. They were vibrating on the floor of the barbershop as I sat there.

My mom started yelling at me. "*Carlitos, ven aqui! Ven aqui!*" ("Carlos, come here! Come here!")

I was scared, 'cause the woman screaming was clearly scared and everything felt so chaotic. I jumped off the chair and ran over to my mom. She held me tighter than normal. There was more chaos outside the front window of the barbershop as I saw more people running past.

"Carlitos, I think someone's baby got kidnapped," my mom said.

We sat in the barbershop holding each other for a few minutes. When all the screaming stopped, my mom and I walked out the front door. We went down the huge hallway on the second level of the mall, moving toward the source of the commotion. There was a police car and sirens in the background and probably fifty or so people gathered at the end of the mall hallway.

As we got closer, I saw Curtis! He was talking to one of the police officers. There were roughly seven other men talking to police officers too. I remember them so clearly. One was a heavysset older Black man. He was breathing deeply, and he kind of looked like my uncle Denicio. He had a bunch of moles on his neck and seemed to be talking more with his eyes than his mouth. Then there were two younger men who looked like brothers. They were White and really skinny like me. They might have been eighteen years old, and they weren't breathing that hard. But they talked one hundred miles an hour, like they were almost giddy, gesturing with their hands. They wore tank tops and jean shorts and looked a bit like the boys who picked on me at school. Then there was a rich guy. I say "rich

guy” only because he wore what my friend Billy’s dad wore. And Billy was rich. He lived over on Windfield Circle, where all my rich friends lived. *Must be rich*, I thought. Curtis was talking, loudly. A police officer wrote down everything he said.

And then I saw the mom. It had to be her because she stood there sobbing and holding the little kid the running man had been carrying. Did they catch him? *There was no way Curtis caught him*, I thought. *I saw Curtis run out the door. No way Curtis caught him. Curtis had to have caught up after the faster guys caught the bad guy.* As I looked around, though, I didn’t see any sign of the bad guy who took the kid. Maybe they had him cuffed and in the police car.

“I sure hope Curtis is gonna finish your hair, Carlitos, ’cause it’s looking lumpy,” my mom said, laughing and hugging me. I felt so safe when she hugged me like that. And I felt even safer than normal in that moment.

A few minutes later, Curtis came walking toward us. “We got him. We got the @#\*%\$. And I gave it to him,” he said. “I really gave it to him.”

Even in fifth grade, I knew what that meant. *Good for Curtis*. I would have punched him too. “C’mon, kid. Let’s finish taming that mane,” Curtis said as we walked back to the barbershop laughing about how out of shape he was.

• • •

I don’t remember much else about that day, but my fifth-grade brain did hang on to one takeaway from the experience. As I’ve thought about that scene many times since, I realize that when Curtis saw the other men running by, he didn’t stop to think. He saw two skinny White kids. A rich guy. A Black man that looked like my uncle.

Curtis didn't ask them what they were doing. He didn't hesitate. He dropped the trimmer and ran. Curtis didn't ask them where they lived. He just ran. Curtis didn't ask them who they voted for. He just ran. Why? Did he think about it and research if he should run after the bad guy or not? No. He just did what he did. Why? Because that's what was inside him. And that's what was inside all those other guys too. They came together to do the right thing. As humans.

They didn't have a meeting or form a committee or hold a conversation to try to figure out what the right thing was. They knew. And they ran. Because deep down, even if they didn't know realize it, that's what humans were created to do.

We were created to instinctively band together and reach out for the betterment of one another. We each possess a deep desire to help. An innate desire to see good win. It's inside every single one of us. Yes, even *that* person you're thinking about right now. The one who is the epitome of everything you think is wrong with humanity. It's inside them too.

I know this can seem like a fantasy. That everyone has something in them willing to risk in order to rescue. To join people who don't look like them, talk like them, vote like them, think like them, or worship like them, in order to help others who are in need.

That seems preposterous, right? Especially after 2020. That was a year in which a perfect storm of politics, pandemics, protests, and more showed us the ugly side of humanity. But I want to tell you something true: Every single human being has this desire to help.

Unfortunately, here's what we come up against. This is the pain point. The rub. The overwhelming amount of news and content and social media chatter that floods our eyes and devices every single day tells us the opposite thing. That the

world has gone to hell. That there is no hope for humanity. That our divided opinions have led us to oppression. That the country is just going to get worse from here. That there is no hope for decency in our world. That the whole thing is “us versus them.”

All that messaging leaves us in a scary place, where we are merely surviving instead of thriving. But what if I told you that it doesn't have to be this way? Or even better, what if I told you that the world is *not* this way? That's right. What if I told you that the world is filled with compassionate, giving, kind, and loving individuals who do want to help those around them? Full of people like you and like me, many of whom simply need a recalibration to live with the kind of generosity and goodness they were made for.

And I'm not just talking about recalibrating your co-worker who has a bumper sticker that makes your blood boil.

I'm not just talking about recalibrating your aunt on Facebook whose posts are filled with the epitome of everything that is wrong with humanity (or so you think).

No, I'm talking about *you*.

That's right. Because change starts with you.

• • •

Humanity doesn't need a rebuild; it simply needs a recalibration. A reset, if you will. I have come to the understanding that we have all been created in the image of God. I know that's not the belief system you may have grown up in, but it's the crux from which I am writing. It is the basis I am funneling all these thoughts through. Genesis 1 tells us that we were made in the image and likeness of God, and that's an incredible place to start from. Later in the book, we will dive deeper into what

“creation” should desire to become. For now, just know that this is my starting place.

To rebuild what we were designed to be isn't our job. That would be an impossibility for us. That falls in someone else's hands alone. We will get to Him later, but for the time being, just go with me toward this recalibration. Toward this reset.

If you are over forty, you will understand the next three words and the power they had over our lives.

*Control. Alt. Delete.*

These words were our literal rescue. You see, before there were MacBook Pros that simply worked every single time you turned them on, we had these computers called PCs. Now, I know you might still use one and I've heard that they have gotten better, but let me tell you that in the nineties, these things would fill with so much spyware and viruses that even moving the mouse across the screen would become a cumbersome task. So whenever our computers would slow down because of all the stress that was being put on them from all the processes they were having to do behind the scenes, we would simply press those three buttons at the same time.

Control. Alt. Delete.

What would that do?

Well, to be honest, I don't know what happened on the inside of the computer, but I do know that when it would turn back on, things would run much better. It was like a recalibration and reset. I didn't rebuild the entire computer. I didn't add RAM or put a new motherboard in. I simply reset and recalibrated it to its original design.

We can do this.

And who can help the people around you with that recalibration?

It's not gonna be me.

*It's gonna be you.*

You see, I have seen it firsthand. I have seen this recalibration with my own eyes.

People from both sides of the aisle, people from various faith backgrounds, people who vehemently disagree on politics, policies, protests, pandemics, and deities, all come together for the good of a single human. Putting their opinions and stances and beliefs aside to step up and rescue someone. And I'm not talking about seeing this kind of helping happen in 1985. I'm talking about seeing this happen in 2020 and 2021 and 2022 and on.

You see, deep down inside each one of us (yes, even *them*) is an inherent desire for good. It's not even a desire; it's an actual human reflex inside each of us. This isn't complicated, my friend. We just need to unearth that buried reflex and bring it to the surface of who we are today. And we may have to dig it out of ourselves. Will it take some work? Absolutely. Will it be fun? Absolutely not.

As Curtis walked me back to the barbershop that day in 1985, smelling like the cologne he poured liberally onto his torso, mixed with incredibly strong body odor brought on by his spontaneous workout to chase down a kidnapper, he wasn't thinking about how hard he'd had to work to catch the guy. Curtis wasn't thinking about how much fun he did *not* have sprinting his 250-pound body past Arby's and Sears to jump on top of the kidnapper. No. Curtis was as high as a kite on what he and those other strangers did to help that poor mother and child. They came together to help someone else. They came together. Why? Because that's how we human.

So, are you ready to dig? I've got all the tools you're gonna need. Let's remind the world exactly how to do this.

How to help.

How to hope.  
How to human.

SECTION 1

**be**



## be human

If you say the year 2020 out loud these days, you will likely get a visceral reaction from most people who lived through that year. Try it. Walk up to someone in your house or apartment or neighborhood\* and say, “Look me in the eyes. I want you to say the first word that comes to mind when I say what I’m going to say. Okay? Ready?”

Take a moment and then say, “2020.”

I promise you there will be a reaction of some kind. I’m not sure there’s ever been a number that elicits such a unified response of disgust. I just tried it with my kids. Ready to hear their one-word responses?

My oldest daughter replied, “Ugh.” Not the most poetic answer, but I didn’t raise poets. It’s okay. My middle child responded with the word *sucked*. Okay. I started to see a trend. My third and youngest kid said, well . . . I can’t repeat what he said in this book. He got in a bit of trouble for saying that word.

“What about the year 2019? Or 2018?” I asked. And I went

\* Or *van*—I see you, #vanlifers!

back even a few more years. My little focus group, which consists of my kids, offered quite a few words, all of which were a lot better than *ugh*, *sucked*, and %@\$#\*.

All the words they shared for earlier years consisted of other people's names, or words associated with family trips that they remember fondly. It was astonishing. Nothing but pleasant thoughts for all the other years. Now, I'm not saying that every year prior to 2020 was wonderful for all of us. But I am saying that, by comparison, 2020 was horrible for many of us. Maybe most of us. And to be honest, I don't think it was the pandemic that left the most lasting marks on each person. I think our deeply inhuman response to everything that happened in 2020 left the deepest mark and, for some, the deepest wounds. The year 2020 jacked up humanity. It threw many of us off course, and the problem is that we can't seem to rebound. I mean, I'm writing this book more than two years after the start of the pandemic, and it *still* feels like most of us got knocked off course and can't find our way back. I'm still processing. Still working to understand. Maybe you are too? Why? Because 2020 was about *so much more* than 2020.

...

My dad used to tell me an analogy about a ship. If you draw a straight line from the tip of a ship and it continues—going straight—for one thousand miles, it will end up in the place to which it is pointing. But if that boat moves by only *one tiny degree*, for a few days of travel it may seem like that the ship is still heading to the original target. However, that one degree of change will eventually mean that the ship misses the original destination by more than sixteen miles on a 960-mile journey. That simple one-degree adjustment doesn't seem like a big

deal, day after day, but as those days slowly add up over weeks, you will arrive at a completely different destination than you originally planned.

So, my question is a simple one: How does humanity get back on course to being the kind of people who run together to help a stranger in need? How do we reset our paths and find our way again after getting knocked from our original course?

It starts with us. We each need to get back—individually—to who we were created to be. We need to return to the original design for who God made us to become. When that happens, something comes alive in each of us. Something wakes up. Something that can join with the people around us to do incredible, brave, exciting, kind, and generous things. The kind of things that a world in pain and uncertainty needs.

God created us to come alive in our original plan and design. The spice of the Italian auntie. The peace of the Kenyan hunter. The sweetness of the southern grandma. We *all* have God's creativity deep inside us, and I believe that the first step in learning how to human is to simply . . .

Be Human.

Become who you were created to be. And who were you created to be? The answer, my friend, is, unfortunately, often buried deep within. Buried beneath years and years of trauma, trials, and triggers. Buried somewhere beneath years of slowly growing opinions on issues that may or may not affect you. Buried underneath years of being surrounded by people who look like you, think like you, talk like you, and vote like you. Buried underneath years of watching your favorite television news anchor. Buried underneath years of trying your very best to be human.

Now, I'm not saying anything about whether your years of being buried were good or bad. They could very well have been

some of the best years of your life. But the true you—the one I want us to get to and unlock—was around long before the world around you had any influence over your opinion of policies, people, and politics. That version of you existed long before that scary or traumatic thing that happened to you happened. That original version of you is what we are trying to recover and bring back to the surface. And that version of you is the first step in remembering how to human.

Maybe you're asking yourself, *Why is this so important?* Well, it's important because I think that the world has a way of knocking us off course. Somehow we get convinced that we need to change, pretend, or become somebody other than our original selves, even if the alteration is subtle and small and changes us by only one degree. I've seen it firsthand, as I personally watched 2020 do this to so many people. I saw it happen to *me* in 2020 too!

You see, at the core of each one of us, compassion *can* outweigh personal opinion. It's an internal, innate piece of who we are as humans. It's just like the reflex we saw in all those men chasing down the kidnapper in the mall, in the introduction of this book. Their compassion outweighed their opinions.

Let me offer you another good example of this in practice. In late 2019, my oldest daughter, Sohaila, became ill. Her illness progressed and got worse over the course of a few days, so much so that we ended up rushing her to Vanderbilt Children's Hospital in Nashville, where they found a mass in her chest and diagnosed her with lymphoma.

I could spend an entire book writing about those twenty-one days. They were filled with miracle after miracle. But what I remember most about those days is the army of people who showed up for us—not just in person but online (especially on

Instagram)—to pray. To lift our family in prayer. To intercede on behalf of my precious daughter.

Prayers were sent up, and I can tell you that healing and miracles were received. When I let everyone on Instagram know that the doctors saw a mass in her chest and were checking us into the oncology floor to begin treatment the next day for lymphoma, I saw thousands of new people show up on my Instagram account to begin to pray. I saw thousands of strangers become family. I saw them storm the gates of heaven on behalf of my baby girl. I saw people I didn't even *know* pray for miracles for our family. And miracles happened. After a day of so many people praying, doctors discovered that the mass had air inside it. A team of doctors came in to tell us that they had never seen a cancerous mass with air in it. So right then and there, they changed the diagnosis to an infection. *Miracle.*

On the flip side, I saw people pray for other miracles that did *not* occur. Like when everyone prayed for her pain to dissipate. Instead, her pain increased. I don't know how to make sense of all that. But I do know that people still showed up every day to keep on praying. And isn't that a kind of miracle? To be so kind and caring to a total stranger? They fell in love with my family, and we fell in love with them. They went to battle alongside us, and I'm forever grateful. You know those friendships that are forged in a fire? This was one of those moments.

Now, imagine with me for a second when in March 2020, just a few short months later, I shared my heart on Instagram relating to the racial injustices happening in America. And imagine my surprise when many of those same people who had gone into battle with me on behalf of my daughter Sohaila suddenly sent me messages telling me how horrible I was and how they wished they had never prayed for us. All because I

had shared my perspective on an issue that was incredibly close to me. Imagine my heartache when I got messages from people telling me that they felt they had wasted their prayers.

My heart was crushed. How in the world could so many of these precious people suddenly forget? Forget how to be truly human in the way they were created to be human? How could they show such kindness, generosity, and compassion and then turn around and undo all of it with words of incredible smallness and spite? Even if we disagreed and had differing opinions on matters important to us, did it have to be like *this*? How could they forget so easily?

The truth is that they didn't (forget, I mean). You see, I believed the same things in late 2019 that I believed in March 2020. Perhaps people weren't aware or didn't care enough to know those things about me, or maybe when my daughter got sick, their compassion outweighed their convictions when we asked for prayer for our family.

But the collective stress of the Covid-19 pandemic mixed with racial unrest across the country, tied up with a divisive presidential election, all came together and created a perfect storm. This storm blew many of us off course—even if by one degree, it was enough. And small comments or events that seemed like no big deal the year before suddenly turned into a *massive* deal after a couple months of isolation, lockdown, political jockeying, worry, and stress, and somehow it felt like we ended up landing in an entirely new reality.

...

In these times, with many of us overcome by fear, trauma, stress, and division, I think some of us simply forgot who we are. We forgot how to *be*. And that's what we are going to focus

on in the first few chapters of this book. How can we find ourselves again? How can we rediscover our inner compass again and get our bearings? Because before we can help others, we must first be willing to help ourselves. And we can't help ourselves unless we are willing to do the hard work to remember who we are in the first place.

Now, I'm not talking about some self-help, live-your-best-truth mantra here. Maybe there's a place for that, but not here. We aren't going to self-help our way back to restoring our faith in humanity again. We only need to recognize who we are so that we can turn around and serve other people. Not so that we are finally free all alone. No. What good is it to find freedom if everyone else around us is in chains? We were created to love and be loved. So, this first step—Be Human—is only the beginning.

Let's look at someone who reflected this idea more perfectly than we could ever do ourselves. Let's look at the impossible example. Let's look at someone who knew who He truly was: Jesus.

Now, listen. I make no apologies that I'm an unashamed follower of Jesus. That I believe He is the literal Son of God. But here's the incredible thing: Even if you don't believe in Jesus the way I do, even if you just think of Him as a historical figure who "did good" in the world, there's no greater example left to us in literature or folklore or on how to be human.

You can take the supernatural away from Jesus . . .

He still wins the human award.

You can take the whole God thing away . . .

He still wins the human award.

You don't have to believe what I believe about Jesus Christ (you can read all my other books to find out more on that) to come to a consensus that there isn't a greater example of real

humanity than Him. I'm not talking about that pastor on TV. And I'm not talking about your fifth-grade Catholic school teacher. I'm not talking about people who may have misrepresented Jesus in your life. *Nah*. I don't have time to write the encyclopedia-length books it would require to undo all that trauma. *Nope*. I'm simply talking about the person of Jesus here. And if you let me, I'd love to allow His life to guide us back to the path we were originally intended to be on. For some, that's a simple one-degree shift. For others, that may be two or three degrees—or more. But what I'm certain of is that it's not much more of a major change than that. You are close. *We* are close.

How do I know this? I know because *He* is close.