

# COUSINS

Connected through slavery,  
a **Black woman and a White woman**  
discover their past—and each other

Betty Kilby Baldwin & Phoebe Kilby

## STUDY GUIDE

18 chapters; 6 sessions

Session 1—Chapters 1-3 (pages 3-28)

Session 2—Chapters 4-6 (pages 29-77)

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Session 4—Chapters 10-12 (pages 115-151)

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Session 6—Chapters 16-18 (pages 192-236)

**Session 1—**

1. What kind of man was Betty's dad, James W. Kilby? Describe him.
2. Why was Betty drawn to her dad, both as a child and throughout her life?
3. Why was Betty's dad so angry when she sang "Old Man Dick Finks stole Daddy's land" during the children's game?
4. What connection did Betty's dad make between his insistence that his children receive an education, and his loss of the farm he had inherited?
5. What do you think of Phoebe's question when the U.S. launched attacks following September 11—"Responding to violence with more violence—wasn't that lowering ourselves to the terrorists' level?" (p. 17)
6. Name at least 3 lessons Phoebe learned from her classes at the Center for Justice and Peacebuilding. If possible, choose lessons that include ideas you haven't thought of or considered before. (pp.20-27)
7. What do you think about the value of peace marches and protests?

## Session 2—

1. Consider the persistence of Betty's father in his efforts to have his children attend the local high school. What would you have done if you had been James W. Kilby?
1. Imagine Betty's and her brothers James' and John's experience on February 18, 1959. She was 14. James was 16, and John was 15. How do you think you might have handled yourself that day, and the days following?
2. How do you think Betty was able to go on after being raped at the high school; after Rev. Frank, who had helped lead the fight to integrate the schools, moved away; after fellow students picked on her mercilessly?
3. Do you know whether your ancestors were involved in slavery, either as enslaved persons, enslavers, or both? If so, how did you find out? If you don't know, after reading *Cousins*, has your curiosity been peaked? Might you pursue finding out? Or would you rather not know? Why?
4. How would your sense of who you are change if you newly discovered and/or started to face your family's involvement in slavery or any other oppressions of African Americans since slavery, e.g., sharecropping ("just another form of slavery," p. 64)? One might expect that your reaction would be different depending on whether you were a descendant of the persons harmed by these oppressions or a descendant of persons who did the harming. How so? How would you deal with this knowledge?
5. Think back to your childhood. Did you ever hear adults (White or Black) make disparaging generalizations about Black people? About White people? How do you think these remarks affected the disparaged people, if they were within hearing range? How do you think these remarks affected you?
6. If you were Betty, and you had received Phoebe's emails sent January 15 and 29, 2007 (pp. 70-74), would you have replied, or not? If yes, what would you likely have said?
7. James Kilby's efforts to enroll his children in an integrated local high school meant that the White students' high school education was quite disrupted (p. 77). What is your reaction to that?

### Session 3—

1. How would you likely respond to a visit during a family celebration, announced at the last minute, from two sisters of a different race than yours—who thought they may be related to you? Would you be more like Betty and her daughters, Bettina and Renee, when they met Phoebe and her sister for the first time (pp. 82-83)? Or more like James, Betty's brother (p. 84)? Why?
2. What do you think of Betty's dad's insistence that he and his children should always pray for the people who hurt them? (Note that he didn't say they should **forgive** them.) Betty resisted this strongly as a child, but as an adult seemed to agree with her dad. What was Mr. Kilby's and Betty's reasoning, even though the praying didn't usually result in "reconciliation and the Beloved Community"?
3. How does Betty figure out when to stay in a job and fight for her rights as an African American woman—and when to move on because staying would change nothing and get her nowhere?
4. What are the 6 safety rules required of an African American driving a car (p. 99)? How many do you need to practice in order not to be violently endangered?
5. How well is our society doing in telling the full truth in our historical museums and commemorative homes—both in what they present, and in the training of their human guides (pp. 101-102)? What have you experienced or witnessed?
6. Imagine Juliet's life (pp. 103-114, 145). She was Betty's great-grandmother. Imagine Simon Kilby's life (pp. 104-114). He was Betty's great-grandfather. How do you think they were able to go on, day after day?

**Session 4—**

1. How do you understand Betty's brother James' positive activism when he had been so mistreated as a child? He was nearly starved at the regional public school for "Colored children" (p. 116). As a late teen he had to flee his VA home because he was falsely accused of throwing rocks and could have been jailed had he not left (pp. 116-117). Rather than becoming vengeful or bitter, he organized caring for others (the security guard at the Watergate (p. 117), high school-aged Black men (pp. 117-118), and making historical education efforts (pp. 118-119). How did he do that?
2. Why was it such hard work to get participation in the 6 dialogues about how integrating the schools in Warren County, VA, impacted the community (pp. 123-127)? Why, more than 50 years later, are there still tensions around Black activism? How do these tensions affect opinions about the Black Lives Matter movement?
3. How appropriate is the text on the historical marker that stands at Warren County High School (pp. 129-131)? How fair is the text?
4. Why do you think Betty was so overwhelmingly received by the students at the high school in Kalamazoo (p. 139-141)? She was not a celebrity. Attendance was voluntary. One kid who didn't like to read wanted his mom to buy him Betty's book. What was going on?
5. Do your best to answer Phoebe's questions in the first paragraph on page 142, and in the first paragraph below the break on page 145. Imagine yourself as one of her slaveholder ancestors and speak honestly.
6. Phoebe's great-grandfather Andrew Jackson Kilby was "an enthusiastic Confederate" soldier. He was wounded in the fierce battles at Gettysburg. After experiencing the film of the battle at Gettysburg Visitors' Center, Phoebe is sure Jack "felt fear, but did he feel grief" (p. 148-151)? Do you know soldiers, or have soldiers in your family, who you could talk with about these different emotions in battle and afterwards?

## Session 5—

1. Why might trying to “*transform* historical harms” be a better approach than trying to “*heal* historical harms? And yet “healing” appears in Coming to the Table’s Vision and Mission statements. Which of these do you think is the better word from your own experience?
2. What strikes you as especially helpful in the 6 questions that Restorative Justice says are essential in order to have a more just outcome when a wrong has been done against another person (pp. 154-155)? Recall a crime or injustice that you’ve been close to. How would the outcome have been different if a Restorative Justice process had been used?
3. Explore how to live with this paragraph by Betty (p. 171): “African American students who attended high school in the Colored school system believe that integration was not a good thing, because with integration, they lost the love and caring of their Colored/Black/African American teachers. This was an undeniable fact because many African American teachers lost their jobs, and many African American schools sat empty and lifeless for years. I believe that I shared blame for this, too.”
4. How do you understand this statement from Betty (p. 172): “Getting an education was the best thing that could have happened to me. Not only did I learn and grow, it allowed me to take back what the devil stole from me.”
5. Do you think White people should examine their family’s and their own complicity in the oppression of Black people? Do you think it can be done honestly? Do you think this is just dwelling too much on the past, or can we learn from the past? Could this complicity still operate today?
6. Do you think that if Betty and Phoebe had met 25 years earlier, they may not have been ready to regard each other as true cousins (p. 173)? Why or why not?
7. Is it appropriate to reconstruct slave dwellings at historic sites like Monticello, when they had disappeared because they weren’t built to last? Historians have usually insisted that reconstructing old buildings is “Disneyfying history.” What’s the right thing to do (pp. 190-191)?

**Session 6—**

1. How would you answer the question an audience member asked Betty and Phoebe after one of their joint presentations: “How much progress have we made since February 1, 1960?” (when Black students were trying to integrate lunch counters; p. 202).
2. Are there good reasons why White psychiatrists may not be able to help traumatized Black children? And the reverse, racially (pp. 203-204)?
3. Might the vision of Coming to the Table be able to be extended in our society beyond Black and White people to others who have harmed and been harmed by each other (p. 207)?
4. What do you think of Phoebe’s idea that instead of erecting monuments on battlefields, “sunflowers be planted in great swaths, one for each soldier who fought. . . or died”? And that “sentinel trees” be located on battlefields so we can contemplate what “they’ve seen foolish humans do” (p. 233-234)?
5. What would you like to ask Betty? What would you like to ask Phoebe?
6. Do we do our children favors by choosing *not* to live in integrated neighborhoods? And by *not* sending them to integrated schools?