

On Being White
Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Columbia
Rev. Paige Getty
January 15, 2006

Call to Worship: *Crocus Prayer*, by Kim Crawford Harvie
adapted from an anonymous source (JTW Sunday Handbook, p. 16)

Reading: the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
from his Speech to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference
August 16, 1967

Sermon:

I don't consider myself a risk-taker. Until becoming a minister and regular preacher, I certainly wasn't a risk-taker when it came to doing or producing things that would be subject to public scrutiny. I think I've told you before that in elementary school one of my report cards had a note to my parents: "Paige needs to trust herself more, and complete assignments without constantly checking in with me to be sure she's doing it right." In my adult life, I rarely have accepted challenges or assignments if I wasn't already certain that I could do them well. My motto has been, "If it's worth doing, it's worth doing well." Why put your effort into something if you know it will fail? Or if you know someone else could do it better?

And so it was that I was sitting in the congregation during a colleague's installation ceremony a couple years ago, when one of our more senior Unitarian Universalist colleagues, Rev. Yielbonzie Charles Johnson, was speaking. Incidentally, I had arrived very late, due to prior commitments here, and I got there only in time to hear this last 30 minutes of the ceremony, plus a couple pieces of music. But during his charge to the congregation as they entered this new relationship with their minister, Yielbonzie spoke to me, and his words are the only thing I remember from those 30 minutes. He said, "The important things in life are worth doing badly." Sometimes you've just got to do what you can... stick your neck out... do your best... knowing that you are likely to mess things up the first or second or twentieth time around.

That, to me, is what it's like to confront the monumental task of dismantling racism. There is a systemic and overwhelming power imbalance in our society, and to address it as an individual, or even as a congregation of 400 adults, feels like Don Quixote tilting at windmills. But, of course, that's why racism persists. We can't fix it, so why bother trying? It is the sin, as I mentioned last week, of sophisticated resignation. But instead, one by one we must commit and re-commit ourselves to doing our part for such important and ultimately spiritual work. Life itself, after all, is a Journey Toward Wholeness... and we will take missteps on that journey, and we will make mistakes—sometimes tragic and harmful ones—but we must persist.

And so I accept the challenge offered in our opening words this morning, by the Rev. Crawford Harvie,

Wrongs *won't* work themselves out.
Injustices and inequities and hurt don't just dissolve.
Somebody has to stick their neck out;

Somebody who cares enough to think through and work through hard ground,
Because they believe and they have something personal and emphatic to say about it.

Or as Rev. King said, “In other words, ‘Your whole structure must be changed... America, , you must be born again!’”

And in this congregation that is comprised mostly of white, European-Americans, in an association comprised mostly of white, European-Americans, it is appropriate for us to talk about white privilege. It’s uncomfortable... we don’t like to talk about it... but it’s disingenuous if we frame prejudice and oppression only in the context of what it is like for “them” —the disadvantaged, the powerless, the “other”—without acknowledging the benefits and *advantages* that we get from it. Such distancing of ourselves keeps us safe and comfortable. As long as we don’t act with malicious intent against persons of color, we feel we can claim innocence in the perpetuation of racism. I hope to convince you otherwise this morning.

Author and Yale Law professor Harlon Dalton writes the following, which I will share with you slowly (I had to read it twice for it to sink in) (JTW 20):

One view [of racism]—perhaps the most common—centers on race-based animosity or disdain. [In this view, r]acism equals disliking others (or regarding them as inferior) because of their race... This evenhanded approach would be fine if psychic pain were all that mattered, but race-based antipathy can have material consequences as well. And those consequences are not distributed evenly in our racially stratified society. There is a real difference between being insulted and being clubbed; between hurt feelings and radically diminished economic opportunity. Many thoughtful social critics argue for a definition of racism that takes such differences into account. In their view, the label “racism” is appropriate only when negative racial sentiments are put into action and result in serious disadvantage.

...[But] there is a second flaw in the traditional approach to racism, one that survives even if we take consequences into account. And it is this: by treating antipathy as a necessary condition, we do not reach the behavior of people who have no malice in their hearts but nevertheless act in ways that create and reproduce racial hierarchy. That is why I embrace Professor David T. Wellman’s notion that racism consists of “culturally acceptable beliefs that defend social advantages that are based on race.” Or to rephrase it slightly, racism consists of culturally acceptable ideas, beliefs, and attitudes that serve to sustain the racial pecking order.

Racism isn’t sustained merely by the acts of malicious and hateful individuals. Racism is sustained by the perpetuation of culturally acceptable ideas, beliefs and attitudes... of well-meaning, good-natured people.

I had my first formal lesson about white privilege about eight years ago. Until then, I had been blissfully ignorant, comfortably unconscious of my own privilege. Even today, I avoid thinking about these things much of the time. But it was in that workshop that I learned about the practice of redlining—where banks and other lenders would literally outline in red certain areas on maps (areas where communities of African-Americans were in the majority) and then refuse to offer mortgages for purchases in those red-lined areas. I listened to explicit examples about racial profiling, of sorts—where youth of color were watched by store owners from the moment they entered a store until they left, under

suspicion of shoplifting. (Meanwhile, white youth were getting away with all sorts of things, while not being watched.) We were walked through a whole litany of examples of privilege that had never before even occurred to me. Consider some of these statements for yourself...

1. If I should need to move, I can be pretty sure of renting or purchasing housing in an area which I can afford and in which I would want to live.
2. I can be pretty sure that my neighbors in such a location will be neutral or pleasant to me.
3. I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty well assured that I will not be followed or harassed.
4. I can turn on the television or open the front page of the paper and see people of my race widely represented.
5. I can choose blemish cover or bandages in “flesh” color and have them more or less match my skin.
6. When I am told about our national heritage or about “civilization,” I am shown that people of my race made it what it is.
7. I can be sure that my children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence of their race.
8. Whether I use checks, credit cards or cash, I can count on my skin color not to work against the appearance of financial reliability.
9. I can arrange to protect my children most of the time from people who might not like them.
10. I can swear, or dress in second-hand clothes, or not answer letters, without having people attribute these choices to the bad morals, the poverty or the illiteracy of my race.
11. I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race.
12. I can be pretty sure that if I ask to talk to “the person in charge,” I will be facing a person of my race.
13. I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group.
14. I can go home from most meetings of organizations I belong to (including this congregation) feeling somewhat tied in, rather than isolated, out-of-place, outnumbered, unheard, held at a distance or feared.

After being introduced to this list in that workshop eight years ago, we were divided into groups according to our race. Those of us who were white were instructed to talk about these privileges, and what is *good* about them. During that sharing time, I said I was glad I didn't have to worry about being followed every time I was in a convenience store, just because of my race... that I was glad not to be red-lined out of (or into) certain neighborhoods. And one very kind, yet appalled, [white] colleague said to me, “How can you be glad to have the privileges when other people don't have them?” I was stunned for a moment, feeling guilty, and then realized that yes, I *am* glad to have these privileges—and while I

don't want to relinquish them, I also don't want others to be deprived of them, either. The solution isn't for us all to be in worse shape, but for us all to be in better shape.

We can present arguments and examples all day long, but the fact is that we Americans live in a *white* world. We who are European-American, or who can pass for European-American, have privileges that persons of color simply do not have.

Some of you may remember during the search process for a new minister in 2002 & 2003 that Keith Kron came one Sunday to lead worship, followed by an afternoon Beyond Categorical Thinking workshop. The workshop is a UUA-sponsored prejudice-reduction program, geared toward reducing prejudice toward ministers in the search process who are persons of color; who are bisexual, gay, lesbian or transgender; and who have physical disabilities. The workshop is designed cleverly to allow participants to share their concerns about persons in these categories, not only anonymously, but also by attributing the concerns to "the congregation" in general... identifying what they think other people will be concerned about. So, the concerns expressed often are pretty candid, albeit anonymous. I have facilitated half a dozen or so of those workshops myself over the past eight years, and some of the concerns that are raised appear without fail in every congregation. One of them—especially about ministers of color—is the concern by white persons that the minister "won't understand my culture." But the fact is, persons of color know far more about white America than white Americans know about persons of color... it's what they see on TV, in movies, in magazines, in newspapers... White America is everywhere.

Similarly, I am a native of a part of our country where certain groups of white people express the feeling that their heritage is being ignored—they say that if there are going to be African-American identity groups, or Asian-American identity groups (on college campuses, for example), then there should be a White identity group, too. It reminds me of a time when my brother and I were children, and one of us (in my memory, it's him, of course) said to our mother, "There's a Father's Day and Mother's Day... why don't we get a Kid's Day?" Her response was, "*Every day is Kid's Day!*" Every day in America is White Culture Day.

In last week's sermon about prophets and prophecy, I mentioned stand-up comedian Chris Rock. The reference was prompted by my recent viewing of his 2004 HBO special "Chris Rock – Never Scared", which I recently watched. In this special, he talks about the financial disparity in our country—in particular, the difference between being "rich" and being "wealthy":

There are no wealthy black or brown people in America. We've got some rich ones, but no wealth.

Here's what I'm talking about... Shaquille O'Neal is rich. The white man who signs his check is wealthy.

I'm not talking about Oprah. I'm talking about Bill Gates. If Bill Gates woke up one morning with Oprah's money, he'd jump out a window – "I can't put gas in my plane!"

Wealth is empowering. Wealth can uplift communities from poverty. Wealth is passed down from generation to generation... you can't get rid of wealth.

And while most of us are neither rich nor wealthy, the analogy still works. Power... White privilege... The very privilege of not having to think about one's own race... those are passed down from generation to generation. And we can't just dispose of them because we don't want to be saddled with the guilt.

Once we've accepted the reality of white privilege, what do we do about it? If we truly want to contribute to the dismantling of systemic and institutional racism, how are we to function in our role as "white allies" to persons of color?

Activist and writer Paul Kivel offers the following basic tactics for being a white ally. It starts by being informed, and by maintaining a conscientious and intentional awareness of the realities of racism...

1. Assume racism is everywhere, every day.
2. Notice who is the center of attention and who is the center of power.
3. Notice how racism is denied, minimized, and justified.
4. Understand and learn from the history of whiteness and racism.
5. Understand the connections between racism, economic issues, sexism, and other forms of injustice.
6. Take a stand against injustice. Take risks. It is scary, difficult, and may bring up feelings of inadequacy, lack of self-confidence, indecision, or fear of making mistakes, but ultimately it is the only healthy and moral human thing to do. Intervene in situations where racism is being passed on.
7. Be strategic. Decide what is important to challenge and what's not.
8. Don't confuse a battle with the war.
9. Don't call names or be personally abusive. Since power is often defined as power over others — the ability to abuse or control people — it is easy to become abusive ourselves. However, we usually end up abusing people who have less power than we do because it is less dangerous. Attacking people doesn't address the systemic nature of racism and inequality.
10. Support the leadership of people of color. Do this consistently, but not uncritically.
11. Talk with your children and other young people about racism.
12. Don't do it alone. You will not end racism by yourself. We can do it if we work together.

You will not end racism by yourself, but it does have to *start* here. We cannot separate ourselves personally from this reality, no matter the discomfort or the sense of inadequacy that may arise. If it's worth doing, it's worth doing badly...

In his Letter from Birmingham Jail (April 16, 1963), Rev. King said, "Lamentably, it is an historical fact that privileged groups seldom give up their privileges voluntarily. Individuals may see the moral light and voluntarily give up their unjust posture; but, as Reinhold Niebuhr has reminded us, groups tend to be more immoral than individuals."

Four years later, to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, he said, "What I'm saying today is that we must go from this convention and say, 'America, you must be born again!'"

Indeed. And may each of us think on these things, talk with one another about them, and do our part to infiltrate and moralize the system... One step at a time, in the name of justice for all.

Amen.

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