

Social Inclusivity and the Colors of Perception

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It is not possible to talk about white supremacy and racism from a liberal white first-person-point-of-view without being surprisingly defensive, incredibly disheartened, and extremely uncomfortable when those sharply defined terms are pointed at you. As UUs, we are, after all, an association whose vision of inclusiveness is as expansive as the arc of human uniqueness and expression. While the theological and organizational foundation upon which Unitarian Universalism has been built originated from the white European Protestant tradition, our evolution to the present day would barely be recognizable to our denominational predecessors, so far have we strayed from their perception of the world order.

Yet, there are those among us who would say that we have not gone far enough...that there remains in our institutional structure and congregational practice vestiges of white bias and superiority, where multiracial and multicultural presence and influences have been the exception to the rule.

As someone who has always served the cause of anti-oppression and who appreciates multiculturalism, I know that I struggled, profoundly, when late last spring the Unitarian Universalist Association went through a painful *exorcism of white domination* and called us to reflect upon our continued collusion with the systemic institutionalization of white power and superiority that continues to dominate our country and perhaps in more subtle or not so subtle ways, is reflected in our congregations. We were called to look deep within ourselves and question our own perpetuation of white superiority and racial oppression.

What initiated the tsunami of denominational self-consciousness was a UU Latino woman who applied for a top-level position in one of our regions and the job was given, instead, to a white male minister. She

claimed it was racism. Some would debate that she was simply not qualified. I cannot speak to the actual reality of the situation. All I know is that the incident opened a Pandora's Box of festering wounds in our brother and sister UUs of color, and **their ensuing grief, anger, sorrow, hopes and dreams poured out like fountains of tears into the waters of Babylon.**

Those of us who had spent years working toward inclusivity and dismantling racist practices were left bereft, as if it were all for naught. What had we missed? What had blinded us into complacency? Weren't we welcoming? Didn't we support anti-racism initiatives and the Black Lives Matter movement? The answers to those questions are complex, and all that I truly know is that somewhere along the way, even with the best of intentions, we lost sight of the fact that our efforts sometimes felt conditional.

Come into this circle of caring and do things our way. Of course, you can be yourself, just not too much, and as long as you don't ask us to change. We support your right to equality, but our idea of equal may not be your idea of equal.

It seemed that our invitation did not include a true blending of racial and cultural riches into our tradition. It was more about assimilation rather than incorporating the perspectives and offerings of other ways to make our coming together a truly shared human experience. **It has been a painful and sorrowful enlightenment, but an important one.**

What I have learned over the past several months is that it is much easier to identify and stand against the overt exclusionary extremism of the KKK and White Nationalists who proudly represent white supremacy than it is to recognize the oftentimes subtle threads of biases, prejudice and fears that course through our own veins. It is painful to look deep into our own souls. Fear of "the other who is different from us" seems to be embedded in our human DNA, and it is only reinforced by what we are taught and our personal experiences.

To name this fear and recognize it requires a willingness to be vulnerable and to admit to thoughts, feelings or assumptions that are sometimes less than noble and oftentimes paralyzing. This is part of the challenge of our human journey, and if we are to overcome the fears that create imbalance in our human relations, then we are going to need to bring them into the light of day and confront them with honesty, humility, compassion, and forgiveness. Creating a truly fair and balanced world is an ongoing process and our personal and collective work is never done.

White privilege is a remnant from centuries past that continues to permeate our society, yet even those of us who would work to change that contribute in our own way to the perpetuation of it, partly by ignoring the fact that it still exists! The reality is that we all see the world through our own lens as well as through the color of our skin. And if you are in the ruling majority, you are not constantly being reminded that you are not.

Back in the mid 1970's when I was studying in Germany, I took a college seminar called The Psychology of Race Relations in the United States. I have two powerful memories from that class that still resonate with me today.

The first was required reading of the book, *Black Like Me*, by John Howard Griffin. In 1959, a Texas journalist by the name of John Howard Griffin decided to embark on a scientific research project that profoundly changed his worldview and which rocked white America. He wanted to know what it was like to be a black man living in the segregated south. As a devout Roman Catholic, he had grown up with the mantra, *If you want to understand the suffering of another, you must walk a mile in their shoes*. So, with the help of a dermatologist and the support of his family, Griffin underwent a grueling treatment that altered the pigment of his skin, until he eventually appeared black. He then traveled through the southern states of Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Georgia for 6 weeks, experiencing life as a black man.

What he discovered shocked and sickened him. His interior journey was just as profound as his external one, and he came to realize

that the world was skewed toward white privilege to the exclusion of all other races. He saw the ugly underbelly of fear and prejudice on one side, as well as the pain and suffering of those whose rights as human beings were being denied. He came to tremble at the *stare of hatred* that he received from white folks, and he embraced the sanctuary of kindness and acceptance from those who were black. What was most challenging for him was his own self-examination as a white man who had prejudices he didn't even know that he had.

The second memory I have from that psychology class on race relations was a documentary that had been made during school integration in the South called, "*The Children Were Watching.*"

When the integration of schools was ordered in the southern states, a videographer went to several different elementary schools and videotaped black children getting off of buses at previously white only schools. Always there were crowds of white parents, carrying babies and toddlers, holding their own frightened school children tight by their sides, all the while yelling and swearing at the little black children who were terrified and brave: *Niggers, go back to the zoo! We don't want your kind here!*

There were many other obscenities spoken, and some of the adults and their parroting children spit on the black kids or threw rocks. All the while, the videographer was quietly filming—the bus arriving—the parents screaming and hurling whatever they could find—the black children facing the terrifying crowds—and then last but not least, the white children...watching. Watching and learning to hate others who looked different from them.

There was no dialogue that I can remember...just the video and the statement at the end which hung there in silence: **The Children Were Watching.** It was a very poignant observation about how racism, and all other isms for that matter, get passed down from generation to generation. The two questions our professor posed were these: **How do we dismantle our inaccurate assumptions and often misguided beliefs, and how does each succeeding generation deal with inherited guilt, shame, and inaccuracies, and then transform them all into a fair**

and balanced society that is affirming of everyone? It was especially interesting to have that discussion in Germany! The answer was the same for both questions: *Listen and learn from each other, and make peace with your own fears and biases. Only then can you grow together and create something new.*

Feminist author, Anais Nin, said that *we do not see things as they are; we see things as we are.* I think this is particularly true when it comes to race relations. The challenge comes when we are asked to reconcile our divergent perspectives. Those of us who are white cannot pretend to know or totally understand what it means to be a person of color in a society that is still skewed against them.

We, who are Unitarian Universalists, must also recognize that our heritage derives from a white European Protestant tradition that is still reflected in our forms of worship, and even though we have made enormous strides to be more inclusive on many different levels, it is now time to take it to yet another.

If we are sincere in our desire to create an all inclusive, multiracial, multicultural, loving and vibrant community of faith, where we can all rise-up together in praise and thanksgiving for this life that we share, then we need to realize that our work is not yet done. We need to *listen and learn from each other, and make peace with our own fears and biases. Only then can we truly grow together and create something new.*

And may we never forget that *the children are watching!*

AMEN and BLESSED BE