

White Supremacy – Then and Now

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Unitarian Universalist

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“The culture of white supremacy is a culture of power.”

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Readings

from Isaiah 58

Is not this the fast that I choose:

To loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke; is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house...?

Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly:

If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail.

from the writings of Frederick Douglass

Those who profess to favor freedom, and yet deprecate agitation, are people who want crops without plowing up the ground. They want rain without thunder and lightning; they want the ocean without the awful roar of its waters.

This struggle may be a moral one; or it may be both moral and physical; but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand; it never did and it never will.

Find out what people will submit to, and you have found out the exact amount of injustice which will be imposed upon them.

The limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress.

Sermon

Well, there is surely no question, is there, that our nation was founded on the backs of African American slaves and the premise of white supremacy and white superiority.

And it is of course no excuse whatsoever to say that, well, this is just the way people (meaning so-called white people) thought back then, even our venerated “founding fathers.”

Because though they thought that way... they were quite wrong in their thinking, and in their perpetuation of the evil system of slavery – about as blatant a form of white supremacy as one might imagine.

Such that in spite of the affirmation in the Declaration of Independence that “all men are created equal”, in effect a few years later the Constitution *assumed* the reality of slavery: the enslaved of course could not vote, and for the purposes of representation were counted as three-fifths the value of whites. It was politically complicated, but all had to do with assumed continued white supremacy.

The good news is that not all whites in the late 18th and 19th centuries owned slaves or approved of the institution of slavery.

Some in fact, as we know, were quite virulently opposed to slavery and the slave trade, among them the New England folks we call the transcendentalists – including Henry David Thoreau, whose 200th birthday approaches.

Thoreau, for example, famously refused to pay his poll tax and spent a night in jail because the tax supported slavery and the immoral Mexican war. His night in jail gave rise later to his essay *Civil Disobedience* – which directly influenced thousands over all the years since, including the likes of Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr..

In regard to the Fugitive Slave Law, when in April of 1851 a Boston judge sent runaway slave Thomas Sims back to his owner, Thoreau was outraged, and refused to take part in the annual celebration including bells and roaring cannons of the Battle of Lexington and Concord the very next week. He wrote at the time, referring to Christian scripture:

Of course it makes not the least bit of difference – I wish you to consider this – who the man was, whether he was Jesus Christ or another, - for inasmuch as ye did it unto the least of these his brethren ye did it unto him. DO you think *he* would have stayed here in liberty and let the black man go into slavery in his stead?

Then, several years later Thoreau was a staunch defender of John Brown’s failed raid on Harper’s Ferry with the goal to start a slave rebellion. In response to the arrest and later hanging of Brown and others, Thoreau wrote of “A government that pretends to be Christian and crucifies a million Christs every day.”

As for Brown himself:

I know that there have been a few heroes in the land, but no man has ever stood up in America for the dignity of human nature so devotedly, persistently, and so effectively as this man.

Well, slavery, the most obvious manifestation of white supremacy one might imagine, finally ended as a result of the carnage of the Civil War. More than that... African American men were shortly thereafter given the right to vote through amendments to the Constitution.

But we know that the right to vote on paper pretty soon meant less than the worth of the paper.

We know the history of voter suppression that began at the outset of the new right to vote.

We know the history of Jim Crow. Of lynching.

We know the history of so-called “separate but equal.”

What has been going on? Answer? It is all about power, as the quote at the top of your order of worship affirms. And as we heard in the reading from Frederick Douglass, power does not let go without a struggle.

But with that I mind... didn't the *struggle* of the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 60s put an end to discrimination against African Americans, an end to voter suppression, an end to white supremacy and white privilege, and the beginning of genuine equality?

Well, indeed much was accomplished through the agitation, marching, and so on of the Civil Rights movement. This cannot be denied; we could make a pretty nice list of the good that came from the Civil Rights movement, legislatively and socially.

Yet try as some might to say otherwise, white privilege endures and political and social systems which were birthed to serve European Americans continue to this day to foster white supremacy.

Now – I don't know about you, but until recently I thought of “white supremacy” as a term having to do largely or entirely with groups such as the Ku Klux Klan or the so-called alt-right groups actively promoting ideas of white identity and white nationalism.

And we're not like them, are we? We're not white nationalists or white supremacists, are we?

Maybe not in so many words... but it truly is undeniable that white privilege endures, and with it white supremacy. In other words, you don't have to agree with the idea of white privilege or white supremacy in order to benefit, if you are white, from white privilege and institutions founded in and perpetuating, however subtly, the idea of white supremacy.

Voting? If we are white, our right to vote and the ease with which we can cast our votes is not threatened. But in many parts of the nation this is not the case if you are African American or poor and therefore often disproportionately affected by new voter I.D. laws – which is just the continuation of a system set-up to favor those of European ancestry.

How about just going about one's daily life? A short story.

Not long ago we were driving on the bucolic Merritt Parkway in Connecticut. We came up on a sporty looking bright blue car in the right lane – I think a Mercedes or BMW... driving just under the speed limit. Which surprised me.

As we passed, I glanced over and saw that the driver was a young African American man.

I was in the midst of doing a fair amount of reading on the sorts of issues I'm exploring with you today. So I wondered: Perhaps this young black man driving a blue sports car really did not want to draw the attention of the men in blue.

Of course I don't favor getting stopped by the police either. But for me? I would not imagine that being stopped by the State Police could be potentially a matter of life and death. For that young man?

Many years ago I was stopped for speeding (I think it was 40 in a 30 on a wide four lane road with very little traffic in Watertown (not to excuse my speeding, but to explain it). I was pulled over, and as the officer approached I, having had no prior experience with such things, started to get out of the car. The officer quickly had me get right back in, and we resumed in a friendly enough way from there.

Yes, I received the appropriate ticket. But I was not pushed up against the car and patted down to check for weapons.

But as we ought to know by now, and as every African American man well knows, had I been black – no matter rich or poor, no matter how many academic degrees – that might well have been how things had gone.

The young man in that blue sports car on Merritt Parkway had quite likely had “the talk” from his parents as to how to interact with the police, and to begin with how to avoid interaction with the police.

White privilege? You bet. But I – like anyone with a shade of skin something like mine – don’t even have to think about it. Whereas if your skin is of darker hue... you just might find it more difficult to get a loan... or a promotion... or a good education for your children... or a safe place to live... and on and on.

Now, why am I talking today about this ongoing issue and challenge? One reason is that in our own denomination we are currently in the midst of struggling with the remnants of white privilege and white supremacy, however unconscious it often is. Some of you have followed the recent train of events:

There was a position open for the “regional lead” in the southwest part of the country. Many applied, and a white, male minister was offered the position. Well, it turned out that a woman of color, Latina, who by all accounts was just as qualified for the position had been passed over.

Without going into the entire complex story (you can read all about it on the UUA web site), when this came to light, it resulted in the resignation of the president of our association, Peter Morales, as well as the chief operating officer, and then the appointment of a three person co-presidency to serve until the already planned presidential election this month. The three, all of them African American, are a former UUA president, a professor at one of our seminaries, and an eminent lay person.

Their charge is to begin the process of institutional self-examination of the roots of our Unitarian Universalist Association within the larger culture of white privilege and supremacy, and to help us move forward from there.

But what about each of us, and us as a congregation? What are we to do to come to terms with systems of white supremacy that continue to be at play (I mean, look at us and look at the town in which we are situated!).

What *is* to be done? What are we, those of us who are called white, who may consider ourselves white, meant to do?

First thing is simple: to learn to acknowledge that the first dimension of white privilege is this: In our daily lives and most of the time, we who are white don’t *have* to think much about any of this, we don’t have to think of ourselves as white, much less as privileged. Whereas our brown and black sisters and brothers can hardly avoid remembering the color of their – and our – skins.

Think about that: Supremacy? Privilege? Just feels normal if you’re on the privileged end of things – like the water in which we are swimming. But it is water in which a black man (or any person of color, or any immigrant, or anyone on the short end of the spectrum of class, or anyone who doesn’t conform to “acceptable” identity when it comes to gender or sexual expression, or anyone who is differently abled...) – can drown.

What else can we, white folks, do when it comes to the spectrum of race and color?

Near the end of his book *Tears We Cannot Stop: A Sermon to White America*, Michael Eric Dyson (New York Times columnist, Georgetown professor, and Baptist minister) has some suggestions, including educating ourselves through books and films, talking with one another about the realities of privilege and white supremacy, participating in rallies or marches having to do with dismantling racism and racist institutions, speaking up when the occasion arises, and in Dyson's words, "Make reparation" – in ways small or large find ways to give advantage to those who have been so long disadvantaged; can be as simple as a larger tip, or could be offering a leg up or better pay if we are in charge of hiring or salary recommendations, or could be contributions to organizations serving primarily African American kids or communities.

Finally? Dyson encourages those of us who are defined as white to develop empathy: To work on imagining what it would have been like to be a slave – or, now, disadvantaged because of the color of your skin, whether at work, in regard to educational opportunities, or seeking a loan, or fearing you could be killed simply for the "crime" of "driving while black."

Thoreau clearly had this sort of empathy. We can too.

Throughout all of this, I'll say once again that we must remember that for those of us who are white, even having a choice as to whether to engage in these ways or not... is part of white privilege.

In ways, then, small – and as often as possible large – may we bring our Unitarian Universalist faith and principles of love and justice to life by being among those who help to create what Dr. King called the beloved community of justice, equality, freedom, and peace.

Amen.