

WHITE FRAGILITY, INCLUSION, ACCEPTANCE & MULTICULTURALISM

PART I

The Journey--Seeing the Problem

Several colleagues had been telling me about Robin Diangelo's book, *White Fragility*, for some time before I decided to get a copy. That is the source for part of the sermon title, but back to that in a few minutes.

Having been born the child of a father who was raised Jewish and fought against the Nazis in World War II and a mother whose family was Catholic though she was mostly raised Methodist, and having grown up Methodist in the 1960s in the near western suburbs of Chicago, living through nearby race riots, campus unrest, the assassinations of JFK, RFK, Malcolm X, and MLK, and the Democratic Convention in '68, I have some history with active racism. When I came into Unitarian Universalism, my first settled ministry was in Southern California and I became very involved in the Journey Toward Wholeness program which had just been put in place at the UUA General Assembly in Indianapolis in June of 1996. The Journey Toward Wholeness program offered workshops which required white participants to confess their racism. Somehow as a liberal activist working to mitigate various isms including racism, that tactic never sat well with me. That I benefitted from being a white male, I always knew and readily admitted, but it felt like a big jump from white male privilege to active racism. I stayed involved with the JTW programs and the Jubilee World workshops for some time, but eventually stopped going to meetings. The JTW program mostly faded out as another not fully successful attempt to bridge the gap in Unitarian Universalism between black and white. There had been a previous attempt in the late '60s that became a spectacular failure when promised funding of \$1 million was cut, probably mostly due to budget shortfalls, but with the result that many Black UUs left the movement.

The JTW program resulted in Anti-Racist, Anti-Oppressive, Multi-Cultural or AR/AO/MC efforts including talk of viewing every program through an Anti-Racist, Anti-Oppressive, Multi-cultural lens. A separate UUA committee was created to assess the AR/AO/MC efforts of Unitarian Universalism. For several years, it seemed as though this obsession to be as AR/AO/MC as we could be dominated all other work within this movement. I don't think I ever disagreed with the need for this work so much as I disagreed that it should become the overarching priority that it seemed to become within Unitarian Universalism.

At the UUA General Assembly in Columbus, Ohio in 2016, a new program was supported which became BlackLivesUU. The UUA Board agreed to fund it with \$5.3 million over several years, partly in reparations for the cut funding in 1970. BlackLivesUU is for and is

run by persons of color who identify as UU, and it appears to operate with little accountability to the UUA. I think it is well-intended, but I would like to know more about what it offers than I have been able to find on its website. BLUU seems to operate as a group entirely separate from Unitarian Universalism except for its members identifying as UU. BLUU has its own resources, media, events, and worship experiences which are open with a few exceptions to all persons of color, but generally not whites. The rationale for excluding whites, which I mostly accept, is that persons of color need a safe space to deal with their own issues rather than also having to relate to whites.

So along with the AR/AO/MC efforts within UUism, and the creation of this new BLUU organization, we have the ever clearer and louder Racism from the White House. And then there is Robin Diangelo's book, *White Fragility*, which I have been reading. White fragility seems to encompass most of the responses by whites as we are called out on our privilege, racism, or superiority. Like the requirement within the Journey Toward Wholeness program that we confess our racism, I do have more than a little resistance to being expected to confess my White Supremacy. That I have enjoyed the benefits of white male privilege and that I continue to enjoy the benefits of a system that is inherently racist and to a great extent promotes white supremacy, I will more readily acknowledge. I am willing to go so far as to practice penitence for my continuing complicity in the system that does not merely allow, but too often encourages racism and white supremacy, but I am not yet willing to confess that it has ever been my choice to practice racism or white supremacy.

I remain troubled by the idea that racism is the most significant problem facing our movement, nation or world, but daily I am reminded how virulent a problem it is. The anti-immigrant rhetoric and the fear mongering over a caravan of poor immigrants seeking asylum due to the violence in their own homeland, in part caused by our national meddling, arises out of the same xenophobic and racist response to the other, to those who differ from us which underlies much of the racism in our own country.

Two other matters came to my attention this week that I want to mention in regard to the current climate around race in this country. The first hits quite close to home in terms of geography and religion. Our UU Congregation in Fresno was removed as a polling place for this week's election due to complaints following the June Primary. The complaints had to do with the presence of Black Lives Matter banners. The banners were well over the required number of feet away from the polling place, and no matter on the ballot had any correlation to the banners in any way that they could be construed as electioneering, but the local election official decided to remove Fresno UU anyway. A story in the Fresno Bee dated November 2nd in the digital edition describes the matter and the decision to move the polling place to another church. The Black Lives Matter signs had previously been vandalized, and this whole matter has been disturbing for UUs and for the black community. The complaints surely came from whites uncomfortable with the signs.

The other matter much in my thoughts was the murder of 11 Jews at the Tree of Life Temple in Pittsburgh. I was pleased to see several UUs Friday evening at the Solidarity Shabbat at Temple Israel. We all know that race is a non-scientific human construct created to justify division, and that the Jewish people has often been considered a separate race by those who have tried to destroy the Jews. Such was the case in Nazi Germany and so it is today for many Neo-Nazis and others who are seeking to control our nation and the world. I was pleased to see such a large gathering of people from the community at Temple Israel standing in solidarity with our Jewish sisters and brothers. That Neo-Nazis and others in our nation have found reasons to exhibit such hatred toward members of a Jewish community solely because they are Jewish is almost unimaginable in a free democratic nation. It took several days for me to even comprehend this new upheaval of what I thought were our national values. I remain almost speechless to see again this horror visited again upon my father's people, and now in the United States, not in the middle ages or even in the horrible wars of the 20th century, but in our time here.

These are the results of white nationalism, the venting of an anger that has been unleashed by Trump's rhetoric, an anger that has been simmering for a long time among those who eschew or fail to understand science, among those who blame liberals and Blacks and Latinos and immigrants and Muslims for taking jobs while they ignore the impact of automation and the greed of banks and corporations and the wealthy. This is the impact of replacing humanistic values with modern capitalistic consumerism. If you keep the populace happy with enough stuff and blame groups not in power when there are shortages then you can accumulate amazing amounts of power and wealth. When will they ever learn? When will we ever learn?

Our society is more divided even than during the 1960s, the era of Vietnam, the era of protests over Civil Rights, the era of Campus Protests. Long simmering racism, sexism, heterosexism, anti-Semitism, anti-education, and anti-immigrant feelings are being unleashed by Trump's fear-mongering rhetoric. I can't believe that he is either smart or evil enough to know what he is unleashing, but look at the results of his efforts. As much as he tries to make it appear as though he alone is making decisions, he brought with him a swamp full of political operatives that are unleashing an unbelievable amount of hate. We know he admires dictators, but what is his end-goal, what is he really trying to accomplish? He has gone beyond just the matter of gaining wealth because his latest lies appear to only increase his power if they are believed and it becomes clearer and clearer that his views do not benefit anyone other than himself and only in the matter of power.

Even in this time of multiple super-heroes, there is no super white-skin, blond-haired, blue-eyed Aryan race to benefit from this hate. There is no White race, just as there is no Black or Latino or Jewish race. We are all human, all homo-sapiens, all one species, with a variety of skin, hair, and eye colors. When we take action against one group, one skin color, one nationality, one religion, we only ultimately hurt ourselves, humans.

White Fragility is about protecting the illusion that our group is better than another group, that being white should offer privileges that ought not to be shared with Blacks or Latinos or GLBTQ persons or Muslims or immigrants. White Fragility is about protecting our wealth and power from an evil Caravan of bad people that will take over our country, our jobs, our womenfolk and leave us with nothing. Interesting that the only ones really trying to take things are the Republicans who want to take away health care, Social Security, and any other safety net protections. White Fragility is the effort to protect the status quo of white privilege at all costs. And white fragility involves actions and responses that are often unconscious, not well thought out, knee-jerk responses that protect the status quo.

We do live in a racist, sexist, homophobic society. Until the last election, I thought, hoped, believed that things were getting better, that we were closer to valuing and respecting all persons. The last 2 years have shown just how far we have yet to go in honoring the rights and values of all persons. I wish I could see it as just a step back for the two we had come forward, an anomaly rather than a full reassertion of the white straight male Christian paradigm of dominance. Perhaps the election Tuesday will reassert progress, but oh how easily we have been led astray by lies, so many lies, lies that tapped into hidden reservoirs of fear and hate.

Today we see the problem so much more clearly, and it can seem to be an insurmountable challenge. Today we recognize how much work yet remains and how far we need to go to become a society that respects all persons without regard to gender or the shade of our skin or the color of our hair or eyes. We have a chance to change the momentum on Tuesday, a chance to reassert the value of justice, compassion, law, and the Constitution. We have that precious opportunity to vote, and our votes may still make a difference. It may be the only thing that will make a difference.

Next week I will talk about being the change we hope to see, about doing what we can to make a difference! Until then, vote as if your life depended upon it, for well it may!

Shalom, Salaam, Blessed Be, Namaste, and Amen!