

White Privilege – January 15, 2006

The Rev. Suzelle Lynch, Unitarian Universalist Church West

(Reading used follows sermon)

I love Karen Katz's book "The Colors of Us." I asked Maria to tell that story today – and we used my daughter Grace's copy of the book to create the images projected on our big screen today. It's a beautiful book, with its brightly-colored illustrations. And I love that little adopted girl, Lena who is the color of cinnamon and her artist mama, who is the color of French toast. I love to walk with them through their world, admiring the many different kinds of brown, the multicolored beauty of the multicultural people in their lives. We have been reading that book to Grace since she was a toddler. It reminds me of a world I'd like to live in – a world where my interracial family is not unusual, a world where differences are seen but not denigrated, where people are appreciated for who they are, a world where there is at least a hope of true equality among persons.

That's the world I want for my daughter – the world I want for all of our sons and daughters. Not a color-blind world, where we pretend that differences don't exist, or a world where we focus on differences to empower some groups of people and exclude or oppress others – inadvertently or purposefully. With all the power of my love for my child, I want a world that recognizes and values diversity so highly that the people in it are willing to work, and work hard, for the kind of social change that takes generations.

It's the hope of that world, and my belief that we can help it happen, that has me here today to speak about things that may be difficult or embarrassing or possibly even guilt-inducing... It's the hope of that world that would have me invite you to stay with me, to not push away what I say if it begins to make you uncomfortable or if you find yourself doubting the truth of it. Because I believe that world is what so many Unitarian Universalists long for.

Tomorrow is a Federal holiday honoring Civil Rights leader the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. In a somewhat stereotypical fashion, I have nearly always chosen to preach on a subject related to racism or oppression on the Sunday before Dr. King's day. If he were alive, I don't know what he'd say about this. Perhaps he'd rather that preachers preach about peace or poverty today, since those also were a major focus of his work (and they are certainly not unrelated to race and oppression).

But today I want to talk about white privilege.

Several decades ago, one of the white scholars who broke the news to white people about white privilege was Wellesley College women's studies professor Peggy McIntosh, the source of our earlier reading. Here's another definition, this time from Kendall Clark, a Ph.D. student in Religious Studies at

Southern Methodist University and one of the creators of a website called www.whiteprivilege.com . White privilege: a right, advantage, or immunity granted to or enjoyed by white persons beyond the common advantage of all others; special freedom or immunity *from* some liability or burden to which non-white persons are subject. (*partial composite definition – see website for full definition.*)

Robert Jensen, a journalism professor at the University of Texas in Austin talks about white privilege this way in an article that first appeared in the Baltimore Sun some years ago (July 19, 1998). He wrote, “Here's what white privilege sounds like: I am sitting in my University of Texas office, talking to a very bright and very conservative white student about affirmative action in college admissions, which he opposes and I support.

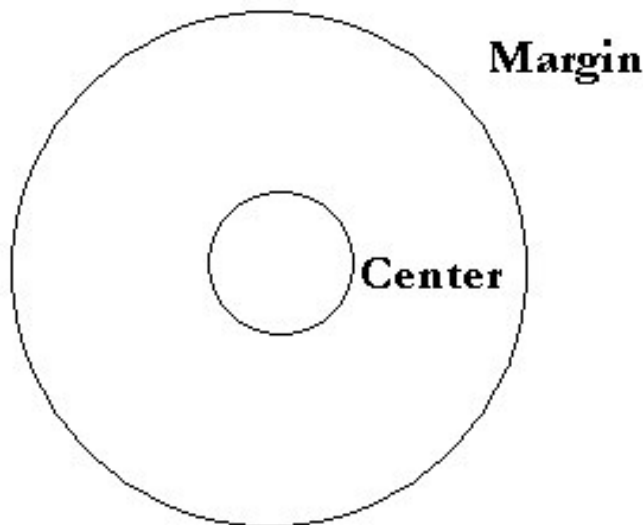
The student says he wants a level playing field with no unearned advantages for anyone. I ask him whether he thinks that in the United States being white has advantages. Have either of us, I ask, ever benefited from being white in a world run mostly by white people? Yes, he concedes, there is something real and tangible we could call white privilege.

So, if we live in a world of white privilege -- unearned white privilege – (I ask him) how does that affect your notion of a level playing field?

He paused for a moment and said, "That really doesn't matter."

That statement, I suggested to him, reveals the ultimate white privilege: the privilege to acknowledge you have unearned privilege but (to) ignore what it means.”

Some of us might wonder what “unearned” privilege means. Take a look at the cover of your order of service. See that simple little diagram – the two circles, one labeled “center” and the other “margin.”



All of us, as individuals, have things about us that tend to be valued by our culture – things that put us in the center – the sweet spot, if you will. For example, our culture values money, and many of us, I'd venture to guess that it's most of us in this room, have enough money to live on. Indeed, some of us have more than enough to survive – we have enough to buy luxuries like coffee at Starbucks every morning and a new car every couple of years. Heirloom-quality furniture for the living room, vacations to interesting places, and a college fund for our children. Wealth puts us in the center of the circle in our culture, and gives us the power to make choices, the power that comes with feeling comfortable.

Not having enough money – having to choose between buying diapers for the kids or paying the electric bill -- pushes us to the outer edges of the larger circle in our culture, and causes in us a feeling of having no choices, and little power.

What are some of the other things that confer power in our culture?

Education is one. Being male is another. Being tall, interestingly, is another. Being beautiful or handsome is another source of power in our culture. Not having physical disabilities. And of course, being the right age – neither too young or too old. Being of the majority race or religion or sexual orientation also confers power.

How many of you know what it is like to be part of an "in group" or an "out group"? Sometimes it's easiest to grab hold of this concept by thinking back to high school or middle school or even elementary school. For me, it becomes clear when I remember what used to happen to me in about third or fourth grade – there I'd be, standing on the playground during recess, or on the yellow wooden floorboards of the school gym; standing there and standing there, hanging my head, waiting and waiting and growing more and more embarrassed

as the two opposing dodgeball team captains alternated choosing players for their teams.

My husband has a funny t-shirt that summarizes this experience – right across the front it says, “Picked last in gym.” It’s funny when he wears it, because he’s a big handsome, athletic guy who was rarely picked last. I was a scrawny, physically awkward child and nearly always one of the very last to be chosen for any team. I was, in that aspect of life, pushed way out on the margin of the circle, and it hurt.

I tell you this not so that you’ll feel sorry for me – though you can if you want to – but rather, as a way for you to think personally about power and privilege. We mentioned some things that put people in the center of the circle – now I ask, when you were a child, what were the things in your life that made you marginal?

Perhaps you were a slow reader, or were poor at math. Maybe you had a lisp, or a last name that other kids made fun of. Or it might have been that your mom bought all your clothes at the Salvation Army. Maybe you were a boy who liked flowers or a girl who liked guns. Perhaps your family drove an old car. Or maybe you lived in an apartment when all your friends’ families lived in houses.

Now imagine that you have had to go through life with that thing, whatever it may have been, tattooed on your forehead. “Picked last in gym.” It’s the first thing anybody notices about you – right out there in plain view. (That’s what it can feel like when you’re not white – that the first thing people pay attention to about you is what our culture names as marginal). And not only that, but for the marginalized, the world is set up in a system that reads these tattoos as though they were barcodes. And the system either opens doors for you – doors to career opportunities, educational opportunities, housing opportunities, relationships – or slams them shut in your face.

Being white, though, circumvents the barcoded gate system. It functions like an additional, invisible, tattoo that the bar code readers of our culture interpret as the signal to open wide the gates to good things. It’s something that automatically confers entrance to the center of the circle. Automatically, without our having to do anything or be anything or learn anything or work hard -- that’s what “unearned privilege” means.

Robert Jensen, the Texas journalism professor, puts it this way: “White privilege, like any social phenomenon, is complex. (but) In a white supremacist culture, all white people have privilege, whether or not they are overtly racist themselves. ...”

He continues, “What does that mean? (In my case) Perhaps most importantly (it means), when I seek admission to a university, apply for a job, or hunt for an apartment, I don’t look threatening. Almost all of the people

evaluating me for those things look like me -- they are white. They see in me a reflection of themselves,... I smile. I am white. I am one of them. I am not dangerous. Even when I voice critical opinions, I am cut some slack. After all, I'm white."

(Jensen goes on) "My flaws also are more easily forgiven because I am white. Some complain that affirmative action has meant the university is saddled with mediocre minority professors. I have no doubt there are minority faculty who are mediocre, though I don't know very many. As Henry Louis Gates Jr. once pointed out, if affirmative action policies were in place for the next hundred years, it's possible that at the end of that time the university could have as many mediocre minority professors as it has mediocre white professors. That isn't meant as an insult to anyone, but is a simple observation that white privilege has meant that scores of second-rate white professors have slid through the system because their flaws were overlooked out of solidarity based on race, as well as on gender, class and ideology."

Some people cannot believe that the United States is still a racist society. But white folks have long cut other white folks a break. "I know," Jensen says, "because I am one of them."

Jensen acknowledges that he did not get where he is by merit alone. "That doesn't mean that I don't deserve my job, or that if I weren't white I would never have gotten the job," he says. "It means simply that all through my life, I have soaked up benefits for being white. I grew up in fertile farm country taken by force from non-white indigenous people. I was educated in a well-funded, virtually all-white public school system in which I learned that white people like me made this country great. There I also was taught a variety of skills, including how to take standardized tests written by and for white people."

We all have power – and for some of us, a portion of that power is unearned, and comes from white privilege. Yet we all feel powerless at times or in certain circumstances – some of us feel powerless quite often. That's part of what makes white privilege hard to understand.

I, like many of us who are white, share Robert Jensen's experiences. Would I even be here, standing before you as your minister, if I weren't white? I'll never forget a conversation I had with the wife of one of my UU clergy colleagues. He's a wonderful minister, and I truly admire him. I was telling his wife how good I think he is and how wonderful it is that the church he serves is doing so well. And she said to me, somewhat complacently "Well, Suzelle, he's always chosen to work for healthy churches." But you know what? He CAN choose healthy churches. He's the "gold standard" as far as UU ministers go: white, middle aged but not too old, Harvard-educated, heterosexual, no physical disabilities beyond a pair of glasses or two. Would his church have chosen him if he weren't white? He never has to think about this.

When we first encounter the concept of white privilege, it can be hard to accept. It makes me think of the time back in high school, when I got a coveted job working at a cookie store at my local shopping mall, beating out a number of my friends. One of them, a girl named Roxann, started a rumor that I got the job because I had done something improper with the store owner! I was outraged by the suggestion that I would actually do something improper – but even more so by the suggestion that to get that job or any job I would have to. I believed, as most white people do, that I got the job based on merit and hard work.

It's hard to let go of the myth that we operate as a meritocracy here in America, a system where those who are good and work hard get ahead, and those who are bad or lazy fall behind. But we must let go of this myth, for when we look at the evidence it is impossible to argue reasonably that those of us who are white are not benefitting simply from being white. What has always been hard for me to accept is that if we are benefitting, then that means people who are African American, Native American, Asian American, Latino or Latina, or multiracial are being penalized. It has been hard for me to accept my success is at someone else's expense. That for me to be on top means I am standing on top of another person.

But the facts are undeniable that the lives and cultures of people of color are valued less than white lives in this nation. Just taking a simple look at the way “benefits and harms are apportioned in the U.S. -- including wealth and income, equality of treatment in court and from police, access to colleges, universities, and even the political symbolism of state flags,” is persuasive, according to Kendall Clark. Another interesting, if grim, way to look at this has to do with the crimes for which the death penalty is given. Studies show that the death penalty is reserved primarily for those who kill white people. A recent study in California (“The California study, 'The Impact of Legally Inappropriate Factors on Death Sentencing for California Homicides, 1990-'99,') found that 80 percent of executions in California were for killers of whites, (even) though non-Hispanic whites make up just 47 percent of all Californians,... Those who kill whites are more than four times more likely to be sentenced to death than those who kill Latinos, and over three times more likely to be sentenced to death than those who kill African-Americans.”

http://justworld.typepad.com/perspectives/against_racism_and_oppression/index.html

So now that we know what we know about white privilege, what are we called to do?

For us as Unitarian Universalists, this is where the rubber meets the road, quite frankly. For as my colleague the Rev. Anita Farber-Robertson once wrote (*in a report to the UUA as co-chair of the UUA Racial and Cultural Diversity Task Force, in the 1996 report “Journey Toward Wholeness,” p. 39*): “For Unitarian Universalists, any behavior, any theology, which would shut people out, separate the saved from the unsaved, hold any persons as less than sacred, is wrong.

Our theological tradition has the potential of sensitizing us to dynamics of exclusion and dehumanization, allowing us to know that they are diminishing us all.” Knowing that white privilege is part of a system that shuts people out, holds them down, and works to convince them that they are unworthy, we are called to use the power white privilege gives us to change our culture, and to change our culture in such a way that our privilege is reduced.

This is counter-intuitive for many of us. Our job is to use our power to change our world so that we eventually have less power. This seems like a huge violation of the “American Way”, which is to get more power, especially in the form of wealth, anytime we can, isn’t it.

But if we want a truly level playing field, a truly multicultural world, we must recognize that white privilege gives us power to work for the greater good. We must use our power to give up power.

That means things like working for affirmative action, so that there will be more people of color in positions of power who can help give a leg up to still others. It means taking a chance to promote or mentor someone who may not look like us or act like us, too.

Using our power to give up power means listening to the voices of African Americans, Asian Americans and Native Americans, and to the Latina and Latino voices in our communities – as they speak not only about the beauty of their cultures, but also about the problems or blocks to greater success they might experience, and the kinds of solutions they would envision. And then it means working and giving under the leadership of the people involved to help put those solutions in place.

Using the power that comes with white privilege to share power with others means not dismissing what the media terms “black on black crime” as only the problem of those directly affected, but instead, remembering that we are all one human family, and we all are affected and must respond. And then listening to and empowering the ideas and solutions proposed by those who are directly affected.

Using our power to give up power also means being willing to lose, at times. I think of the corporation I worked for before I became a minister, and the money they used to spend doing neighborhood clean-ups and other short-term community service projects. What if, instead of using corporate profits that way, they had worked to pass laws or legislation that would help the people in those neighborhoods help themselves on a long-term basis? Usually the corporation lobbied to block such laws, because they inevitably meant higher taxes, and lower profits. But what if they had been willing to give up some of that wealth to work for the greater good? And I ask myself, if they had been willing to do this for the greater good, would I have been willing to work for a lower salary to help the corporation accomplish that same good?

These are the kinds of questions – systemic questions – all of us can ask, as well as doing the hard personal work of acknowledging how we who are white benefit from white privilege. And if we do these things, and we teach them to our children and our children’s children, one day, right here in America, we may see a brighter, more beautiful world, like the world of *The Colors of Us*. A world where differences are seen but not denigrated, where people are appreciated for who they are, a world where there is true hope of real equality for all persons.

In the words of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.: Now let us rededicate ourselves to the long and bitter -- but beautiful -- struggle for a new world. Shall we say the odds are too great? Shall we tell ... (our brothers and sisters) the struggle is too hard? Will our message be that the forces of American life militate against their arrival as full persons, and we send our deepest regrets? Or will there be another message, of longing, of hope, of solidarity with their yearnings, of commitment to their cause, whatever the cost? The choice is ours, and though we might prefer it otherwise we must choose in this crucial moment of human history.

May we choose, this day and every day, to use our power and privilege to lose our power and privilege for the greater good. It won’t be easy, and we may not see the promised land in our lifetime. But with all the strength of a mother’s love for her child, I tell you, it will be worth it.

Amen.

Reading

White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack

By Peggy McIntosh

<http://www.cwru.edu/president/aaction/UnpackingTheKnapsack.pdf>

Through work to bring materials from women's studies into the rest of the curriculum, I have often noticed men's unwillingness to grant that they are overprivileged, even though they may grant that women are disadvantaged. ...

Thinking through unacknowledged male privilege as a phenomenon, I realized that, since hierarchies in our society are interlocking, there was most likely a phenomenon of while privilege that was similarly denied and protected. As a white person, I realized I had been taught about racism as something that puts others at a disadvantage, but had been taught not to see one of its corollary aspects, white privilege, which puts me at an advantage.

I think whites are carefully taught not to recognize white privilege, as males are taught not to recognize male privilege. So I have begun in an untutored way to ask what it is like to have white privilege. I have come to see white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was "meant" to remain oblivious. White

privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools, and blank checks.

(For example)

1. (As a white person) I can if I wish arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time.
2. 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.
3. I can be pretty sure that my neighbors in such a location will be neutral or pleasant to me.
4. I can turn on the television or open to the front page of the paper and see people of my race widely represented (in ways that are positive or neutral).
5. When I am told about our national heritage or about "civilization," I am shown that people of my color made it what it is.
6. I can be sure that my children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence of their race.
7. Whether I use checks, credit cards or cash, I can count on my skin color not to work against the appearance of financial reliability.
8. I can be pretty sure that my children's teachers and employers will tolerate them if they fit school and workplace norms; my chief worries about them do not concern others' attitudes toward their race.
9. I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race.
10. I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group.
11. I can criticize our government and talk about how much I fear (or dislike) its policies and behavior without being seen as a cultural outsider (or a traitor).
12. If a traffic cop pulls me over or... the IRS audits my tax return, (or I am searched by the airlines before boarding a plane) I can be sure I haven't been singled out because of my race.
13. I can easily buy ... picture books, greeting cards, dolls, toys and children's magazines featuring people of my race.
14. My culture gives me little fear about ignoring the perspectives and powers of people of other races.

“White Privilege”

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15. I can worry about racism without being seen as self-interested or self-seeking.
16. I can take a job with an affirmative action employer without having my co-workers on the job suspect that I got it because of my race.
17. If my day, week or year is going badly, I need not ask (myself whether or not each negative episode had something to do with my race).
18. I can be sure that if I need legal or medical help, my race will not work against me.
19. I can travel alone or with my spouse without expecting embarrassment or hostility in those who deal with us.
20. I can wake up in the morning and not have to think about race.