

“Racism and Its Effects”

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Our world can be an intimidating place. Indeed, we all live in a hostile environment: classism, racism, heterosexism, ableism: we swim in a sea of isms. Racism is but one of many forms of oppression permeating our lives, both our social and inner psychological lives.

Audre Lorde names herself as “a black feminist lesbian mother poet,” Suzanne Pharr as “a community organizer and strategist, political educator, trainer, speaker, writer, and political handywoman.” Both defend the view that there is no hierarchy of oppressions. Sexism, racism, homophobia, ableism, anti-Semitism, and ageism are each terrible and destructive—and all connected. To eliminate one oppression successfully, both Lorde and Pharr write, a movement has to include work to eliminate them all. Otherwise success will always be limited and incomplete.

Recognizing that all oppressions are connected, I want to talk this morning about one in particular: *racism*. The Unitarian Universalist Association has made a committed effort, since 1992, to study how race has effected our movement—and us as members of that movement, and to take concrete actions to heal its corrosive effects.

From 1492 to today racism has had a central place in the American experience. Our own personal experience, included.

My earliest memories of race include driving downtown in my maternal grandfather’s Oldsmobile: “Lock your doors,” he’d say as we crossed 105th Street—and the faces suddenly became all black. There were images on TV and in the movies and in sports, from Stepin Fetchit to Jackie Robinson. Beginning at nine years old, I became very involved in YMCA swim meets, some against all black teams in poor all black neighborhoods.

I remember, too, my father telling dialect jokes. Lover of wordplay that he was, he told them in close to a dozen voices: Louis, Manfred, Juan, Gunter, Molly, Luigi, and of course Rastus. Racial stereotypes were reinforced. And I have to admit, with shame, we laughed.

There were other memories, too. Mom’s abhorrence of her father’s and sister-in-law’s racial slurs led, eventually, to her telling them off—and their cessation. Her decision, in the mid-sixties, to go back to work as an inner-city librarian had considerable racial dimensions. I also recall how every year my Dad helped Bessie, our once-a-week housekeeper, with her taxes. They’d choose a night when he was going to be in town, spend the evening sorting through all her papers together and complete her return. After they’d finished, he’d drive her home. One year—this was the early 60’s and I was twelve or thirteen—I was invited to come along. Deep into Hough—Cleveland’s ghetto—we drove; it was pretty run down and impoverished, but nothing was said, with Bessie in the

car, about locking the doors. Pulling up to her rundown row house, Dad escorted her in as I waited outside. When he came back a few minutes later he turned the car key, and looked at me pensively. Then he said “It isn’t fair, is it?”

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In her book *Learning to Be White*, UU Theologian and former Meadville-Lombard and Harvard Divinity professor Thandeka, describes a moment in everyone’s childhood when she or he is “inducted” into their racial group. James Baldwin and Maya Angelou write movingly of their inductions into blackness. This is true for everyone, but Thandeka’s focus is on how Euro-Americans “learn to be white.” She begins with personal accounts, like Dan’s:

In college during the late 1950’s, Dan joined a fraternity. With his prompting, his local chapter pledged a black student. When the chapter’s national headquarters learned of this first step toward intergration of its ranks, headquarters threatened to rescind the local chapter’s charter unless the black student was expelled. The local charter caved in to the pressure, and Dan was elected to tell the black student member that he would have to leave the fraternity. Dan did it. “I felt so ashamed of what I did,” he told me [as we dined together at a posh downtown restaurant], and he began to cry. “I have carried this burden for forty years,” he said, “I will carry it to my grave.”

Thandeka imparts many other stories, shared with her by Euro-Americans, of when and how they first learned—from their families and their peers—

1. to begin think of themselves as white; and
2. learned how to act and behave in ways that will keep them safely within this racial pale.

Euro-Americans who have no such memories, Thandeka believes, have simply forgotten them. Forgotten them—repressed them—because they tend to be *painful*. Like those of Dan.

Dan’s moral failure of nerve had brought on a loss of self-respect to be sure, but behind his moral failure was a very real and primal fear: *exile*. He learned to stifle himself in the face of ancient, collective feelings of being vulnerable and at risk within his own (racial) community. His tears revealed the depth of the compromise he made with himself rather than risk venturing beyond the socially mandated structures of proper “whiteness.” His tears were also the result of *shame*: the emotion expressed when a deep inner conflict is exposed. In the case of learning to be white, the inner conflict pitches self against self in an effort to stop feeling curious about or longing for cross-cultural community. Such feelings have to be blocked off in some way because one’s caretakers and immediate peer group deem them bad—literally, beyond the pale. Such feelings are real, however, altogether understandable, and (as I said earlier) painful.

As children we want—and *need*—love from our parents; we end up feeling compelled to begin separating ourselves from our own feelings in order not to be forsaken by our caregivers. We all go through this, but for some kids it's awful. Drawing on the work of Swiss psychoanalytic theorist Alice Miller, Thandeka's "learning to be white" stories reveal this inner "self-alienation" process as it takes root in our souls. I remember discovering Alice Miller in the 1980's and reading everything she'd written about how children blame themselves—never their caretakers—for not living up to abusive standards. We adjust, and learn all the rules and protocols in order to be accepted. As teens we may play with rebellion, but when as grown-ups we look around and recognize the true social and professional costs of flaunting such standards, most of us most of the time throw up our hands, bury ourselves in our work, and settle for the fact that this is just the way things are. Like child abuse, like violence against women, racism becomes internalized, and typically played out on the next generation. But the cost of adjustment is high: we become separated from our own feelings in exchange for a tenuous—and easily retracted—acceptance by the very folks who made us feel bad for having resonant feelings of connection to others in the first place.

So it is that racism exists *socially*, but internally too: *psychologically*. As socially constructed beings, with socially constructed identities, we internalize cultural forms until, all too often, we lose all but the faintest awareness of that still small voice within—with its true feelings and sensitivities. How do we liberate ourselves?

Liberal religion's efforts to confront and respond to the evils of white racism face many challenges. These challenges spring from longstanding tensions and ambiguities in our tradition, tensions and ambiguities highlighted by another UU theologian, Paul Rasor.

First there's the tension, in our tradition, between cultural accommodation and prophetic critique. History shows that the accommodating side has been the stronger of the two, and has blunted the edge of our prophetic witness. A related tension that contributes to the all too tepid liberal response to racial injustice is *social class*. By in large, middle-class churches (UU included) tend to emphasize individual self-consciousness, personal salvation, financial security, and an ethic of personal responsibility. UUs tend to think of ourselves (often correctly) as members of *the managerial professional class*, limiting our ability to engage social justice issues at a deep level, because overturning the existing system would be contrary to our interests. This danger persists even as we seek to become antiracist.

Another recurring tension in liberal theology is its ambiguity about spirituality. Ambiguity about spirituality, writes Rasor, "profoundly affects the ability of religious liberals to sustain a commitment to antiracist work." True enough, there are strands of Unitarian Universalist tradition explicitly grounded in mysticism and spirituality from the beginning. But by and large we've been more comfortable with analysis than with prayer, and come more out of our heads than out of our hands or our hearts. As Rasor notes,

Too many liberals fall into the trap of thinking that spirituality and rationality are somehow opposed to each other. But attending to the

spiritual dimension of our religious lives is essential if our antiracism work is to be effective because the evil of racism lies deeper than institutional structures and systemic power relations. It has a spiritual dimension that liberals often fail to recognize. As a result, despite our clearest analysis and noblest intentions, we sometimes fail to truly engage and call out the evil that holds us in our grasp.

These tensions and ambiguities have, over the past 200 years, rendered us less effective agents of racial justice than we might have been. Liberal religion's acquiescence to aspects of *Social Darwinism* and its general endorsement of *manifest destiny*—both seen in the 19th century as somehow promoting progress—can be seen today as racism couched in liberal values of scientific advancement and social-political progress. These tensions and ambiguities were there throughout the Civil Rights Movement. Arnold Westwood's sermons in the Cleveland Unitarian Church may have inspired my Mom, but they also led, a few years later, to his being fired. As legal scholar Anthony Cook sees it [*The Least of These: Race, Law, and God in American Culture*, 1997], the liberal-progressive coalition that emerged around the civil rights movement following the end of World War II disintegrated because it couldn't really deal with the deeper dimensions of racism. This happened in 1965, just as the Voting Rights Act was passed. As Martin Luther King and others said repeatedly, a law prohibiting discrimination wouldn't really do much unless poverty and classism were also addressed. But white liberals, as a rule, were unwilling to do this. They were afraid of King's new call for a radically inclusive coalition, and even more afraid of the explicitly race-conscious agenda of the black power movement.

I believe that liberal religion's inherent tensions and ambiguities will continue to limit our effectiveness in combating racism unless we recognize that racism poisons our hearts as well as our institutions. In other words, *we must attend to racism's spiritual dimensions*. For racism is not only a matter of institutional structures and social power disparities; it is also a profound *evil*.

This is a hard message for liberals to hear. Harder to hear than the moral claim that racism is wrong. Harder to hear than the anthropological claim that people have the capacity to create repressive institutions and do horrible things. These statements are true, of course, and represent the way we usually think about systemic evils. But I am saying something more. I am making a theological claim: *racism is a profound structural evil embedded deeply within our culture and ourselves*. It is a "power" in the biblical sense, an impersonal spiritual force that separates us—even non-racists, even antiracists—from the good we seek.

It is hard for liberals to talk in these terms because we have no real theology of evil and therefore no language or conceptual reference points adequate to the task. But any other approach, I believe, is insufficient. Treating racism as an evil, *a power that has us in its grasp*, also helps us keep in mind what we're up against. This doesn't mean thinking of racism as some kind of disembodied supernatural demon or anything of the kind. White racism is a cultural construct; it's an invention of human beings in specific historical

settings and social contexts. But to approach it as a human construct *and nothing more* misses its profound power over us. We are tempted to think it can be dismantled with the right motivation, proper analysis, and good programs. It will take all of these and more; but by themselves they are not enough.

This challenge reveals another ambivalence for religious liberals. As much as we say we want spirituality in our lives we are often reluctant to go very deep in search of it. This may be due in part to our traditional emphasis on rationality which, Rasor notes repeatedly, many of us erroneously place in opposition to spirituality. An added factor may be our implicit awareness that sustained spiritual practice can take us deep inside, exposing aspects of ourselves we may rather not see: ancient fears of exile from our caretakers, memories of shame, feelings of not being white enough, or good enough, or even loveable if we fail to make the grade expected of us by our caregivers and peers. Feelings that in Dan led to his tears. Feelings, according to Thandeka, that we all have had, and that are buried deep. Feelings that, only once they're remembered and brought to expression, can we begin to heal.

The dimensions of our struggle to end racism are vast and bewildering. We've been shaped by the very powers and structures we now want to dismantle. It is important to remember that *there is no biological basis for the racial categories we use*. Not only racism, but the category of race itself is a culturally and socially constructed concept. We were all unwittingly "cultured" into the racial identities we now carry. The fragmentation of our society produces a parallel fragmentation within our individual selves. Those of us who were educated into whiteness were educated into an alienated state of mind, a fragmented way of being in the world—alienated from our feelings and from one another. The same is true of those cultured into other racial identities. In a fractured society we all become fractured selves. We displace our frustration by beating up one another instead of reaching out—a strategy, almost invariably unconscious, which only makes matters worse. This is why the social transformation we seek requires spiritual transformation as well. Without it, our antiracism work becomes difficult to sustain or retreats into the safety of disengaged analysis or internal debate.

Hard inner spiritual work of this kind is exactly what our Multi-Racial Development Committee has been engaged in for the last four years. The profound success of our January 17 interfaith Martin Luther King service swelled the ranks of the Multi-Racial Development Committee. While this is undoubtedly a good thing, it also led the group away from the inner work it had been doing by engaging in a strategy of condemning racial episodes—at UC San Diego and elsewhere—and forsaking the sharing of personal stories. The issue is one of the heart—each person's heart—and won't go away until we are each one of us able to safely open our hearts, with all their contradictions and fears, to others. That's what churches do best, and that's what I hope the MRDC continues to focus on.

In a beautiful essay entitled "A Struggle to Inhabit My Country" Rebecca Parker, President of the Unitarian Starr King seminary in Berkeley, describes her own coming of age as a white person. "To come of age in America as a white person," she writes, "is to

be educated into ignorance. It is to be culturally shaped to not know and not want to know the actual context in which you live.” In her case, to not know anything about the many local Indian tribes living nearby her youthful home in Washington state, or what went on in their communities, or among the Chinese or Japanese or Spanish-speaking or African-American communities also in her midst. Her reeducation began with a near death experience that helped Dr. Parker realize what a small country she was living in—and began her quest to expand it by expanding her of sense self: to include people of all races, their stories becoming hers as well.

Paul Rasor, Thandeka and Rebecca Parker have all written passionately in support of covenant groups, small group ministries, and the like. These three Unitarian Universalist leaders believe in covenant groups because such groups are among the best venues for doing the inner spiritual and emotional work they all believe is critical if we’re ever to eliminate racism in our country *or* in our movement. Covenant groups enable this by providing a safe place for us to deconstruct our self-alienated identities and, with the help of others engaged in the same hard work, reconstruct more lively, loving, whole selves.

Covenant groups nurture connections beyond the trivial and superficial. Over time, congregations with strong covenant groups grow closer to one another and more trusting. And *more skillful in their social action initiatives* by not trying to solve everything at once. Trying to solve everything at once is impossible anyway, and can lead us to think we know the right possible outcome. Instead, responsible action involves creating conditions for continued struggle and for the possibility of creative change in the future. We need to dedicate our heads, hands, and hearts to this task. We need to find ways—like reenergizing our covenant groups, like maintaining a spiritual focus with our Multi-Racial Development Committee—to build and nurture communities that can sustain us. At their best, such communities, including our congregational community here at UUCCSM, can faithfully nurture an antiracist identity: an expanded, “bigger country” identity that can help us individually overcome isolation and alienation in an often hostile world.

So let it be. So let it be here. So let it be here today. And every day hereafter.

Shalom. Amen. Blessed Be.

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