

On Being Co-Conspirators – Not Allies

- a sermon compiled and presented by Dawn Daniels, UUFCM Minister

Sunday, October 15, 2017

Meditation

- by Rev. Karen Armina, a white minister in Wisconsin:

“The Quaker activist and songwriter, Carrie Newcomer, sings these words of encouragement: ‘Come on and look inside you - it’s the best place to start.’ The greatest revolution is a simple change of heart.’

We think we have to change all those things that are happening out there, and that change can happen as a direct result of our actions. And sometimes this is true. Especially in the arena of social change, where we need to very intentionally build momentum to create more just conditions.

But more often, I’m learning, true change happens only when we take the time and the risk of sitting with something hard. True change in the world is intimately related to our internal transformation, which is intimately related to our presence to ourselves.

Culture is simply everything that’s around us. At some point in our lives, we learn that there are other ways of being. Our human tendency is to think that ours is better than theirs. When we are white, thinking that ours is better is supported by the fact that our social and political systems have been built through the same frame through which we’re looking.

We learn that our way is the right way and the best way. Simply put, this is white supremacy culture.”

Reading

“A Brave and Startling Truth”

~ Maya Angelou

We, this people, on a small and lonely planet

Traveling through casual space

Past aloof stars, across the way of indifferent suns

To a destination where all signs tell us

It is possible and imperative that we learn

A brave and startling truth

And when we come to it

To the day of peacemaking

When we release our fingers

From fists of hostility
And allow the pure air to cool our palms
When we come to it
When the curtain falls on the minstrel show of hate
And faces sooted with scorn are scrubbed clean
When battlefields and coliseum
No longer rake our unique and particular sons and daughters
Up with the bruised and bloody grass
To lie in identical plots in foreign soil
When the rapacious storming of the churches
The screaming racket in the temples have ceased
When the pennants are waving gaily
When the banners of the world tremble
Stoutly in the good, clean breeze
When we come to it
When we let the rifles fall from our shoulders
And children dress their dolls in flags of truce
When land mines of death have been removed
And the aged can walk into evenings of peace
When religious ritual is not perfumed
By the incense of burning flesh
And childhood dreams are not kicked awake
By nightmares of abuse
When we come to it
Then we will confess that not the Pyramids
With their stones set in mysterious perfection
Nor the Gardens of Babylon
Hanging as eternal beauty
In our collective memory
Not the Grand Canyon

Kindled into delicious color
By Western sunsets
Nor the Danube, flowing its blue soul into Europe
Not the sacred peak of Mount Fuji
Stretching to the Rising Sun
Neither Father Amazon nor Mother Mississippi who, without favor,
Nurture all creatures in the depths and on the shores
These are not the only wonders of the world
When we come to it
We, this people, on this minuscule and kithless globe
Who reach daily for the bomb, the blade and the dagger
Yet who petition in the dark for tokens of peace
We, this people on this mote of matter
In whose mouths abide cankerous words
Which challenge our very existence
Yet out of those same mouths
Come songs of such exquisite sweetness
That the heart falters in its labor
And the body is quieted into awe
We, this people, on this small and drifting planet
Whose hands can strike with such abandon
That in a twinkling, life is sapped from the living
Yet those same hands can touch with such healing, irresistible tenderness
That the haughty neck is happy to bow
And the proud back is glad to bend
Out of such chaos, of such contradiction
We learn that we are neither devils nor divines
When we come to it
We, this people, on this wayward, floating body
Created on this earth, of this earth

Have the power to fashion for this earth
A climate where every man and every woman
Can live freely without sanctimonious piety
Without crippling fear
When we come to it
We must confess that we are the possible
We are the miraculous, the true wonder of this world
That is when, and only when
We come to it.

Sermon Reflection

So...let's come to it this morning.

What does it mean to be a people of courage? For those of you visiting with us, this has been the organizing question for our October worship services – each week we focus in on a specific aspect of this question.

The title for this message comes from a blog posting that followed the massacre in the Charleston AME church in the summer of 2015. The blogger, Rose Hackman, was reporting on a protest rally that took place following the shootings. Feminista Jones, a 36-year-old social worker and writer shouted into a bullhorn:

“I am not interested in white allies. What we need are co-conspirators,”. Her solemn audience cheered her on.

“The definition of ally-ship is to mutually benefit and support. Black people are not obligated to provide support to people who are dominant,” Jones said. “We are not working together on a mutual goal. My goal is to live. You don't have that same goal.”

Hackman notes that “the disparity in realities does not mean Jones wants to exclude white people from participating in rallies and civil action, quite the contrary. Jones wants more, not less.

“What I need is for people to come and work with us in the trenches and be there alongside us. It's not about being on the outside and saying ‘yes, I support you!’ It's about ‘not only do I support you, but I am here with you, I am rolling up my sleeves. What do I need to do?’”

Feminista Jones is not alone in her call. The call has been repeated many times since by people of color across this nation. A coalition of voices from our own Unitarian Universalist Association put out a call to action last spring for UU congregations “to look critically within our faith communities...for the ways racism, sexism, and white supremacy live.” This call to action took the form of asking congregations to disrupt the “business as usual” of their Sunday morning worship gatherings to conduct a “white supremacy teach-in.” **“White supremacy” is a provocative phrase**, as it conjures up images of hoods and mobs. Yet in 2017, actual “white supremacists” are not required in order to uphold white supremacist culture. Building a faith full of people **who understand that key distinction** is essential as we work toward a more just society in difficult political times.

Six hundred UU congregations responded to the initial call last spring and held teach-ins all across this land. As our congregational leadership had already committed in August 2015 to making anti-racism work a key focus of our social justice efforts, and we had already put some effort into better educating ourselves through readings, workshops, and the occasional sermon, we didn’t participate last spring. But today we are. This morning we are, at least for this brief time that we’re here together, going to sit with whatever uncomfortableness we may carry or protestations we may feel rising and summon the courage I believe our convictions require of us to **dig deeper, to face more fully** the truth and continued ramifications of whiteness in our culture. I believe that nothing will significantly change unless we can bravely address and overcome what activist Juliette Hampton Morgan termed “the fear of decent white people.”

Beloveds - this is our work to do.

So...for this morning I would like us to consider the words of Dr. Robin Diangelo from a piece titled: “11 Ways White America Avoids Taking Responsibility for its Racism: The Pernicious Impact of “White Fragility.”

<http://www.hopkinsmn.com/police/equity/pdf/11-ways-avoid-taking-responsibility.pdf>

She writes:

I am white. I write and teach about what it means to be white in a society that proclaims race meaningless, yet remains deeply divided by race. A fundamental but very challenging part of my work is moving white people from an individual understanding of racism—i.e. only some people are racist and those people are bad—to a **structural understanding**. A structural understanding recognizes racism as a default system that institutionalizes an unequal distribution of resources and power

between white people and people of color. This system is historic, taken for granted, deeply embedded, and it works to the benefit of whites.

The two most effective beliefs that prevent us (whites) from seeing racism as a system are:

that racists are bad people and

that racism is conscious dislike;

if we are well-intended and do not consciously dislike people of color, we cannot be racist. This is why it is so common for white people to cite their friends and family members as evidence of their lack of racism. However, when you understand racism as a system of structured relations into which we are all socialized, you understand that intentions are irrelevant. And when you understand how socialization works, you understand that much of racial bias is unconscious. Negative messages about people of color circulate all around us. While having friends of color is better than not having them, it doesn't change the overall system or prevent racism from surfacing in our relationships. The societal default is white superiority and we are fed a steady diet of it 24/7. **To not actively seek to interrupt racism is to internalize and accept it.**

As part of my work I teach, lead and participate in affinity groups, facilitate workshops, and mentor other whites on recognizing and interrupting racism in our lives. As a facilitator, I am in a position to give white people feedback on how their unintentional racism is manifesting. This has allowed me to repeatedly observe several common patterns of response. **The most common by far is outrage:** How dare you suggest that I could have said or done something racist!

Given the dominant conceptualization of racism as **individual acts of cruelty**, it follows that only terrible people who don't like people of color can commit it. While this conceptualization is misinformed, it functions beautifully to protect racism by making it impossible to engage in the necessary dialogue and self-reflection that can lead to change.

Outrage is often followed by righteous indignation about the manner in which the feedback was given. I have discovered (as I am sure have countless people of color) that there is apparently an unspoken set of rules for how to give white people feedback on racism.

The Rules of Engagement

After years of working with my fellow whites, I have found that the only way to give feedback correctly is not to give it at all. Thus, the first rule is cardinal:

1. Do not give me feedback on my racism under any circumstances.

If you break the cardinal rule:

2. Proper tone is crucial – feedback must be given calmly. If there is any emotion in the feedback, the feedback is invalid and does not have to be considered.

3. There must be trust between us. You must trust that I am in no way racist before you can give me feedback on my racism.

4. Our relationship must be issue-free – If there are issues between us, you cannot give me feedback on racism.

5. Feedback must be given immediately; otherwise it will be discounted because it was not given sooner.

6. You must give feedback privately, regardless of whether the incident occurred in front of other people. To give feedback in front of anyone else—even those involved in the situation—is to commit a serious social transgression. The feedback is thus invalid.

7. You must be as indirect as possible. To be direct is to be insensitive and will invalidate the feedback and require repair.

8. As a white person I must feel completely safe during any discussion of race. Giving me any feedback on my racism will cause me to feel unsafe, so you will need to rebuild my trust by never giving me feedback again. Point of clarification: when I say “safe” what I really mean is “comfortable.”

9. Giving me feedback on my racial privilege invalidates the form of oppression that I experience (i.e. classism, sexism, heterosexism). We will then need to focus on how you oppressed me.

10. You must focus on my intentions, which cancel out the impact of my behavior.

11. To suggest my behavior had a racist impact is to have misunderstood me. You will need to allow me to explain until you can acknowledge that it was your misunderstanding.

These rules are rooted in white fragility.

Their contradictions are irrelevant; their function is to obscure racism and protect white dominance and they do so very effectively. Yet from an understanding of racism as a system of unequal institutional power, we need to ask ourselves where these rules come from and who they serve.

Many of us actively working to interrupt racism continually hear complaints about the “gotcha” culture of white anti-racism. There is a stereotype that we are looking for every incident we can find so we can spring out, point our fingers, and shout, “**You’re a racist!**” While certainly there are white people who arrogantly set themselves apart from other whites by acting in this way, in my experience over 20 years this is not the norm. It is far more common for sincere white people to agonize over when and how to give feedback to a fellow white person, given **the ubiquitousness of white fragility**. White fragility works to punish the person giving feedback and essentially bully them back into silence. It also maintains white solidarity—the tacit agreement that we will protect white privilege and not hold each other accountable for our racism. When the person giving the feedback is a person of color, the charge is “playing the race card” and the consequences of white fragility are much more penalizing.

Racism is the norm rather than an aberration. Feedback is key to our ability to recognize and repair our inevitable and often unaware collusion.

In recognition of this, I follow these guidelines:

How, where, and when you give me feedback is irrelevant – it is the feedback I want and need.

Understanding that it is hard to give, I will take it any way I can get it. From my position of social, cultural, and institutional white power and privilege, I am perfectly safe and I can handle it. If I cannot handle it, it’s on me to build my racial stamina.

[...]

The above guidelines rest on the understanding that there is no face to save and the jig is up; I know that I have blind spots and unconscious investments in white superiority. My investments are reinforced every day in mainstream society. I did not set this system up but it does unfairly benefit me and I am responsible for interrupting it. I need to work hard to recognize it myself, but I can’t do it alone. This understanding leads me to gratitude when others help me.

In my workshops, I often ask the people of color, “How often have you given white people feedback on our unaware yet inevitable racism and did that go well for you?” Eye-rolling, head-shaking, and outright laughter follow, along with **the general consensus of “never.”**

I then ask, “What would it be like if you could simply give us feedback, have us graciously receive it, reflect, and work to change the behavior?” Recently a man of color sighed and said, “**It would be revolutionary.**” I ask my fellow whites to consider the profundity of that response. **Revolutionary**

that we would receive, reflect, and work to change the behavior. On the one hand, it points to how difficult and fragile we are. But on the other hand, [it points to] how simple taking responsibility for our racism can be.

Closing Words

“Be About the Work”

- by Andrea Hawkins-Kamper

May we see all as it is, and may it all be as we see it.

May we be the ones to make it as it should be,

For if not us, who? If not now, when?

This is answering the cry of justice with the work of peace,

This is redeeming the pain of history with the grace of wisdom,

This is the work we are called to do, and this is the call we answer now:

To be the barrier and the bridge,

To be the living embodiment of our Principles,

To be about the work of building the Beloved Community,

To be a people of intention and a people of conscience.

Resources

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/26/how-white-americans-can-fight-racism>

<https://www.uuworld.org/articles/black-hole-white-uu-psyche>

<https://www.uua.org/worship/words/reading/story-whiteness>

<https://radicaldiscipleship.net/2017/07/05/white-supremacy-overt-covert/>