

Sermon - Let's Talk About Whiteness

by Kevin Daum

Okay, I am a white man, and today I'm speaking to white people. Feel free to include yourself if you are white-passing, or even if some of your ancestors are white and you want to explore the white part of your identity. In honor of Memorial Day, I'll give you the Bottom Line Up Front. Today I'll be attempting to emphasize what I believe are three important responsibilities of white people, which are born of my own experience. They are **opening, listening, and changing**.

First, I invite us to **open**. I think this is the kind of opening that can feel like breaking, to quote the story for all ages we read moments ago (*Not My Idea* by Anastasia Higginbotham). I invite us to open up to the possibility that no matter how liberal and progressive our upbringing and current communities, we white people have all been socialized in a world that has repeatedly told us that we are better, smarter, more moral, and more deserving, and those messages have shaped our psyches in ways that can probably never be fully undone. This is called internalized dominance. We still harbor unconscious racist attitudes and occasionally engage in racist behaviors. I invite us to open to the realization that white supremacy culture exists, that we're largely unaware of it, and that we've largely accepted it. This is where we'll spend the bulk of our time today.

Next, I invite us to **listen**. We can engage within and across racial differences, inviting other whites and people of color to give us honest feedback on how we're showing up and how we've affected them. We can listen without offering justifications, and take what others say to heart. This is probably the most difficult step.

After that, I invite us to **change**. We can commit ourselves to continually doing our own work, being self-reflective, noticing how we show up and affect others. We can form relationships characterized by mutuality. And we can engage within and across differences to dismantle racist structures wherever they exist, starting with our own organizations and institutions. As white people, dismantling racism is our responsibility. I'll say that again: **dismantling racism is the responsibility of white people**. Modern racism was invented by white people to benefit white people, and it has been doing so for at least four centuries.

As an example, just to get us thinking about where the rubber meets the road: we're about to hire a new minister. If we are not reflective on how race affects our impressions of candidates, we will reproduce the racist dynamics that we've been socialized into. We'll end up thinking the person that is more similar to us is the better "fit." It's our responsibility to ensure we engage in a fair hiring process, and that requires us to make conscious our unconscious biases. Let me emphasize: I don't think shame is a useful tool in this work. We all have biases. We're human. Please don't shame yourself or someone else for them. Start with where you are.

Okay, let's talk about whiteness. At the start, I acknowledge that sometimes conversations about race can feel like walking on thin ice, or through a haunted house at Halloween. You never know when you're going to make a wrong turn that'll get you into trouble. When something is hard, you can go ahead and call it work. Conversations about race are part of the work of racial justice. I'm not here to convince you that it gets easier, but I hope to start to convince you that it's worthwhile.

As Sarah Stewart wrote in the story that Andrea read for us, "whiteness is not an ethnic group, a cultural group, or a nationality." So what is it? Whiteness, and race in general, are social constructs with real consequences. Paul Kivel calls whiteness "a powerful fiction enforced by power and violence. Whiteness is a constantly shifting boundary separating those who are entitled to certain benefits from those whose exploitation and vulnerability to violence is justified by their not being white."¹ Let's compare Kivel's definition with some examples. Bell, Funk, Joshi, and Valdivia, writing about the beginnings of the United

States, write “racial categorization and hierarchy evolved hand in hand to define some groups as inherently superior (those who were white/light skinned) and other groups as inferior (those with darker skin). This idea meshed well with a colonial and revolutionary system that espoused principles of equality and rights but had to rationalize the enslavement of human beings.” Yes, Kivel’s definition checks out here; slavery is the epitome of exploitation and vulnerability to violence.

Half a century later, Irish, Italians, and people immigrating from eastern European countries were not considered white. They were regularly discriminated against. You may have heard of signs hung on shop windows stating, “No Irish need apply.” Again, Kivel’s definition checks out. Eastern European immigrants experienced job discrimination. This was the case until, in the years following the Civil War, when freed slaves began migrating north, those newer European immigrants found common cause with other light-skinned people in their discrimination towards African Americans. They sacrificed their cultural heritage in order to be counted as white.

Finally, as we heard in Stewart’s story, as late as the 1920s, if you weren’t born in the U.S., you had to prove you were white in order to become a citizen and own property. Again, Kivel’s definition applies: only immigrants who could prove they were white could own property and start building wealth for themselves and future generations.

These are just a few of many examples of ways in which whiteness was defined in such a way as to provide benefits to some at the exclusion of others. For more examples, check out the list of resources included in your order of service, especially *Uprooting Racism* by Paul Kivel.

It’s at this point that I want to give you all a chance to interact with today’s topic. First, a question for you: are you white? Paul Kivel writes, “If, when you move down the streets of major cities, other people assume, based on skin color, dress, physical appearance or total impression, that you are white, then in U.S. society that counts for being white.” But some of us who are read as white resist the label. Why is that?

I’m going to give you a couple questions to discuss with a neighbor or, if you prefer, to journal about on your own. I’m not going to ask you to report out to the larger group. There are some papers and pens up front. You can start talking as soon as ring the bell. Here’s the prompt: What parts of your identity does it feel like you lose when you say “I’m white?” If you don’t identify as white, you can respond to this: What parts of your identity are hidden until someone gets to know you? I’ll call us back together in two minutes. Since you only have a couple minutes, watch the time to ensure you both have a chance to speak. (Ring bell)

Another way of looking at whiteness is through the lens of the culture that has been created by it. Tema Okun has written a marvelous piece on characteristics of white supremacy culture and their antidotes, including an introduction to how culture operates, that I highly suggest you check out. It’s listed at the bottom of your list of resources. This will provide the prompt for our next discussion question. Okun’s characteristics of white supremacy culture are “Perfectionism, a sense of urgency, defensiveness, valuing quantity over quality, worship of the written word, belief in only one right way, paternalism, either/or thinking, power hoarding, fear of open conflict, individualism, belief that I’m the only one (who can do this ‘right’), the belief that progress is bigger and more, a belief in objectivity, and claiming a right to comfort.” Take a minute to take in the list (it should be on the screen), then turn to a neighbor or your paper and make some quick observations on which of these characteristics are especially ingrained in your own ways of thinking and behaving. I’ll call us back together in three minutes. (Ring bell)

I hope that last discussion question helped us get a handle on *why* it matters to talk about whiteness. One good reason is to start to grasp the costs of racism to us as white people. That conversation can help white people find self-interest in anti-racist work, which is important for maintaining authenticity and endurance in the work. I remember the first time I saw Okun’s list, I saw myself *all over it*. I’ve suffered from perfectionism, a sense of urgency, a fear of open conflict, a belief in only one right way, and a belief in objectivity most of

my life. I also picked up worship of the written word, paternalism, dualistic thinking, power hoarding, and a belief that progress is bigger and more from most of the institutions I've been a part of, and especially from Christian churches. These characteristics do *not* lead to healthy institutions or healthy people.

I've felt this cost personally. I carried these white cultural characteristics into my anti-racism work, with detrimental consequences for myself and my family. When I first became active in anti-racist efforts, I felt that, as a white person, I didn't deserve to take any breaks or pace myself. Sense of urgency and quantity over quality, right? I also felt I had to be perfect. I couldn't accidentally recreate any racist dynamics, or I'd be doing more harm than good, right? In addition to perfectionism, that's manifesting a belief in only one right way and a fear of conflict. Long story short, I put far too much pressure on myself and burned myself and my family out multiple times.

Our Unitarian Universalist principles also help us understand why it's important to interrogate whiteness. Our first principle calls us to recognize the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Of course, we as white people need to recognize that people of color have just as much worth and dignity as us. However, we also need to recognize our own worth and dignity, which becomes more difficult the more we learn about the history of white people using their control of systems to advantage themselves at the expense of people of color. Perhaps this is part of what James Baldwin was getting at when he said, "White people in this country will have quite enough to do in learning how to accept and love themselves and each other, and when they have achieved this – which will not be tomorrow and will not be today and may very well be never – the Negro problem will no longer exist, for it will no longer be needed."

Our second principle pushes us to work for justice, equity, and compassion in human relations. Equity requires us to give each person what they need, rather than giving everyone the same exact thing. It's hard to make a case for equity in race relations without understanding the history of racism and whiteness.

Our sixth principle encourages us towards the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all. I don't think such a Beloved Community is possible without people who are comfortable talking about, respecting, and celebrating our differences. Until we can acknowledge our whiteness and the historical legacy that comes with it, we cannot truly be in community with people of color. In my experience, simply signaling the people of color you know that you are willing to talk about how race affects their life and your relationship will lead you to a level of depth in your relationship that would have been impossible without that invitation.

Even the seventh principle is at play here, because one of the historical legacies of racism is the exploitation of natural resources for the enrichment of wealthy white folks, from the cotton plantations of two centuries ago to the Dakota Access Pipeline today. I believe respect for the interdependent web of all existence calls us to work for a world in which all people with connections to the land and its resources have a say in what happens with it.

The final reason I'll give today for talking about whiteness is that, as white people, ending racism is our responsibility. When talking with Krista Tippett for an episode of *On Being*, writer Eula Bliss said, "*The state of white life is that we're living in a house we believe we own but that we've never paid off.*" European settlers built our country on the genocide of the indigenous population, the theft of their land, and the enslavement of Africans. White people are still benefiting from that theft of life, land, and labor. We white folks have to figure out practical ways to share what we have, and maybe even experience Beloved Community as a result.

But white folks can't get serious about reparations if they're still getting defensive when someone merely points out the fact that they have white privilege. Having conversations about whiteness is one way we can each help the white folks in our lives gain some stamina so we can move beyond Racism 101 and start looking for real solutions.

Okay, I want to end with some lessons I've learned about listening and changing.

First, whites need to show up and be vulnerable. When we, as white people, show up in anti-racist work thinking we're good allies and we know what to do, no one is better for it. We're not in a position to grow. On the other hand, if we show up vulnerable, as the messy, imperfect human beings that we are, we are ripe for change. And that vulnerability helps us connect with other white people and call them in to the work along with us.

Second, it's liberating to gather with other white people and admit to racist attitudes and behaviors. I wrote a blog post about this a couple years ago, after watching the video that Dawn showed us in which Jay Smooth compared unlearning internalized racism to dental hygiene. What I found in a circle of supportive, anti-racist white folks, was that there were many ways I participate in racism that I hadn't even understood as such. We can't do this work alone.

Third, elitism and purity are unhelpful. You will find self-righteous activists who will delight in pointing out all the ways your work is problematic, especially if you spend some time on social justice twitter. Please don't be one of these people. It's important to stay open, to listen to criticism, to be accountable to others, and especially to people of color. And if someone invites your critical feedback, by all means, be honest, with love. But something Evangeline Weiss said at a training I was a part of has stuck with me: there are as many ways to do anti-racism work as there are people doing it. We need everyone in the game. So, if you receive unsolicited criticism of your anti-racist efforts from another white person, just ask that person to help you make it better. You'll find out how much they really care.

Finally, be gentle with yourself. Pace yourself. Don't let guilt prevent you from doing the work. Don't try to solve every problem at once. We can't dismantle centuries of racism overnight. Love yourself, as Baldwin invited us to. This is long-haul work, work that I believe is critical for the survival of the human race. Let's *open, listen, and change*.

Shalom and salaam, blessed be, and amen.