

Crossing into Braver Space
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I have a confession to make. I am a Facebook coward. I happily become friends with like-minded people, and I amplify items that are humorous or have a social justice message that reflects my values. Rarely do I write an original post. Even my choice of emoji has a very small range: “Like” or “Love.” The groups I belong to are reading groups, religious organizations like my local UU and the local Buddhist sangha, professional organizations, academics, glass paperweights, and other “safe” groups. When a “friend” posts a racist statement, I don’t confront that friend—I merely unfriend them. Am I private or merely cowardly? I suspect the latter. I am also rather useless when it comes to spreading messages of social justice directly on Facebook or other social media.

A member belonging to one of my safe Facebook groups recently posted a photograph of a luxury train car that was in service in the 1880s. It had plush velvet seats, veneered polished wood trimmings, the finest chandeliers, and first-class service. There was quite a bit of ooh-ing and aah-ing in the replies. Some of these railroad cars have been restored and are the stuff of museums today. But my immediate reaction was to think of Ida B Wells—Ida B Wells, who purchased a first-class train ticket in 1883 to travel from Memphis Tennessee to Woodstock, where she worked as a schoolteacher. She settled in her plush seat and all was well until the conductor—a white man—came down the corridor and asked for her ticket. Even though she duly showed him the first-class ticket, he told her to move out of first class to the front car of the train—the car that collected the smoke from the train’s engine. This car also held the rowdy male drunks and smokers and was not a place for “ladies.”

Ida B. Wells refused, and when the conductor tried to forcibly remove her from her seat, she braced herself with her feet against the seatback in front of her and even bit his hand when he wouldn’t let go of her. It required the help from the baggageman, another employee and two white male passengers to forcibly pry her out of the seat.

Not to be outdone, Ida B. Wells sued the Chesapeake, Ohio and Southern Railroad Company for violating the Equal Accommodation Statute. She won the case and the court awarded her the hefty sum of \$500. The Tennessee Supreme Court overturned the verdict and she was forced to pay the court fees. Using her pen instead of her teeth, she continued to fight racial injustice and racial violence for the rest of her life.

Social media are swamped with historical accounts of events that ignore injustices to blacks, not just under slavery and during Jim Crow, but to this day. The construction of Central Park in its perfect rectangle in the middle of Manhattan was accomplished partly by taking the land of Seneca Village by means of eminent domain and dispersing its more than 250 black homeowners. The graves of their loved ones remained behind and their markers disappeared.

A social media post about Seneca Village and the injustice done to its occupants immediately elicited a comment that the Irish were also mistreated in 19th century American society. Yes, but they were not the occupants of Seneca Village, and the graves we walk over in that area of Central Park are those of black people. So are the unmarked graves of slaves in popular tourist attractions like Mount Vernon, the plantation owned by George Washington, and those in countless other locations.

And when Chicago's mayor—who is black—stated in an interview a few days ago that blacks in Chicago make up the majority of Covid-19 victims, there was an immediate condescending response on Facebook that the virus does not recognize race, that its spread is merely geographical. Then why is it that 70% of Chicago's victims are black even though they comprise only 30% of the population? Why indeed? For one thing, disproportionately more of essential workers are black. Moreover, wearing a protective face mask or scarf when you are a black man carries with it the risk of being seen as someone who is about to commit a crime and could be shot, rather than as a person wearing a protective device.

So, when I saw that photograph of the plush railroad car of the 1880s, I could not help but step out of my protective cowardly Facebook shell, and I posted a response that read "Whites only, I'm sure." Within minutes, I was barraged by a set of vicious and admonishing responses, ranging from "that reply is inappropriate for this group" to accusations that I don't understand that this has nothing to do with race, only money. Don't I understand that these railroad cars were to be used or even purchased by people who were rich, and that this had nothing to do with one's skin color? Some responses even listed points, as 1-2-3, explaining that it was simply personal wealth that made it possible to travel in such cars.

Those 1-2-3 explanations demonstrated a continued willingness by some to whitewash our history and to consider wealth and conspicuous spending as a sign of personal accomplishment, without considering how ill-gotten that wealth may have been. My immediate reaction was to hide, leave the group, perhaps even leave Facebook altogether. Then I reflected on it and decided not only to stay, but to post more such responses and reflections, not fewer. It was time for me to cross into braver space. Where Rudyard Kipling talked about the "White Man's Burden" in the infamous poem, we can talk today about ways in which we can address our Racism: the white person's burden. There's work to be done if we are going to confront and acknowledge much of the whitewashing of our nation's racist history.

Our seven UU covenantal principles commit us to value the worth and dignity of *every* person, to accept one another and to act with justice, equity and compassion, with the goal of a world community in which there is peace, liberty, and justice for all. This commitment also implies a willingness, nay, a requirement to confront our racist history and racist society today. The proposed 8th UU principle, drafted by BLUU—Black Lives of Unitarian Universalism—calls us to actions that "accountably dismantle racism and other oppressions in ourselves and our institutions."

On social media, then, let us grow our edges and step into a slightly braver space, where we identify and name historical racial injustice. Instead of just visiting the magnificent plantations that were built and run with slave labor, and where we walk over unmarked graves of slaves, let us envisage going to the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture. When walking in Manhattan's Central Park, let us show our children the marker where Seneca Village once stood. And let us lament the sad reality that a black man in Chicago may have to forego wearing a protective mask during the Coronavirus pandemic, so as not to be mistaken for a criminal. Let us cross into braver space together.

May we make it so.

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