

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York
“Freedom and Fulfillment through Letting Go”
October 11, 2015 Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore

Call to Celebration

I doubt any of us would like to be called a racist. Yet many of us of every color remain bound in a deeply racist society. Worse, to avoid the discomfort of witnessing it in action, many of us prefer to look the other way.

Waking up to this reality for those designated by the system ‘white’ can be very unpleasant. People who are designated non-white hit this reality involuntarily at an early age. Guilt about what white people have done to non-whites drives their fear of being held accountable for their participation, accrual of benefits and for the sins of their ancestors. Or, if they are willing to acknowledge the cruel and unjust history of oppression by whites, figuring out what to do to dismantle such a pervasive system of power and control immobilizes them with confusion.

Bad as this is, I want you to know that there is a lot of good news today for both oppressor and oppressed. Historians comprehend how this system developed with increasing clarity. They understand the motivations and the vulnerabilities that allowed the oppressive dynamics to take hold. And reformers are developing more and more effective strategies to dismantle them.

The best news is working to end systems of oppression is a path to freedom and fulfillment for everybody. The most powerful tool in the toolbox for building a better society is not revenge. It is not grounded in punishing or harming. It isn’t hobbling people with shame and guilt. The most powerful tool in building a better world is the love discovered when we begin to let go of the attitudes, habits and attachments of privilege.

And one of the best places to learn to begin to let go of the attitudes, habits and attachments of privilege and to love people who are different from you is right here in a Unitarian Universalist congregation.

And by standing here, in the light of day, though the storm of hate may rage around us, we will not fear it. Our love and the warmth of our community can resist that hate and not let the cold bother us ... anyway. (see last verse of song “Let It Go” from the movie “Frozen”)

You are in the right place this morning, as we join together in the celebration of life.

Reading

From "8 Reasons to Hate Columbus Day" by Aaron Sankin (Daily Dot 10/13/2014)

Why hate Columbus Day? Here are 8 reasons:

1. Christopher Columbus was terrible

It's become pretty cliché at this point to note, but Christopher Columbus was a terrible human being...After sailing to the new world, Columbus didn't really seem to care very much about establishing trade routes or interacting with foreign cultures. Instead, he saw some of the natives wearing gold jewelry and made it his life's mission to kill and enslave as many of them as possible to steal as much of it as possible.

2. Christopher Columbus didn't actually discover America

The first human beings to "discover" America were the nomadic tribes who crossed over the land bridge in the Bering Strait from Asia into what is present day Alaska and whose ancestors then settled the continent. ... Approximately 500 years before Columbus stumbled onto the New World, Viking explorer Leif Erickson was blown massively off course while sailing from Norway to Greenland and landed in the place he called "Vinland" due to the presence of naturally-growing grape vines.

3. Christopher Columbus didn't actually prove the Earth was round

At the time when Columbus sailed the ocean blue, very few people actually thought it was possible to fall off the edge of the Earth. All the way back in 240 B.C.E., Greek astronomer Eratosthenes proved that the Earth was round using science.

4. Even the origin of Columbus Day is horribly depressing

Starting in the late 1800s, a wave of Italian immigrants started coming to America. Instead of welcoming them with open arms, much of the country reacted with revulsion ... In 1891, one of the largest mass lynchings in American history took place in New Orleans after nine Italians were acquitted of murdering the city's police chief. An angry mob decided to drag them from their jail cells, along with a pair of other Italians who were being held on unrelated charges, and lynched them all.

In the early 1900s, leaders in the Italian-American community [and] the Knights of Columbus, pushed to get the government to honor Columbus Day as a way to convince Americans to stop being so racist toward Italians.

5. No one actually celebrates Columbus Day

6. We're lionizing the wrong European explorer

... The Oatmeal creator Matthew Inman proposed a different hero from that era: Bartolome de

las Casas. De las Casas was a 16th Century Spanish writer, Dominican friar, and activist for the cause of Native American rights. One of the first European explorers to ever come to the Americas, de las Casas tried and failed to create a model state practicing a less exploitative form of colonialism in Venezuela. Afterward, he became a monk and spent the rest of his life decrying slavery and arguing vigorously in favor of universal human rights for Native Americans. He was appointed to be the first "Protector of the Indians" by the Spanish court.

7. Election Day would be a much better holiday for everyone to get off

Or finally, 8. just [change it to] Indigenous Peoples Day

<http://www.dailydot.com/politics/columbus-day-is-terrible/>

Sermon

I don't expect I'm going to have to go to great lengths to convince this congregation just how bad Columbus was, even if we contextualize him to his times. Historians like Howard Zinn and the book 1493 by Charles Mann expose just how wretched the guy was. A little more from Aaron Sankin's article I quoted gives you the flavor of the man:

On his return trips to the Americas, Columbus forced the natives to continually bring him gold. When someone brought him gold, he gave the person a little pendant to wear around his or her neck, which exempted that person from needing to bring him more gold—at least for a little while. The freedom granted by that pendant would eventually expire and, if a native didn't bring Columbus more gold, he'd cut off a hand and make the native wear it around his or her neck.

Add to this his initiation of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. [Writes Jack Weatherford](#)

After he failed to contact the emperor of China, the traders of India, or the merchants of Japan, Columbus decided to pay for his voyage in the one important commodity he had found in ample supply -- human lives. He seized 1,200 Taino Indians from the island of Hispaniola, crammed as many onto his ships as would fit, and sent them to Spain, where they were paraded naked through the streets of Seville and sold as slaves in 1495. Columbus tore children from their parents, husbands from wives. On board Columbus' slave ships, hundreds died; the sailors tossed the Indian bodies into the Atlantic.

Now we can look back in horror at stories like this, as we should, but we also need to contextualize the normative nature of slavery in human history. The ideal of liberty for all is a fairly new innovation around three hundred years old. Slaves haven't ever been fond of slavery of course, but social movements to outlaw it didn't start until the eighteenth century. There were spotty examples of banning slave trade like Buddhist king Ashoka who banned

slavery 2300 years ago in what is now India, but Protestant Europeans didn't start banning it until the end of the 1700's.

Before that, the Viking raiders captured and sold slaves. Italians headed up to the Caucasus to find barbarians to grow sugar for them in Crete and Cyprus. Of course the Romans and Greeks took Celts and Gauls as slaves during their conquests. What is important to know about this period is slaves were mostly white folks, especially those from Eastern Europe around the Black Sea. There was nothing unusual about being white and being a slave.

That started to change in the seventeenth century in Virginia. The plantation owners had an enormous amount of available land to farm and not enough people willing to do it. The English had three ideas of labor: the wage laborer, the indentured servant and the slave. Any Englishman who wanted land could farm for themselves and were uninterested in being a day laborer for someone else. Indentured servants were used at first but there were just not enough of them and their term of service was limited. Much of the early laborers were indentured, even some of the early Africans who earned their freedom and started their own plantations. In Europe, historically people became slaves through war and cross border raids. The captured slaves often had differences in appearance and language from their owners made it easy for the owners to see them as less than them and demean them. Africans, whose skin color, hair and faces were very different looking, easily fit their image of a people suited for negative bias.

The term "white" appeared in the middle 1600's after the Bacon Rebellion that saw European and African folks finding common cause against the plantation owners. The owners figured out a way to divide the Europeans from the Africans by giving the Europeans an inch more privilege. Their basis for this was religious and feudal. Remember this was a time when kings still ruled by divine right. The owners appealed to the divine hierarchy of king, aristocrat, artisan, peasant and serf, the equivalent of a slave. They subjugated Africans and slightly elevated the poor Europeans, giving them a power differential over the African slaves and then identified them as "whites." It was the old story of divide and conquer and it worked to bring the new whites into collusion with the owners. So even if a white person was a slave, he or she would be subject to slightly better treatment and conditions.

This division strategy worked so well to pit the poor whites against the enslaved blacks that it was replicated throughout European colonies around the world giving privileges to one group that was a minority and discriminated against the majority group. The privileged status locked them in as vassals who wouldn't turn against their overlords, for fear of losing their privileges, and being vulnerable to reprisals by those they oppressed. The Hutu's and the Tutsi's are examples of this strategy in Rwanda to disastrous later result.

What complicated this new whiteness designation was the American Revolutionaries' idea of liberty they were spouting off about. Their natural right to liberty permitted them to separate from England, they proclaimed. But just who was going to get to be free? While racial

prejudice was long held by Europeans against Africans, declaring the universal principle of liberty for some people and not others required some explaining. The idea of one race being superior to another became the way to justify it. The increasing demand for sugar and cotton needed by the distilleries and mills demanded cheap labor that slavery provided. To preserve the union, the new constitution permitted slavery by dehumanizing dark skinned people through counting them as three fifths of a person.

This whiteness didn't just separate Europeans from Africans and Indigenous Peoples. Not everyone who was European qualified as white. Jews, Catholics, Irish and Italians didn't make the grade and suffered exclusion. This was because it a time of enthusiasm for classifying and ranking races. One way it was being done was by studying people's skulls and facial features. Darwin's discoveries of evolution only fanned the flames to rank people racially.

In my research on whiteness this week, one of my most disappointing discoveries was finding out how racist Ralph Waldo Emerson was. Now you need to understand supporting abolition of slavery didn't mean Emerson might see slaves as equals. In fact, he held in contempt the Irish laborers that lived near him. In 1829 he wrote:

I think it cannot be maintained by any candid person that the African race have ever occupied or do promise ever to occupy any very high place in the human family. Their present condition is the strongest proof that they cannot. The Irish cannot; the American Indian cannot; the Chinese cannot. Before the energy of the Caucasian race all other races have quailed ...

Influenced by a long friendship with Thomas Carlyle, Emerson lionized the Norse and the Saxon character he found in the Germans and English. He celebrated their virile dominance of lesser peoples. Emerson wasn't a rainbow coalition kind of guy, but an elitist through and through.

(This is where we need to pause and recognize we can't assess someone's worth by the weakest aspects of their personality. Though Emerson contributed significantly to racism in this country, he had many other admirable qualities worthy of appreciation. I hope the ignorance I'm operating in today (that I don't recognize) will not tarnish my memory among future generations ... at least too much)

There is a lot of sad, destructive history out there that documents the construction of whiteness. I'd like to do a class on this if there is enough interest to expose more of it so we can better understand the driving motivations, the prejudices, the ignorance, the economics, the manipulations and the downright evil intentions that constructed the white privilege that infects our society and creates so many problems today. This privilege is mostly invisible to those designated white who benefit from that privilege. It screams out and demeans on a daily basis those who are not designated white.

Where it does the most damage is inside our heads. Those who are white internalize the “I’m better than” and “I’m more deserving” message. Those who are deemed non-white often internalize, without realizing it, the “I’m less than” and “I’m undeserving” message. The invisible self-worth damage of racism keeps many non-whites from confronting the system because they unconsciously buy into it. Whites don’t pay attention to it because they accrue benefits for not noticing it. Leah’s story about the cricket is such a powerful example. Frog tells cricket he is ugly and he takes it in as the truth and can’t hear any other opinion.

What whites don’t recognize is the price they are paying for that privilege. As Michelle Alexander documents in *The New Jim Crow*, our nation has systematically set up a pipeline to suck up young black men and send them to prison. That police, judicial, and prison system is very expensive to taxpayers. But by marginalizing people, there is an even bigger price to pay in everyone’s personal lives. It is fear. Fear of the other who might harm us on the street or in our homes. The obsession with guns is emblematic of that fear of the dangerous home intruder waiting in the dark to rape and steal.

The biggest price though is moral. Participation in a system of oppression be it domestic or foreign, creates suffering for everyone. We cannot separate ourselves from the violence that is done to support an unjust status quo.

The more I learn about the sins of the fathers and to a lesser degree mothers, the more I want to do something about it. The more I become aware of the harm being done to protect my privilege, the more I want to dismantle this system entirely.

I’m very grateful we are part of a Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations that is deeply committed to this work. One leader in this work who is a long-time activist is Chris Crass. He is on the cutting edge of the work striving to expose and dismantle systems of oppression. I commend to you his book I’ve been reading: *Towards Collective Liberation: Anti-Racist Organizing, Feminist Praxis, and Movement Building Strategies*.

Let me just say, this work is not for the faint of heart. Worthy though it may be, this is really difficult, challenging work. My experience with community organizing in ARISE was heart breaking at times. I learned just how hard this work is even when my mind, heart and hands were in the right place.

That’s why I’m very excited by the vision of Catalyst, the organization in which Crass works. Inspired by civil rights legends Ella Baker and Anne Braden, their strategy for organizing is called “collective liberation.” Here is how Crass describes a little of how they got to it:

... [Catalyst] first approached anti-racist work from a fear-driven and damage control perspective, in which we tried to control our own and other white people's individual behavior without actually tackling the systems and institutions that prop up and perpetuate white supremacy...[slowly] we began to move from an anti-oppression lens to a collective liberation approach...

Collective liberation challenges divide-and-control tactics [of white supremacy] by emphasizing how our fate is bound up with each other. With collective liberation as our goal, we seek to create a society where everyone has access to human rights, food, dignified work, housing, education and health care. It means that "no one is free when others are oppressed," and it means recognizing that oppression strips all of us of our humanity, keeping us disconnected and alienated from each other and the planet. Within a collective liberation vision, white people work to end racism not for or on behalf of the interests of people of color, but because our lives and humanity depend on the eradication of racism as well...

The glue for the work Crass describes is love. And to experience that love, whites have to let go of thinking they can hold on to white privilege and also have a good, healthy society that meets everyone's needs. The true freedom and fulfillment we all seek will be found in letting go of separation and isolation and then embracing each other as love shows us how.

Crass continues:

Organizing from a place of love means trying to practice and embody what we are organizing towards. Our work is based in a deep love for the liberation of all people, love for the justice movements we are part of, and love for the legacies of global resistance that inspire our work...

I'm very encouraged by Crass' vision of how whites can be effective collaborative leaders in this work to dismantle racism and white privilege. May our congregation consider committing to this work more deeply so we may build a new way for human beings to be together in love.

Benediction Let us take inspiration for this work of collective liberation from James Baldwin's poem for David titled Mirrors

Although you know
 What's best for me,
 I cannot act on what you see.
 I wish I could:
 I really would,
 And joyfully.
 Act out my salvation
 With your imagination.

Although I may not see your heart,
 Or fearful well-springs of your art,
 I know enough to stare
 own danger, anywhere.
 I know enough to tell
 You to go to hell
 And when I think you're wrong
 I will not go along.

I have the right to tremble
 When you begin to crumble.
 Your life is my life, too,
 And nothing you can do
 Will make you something other
 Than my mule-headed brother.

Sources used developing this service:

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James Baldwin, Jimmy's Blues and Other Poems, Beacon Press, 2014 (1983, 1985) (Bethlehem Library)

(and of course Wikipedia)