“On Being Color-Blind”
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Reading: Matt 7:3-5 (NRSV)

Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, “Let me take the speck out of your eye”, while the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor’s eye.

On a summer vacation in the early ‘60s, when I was maybe 10 years old, my parents loaded us up in the car for a trip to visit Dad’s parents in Florida. Once there, it did not take long before we were out of clean clothes to wear. Mom packed up the laundry and headed off to the local Laundromat.

As she tells the story, she hauled the basket inside and began to sort the clothes, and then noticed something unusual: on some of the machines there were signs saying “colored”, while other machines were labeled “white.”
This was momentarily puzzling, but then she thought, “Good idea! –keeps the darks from bleeding on the lights! The jeans and tee shirts went into a couple of the “colored” machines, and socks and underwear went into a machine with a “white” sign.

My grandmother set her straight when she got back to the house.

Fast forward to 2015. The Voting Act and the landmark Civil Rights Act have been in place for decades, The Black separatist movement and the riots in Watts and Philadelphia and New York and Chicago have faded in our collective memory. African American voters and white voters and Latino voters together have put a black President in office—twice. There are no more washing machines labeled “colored” and “white” (unless some Laundromat is implementing an efficiency measure, as my mother assumed years ago!)

Few would deny that significant progress towards racial equality has been made since we made that family road trip to Florida.

Unitarian Universalists have celebrated and contributed to that progress. Watching the film “Selma,” we can take pride in the fact that we were there in force, and that there
were UUs – Rev. James Reeb and Viola Gregg Liuzzo—who gave their lives putting their shoulders to the wheel. (Walton n.pag)

The public dialog about race seemed to take a back seat for a while as attention turned to other issues such as climate change and gay rights. But racial justice is back in the forefront, driven by a wave of race-related violence: the death of Florida teenager Trayvon Martin at the hands of a self-appointed white vigilante; a number of high-profile killings of unarmed people of color by police; and the appalling murder by a young white supremacist of nine black church members attending a prayer meeting in Charleston, South Carolina.

Unitarian Universalists know that America has a huge race – and-class issue. There is so far to go, so much to be done to bring about the changes that we feel are needed. We go out into the world to work on political campaigns, we lobby, we show up for demonstrations, we organize. But results of psychological studies in recent years suggest that the changes we hope for will be out of reach until individual whites in large number, led, I like to think, by those who are liberally religious, give as much attention to transforming themselves as to transforming external structures of power.
This is a journey of self-awareness offering spiritual growth and deepening, one that asks us to recognize, confront, and release, layer by layer, our own hidden race-related assumptions and biases.

Theologian, philosopher and activist Cornel West addressed this when he spoke at the Unitarian Universalist Association’s recent General Assembly in Portland. An imposing figure, he leaned out over the podium, fixed the audience in his eye, and boomed, “I’ve got a lot of vanilla brothers and sisters who work with me that say, “Brother West! Brother West! You know, I’m not a racist any longer. Grandma’s got some work to do, but I’ve transcended that!

And I say to them, ‘I’m a Jesus-loving free black man and have tried to be so for fifty-five years . . . , and when I look into the depths of my soul, I see white supremacy because I grew up in America. And if there’s white supremacy in me, my hunch is . . . you got some in you, you’ve got some work to do, too. Oh yeah! We’re not talking about purity, we’re not talking about being pristine. [The question is] what is the quality of your struggle to push it back??” (n. pag.)

“Push what back???? I’m not a racist!” we want to object loudly. But consider: there is evidence that, whether
they are conscious of it or not, the vast majority of white Americans do harbor attitudes of superiority with respect to persons of color.

A recent report to the American Anthropological Association states flatly, “The literature on white racism is now massive.” The largest body of data comes from the Implicit Associations Test (IAT), an anonymous online assessment tool developed by Harvard psychologist Mahzarin Banaji and his colleague Anthony Greenwald that measures unconscious bias. Results from more than two million test-takers suggest that 88% of white people taking the test had a pro-white or anti-black implicit bias of which they were oftentimes unaware. Furthermore, almost half of African American test-takers exhibited a preference for whites and some level of anti-black bias. Interestingly, no connection was found between political views and unconscious bias.

Contrary to what the song from the musical “South Pacific” says, you do NOT have to be carefully taught to acquire the assumption of white superiority. We’re like frogs in a polluted waterway: the toxins come in through our skin. Audrey Smedley and Janis Faye Hutchinson, the editors of the American Anthropological Association report, write, [This
A worldview is learned by everyone who grows up in American society. It is absorbed simply through the course of daily interactions and experiences from the media, journals, TV, movies, advertisements, and religious and educational institutions. It conveys the image that whites are dominant and superior; they have the knowledge and they are in control” (Smedley and Hutchinson 3).

While some have questioned the validity of the IAT, multiple smaller studies have also revealed high levels of bias among whites. Essays written by hypothetical students with “black” names received lower scores than identical essays attributed to “white” students. Doctors did not order certain procedures for black patients as often as for whites. In computer simulations, Whites are more likely to conclude that an object held by a person was a gun if the he is black. And on it goes. In most cases the subjects did not consider themselves racist. (Routledge n. pag)

These racist assumptions reveal themselves in racial microaggressions, a term coined in the ‘70s by psychiatrist Chester Pierce. Derald Wing Sue of Columbia University, an expert on racial relations, defines Microaggressions as “the brief and everyday slights, insults, indignities and denigrating messages sent to people of color by well-intentioned White
people who are unaware of the hidden messages being communicated” (Sue, subtle, n pag.)

Sue defines three kinds of microaggression:

**Microassaults** are conscious, intentional discriminatory actions.

**Microinvalidations** are “communications that subtly exclude, negate or nullify a person’s thoughts, feelings or experiential reality.

**Microinsults** are “communications that subtly convey rudeness an and insensitivity that demean a person’s racial heritage or identity.”

Research and interviews with people of color suggest that microinsults and microinvalidations are more difficult to handle than more overt expressions of racism because they “fly below the radar,” the target may be uncertain why they feel insulted; perpetrators are not aware that they have done anything wrong. The person of color on the receiving end is in a bind; if they voice their feelings, the perpetrator denies meaning any offense, and the target may be labeled “thin-skinned” or “paranoid” If they don’t speak up, the stress is internalized; the cumulative effect is toxic. In either case, the ambiguity of the situation drains energy and increases stress. (Sue, Is subtle bias harmful?, n.pag.)
The white person committing a microaggression typically considers himself fair-minded and would never knowingly discriminate. This makes it very hard to get him to see that there is a problem. He feels that his status as a “good person” is being unjustly questioned.

Let me give you a couple of examples. A white person might claim to be color-blind, or say something like, “I don’t notice your color.” This is a microinvalidation. People of color rarely have the luxury of being unaware of their color; that is a privilege that whites enjoy. (Bednick, 4 Barriers, n. pag.) Jarune Uwujaren observes, “[I]f you have trouble seeing race or are tired of people making things about race, realize that if they could, most people of color would ignore race too (qtd in Bedrick, All Lives Matter, n. pag.)."

David Bednick deconstructs another example: the conversion of the slogan “Black Lives Matter” into “All Lives Matter,” also an invalidation. While all lives DO matter, the circumstance that inspired the original slogan was the
shooting of Trayvon Martin, a young black teen walking through a white neighborhood. Changing it to All Lives Matter is a dismissal of the black community’s experience of the level of violence directed towards it—kind of like having someone equate their experience of having a tooth pulled with your cancer surgery. Erasing race from the slogan before the circumstances that created it were addressed effectively said to the black community, “OK, we’ve talked enough about that.” Or, “You can’t make me see that.” The power to change the subject rests with whites. (n. pag.)

The first step in the journey of racial self-awareness is also the most difficult: making the “invisible” visible—and looking at it rather than turning away. A good place to start is by going to the Implicit Project website (implicit.harvard.edu) and taking the IAT. It’s anonymous and takes less than 30 minutes. There are many versions of the test aimed at unearthing unconscious bias against different groups or types of people (for instance, you can test your attitudes toward obesity). I began with the most frequently-accessed instrument, the one that probes for implicit associations with African Americans.

Now, I grew up in a family that was active in the civil rights movement; my first husband was West Indian and my
oldest child is biracial; my grandchildren are all black. Racist? No way! Imagine my dismay when I took the IAT online and it showed a slight preference for whites! It’s uncomfortable and unsettling to see in yourself what you don’t want to see. But knowing that it’s there will help me pay closer attention to my own reactions and responses and to learn and grow from what I become able to see.

For instance, I want to think more about my feelings and reactions as I sat in the home of my grandson’s other grandmother, who is African American, and listened with her to the outcome of the Michael Brown shooting investigation in Ferguson. The official giving the press conference went to great length to explain all of the measures that had been taken to ensure a fair and complete examination of the evidence.

I remember thinking that they had made a persuasive case for the decision not to press charges against the officer. I remember thinking that each shooting incident had to be examined separately, and that the outcome of each was not connected to the others. I was definitely not experiencing what she was, the cumulative effect of all of these incidents year after year, all connected, crushing, monolithic.
The inner exploration that exposes bias is good for the body and the soul. Racism that is suppressed and denied, and the failure to recognize and own microaggressions that come from it are corrosive over the long haul. If it remains unacknowledged, it can lead to anxiety, fear and apprehension towards those of other races; lowered empathy; and what Sue describes as “a dimming of perceptual awareness and accuracy that is associated with self-deception”(How does microaggression n.pag.)

“What happens when you interrogate yourself? What happens when you call into question your tacit assumptions and unarticulated presuppositions and begin to become a different person?” asks Cornel West. (Ware n. pag.) I expect you find that the inner work of rooting out bias and racism gives action against the external structures of power and oppression greater integrity and a firmer footing. “First take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor’s eye.”

It’s not easy, and it’s not quick. William Butler Yeats puts it well: “It takes more courage to examine the dark corners of your own soul than for a soldier to fight on the battlefield.” (qtd. in Walton n. pag.) But as Unitarian Universalists committed to affirming and promoting the
inherent worth and dignity of every person, we must be willing to do it.

And if you don’t always like what you find, remember that guilt and shame don’t do anyone any good, and that the First Principle applies to you as well.

BENEDICTION: From Maya Angelou

History, despite its wrenching pain
Cannot be unlived, but if faced
With courage, need not be lived again.
Lift up your eyes upon
The day breaking for you,
Give birth again
To the dream


Walton, Christopher L. “So nobly started: Martin Luther King Jr’s eulogy for James Reeb”. UU World May/June.1 May 2001. Web. 1 August 2015.


YouTube. 1 Aug. 2015.
