

“I Don’t Want To Be White”
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Mt. Diablo Unitarian Universalist Church
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An honest look at the history of our country and our state can be very disturbing for those of us who recognize our ancestry as white. As my daughter pointed out to me one day when she was in middle school, every time you study a group of people in our country doing something to disempower or hurt another group, it seems to be white people. Even if we believe none of our own ancestors were directly involved in America’s history of racial oppression, it’s hard not to feel some sense of guilt by heritage.

I knew how she felt. When we begin to see the many ways in which racism steers benefits towards white people, like the examples of privilege Sonja and I shared a few moments ago, it’s hard for me as a white person to escape a feeling of shame. My white skin begins to feel like a mark of being soiled.

If being white means being somehow responsible for or complicit in racism, I don’t want to be white.

I have learned to approach the topics of race, racism, and racial justice with a great deal of humility. Today, the Sunday before Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, I’m speaking as a white person, about the experience and meaning of whiteness in a racially constructed society. In this, I speak from my own experience, analysis, and learning as a white, European-descended American straight male; I cannot claim to speak for all white people, but I hope these thoughts will offer something useful to you. For those who identify as people of color, Latino/Latina and Hispanic, and others of African, Caribbean, Asian, Pacific Islander, Native American, Arab, Middle Eastern, South Asian and other heritages, it’s my hope that although I am focusing today on whiteness, there will be some resonance for you as well.

When I became a member of the Thomas Jefferson District Anti-Racism Team, twelve years ago, I participated with the group in several extended training sessions. I started to learn more about the history of racism and resistance, and I encountered ideas that were new and exciting to me. It was especially powerful to begin to understand that racism wasn’t simply a matter of personal prejudice. Instead, I learned, racism is a system of laws, institutions, and social structures, designed to maintain differentials of privilege and power in favor of white people.

By our second five-day training, learning to see racism as a set of interlocking structures and systems, we Anti-Racism Team members—at least we white members—were eager to get started looking for practices and customs in our churches and in the Unitarian Universalist Association that might still be working to keep our Association so white-dominated. We wanted to start talking about fixing other people in the light of all our new-found knowledge. How could we help others to learn what racism really is? How could we begin to remake our congregations and our Association? We’d had enough talk about white privilege. *We got it.*

One weary afternoon, one of our trainers started down that road again, even though he had promised we could talk strategy in that session. I picked up my notebooks and walked out

without speaking to anyone, but making sure that everyone noticed me leaving. I was going home; I was done.

When Leslie came to find me, I was surprised to discover that she was not furious with the treacherous trainers, she was furious with ME. Our entire team was in danger of falling apart. The white team members had refused to let any more work go forward until they figured out why I had left. One of my heroes, our friend Leon Spencer, had declared that he needed to caucus with his people, the people of color, and they all left. Leon's last words to the white people were: "Let us know when you're ready to be serious."

Leslie helped me see what I had done as an act of privilege. I could walk away because I was white. I assumed that everyone was as angry as I was because as a straight, white male I had learned to think I knew how other people SHOULD feel. I assumed the right to blow up the proceedings if my expectations were being frustrated because I had been taught as a white male to see my expectations as normative for everybody.

After a long time I went back to where the white peoples' caucus was sitting wondering what the heck they were supposed to do. It was a hard conversation, but in the end we had coined a new phrase for ourselves: "Acting white." It meant letting our racist white identity, the one racism pushes on white people, guide our actions and choices. It meant acting from an internalized sense of superiority and privilege instead of from a sense of accountability to the group. I was grateful we hadn't decided to call it "acting like David."

This is an enormously important part of developing an anti-oppressive white identity: realizing that even if we are sure that we "get it," even if we really DO "get it," as white people we still live with internalized issues that can erupt when we least expect it, even when we think we're acting with complete integrity. The racial identity our culture confers on us comes with internalized messages that do not go away just because we know better.

How do we resist racism, in our culture, our congregations, and in our own lives? I have come to believe that one essential step is claiming our racial identity, and reshaping it to resist racism.

To develop an anti-racist identity, we must first acknowledge the racial identity we have been given. This is hard for white people, because we have been taught that our identity has nothing to do with race. Accepting that some of what we have always thought of as "objective" or "universal" values may simply be reflections of white culture is very challenging—but it is necessary. We need to learn to call ourselves white people. "As a white person, I've always learned that silence is the right way to express reverence, not shouting, dancing, or clapping." "As a white person, I think I should speak up if I have an idea that seems important to me, without waiting for an invitation." "As a white person, I think punctuality is important enough to break relationships over." Try it on with some issue of your own choice, something you're absolutely *sure* has nothing to do with race. It's a shift of perspective, isn't it?

Developing an analysis of current events that acknowledges race as a powerful factor is another indispensable tool for developing anti-racist identities. Again, this is painful for many of us who are white. Learning to live with the pain people of color experience from racism on a daily basis

is hard for white people. We want to make it go away for them. On my own not-so-good days, I want to tell them how they should make it go away.

When it happens within our own families, this is very difficult. I find it utterly harrowing that my wife and my son live on the other side of society's racial divide from me. They have had and will have painful racial experiences I can't protect them from. Some have come from my own family, like the conversation my mother had with eight-year-old Garner about Leslie, saying "Well, I just know I wouldn't trust someone with that kind of last name." Both our children have experienced prejudice around their name. It was easy enough to laugh it off when red-haired, blue-eyed Garner heard a marching band member yell, "Maybe you'll get it if I say it in your language!" It was harder when first-grade Liam had classmates make the slant-eyes and pseudo karate moves at him. The pain of multi-racial families doesn't belong only to the non-white partner or children. Often both spouses find that their partner's family has difficulty accepting them.

Of course, the essential component of an anti-racist identity is the work we actually do to dismantle racism. I have to remind myself often that deploring racism is not actually working to eradicate it. Whatever our role, whatever our gifts, whatever our race—racism affects us all, and we are all needed to put an end to it.

I had a striking lesson in this necessity about five years ago, when DRUUMM asked its white members to stop attending regular DRUMM meetings and instead to form a new, separate organization for white allies. I got this news during a General Assembly which had been hard for me because I had been coming to the realization that most of my friendships within the Association were with people of color, and existed more because I was Leslie's partner than because of my own identity and actions. I was feeling isolated and angry, and when I walked into a room filled with only white people I was not at all open to extraordinary possibilities. I didn't want to be with white people, I wanted to be with my friends. Leslie's people. If these were my people, I wanted no part of them. I was stony and silent, and I had no intention of ever joining ARE. After all this time, all this training, all this identity development, there I was again: I didn't want to be white.

So it was pretty ironic when I got invited by Allies for Racial Equity, the organization that formed that day, to take part in a conversation between DRUUMM leaders and leaders from the U.U. Musician's Network about cultural misappropriation. It was an extraordinary experience of sharing complex, painful, joyful realities; misunderstandings were addressed, and people had a chance to understand each others' pain, to seek and to offer forgiveness, and to share our deepest hopes for our Association's future in a multicultural world. That conversation has evolved into the Council for Cross-Cultural Engagement, an ongoing conversation among leaders from DRUUMM, the UU Musician's Network, the UU Ministers' Association, the Liberal Religious Educators Association, and Allies for Racial Equity.

From the beginning, my role in this conversation was, specifically, to be a white person: A white person who's a music educator and could speak the musicians' language; a white person who's done anti-racism work and has developed some trust with the people of color at the table; a white person who knows some of the pain of discovering whiteness and can stand with other white people who are just encountering it in a deep way for the first time. A white person who's part

of a multiracial family and knows to my bones how high the stakes are for coming to peace with the reality of race in our most important relationships.

My work, my special role, my power to make a difference, all came from claiming my identity as a white person—a white person with particular knowledge and experience and commitments. An anti-racist white person. And it helps that I'm an Irish tenor, because we sing a lot.

So it turns out, I DO want to be white after all-- if being white means being myself in this complex way, living in integrity and truth with people who slowly come to trust me enough to share their reality with me. Claiming our racial identities is not a surrender to racism if we are reshaping those identities as a tool for resisting racism. Staying in the struggle against racism is hard, but it is holy work. And along the way, something wonderful can happen.

What happens with the Council now, for a few days each year, is a chance to live into the multiracial, multicultural future I know is coming for us all. We create that opportunity by our work and by the trust we have built over time, and by our willingness to tell our truth and to hear each other's. It is never an easy conversation, but it is a deeply joyful one, even when we are sad or angry together. And did I mention that we sing a lot?

What makes it extraordinary is the experience of *wholeness*. In the end, claiming and living out of our anti-racist identities is a way of becoming whole, and that is holy and ultimately joyful work. When we live together in all the complexity of our multiple identities, we are moving toward wholeness: Wholeness for ourselves; wholeness for those with whom we are in relationship; wholeness for our entire, undivided human family.