



Our Eyes Are Opening:
Reflections on Racism,
White Privilege,
& White Supremacy



Peoples Church Unitarian Universalist
2018 Social Justice Exploration

Presented in a worship service held
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Peoples Church Unitarian Universalist
Special music by Slayton Thompson



THE FIRST STEP toward brotherhood is to face the facts: that there are no significant differences among the races of mankind in intelligence or in talent: that all human beings share the same needs for food, clothing, shelter and a sense of purpose; and that the barriers which come between us are artificial ones.

Next, we must build together a community of equal opportunity for all through voluntary acts of goodwill and fairness. As we have the opportunity to learn together in the same schoolrooms to work side by side at desk or factory, to live side by side in open neighborhoods, the artificial barriers will disappear and we will come to know one another as individuals; neighbors, friends, brothers.

Polly Ely, *Peoples Voice*, February, 1963

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INTRODUCTION

Marcia Swift

From the online publication, *The Root*:

"Because you were born white you have advantages that are systemically, culturally, and psychologically present. These are advantages that have been built up and cemented for hundreds of years." This is white supremacy.

"White supremacy is not racism. White supremacy is the result of racism. White people participate in white supremacy every day, often unknowingly. It has nothing to do with hate or willful malice."

THESE ARE JUST some of the reasons why in December of 2017, the Social Justice Council asked the congregation of Peoples Church to undergo a year-long exploration and study on racism, white privilege and supremacy. This we have done and 35+ people have participated in all or part of the events we held this year to learn about ourselves in terms of our relation to and participation in white supremacy.

We read four books and held seven Forums to discuss the insights we gained from the readings and our new awareness of what racism actually is and how our white privilege has and continues to contribute to institutionalized white supremacy We participated in

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Juneteenth, an annual community celebration of the end of slavery. And we toured the African-American Museum (our fourth-quarter First Sunday Plate Collection recipient), where we learned more about American and Iowa history, and this very special museum in our state.

Where do we go from here?

This is the question we ask everyone to think about.

This is a compilation of some of our insights and learnings which we wish to share with you.

It is an invitation to join with us on the rest of the journeys we may take.

*One more step,
We will take one more step,
Till there is peace for us and everyone,
We'll say one more step...*

REFLECTION I

It's Not Over and It Never Has Been

Clarice Krippner

ONE OF THE COMMENTS those of us who are working for racial justice for black citizens often hear is “Why aren’t they over it? Slavery and even the civil rights movement happened a long time ago. It’s time blacks stepped up and made it on their own.”

Our study of white privilege has helped me answer that issue.

I have learned that the oppression of African-Americans never really ended after the Civil war – the war that was supposed to make them free.

During Reconstruction, black citizens did make a good start at changing American society – they were not incompetent and foolish people who terrorized good white Southerners, as I had learned in my school textbooks. Blacks, with the support of Northern enforcers, had access to voting and were able to build a coalition with sympathetic Southern whites and influence law and government. More African Americans during Reconstruction held public office than in any time since.

With this fusion of blacks and whites, they passed laws establishing access to education for all citizens, fair pay for workers, and equal access to an impartial justice system.

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Sadly, these reforms were abandoned when the North grew tired of supporting them and racist Southern leaders used terrorism and slander to take power away from Black leadership.

Quickly, the healthy changes of Reconstruction were squashed by the oppressive acts of Jim Crow laws that followed: practices that turned newly freed people back into slaves by the sharecropper system, and kept them poor. So, they never had quite enough to feed, clothe, or educate themselves.

Voter Registration laws kept African Americans from voting and holding office, and from fully participating in political life. They were prevented from having any part or influence in government.

Segregation by law up until 1964 kept African American from using the same schools and colleges, living in any neighborhoods they chose, using the same doctors, restaurants, drinking fountains, buses or even train cars as whites did.

Black veterans after WW2 were not allowed to participate in the benefits of the G.I. Bill – they did not have the same access to loans to buy homes or grants to attend high schools or colleges. The G.I. Bill helped white veterans create wealth for their families into the next generations; black families were again kept poor.

That changed somewhat after the Civil Rights Movement,
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and the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 created improvement in access to political rights and the end of blatant segregation. But in education, housing, work and access to loans there was much discrimination. This still kept African Americans economically disadvantaged.

Even after the Civil Rights Act in 1964, black men out in public could be arrested for little reason and thrown into prison and then assigned to labor camps. Even if they were not called slaves they still lived in slavery—their labor stolen from them and often punished brutally.

More recently we have seen the War on Drugs, which has targeted black men for minor offenses and handed out harsh sentences, making resumption of a life after prison difficult, and leaving families without their fathers and sons.

Government often does not make needed investments in black neighborhoods—in schools, parks, recreation and medical facilities as well as encouragement to grocery stores and other needed businesses.

We see today the hyper-vigilance of the police and white citizens' hostile attention to African-Americans doing perfectly normal things, like walking into their own apartment building or waiting for a friend at Starbucks. They are picked up for very little cause, in situations that often descend into police brutality. And now after Voting Rights Laws have been gutted, we see voter suppression.

No, slavery is not over, and it really never has been.

*One more word,
We will say one more word,
Till every word is heard by everyone,
We'll say one more word...*

REFLECTION II

Waking Up White

Jo Wasta

WAKING UP WHITE is the title of the first book we read in our Social Justice racial series. The author, an Eastern white suburbanite – this is her wake up call. Without opening the book, I knew this title was directed straight at me.

I see how my Midwestern life has been lived in a white ghetto, in stark exclusion from other races, religions, and nationalities. Comfortable, complacent – and stunning blind to my fellow citizens in a nation built on diversity.

I've thoughtlessly skimmed past many opportunities, that might have widened my horizons:

- In my suburban Chicago high school: besides cheering them as heroes on our sports teams, not much noticing my black classmates. I still don't know where those black families lived.
- In the '60s, I was part of a YWCA-sponsored interfaith, interracial panel, sharing our awareness of past prejudices. However, we skimmed right past an opportunity to learn of the suffering internalized by generations of our Jewish panel members, or the indignities they, or our black panel members, were then experiencing in Cedar Rapids.

So, Waking Up White is still my story.

When we were taking orientation classes for Peoples Church

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membership, I recall how much we enjoyed them, but how foreign all of the emphasis on social justice was for me – and that I just couldn't see myself as an activist.

Well, this changed, as we read our second racial justice book, Tears We Cannot Stop. This is a personal story by a contemporary black American father, telling how he and his neighbors need to train their very young children how to survive life-threatening encounters – like those we see too often in our headlines. My heart went out to all of these fathers...life-threatening concerns that as a parent or a child I never had to consider. Day-to-day securities and freedoms I could take for granted, denied to black families.

And then our third book, We Were Eight Years in Power. This is a long history of unjust American laws and legal decisions that have served to create the inequalities fostering the poverty in today's black communities.

One of those restricting laws caused me to think back on my Cornell College years, just after WW II. Our outstanding Cornell wrestling team took a national collegiate wrestling championship! Yes, rather small at the time – Cornell in Mt. Vernon, Iowa!

How could that happen? Because our team was composed of returning WW II veterans – very motivated – and strong! (Not your average high school graduates!)

Enrolled under the GI BILL, their tuition was paid in return for their service to their nation. Many of them have since had

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outstanding careers and accomplishments. It hadn't occurred to me, but in this book, I learned why there were no African Americans among those returning GIs. It seems the GI Bill legislation denied benefits to veterans of color!

While over 7.5 million WWII vets gained this economic foothold to benefit their families and their succeeding generations, this foundation was refused to those of color, expanding the economic divide we see today in minority communities.

This is one of countless laws on the books that limit minority freedoms and securities. Worse, new inequality legislation is sneakily appearing today, as those threatening voting rights in our last election.

So, over 150 years after emancipation, here too – *enough is enough!*

It is definitely time to step out of our complacent white ghettos. Time that we care enough:

- To listen more, learn more, and stay very close to our legislators;
- To assure that legislation considered is backing equality, forwarding every opportunity to level the American playing field, and
- To guarantee the full benefits of our constitution – beginning in our neighborhoods, and beyond.

*One more prayer,
We will say one more prayer,
Till every prayer is shared by everyone,
We'll say one more prayer...*

REFLECTION III

How I've Changed How I Think and Act

Kathy Juba

WHEN I FIRST HEARD that the church was considering studying the topic of white privilege and white supremacy, I have to confess I didn't think it really applied to me. What I have learned over the past year is just how very, very much I have benefitted my entire life and continue to be privileged just because of the color of my skin. I have also learned just how oblivious I have been to receiving that benefit. I am guessing some of you may be in the same place I was.

In Debby Irving's book Waking Up White and Finding Myself in the Story of Race, she used an example from Dr. Steven Jones of a right-handed person to illustrate invisible privilege. As a right-handed person, I never go through my day thinking of how much easier my life is as a right-handed person compared to a left-handed person. Since I am NOT left-handed, I don't think about daily activities that make life more difficult for a left-handed person. Similarly, being white keeps me from awareness of what people of color encounter in their daily lives.

This hit me one day when I needed to wait in my car outside a school during the day while school was in session. The weather was pleasant, so I sat in my car, reading something like a magazine, and not one person who walked by seemed to notice or care. Would that have been the case if I had been a black male?

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I am guessing not. I am guessing I would have soon minimally been talking with some school official about why I was just sitting there, not coming in or leaving. I am guessing I would have known enough to know that I couldn't sit there and would have needed to find someplace else to wait.

So how does a white person become more aware of what a person of color deals with?

By identifying and examining the behaviors of white culture that hold racial barriers in place. Debbie Irving found each of the eleven in herself and I can also relate. If anyone is interested, I would be happy to share them with you, not to accuse you or others of doing anything wrong, but in *becoming aware of them*, you can think about how YOU might change some of your attitudes in the future when dealing with people of color.

One of the most profound pieces of learning for me from all of this has been to identify characteristics of white culture and then to ask myself, "Why should MY way be any better than THEIR way?" It's just different!

Back in my college days when I had a summer job on the Rosebud Indian Reservation in SD, I learned many of the cultural characteristics of Lakota Sioux. In doing that, I then felt that I needed to help them *adapt to white culture*. What I have learned this past year is that I was and am displaying characteristics of white supremacy by assuming that THEY are the ones that need to change and that THEY need my

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HELP to do so. As Irving explains in her book, the persistent need to help and fix are trademarks of the dominant class.

What I learned that has changed me the most is that I don't need to *help* and *change* the lives of people of color, but instead I need to help and change *white people's attitudes* toward the lives of people of color.

*One more song,
We will sing one more song,
Till every song is sung by everyone,
We'll sing one more song...*

REFLECTION IV

Dismantling the System

Joye Winey

I GREW UP in a lower middle-class family in Des Moines in the '40s and '50s. My Dad was a union organizer. If it wasn't made or picked by union workers, we didn't wear it, drive it or eat it. He was also long-time chairman of the Iowa Civil Liberties Union. I went to a large integrated high school in Des Moines. My parents had black friends who were in our home. I had friends of many religions, but no close black friends.

Our home was filled with discussions of racial injustices in our community. We did not enter businesses that rejected black customers, such as the infamous Katz Drug Store. I was taught to speak up when I saw those injustices. I knew the history of the black struggle.

In spite of being in that enlightened environment, I missed the part of racism not being synonymous with prejudice. I got the part about disadvantaging people of color, that they had to be better in all ways to achieve their goals.

But I missed the white supremacy part.

I missed the institutional racism by our federal government.

I missed the part where I got the advantages.

I took for granted that I could go to college where I wanted,

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get the job I wanted, live where I wanted not just because I was qualified but because I had a leg up by being white, even as a woman.

These discussions have made me a more aware teacher as I work with my 18 ELL (English Language Learner) students from many African countries. We teach each other with joy, laughter and respect.

It has made me more aware of my interactions with black strangers and my expectations of their responses.

Recently, at the polls, my daughter refused to show her ID, I refused to say my name and address when asked. We both understand that tiny bit of civil disobedience was part of white privilege.

This quote from *Small Great Things*, by Jodi Piccoult (Ballantine Books, 2016), spoke to me:

Kennedy:

“Do you think there will ever be a time when racism doesn’t exist?”

Ruth:

“No. because that means white people would have to buy in to being equal. Who’d choose to dismantle the system that makes them special. . .”

*One more seed,
We will sow one more seed,
Till there's a seed of hope in everyone,
We'll sow one more seed.*

REFLECTION V

Where Do We Go from Here?

Marcia Swift

Ijeoma Oluo, in her book, *So You Want to Talk About Race*, asks us white people these questions:

- Where do you spend your money?
- What entertainment and arts do you participate in? Are you speaking up when all the management in your office are white or are all male?
- Are you attending school board meetings and asking about how they're disciplining children of color or disabled children?
- Are you going to city council meetings and asking what their police reform efforts are?
- Are you even voting in city council elections?
- Are you having tough conversations in communities that feel like they can dismiss marginalized populations when none of them are in the room?

Racism is not people with evil intent rubbing their palms together and thinking of all the little people they are going to oppress and crush - although unfortunately we have seen some of these people come out of the woodwork of late. Rather, racism is, simply, put, a functioning system -- a system that all of us, as white persons, live with, participate in, and benefit from.

We learned this year that racial trauma is a lifelong process. Its intergenerational. It lasts hundreds of years. Every

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person of color comes to every new instance with their entire history of racial trauma. Racism has been systematically harming people of color for millennia, and it's been stripping white people of their humanity at the same time.

Over the last year, this process of acquiring knowledge and becoming aware has been uncomfortable at times, heart-breaking at times, but also exciting – with lots of light bulbs going off in our heads and hearts.

What do we do with our newfound knowledge and insight? What do we do about all the members of the congregation who did not participate in any way in this yearlong study and examination? We wonder what you're thinking right now during this service. We hope you'll share your thoughts and ideas with us.

Where do we go from here? Here are a few tips based on what we talked about in our study – on some things we can do now, next year, and forever:

1. **Smile and say hello** to *all* people of color you see on the street and in your daily business. It says, "I see you and I'm happy to see you."
2. **Do a headcount** on who's in the room. It's easy to see that white dominance is real and we have more than our fair share of everything.
3. **Change up your liberal diet.** *The New York Times* and NPR are white liberal media. If I want the big picture of American life, I go to sources to stay up on news, culture,

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and lifestyle from the Black perspective. *The Root* and *The Griot* are two good online sources to check out.

4. **Read, read, read.** There are so many books written about racism, white privilege and supremacy.
5. **Listen, listen, listen.** To what people of color are saying and have been saying all along. Learn from people who understand racism in ways we'll never know.
6. **Expand your circle of friends and acquaintances** to include diversity. If we do this we'll learn about movies, books, tv shows, musicians, plays and other pieces of our culture that we didn't even know exists.
7. **Protest.** When and where your white voice matters. It is especially important to be in relationship with the communities who have already been doing this work for years before the majority of us knew something was an issue.
8. **Attend a workshop.** There will be a White Privilege conference in Cedar Rapids March 20-23.
9. **Don't ask your black friends to explain.** They've been explaining *forever*. We have not been listening. Instead join a white affinity group, such as Standing Up for Racial Justice. Or, start one!
10. **Commit to supporting the Black Lives of Unitarian Universalism Collective.** The BLUU provides ministry for and by Black Unitarian Universalists, while also working to expand the role and visibility of Black UUs within our faith. Support the adoption of an Eighth Principle, which is:

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*We the member congregations of the Unitarian
Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and
promote: journeying toward spiritual wholeness by
working to build a diverse multicultural Beloved
Community by our actions that accountability dismantle
racism and other oppressions in ourselves and our
institutions.*

So may it be.

*One more home,
We will build one more home.
Till there's a place for every one of us,
We'll build one more home.*

CLOSING PRAYER

Tears We Cannot Stop

Michael Eric Dyson

OH GOD, the hour is dark. The suffering great. But we will not give up. We will not surrender.

We will not surrender because we have endured the lash of spite and the whip of hate on our backs.

We will not surrender because we know that faith is greater than fear, good triumphant over evil, love more noble than hate.

We will not surrender because our mothers and fathers, and their mothers and fathers, and their mothers and fathers, and their mothers and fathers too, believed that no obstacle put in their way could stop them. They believed that the grace you gave them for their journeys would outlast any challenge to their hearts and minds.

We will not surrender because your enduring and indestructible Word feeds the souls of our people.

We will not surrender because blackness is a gift that has blessed the world beyond compare. Our minds and hearts, and our tongues and bodies, too, have made Earth a better place to live. We will not surrender because we have survived.

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Oh God, we are not naïve. We know, just as white America knows, that our legion, multiple, complicated, adaptable, triumphant blackness threatens whiteness.

Oh God you placed a paradox in our midst like a rainbow at the end of the storm: if we are to understand America we must understand blackness.

Oh Lord, black folk are everything; we are every possibility of American, even human, identity made real. That means we are everywhere, just like our white brothers and sisters. We are going nowhere. We are your children too. We will survive. We are America.

One More Step

Joyce Poley

One more step,
We will take one more step,
Till there is peace for us and everyone,
We'll take one more step.

One more word,
We will say one more word,
Till every word is heard by everyone,
We'll say one more word.

One more prayer,
We will say one more prayer,
Till every prayer is shared by everyone,
We'll say one more prayer.

One more song,
We will sing one more song,
Till every song is sung by everyone,
We'll sing one more song.

One more seed,
We will sow one more seed,
Till there's a seed of hope in everyone,
We'll sow one more seed.

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One more home,
We will build one more home,
Till there's a place for every one of us,
We'll build one more home.

One more bridge,
We will cross one more bridge,
Till we have found the peace we're longing for,
We'll cross one more bridge.

Day by day,
We will live day by day,
And when we stumble we'll begin again,
And take one more step.

Original lyric ©1986 Joyce Poley

Additional lyrics written especially for this choral arrangement © 2016

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