

## **Sin, Systemic Racism and the Culture of Whiteness**

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Unitarian Universalist Society

Sacramento, Sunday, August 20, 2017

*Hymns:* This Little Light of Mine, adapt.; Spirit of Life/Fuente de Amor; We'll Build a Land.

*Personal Reflection* by Laura Sheperd: Experiences of Racism  
(printed after the sermon)

*Sermon* by Roger Jones

Over a week ago, Neo-Nazis and White Nationalists began two days of protests in Charlottesville. On Friday night, carrying torches, they marched through the campus of the University of Virginia, chanting slogans like: "You will not replace us. The Jews will not replace us." By *us*, they mean white people. What they call the *white race* is at risk of extinction. They see the enemy as Jews, immigrants, people of color, and liberals. Last Saturday at a rally they chanted more slogans and carried signs. They were proclaiming not only white pride, but white fear too. Fear—yet many of them carried semi-automatic rifles.

Fortunately, many more people showed up to oppose the protestors with words of love, justice, peace, and faith in human equality. Yes, apparently a small minority of Anti-fascists were itching to fight the neo-Nazis, or at least shout them down, but the so-called Antifa activists bore no firearms. The vast majority of people in the counter-protest march were dedicated to nonviolent action, and trained in it. These folks included several dozen leaders of many faith traditions and many colors. One picture from the day shows the clergy linked arm in arm, dressed in clerical vestments. Backing them up were members of the Thomas Jefferson Unitarian Church and other local residents of Charlottesville, plus Unitarian Universalists from Richmond, Virginia, and other cities--ministers as well as lay members.<sup>1</sup>

The new president of our denomination was there, the Reverend Susan Frederick-Gray. Susan described the scene:

As clergy, when we were standing arm in arm, we were facing off directly against armed right-wing volunteer militia. They were armed with long guns, semi-automatic weapons, and camouflaged in military uniforms although they were not military. They claimed to be keeping the peace but that is not their job, they are not police, they were not accountable to the citizens of Charlottesville nor to the state of Virginia, they were... accountable only to their own ideology. And as they were lined up on the streets, the police were nowhere nearby.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, the police officers and police barricade were behind the line of clergy, not protecting them. Suddenly the White Nationalists came charging at the clergy—and it was the

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<sup>1</sup>Farah Stockman, "Who Were the Counterprotestors in Charlottesville?" *New York Times*, August 14, 2017.

<https://mobile.nytimes.com/2017/08/14/us/who-were-the-counterprotesters-in-charlottesville.html?referer=http%3A%2F%2Fm.facebook.com%2F>

<sup>2</sup> Elaine McArdle, "Representing a Moral Center," *UU World* online, August 17, 2017. [http://www.uuworld.org/articles/clergy-coalition-resists-white-supremacy?utm\\_source=uuworld&utm\\_medium=front&utm\\_campaign=1st](http://www.uuworld.org/articles/clergy-coalition-resists-white-supremacy?utm_source=uuworld&utm_medium=front&utm_campaign=1st)

Anti-fascists who jumped between them, and protected them. This accounted for one of the skirmishes in the news. Not far away a young white man from Ohio drove his truck and ran into and ran over dozens of counter-protestors. He injured many people, and murdered a young woman, Heather Heyer.

Terrorism. Terrorism is defined as a violent threat or an actual attack intended to incite fear among a targeted group of people. Terrorism and racist hatred are dangerous threats. The violence is traumatic. The violence is unforgettable for the victims and those who care about them. Yet in this country, the damage of racism has been deeper and wider and often less visible than those dramatic displays of terrorism and bigotry.

Recently in my sermon about the history of our Sacramento congregation in the 1970s, 80s and 90s, I said this: “Our habits of [church life] were so ingrained, so pervasive, that we could not even see them. This is a definition of culture--habits, patterns, attitudes and ways of being which are so familiar that you don’t notice them. You don’t notice. And when unhealthy patterns are pointed out, you feel uncomfortable. You don’t know how to change them. In 1970, an interim (consultant) minister told our leadership that it would take effort to ‘become conscious of our pattern[s]’ and then more effort to break through them.” I think the lens of culture applies in many settings. The lens of culture applies in a society that was built on a racialized system of power and privilege.

The culture I’d like to explore with you for a few moments is the culture of whiteness. For many people, for a very long time, to be white in the United States has meant that you could go through life not having to think about being white. We had even fewer incentives to think about the lives and the life stories of people of color. In recent decades, writers, artists, filmmakers and some religious leaders have helped us to notice the lives, the needs, the stories and the gifts of people who are not in the dominant culture. Even so, we have missed out on many stories and perspectives over the years.

*Between the World and Me* is a book by African American writer Ta-Nehisi Coates. He writes it as a letter to his son, age 15. Coates began writing it when his son was shocked after the police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, was not charged with a civil rights violation after he had killed Michael Brown. His son was heartbroken after a jury found George Zimmerman not guilty for chasing down Trayvon Martin, age 17, and killing him. In the book, Coates is trying to prepare his son for the racialized nation in which he’s growing up. He says this country’s rise was founded on the theft of black bodies and black freedom. It thrived on the taking of Native American lands and lives. It remains a dangerous place for young men of color. Recalling his own childhood and schooling, Coates writes, “I was a curious boy, but the schools were not concerned with curiosity. They were concerned with compliance.”<sup>3</sup>

The corruption of a racist culture, the sinfulness of a racialized caste system, can poison everyone in the system. Coates recalls the bluster and violence of young black men in the city where he grew up. Behind all their boasting and threats, he sees fear. He recalls his own fear and confusion as a youth. His father often punished him with a beating, which he says the father did less out of anger than fear. His father said that he was beating him so the police *wouldn’t*. That’s fear. When he was 12, Coates writes, “my father beat me for letting another boy steal

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<sup>3</sup> Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*, (New York, 2015: Spiegel and Grau), 26.

from me. Two years later, he beat me for threatening my ninth-grade teacher. Not being *violent enough* could cost me my body. Being *too violent* could cost me my body.”<sup>4</sup>

Our culture has created whiteness as the top of the caste system. It’s easier not to see this, and it’s comfortable so long as nobody challenges the system’s rankings. In 1962, James Baldwin wrote a letter to a black 15-year-old boy--his nephew. The writer had been living in Paris, but he was planning to return to the U.S., just as the Civil Rights Movement was again gaining traction. He urged the teenager to wonder what his life could be like if he had no restraints, no social impediments at all. Standing in the way to freedom and safety, was white supremacy, not as a movement but as embedded American culture. Baldwin said:

Try to imagine how you would feel if you woke up one morning to find the sun shivering and all the stars aflame. You would be frightened because it is out of the order of nature. Well, the black man has functioned in the white man's world as a fixed star, as an immovable pillar, and as he moves out of his place, heaven and earth are shaken to their foundations.<sup>5</sup>

For those among us who learned to be white but who still do not feel as if our system is of any benefit for us, there are a few responses. One is to feel shame and failure, as a solitary individual. A second response is to look at our system of economic power and our vulnerability to it, and analyze its impact on us. One more is to blame our problems on people of color, foreigners, or immigrants. During Donald Trump’s presidential campaign, an interesting essay said Trump’s appeal to poor white rural folks and to people hurt by declines in the manufacturing economy was not really an appeal to pride or hope or aspiration. It was, rather, an exploitation of a widespread sense of shame. Shame is dangerous when it fuels resentment and lashing out, and shame is no better when it paralyzes any of us from opening our hearts or stretching beyond our comfort zones.

When I was growing up, I learned that I was white, but I didn’t learn what that meant in the United States. I will always be learning. I did not realize that whiteness was the norm--the standard--against which people were valued and ranked and managed. I felt it, but I did not know what it did for me. I did not realize that American society had been set up to benefit people who would look like me. I did benefit from it, but I did not realize it. Consequently, I didn’t question it. I even participated.

In 1975, in my high school in the middle of my home State of Indiana, I took first year Latin. Our teacher had come out of retirement, back to the high school. She did not bring much life to that dead language. Early on, however, she gave us a list of names in Latin we could choose as our names in class. We went through them one by one. We got to *Maximus*. “That means *the greatest*,” she said. Perhaps out of irony, I said I wanted that one. But so did Myron, a tall, easy-going boy, the only African American in the class. I stood firm, and insisted. Rarely was I pushy with classmates. How did I get such a burst of assertiveness with Myron in front of others? How did I feel so entitled? Myron relented and settled on another name. How could the teacher not have suggested the toss of a coin: heads or tails?

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<sup>4</sup> Coates, 28.

<sup>5</sup> “A Letter to My Nephew,” by James Baldwin, January 1, 1962, *The Progressive magazine*, 1962 reprinted July/August 2017. <http://progressive.org/magazine/letter-nephew/>

As freshmen, we were encouraged to join the Latin Club, for fun social activities, and to learn about Roman culture. Before it was an Empire, Rome was a fledgling democracy--an incubator of liberty and liberal ideas. Yet slavery was part of the fabric of life in Rome, so much so that Latin has one word for both slave and servant: *servus*.

Let me tell you about our club's initiation. If you were a first-year student, you had to wear a poster over you, like a sandwich board, in order to display the name of your owner. You did this for one day at school. You carried their books between classes. The night before that was the Latin Club dinner, in the cafeteria. Its highlight was a slave auction. The vice principal served as auctioneer, a real job of his. When you would stand before the crowd, he would promote your servant qualities. The older kids would bid on you, getting the right to have you wear their names on a sign for a day. I did this. I don't remember who else was there. I don't know if Myron, the 14-year-old African American, also stood there, alone, for the white vice principal to sell him to the highest white bidder. I wonder if Myron's family complained. I wonder if they were told they shouldn't be so sensitive. It's all in good fun, you know.

One day in Latin class our teacher said her cat had given birth to kittens. I was a teenage animal welfare activist, a passion I shared with my mother. The next day I approached the teacher. "Have you thought about spaying your cat?" I asked her. I handed her a pamphlet about the many suffering unwanted kittens and puppies. So, you see, I *was* a kid who could speak truth to power. Yet it never occurred to me or to my mother to challenge anyone about our slave auction. Myron dropped out of Latin class. Actually, he was one of many kids who disappeared from the desks around me in class over the year. Our teacher was not a good one or an easy one, so the Latin program shrank nearly to nothing. The Latin Club and our slave auction died not by revolution, but by attrition.

These days, many more of us who are white are likely to see the harm done by the culture of whiteness. This is not merely because angry men are now asserting their sense of white identity on television and around the country. There's a better reason. Closer to home, closer to church, more of our friends and members who are white have loved ones who are people of color—spouses, in-laws, children, siblings, grandchildren, and friends. The stories and realities of their lives have put flesh and bones on the words of Ta-Nehisi Coates and others who write about their experience of being minimized and marginalized—who write about their fear and grief in these United States.

We learn—as we come to listen to one another as loved ones, friends, and neighbors. Of course, it's not the job of people of color to educate the rest of us about what it means to live and move and have our being in modern America. It's our job as so called white people, to learn what it means that we learned to be white. It's our job to explore what whiteness has done to us, what stories it has kept from us, what realities it has invited us not to see.

Learning to see what we haven't seen can bring up grief, and even shame. Shame is not a useful emotion, whether we take it on ourselves or we lay it on one another. To learn to see what we haven't seen calls for patience and bravery. It calls for spiritual courage to accept the discomfort and feel the scary emotions.

If you have pain and fear, that's understandable. Reverend Lucy and I welcome you to reach out to us. If you have curiosity and a motivation to explore these issues, we encourage you to reach out. Also, stay tuned to the newsletter and our emails for upcoming opportunities.

For those of us who are white, it's not the work of people of color to soothe us when we encounter feelings of discomfort or fragility. It's our work. It is our work to look at the stories and ask questions and sit for a time with our feelings. However, when people of color take the risk of telling us what their experience has been, we can try to provide the safe space of an open heart. We can provide the safe space of taking seriously another's personal experience. This is not an easy skill. Yet we can practice. We can listen with humility to whatever is shared, and take it seriously. In humility, we can listen and learn and let others take the lead. Doing so can help us notice the dominance of whiteness around us, or within us.

Three years ago, I was looking for a house to buy in Sacramento. A church member wanted me to consider homes in her neighborhood, which I did. She promised me fresh muffins every Monday if I moved nearby! Unfortunately, I bought a home elsewhere. She needled me that I was choosing a less racially diverse neighborhood than hers was. That's true.

After moving I joined the online community known as Next Door. Residents in the nearby area can post notices for free: Yard Sale Saturday, Dog Lost, Dog Found, Free baby crib. "Can you recommend a good plumber, painter, handy person?" and so on. In my first year of reading Next Door postings, I saw a number of headlines like this: "Black man walking by right now—T Street." Another headline: "Suspicious black men seen by my corner this morning." Then the post would include a description of the height or the clothing of the persons of color—and maybe their actual behavior. The underlying message of such a posting was: "This person doesn't belong here." Such gut reactions are not surprising. What did surprise me was the blunt way people showed their assumptions and fears. No attempt to cover it, no hint of self-consciousness in what must have seemed like an anonymous internet platform.

I heard later on public radio that such postings were also a problem in other cities where Next Door operates. Next Door then posted several cautions against racial profiling. A Sacramento Police officer posted cautions too: watching your neighborhood is good, but refrain from racial profiling. Report unusual *behaviors*. Do not cite skin color as a reason for suspicion.

As Ta-Nehisi Coates wrote to his son: "All of this is common to black people. All of this is old for black people."<sup>6</sup>

Confronting and exploring the sins of systemic racism is not easy. It's messy work. All of this calls for courage, and we can gain courage from one another. We can trust that among us and within our community there is enough to sustain us on the journey toward racial equity, the journey toward survival and safety and dignity for all people.

In our spiritual community, we come together for large purposes, a deep calling, and a bold mission. This is why we move into the messy work. Even with feelings of discomfort or confusion, frustration or doubt, we have abundant gifts to bring to this topic and to our mission to be a force for healing in the world. To this mission, to the spiritual work of healing, let us bring the gifts of humility, empathy, courage and love. So may it be. Blessed be and amen.

Now please join me for a few moments of silent reflection.

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<sup>6</sup> Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*, (New York, 2015: Spiegel and Grau), 9.

*Personal Reflection* by Laura Sheperd: Experiences of Racism

As a child, in the 1950s, I lived in a predominantly white, ultra-conservative community. The few persons of color residing there were housed separately from the white residents. One day, at about age four, I noticed a group of houses on the edge of town. They were a collection of run-down buildings; really just shacks. The area where these “houses” were located was a piece of land from which water never completely drained. I asked who lived there and was told “The Indians” and that it was “the Indian Village”. I asked why the people didn’t move to a different part of town and was told they liked living there and that they wouldn’t know how to live anywhere else.

I attended high school in Portland, Oregon. When the majority of my classmates and I went off to college in the late sixties, we naively thought bigotry and racism were on their way out in America. After college, I relocated to Sacramento, California as an Air Force member. I met a man I found to be intelligent, funny, and charming. We fell in love and decided to get married. Commanding officers, at that time, were required to provide pre-marital counseling to any military members who were planning marriage. During the closed-door pre-marital conversation, the officer told me I should reconsider marrying someone outside my race. My fiancé was black. He said he felt strongly that mixed marriages were a big mistake. He also informed me that there were a number of states in the South where it was against the law for a person to marry someone of another race, and therefore we could never be stationed there.

During the mid-1970s we continued to live here in Sacramento and experienced incidences of racism only a few times. The only one that stands out in my mind was when a new landlord met my husband for the first time. We had recently moved into one of the units of a small four-plex. We learned from our neighbors that the landlord had called each of our neighbors to ask if they minded living next to us. The neighbors all said they certainly didn’t mind but we couldn’t help but wonder whether the landlord would have tried to evict us if any of them had said yes.

We were stationed in Wichita, Kansas in the early 1980s. Frequently my husband and I were met with angry looks from people of all ages and were, on occasion, subjected to public name-calling. One night we had made a reservation at an up-scale restaurant, outside the base, for an anniversary dinner. The hostess refused to seat us and turned us away. These incidents were embarrassing and uncomfortable, but as adults we were able to remind ourselves that the people involved were ignorant. These racist attitudes were much more difficult for our four-year old son who is, of course, part African American. One day he and I were walking to our car after shopping in a local department store. With tears in his eyes he looked up to me and asked, “Mom, why do old people always give me a mean look?” How could I explain to my innocent child why people would dislike him only because he was of mixed race? At home that evening, my husband and I explained the best we could how wrong some people can be but I was not sure he understood. Needless to say, I was relieved when my husband received orders to return to McClellan Air Force base here in Sacramento where social attitudes, while certainly not perfect, were much better than they had been in the mid-west.

Although in the past two decades, I have experienced less racism directed at me and at my family, our daughter, who was born here in Sacramento in the mid-eighties, has experienced at least some racism. As much as we would like to think it is a thing of the past, it is still with us.

**This Little Light of Mine**

Gospel anthem of the American Civil Rights Movement (1950s & 60s)

Written 1920 by Harry Dixon Loes, adapt. R. D. Jones August 2017

**This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine.**

This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine.

This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine--

*Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine!*

Sending Love to **Charlottesville**, I'm gonna let it shine.

Sending Love to **Barcelona**, I'm gonna let it shine.

**Sending Love around the world**, I'm gonna let it shine—

*Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine!*

**Don't let hatred blow it out**, I'm gonna let it shine.

Don't let hatred blow it out, I'm gonna let it shine.

Don't let hatred blow it out, I'm gonna let it shine.

*Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine!*

**Love thy neighbor, now's the time**, I'm gonna let it shine.

Love thy neighbor, now's the time, I'm gonna let it shine.

Love thy neighbor, now's the time, I'm gonna let it shine.

*Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine!*

**In eclipse and sunshine, too, I'm gonna let it shine.**

In eclipse and sunshine, too, I'm gonna let it shine.

In eclipse and sunshine, too, I'm gonna let it shine—

*Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine!*