

Fighting Injustice or Where Do White People Fit Into the Black Lives Matter Movement

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This is the third sermon in a series on the essential components of your congregational mission statement. I am hoping that those of you who attend regularly are learning that statement by heart after repeating in unison week after week. When I say ‘by heart’ I don’t mean that you can recite the words without looking at the page. I mean that the statement, and all its layers of meaning, live in your mind and heart and inform your participation in the life of this religious community. “First Unitarian Church of Wilmington is a beloved community that nourishes minds and spirits, fights injustice, and transforms the world through loving action.” We have touched on Beloved Community and nourishment of mind and spirit in previous sermons. This morning I want to talk about fighting injustice.

I have to admit that as an outsider first reading this mission statement, I was surprised that you chose that phrase: fighting injustice. Usually we UU’s are so polite and lyrical about our advocacy, so careful to choose words that don’t offend. Even in our advocacy work, we tend to choose nice over confrontational. I wondered why you didn’t say that you advocate for justice. Since Jeff Lott had been a leader in the creation of the mission statement, I asked him to talk a bit about the choice of words. And over the last few months I have come to admire that choice. If we are going to overcome the backlash of racism that we have seen in this nation since the election of Barack Obama, if we are going to end the violent deaths of black people at the hands of law enforcement and vigilantes, if we are to close down the school to prison pipeline, if we are to be part of the movement to bring about civic structures that truly affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person regardless of race or class or sexual identity . . . well then we are going to need a fighting spirit. Not the kind of fighting that practices

physical or verbal violence, but the kind that stiffens the spine for the work to be done. So, we are a people who fight injustice. And the injustice is clearly before us. So I want all of you to consider this an invitation to live out your mission by engaging in learning, conversation, and action in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement. And since I am a white person, and the vast majority of you are also, I am going to speak to the issue of how white people can and should engage with the movement.

I begin by confessing that for a long time I was unaware of the many privileges that whiteness bestowed upon me. My consciousness began to be raised in seminary, when Dr. Roy Morrison, the only UU on the faculty of Wesley Theological Seminary, and one of only a handful of African-Americans, told us a story. Roy grew up in Chicago, and like many urban black men he did not learn, as I did, that police officers are your friends. He was highly educated; he had a PhD in Philosophy of Religion from the University of Chicago. Then he moved to suburban Maryland to teach at Wesley. One day on the way to campus his car broke down. He was in the middle lane of a busy street during rush hour. Traffic was backing up, people were honking and otherwise expressing their impatience. Then he looked back and saw something that struck terror in heart: the flashing lights of a police car. The officer got out of the car and walked over to Roy's car. For a moment, Roy said, he was completely paralyzed with fear. Then the officer said, "Sir, do you need some assistance?" In his terror, for a brief moment, Roy was unable to respond. He described how his mind turned over this strange sentence. A white police officer calling him sir. Offering him assistance. Finally, he was able to say, "Yes I do." The tow truck was dispatched, a ride to work was arranged, and everybody lived happily ever after.

As I listened to him tell that story, I realized how far my own experience of the world was from his. I would have been totally relieved to see those flashing lights, I would have fully expected the police officer to politely offer me help. I would have had no reason to be afraid.

In 1903 WEB DuBois introduced the term double consciousness in his book *The Soul of Black Folks*. He pointed out that people of color know far more about white people than white people know about people of color – thus the double consciousness of their own racial identity and that of white people. Double consciousness is a survival strategy on the part of black folks. The lack of consciousness about the experience of others is an unconscious privilege on the part of white folks.

Contemporary commentator Tim Wise reminds us that nothing has changed since 1903. We white folks are still unaware of much of the experience of people of color; in fact, we resist learning even when the evidence is right in front of our faces. Wise calls this repetitive motion disorder. He says, “That so much of white America cannot see the shapes made out so clearly by most of black America cannot be a mere coincidence, nor is it likely an inherent defect in our vision. Rather, it is a socially-constructed astigmatism that blinds so many to the way in which black folks often experience law enforcement. A disturbing number of whites manifest something of a repetitive motion disorder—a reflex nearly as automatic as the one that leads so many police (or wanna-be police) to fire their weapons at black men in the first place. It is a reflex to rationalize the event, defend the shooter, trash the dead with blatantly racist rhetoric and imagery, and then deny that the incident or one’s own response to it had anything to do with race.”

We white people are hobbled by this repetitive motion disorder – we know nothing and learn nothing about the experience of people of color even as they know all about us – what scares us, what motivates us, what pleases us. It is incumbent upon us to change that. We have to pay attention, we have to learn about our own blind spots, we have to recognize the cocoon of privilege in which we live. If you have not yet read Ta-Nehisi Coate’s book, *Between the World and Me*, do so. It will open your eyes, painfully.

Another personal story. Last winter I was on my way into Harlem on the Metro North train from Westport. I was meeting Barry for dinner at the Red Rooster, a restaurant I had been trying to snag a reservation at for months. Halfway into the city I started getting tweets indicating that an announcement would be made in the next couple of hours about whether Officer Darren Day would be indicted by a grand jury in the shooting death of Michael Brown. I was pretty sure he was not going to be indicted; I was already angry in advance of the announcement. And then I started to feel fear in the pit of my stomach. I did not want to be in Harlem when that news broke. Sure, I would be eating in a pretty expensive restaurant, one that was as totally integrated as any place I had ever been. But then there was that two block walk back to the train station, and the wait on the platform. Hmmm. My instinct was to eat fast and bolt before the announcement came. My instinct was to rush back to my safe white suburb.

As it happened, the news broke while we were standing on the platform waiting for the train home. There were others on the platform, mostly people of color. We all looked at our electronic devices at the same moment; many of us had probably signed up for the same instant text notification service. We looked at each other, shook our heads in dismay, and then boarded the train. So here’s my confession: when those doors closed and we headed out of black Harlem and back

to white Westport, I was relieved. And ashamed. I had a choice to go to a place where I knew I would be safe. And I knew that so many people never once in their lives have that choice. That's why I continue to push myself, and you, to do the work that white people need to do in order to support the Black Lives Matter movement. We need to do the work of examining our own previously unexamined assumptions about race, and then we need invite, cajole or confront others into joining us in that examination. We need to work diligently to expose the biases built into our communities and our nation: in public education, in housing, and most urgently in the criminal justice system. We need to make visible to each other the racism that has so far been invisible to us, and to make audible the prejudices which we have not had to hear, even as people of color in this nation have seen and heard them clearly for hundreds of years. We need to use our white privilege to uncover and tell the truths that people of color have been speaking over and over their whole lives.

If we do not do this work, the shootings of unarmed black men will continue, and the shooters will continue to be exonerated when they say, "I feared for my life." We cannot arm young men and women and ask them to risk their lives to protect us until we are clear that what we are entitled to protection from is real threats, not our irrational and racially based fears.

Unitarian Universalism is a mostly white religion. Not totally, but mostly. For 50 years or more we have been committed to racial justice. When Martin Luther King asked white people of good will to come to Selma, we came. We have tried over the years to overcome the racism that is part of the DNA of the United States of America. We have seldom succeeded. We scratch our heads and ask ourselves why more people of color don't join our churches? "Maybe," we think to ourselves, "it's the music." I think perhaps it is that we are just too nice. I would

imagine that if I had lived every waking moment of my life in fear of the exercise of unconscious white privilege, nice might not be what I was looking for. I might want people who I could trust to FIGHT for justice. Not with violence, but with a ferocity that would not back down from the backlash which will surely come.

When writing about his concept Martin Luther King would speak of Beloved Community as the place that helped people find the middle ground between “superficial optimism and crippling pessimism.” To my mind, superficial optimism is found in countering the assertion that Black Lives Matter with the assertion that all lives matter. Of course all lives matter, but right now we are trying to confront and correct a history of institutional racism that puts a much smaller value on black lives. To my mind, crippling pessimism is found when we throw up our hands and say, “Well, we tried. But this problem is so intractable. I’m just going to get on my train and head back to my suburban garden like Candide.”

Let’s overcome pessimism together. Let’s push through the impulses to superficial optimism together. Let’s learn together. Let’s talk together. And then let’s fight the injustice of racism together. Join me and many other members of this congregation on Saturday at the Chase Center for the Conference on Hope, Opportunity and Race. Come to the Faithful Dialog next Sunday for a discussion about this sermon. And join us for the 4 session workshop on “Being White in the Black Lives Matter Movement” beginning Sunday afternoon December 6th.

We have to push past our fears, past our privilege, past our despair. Otherwise nothing will change. Michael Brown will still lie dead in the street for hour after hour. Eric Garner will still be unable to breathe. Sandra Bland will not survive a traffic stop. It is our work to do – we who are called by voluntary association into a movement that affirms not only the inherent worth and dignity of

every person but also the interconnected web of all existence. I leave you with this brief and profound poem by Ross Gay:

A Small Needful Fact

Is that Eric Garner worked for some time for the Parks and Rec Horticultural Department, which means, perhaps, that with his very large hands, perhaps, in all likelihood, he put gently into the earth some plants which, most likely, some of them, in all likelihood, continue to grow, continue to do what such plants do, like house and feed small and necessary creatures, like being pleasant to touch and smell, like converting sunlight into food, like making it easier for us to breathe.

Our work will not be done until everybody, everybody can breathe.