

Why I Am a Racist
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The bad news is that I am a racist. The good news is that I know it and am committed to struggling *against* racism. And that means working to dismantle racism in myself, in institutions, and in society at large. That's a very large task, one of those where you can't expect total success even in a lifetime. But it's also important enough not to give up just because it seems so daunting.

The first step in the long process of combating racism, of course, is to understand what it is, how it works, and how harmful it is to societies and individuals alike. That in itself is a daunting task, because we're dealing with an extremely complex set of issues. Racism is partly an issue of personal prejudice. But it's also an economic issue, a cultural issue, an education issue, and a profound spiritual issue.

Long-time civil rights leader James Forman reflected on his own experience, writing "Conscious submission to racism seemed to me worse than death. It killed a person's spirit. It took a little from him each time he knew he should not submit – and did." For victims of racism it's often a lose-lose proposition. Either be crushed physically or economically by racist treatment, or be crushed spiritually by your own failure of courage to act against what may be insurmountable odds.

If you saw the movie *Crash* last year, there was a scene that portrayed just such a spirit-crushing experience. An upper middle class African-American couple is pulled over by the LAPD. The husband stands by powerlessly while an officer physically molests his wife. He knows that resistance on his part will lead to possible injury or even death, or at least jail time for assaulting an officer. That one brief incident was a major blow to his dignity, his humanity. And don't forget the humiliation and helplessness of the wife. Add that experience to the larger context of a lifetime, and that should give us some small glimmer of understanding of the spirit-crushing nature of racism.

The Civil Rights movement of forty-odd years ago confronted the issue of race and racism. Fueled by both anger and hope, the movement led to great changes. Legislative changes designed to outlaw discrimination. Attitudinal changes that came with raised consciousness about the spurious roots of racial prejudice.

The good news is that the Civil Rights movement made significant strides in the battle against racism. The bad news is that racism still exists. The good news is that prejudice and discrimination have been marginalized – they are no longer officially acceptable. The bad news is that racism is no longer as overt as it once was. It has become more subtle – almost invisible, at least to those not directly affected. As such, racism has become easier to ignore or deny, and more difficult to recognize and confront.

One important distinction I have encountered is between classical or traditional racism on the one hand, and modern or neoracism on the other. Traditional racism, the more overt variety, was based on biological principles that suggested a natural inferiority of one race with respect to another. This has evolved into more subtle forms of racism based on cultural differences, and on the widespread but mistaken belief that discrimination and its effects have been eradicated.

And where is the evidence for the continuing presence of racism? It is evident on predominantly White college campuses, where Black students continue to face hostility with often inadequate support from administrations and communities. It is evident in corporate suites,

where Black executives are butting their heads against glass ceilings that inhibit their advancement. It is evident in the nation's neighborhoods, where *de facto* segregation still runs deep. It is evident in the use of profiling by law enforcement, as in the very frequent traffic stops for the offense of DWB – driving while black. It is evident in our nation's prisons, whose huge populations are disproportionately people of color. It is evident in the media, where stereotypes of African-Americans as pimps, drug dealers and gang-bangers are still prevalent.

Okay, so I've been arguing fairly vigorously that racism still exists in our society and that it's a very bad thing. So why would I say that I'm a racist? What does that mean? It doesn't mean that I think that, as a white person, I'm biologically superior to non-whites. It doesn't mean that I think that, as a white person, I should be given automatic preference over non-whites in education, housing, employment, health-care, or any other area of life. What it does mean is that I, as a white person, benefit from a social system characterized by racism in the form of automatic, historically-conditioned advantages based on race. Furthermore, I often accept and enjoy those advantages with little or no thought as to how that perpetuates the racist nature of the system.

The term for what I'm talking about here is White Privilege – those ways in which life is just a little bit easier because I happen to be white. Let me give you just a few examples. As a white person in America:

- I can turn on the television or watch a movie and see many images of people of my race in a wide variety of roles, including many positive and heroic ones.
- I learn in school that the history of my country is largely the history of my people, written from the perspective of people of my race.
- I am unlikely ever to be asked to speak for my race.
- I can browse in a store without being followed or arousing suspicion because of my race.
- I will never be stopped, frisked, arrested, or abused by police solely because a person of my race is the suspect in a crime in the area.
- I can afford the luxury of assuming a color-blind attitude like the teacher in this morning's reading.
- I can be hired for a job and not have co-workers assume I was hired because of racial preference/affirmative action.

That last one – about affirmative action – is particularly interesting, and I'd like to say just a bit more about it. Affirmative action, in the form of giving preferential treatment or consideration to minorities for employment or other opportunities, is often attacked as being reverse racism. The argument is that discrimination is discrimination, and it's wrong no matter in what direction it's applied. The ideal is the level playing field, and so it's unfair for anyone to be given any advantage simply on the basis of race.

This argument conjures up the following image for me. Two people are matched up in a mile-long footrace. One of them has ten-pound weights attached to his legs. The race begins, and by midway through it, the weighted runner has lagged considerably behind, exactly as you would expect. At this point, a justice-minded liberal steps in and demands that the weights be removed to make this a fair race. Relieved of the extra burden, the trailing racer asks whether it would be possible to be given a chance to make up the margin before resuming the race. The response? Why no, that wouldn't be fair. The playing field is level now, so just keep running, and good luck.

I think the analogy works quite well. Even if racial discrimination were instantaneously abolished, which is doubtful, the centuries-long accumulation of advantage due to white privilege has still left behind a huge deficit of opportunity. True fairness calls for more than simply ending discrimination and then maintaining the unbalanced status quo. The details are negotiable, but some form of affirmative action to close the gap of opportunity seems the least our society can do. Anything less is effectively a denial or trivialization of our racist history.

Meanwhile, here I am, one of the lucky ones. Oh sure, I've had difficulties in life. I've had to overcome challenges. I've faced disappointment and loss. I share those experiences with all human beings. But I have not had to deal with the additional burden of confronting racism and its effects day after day, year after year, in all of its mind-numbing, spirit-killing guises. That's why I am a racist. And that's why many of you may be too. Not because we're racially prejudiced, although that is hard to avoid entirely. Not because we have some character flaw. Not because we're bad people. But because we live in, and enjoy the benefits of a society with a long history of racism. Where racism has seeped into the marrow of our social institutions, affecting us in ways we can't even fathom. What I am asserting is that to benefit from racism is to be a racist.

There's no shame in being a racist. There's only shame in denying it, ignoring it, and doing nothing about it. So what is to be done? I mentioned earlier that racism is a profound spiritual issue. As such, one approach – and I think a good one – is to adopt anti-racism as a spiritual practice. In the book *Everyday Spiritual Practice*, of which there are copies both in my library and the Fellowship library, the Rev. Dorothy May Emerson has a chapter devoted to such an effort. I'd like to share her vision with you this morning.

For Emerson, the spiritual practice of anti-racism has four parts: attention, education, action, and reflection. So the first step is paying attention, watching the world around you and within you, but doing so through the lens of race. This means being intentional about noticing the daily benefits I receive as a white person and the acts or effects of racism around me. It also means paying attention to my own responses to my observations. This conscientious practice of paying attention can foster a greater level of consciousness of the subtle and sometimes not-so-subtle ways that racism is embedded in nearly every aspect of our lives.

Personal experience and observation is certainly a good starting point for developing an understanding of racism. But thorough understanding, especially of the institutional and systemic nature of racism, requires thoughtful study and analysis. Thus education is the second step of this spiritual practice. Education can occur individually through reading, or collectively through study groups, classes, workshops and the like.

For those interested in pursuing the study of racism and the struggle against it, I offer a number of opportunities. I love to offer opportunities. And I love it when people take advantage of them. First, Jean Wiant has recently compiled a four-page list of “Anti-Racism and Anti-Oppression Resources” available from her, from me, from our Fellowship Library or Religious Education Library, or through the Unitarian Universalist Association or Joseph Priestley District websites. Those resources include various workshops as well as a wealth of written material. One other opportunity I'll mention comes with the next Wonderful Soulful Wednesday here on the eighth of November, which will include a chance to watch and discuss the second of a three part video series called “Race – the Power of an Illusion.” Finally, the Soulful Sundown service two weeks from tonight (Nov. 5) will offer a more personal exploration of racism through poetry.

Dorothy Emerson writes that “Out of the practices of attention and education will emerge the third part of the spiritual practice of anti-racism – action.” One simple (though not necessarily easy) form of action is to speak up whenever you hear a racist remark or idea expressed. Other actions might involve creating an anti-racism team, or advocating for change that serves the end of dismantling racism within institutions, or encouraging others to take up this important work.

I want you to know that whatever anti-racism efforts occur here in this Fellowship, we will not be alone. Last summer’s Unitarian Universalist General Assembly, in response to a request by delegate who felt that efforts throughout the Association were inadequate, passed the following resolution:

Resolved, that the Delegates to General Assembly are charged to work with their congregations to hold at least one program over the next year to address racism or classism, and to report on that program at next year’s General Assembly.

Delegates from this congregation took the resolution seriously, leading quickly to the resource list prepared by Jean, and the video series I mentioned. Where else it will lead depends on all of you – your interest, your initiative, your willingness to take part in this journey toward wholeness.

Returning to the spiritual practice of anti-racism, the fourth part – reflection – emerges naturally out of the other three. Reflection, undertaken in a nonjudgmental framework, free of unnecessary and unproductive guilt, can help you evaluate your effectiveness and allow your feelings about the process to emerge. This reflection process is also likely to lead you into renewed efforts to pay attention, to seek further education, and to identify further possibilities for action.

As you’ve probably surmised, this practice is not simply a matter of completing steps one, two, three, and four, and then you’re done. All phases may be occurring simultaneously, each informed by the other, in an endless spiral that may never reach a final destination, but which certainly will move in a good direction. Dorothy Emerson sums up her commitment to her spiritual practice of anti-racism like this:

I cannot accept the idea that we are victims caught in an oppressive system that is so massive and powerful that there is nothing we can do to change things. Regaining my integrity as a person of faith and conscience, I feel empowered to make a difference in this racist world.

I invite each of you to join me and each other in seeking ways that we, too, can make a difference. To move toward the dream of living as non-racists in a non-racist world. So may it be.