

“WE WORK FOR A JUST AND SUSTAINABLE WORLD”

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OPENING WORDS *Come, Come ~ Rumi/Leslie Takahashi Morris*

Come, come, whoever you are
Come with your hurts, your imperfections,
 your places that feel raw and exposed.
Come, come, whoever you are
Come with your strengths that the world shudders to hold
come with your imaginings of a better world,
come with your hopes that it seems no one wants to hear.

Wanderer, worshipper, lover of leaving
we will make a place for you,
we will build a home together.
Ours is no caravan of despair.
We will walk together;
Come, yet again come.

STORY FOR ALL *Those Shoes* ~ Maribeth Boelts

READING *White Supremacy Deconstructed*¹ ~ Sandra Jones and Gregory Jay

Privilege exists when one group has something of value that is denied to others simply because of the social groups they belong to in a social hierarchy, rather than anything they have done or failed to do.

(Re-statement) Privilege is something of value that is denied to others and given to some for something they really had nothing to do with.

The flip side of privilege is oppression. There cannot be privilege without oppression. If one is privileged, then someone else is oppressed because of it. Privilege takes away...it gives to one and takes from another. Privilege means that others are oppressed and held down by social forces (not necessarily by individuals.) Privilege closes the doors of social opportunity for some.

Oppression is relational and can only exist in relationship to privilege. We learn racism from the day we are born. Race is the basic social divide, second to gender. Racism helps to maintain a general system of exploitation and oppression.

The word racism is a code word for white supremacy. There would not be racism without the ideology of white supremacy...it creates wealth and power for fair-skinned individuals. We can talk about racism, but the heart of the matter is the reality of the oppression created by the ideology of white supremacy and the social structure of inequality that it perpetuates. We need to understand the systematic nature of the

¹ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0KMGX8HNFYU>

economic inequality which pervades the whole system...or we'll always be lying to ourselves.

MESSAGE *We Work for a Just and Sustainable World*

May I be open. May I be willing.

As many of you know, my father was a fundamentalist Baptist preacher. While he believed that he had a responsibility to help the poor and feed the hungry, he also didn't believe that heaven would ever be possible on earth. For him, a better world could only exist in the afterlife. I, on the other hand, was a bit of revolutionary in my youth. I organized marches, joined "Young World Development" and worked for "Teen Corps" in the summer. I believed that a day of peace was dawning, that a better world could exist in the here and now, and that I could help make this happen.

Whenever we talked about the world, my father and I disagreed. He thought he was a realist; I thought he was a pessimist. He saw me as an idealist; I thought I was a realist. It's not that I thought there was anything wrong with being an idealist...it's just that I believed that my ideals were attainable, and therefore very real.

The non-fiction book club is currently reading "Moral Clarity: A Guide for Grownup Idealists"² by Susan Neiman, and while slogging through this provoking yet dense volume, I thought of those conversations with my father. Aha. Finally a bit of insight into those father/daughter debates! Without knowing it, we were having deeply philosophical arguments based in the Enlightenment; he played Hume...which is to say that my father believed that the world as we know it...our experience and our culture...reveals and determines all that can be. I, on the other hand, played the role of Kant...believing that things can be different, and that it is through ideas that we're able to change the world.

It seems to me that Unitarian Universalism, throughout history and now, would 'side' with Kant...if sides were to be taken. This is to say, we have tended to put our faith in our human ability to reason and to think...not just as exercises in understanding the past, but also as vehicles of change for the future. Sure, we also look to experience and culture as resources, but we generally don't see 'what is' or 'what has been' as limiting predictors of 'what can be.'

Over the past couple of years, this congregation has worked to create a 'purpose statement', captured here in our banner, that puts forward a vision of what could be... the community that we want to be. "Grounded in love, the Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough strives to be a welcoming community that embraces life with wonder and inquiry. Dedicated to our Unitarian Universalist principles and inspired by our interconnection with all that is, we foster personal transformation and act for a just and sustainable world." To some extent, these are ideas...ideas about what an ideal community would be and do.

Without question, a gap exists between who we are now, and who we want to be. This was evident at the meeting at which we adopted this purpose statement. You see, the proposed statement read, "the Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough IS a welcoming community..."

² Neiman, Susan, *Moral Clarity: A Guide for Grownup Idealists*, (Harcourt; 2008)

Discussion led to a final statement which reads "the Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough STRIVES to be a welcoming community...." The gap is apparent to us. There is a difference between who we are and who we want to be.

Educator and Quaker Parker Palmer talks about this is the 'tragic gap'³...tragic in the sense of human, not in the sense of disaster. He says we are always standing in the gap between what is and what could be, and that the challenge is to hold the tension without flipping out on one side or the other. To focus too much on what IS might lead to "corrosive cynicism" and to focus too much on what COULD BE can lead to "irrelevant idealism." So, to be effective, we must do our work in that place of tension...in that paradox...by facing ourselves, and what we have to learn...and at the same time keeping our sights on what is possible.

This is exactly what Neiman writes about in "Moral Clarity". She also talks about a gap⁴...between what *is* and what *ought* to be. She suggests that 'grown up idealists' need to navigate that gap...not by capitulating to what is, and not by maintaining naive ideals that cannot be achieved...but rather by recognizing both the IS and the OUGHT, and working to narrow the gap between them.

Our purpose statement is an OUGHT. We don't hold it up in order to be 'should upon', but rather to create a vision for what we think, in a better world, ought to be. To say that we strive to be a welcoming community, and that we work for a just and sustainable world, is to recognize that we want to narrow the gap between the IS and the OUGHT. We have here identified the OUGHT...what we believe can be.

But in order not to fall into irrelevant idealism, and in order to clearly understand where we are and the distance we must travel, we have to also identify the IS. On the surface, this seems easy. We can look around us, and watch the news, and listen to stories, and pay attention to our own experience, and have some idea of what IS. Without going too far afield, we could each name things right here in our community that are not just and are not sustainable...the continuing oppression of our indigenous peoples, the many who are hungry or homeless, the disparity in accessible education and housing, the way the land is treated as a resource to be consumed, the continuing insistence that more roads and more cars lead to a better lifestyle...the list is long.

Neiman writes that "Our only chance to break the shackles of present reality is to begin by paying attention to it."⁵ Pay attention to what IS. We've already heard some pretty difficult words, words that Ben shared about white privilege and oppression. And actually, that's where I think we need to start. See, I think that in order to work for a just and sustainable world, we have to acknowledge, fully acknowledge, what IS. We need to see it, and try to understand it, in order to move toward what OUGHT to be.

What set me in this direction was one of the quotes used in last Sunday's service. Nelson Mandela wrote, "I knew as well as I knew anything that the oppressor must be liberated just

³ <http://www.couragerenewal.org/blog/103-parker-entries/639-parkerpalmer-tragic-gap>

⁴ Neiman, "Heaven and Earth" in *Moral Clarity*

⁵ Neiman, p.147

as surely as the oppressed. A man who takes away another man's freedom is a prisoner of hatred, he is locked behind the bars of prejudice and narrow-mindedness. I am not truly free if I am taking away someone else's freedom, just as surely as I am not free when my freedom is taken from me. The oppressed and the oppressor alike are robbed of their humanity."

Because of his courage, because of his dignity, because of his ability to forgive, because of his humility, because of his smile even in the struggle, I want to identify with Mandela. We want to identify with Mandela and to learn from him. But when I (red) read that quote...that "the oppressor must be liberated just as surely as the oppressed"...I found myself wondering which I am. Am I the oppressed? Certainly, there have been ways in my life that I have been oppressed or overlooked...as a woman, as a member of a family without much social status, as a single person, as a large woman.

If I lived in South Africa, where the difference between oppressed and oppressor is most clearly seen in skin colour, the culture would place me with the Afrikaans...the oppressors. And even here, in this 'free society and nation', if I have to choose...and I believe that living an examined life requires me to choose...if I have to choose between identifying as the oppressed or the oppressor, I have to admit to being an oppressor. I have to admit that.

"Privilege is a sociological concept describing the advantages enjoyed by a dominant group of individuals beyond what is commonly experienced by the non-dominant group in the same social places."⁶ I have privilege, and that means that I am the oppressor.

Now, I don't mean that as some kind of personal confession of sin, or to say that I am solely and intentionally the cause of worldwide oppression. If I see it that way, I get stuck in the place Parker describes as corrosive cynicism. If that is my lens, that I am ultimately responsible, then I will not act. I mean, why bother? Clearly I cannot, personally and individually, free the oppressed. There's nothing that I can do, or not much that I can do, to correct the injustices imbedded in a centuries-old social and economic system. It's hardly worth trying. Easier, much easier, to just resign myself to what IS. And wait. For what? Death? Heaven?

Very briefly, let me speak a bit more about white privilege, which first and foremost is the ability, for those of us who present as white, to go through our lives unaware of race. And I speak of white privilege as just one, though one very obvious, line of division and advantage. We all know there are others...gender, sexual preference, religion, class, etc, etc.

The classic work on white privilege has been done by Peggy McIntosh⁷, who out of Wellesley College and her work on feminism, began to explore the 'blind spots' that men have...in their denial of what they gain from women's disadvantages. She came to see that hierarchies in our society are interlocking...that whites are taught not to recognize white privilege in the same way that men are taught not to recognize male privilege. All this to say, we have not been trained to see ourselves as oppressors, but rather as normative and ideal, so that even if we do justice work, if we hope to free the oppressed, we expect that our work will allow 'them' to be

⁶ <http://uustatesboro.uuism.net/privilege.htm>

⁷ McIntosh, Peggy, "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack"

more like 'us.'

McIntosh came up with a list of the effects of a system of white privilege....conditions that I as a white person can pretty much count on, so much so that they are invisible... things like: turning on the TV or opening a paper and seeing my race widely represented; doing well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race; when facing the 'person in charge', being pretty sure that will be a person of my own race; being sure my children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence of their race and to have teachers of their same colour; buying blemish cover or bandaids in 'flesh' colour and have them more or less match my skin; being able to rent or buy housing in any area that I can afford...The list goes on and on.

McIntosh describes this as an invisible, weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools and blank cheques. Having this knapsack certainly does not ensure that everything is easy or that nothing will go wrong, but its very existence advantages us. One of the tools in that pack is a pair of rose-coloured glasses that allow us not to see our privilege, and to distance ourselves from the oppression that our privilege causes. We are able NOT to see certain things, or hear about them, or CARE about them. And, as long we wear those glasses, we will not see what IS, and we will be unable to change it. Not realizing or admitting that we benefit from privilege - that's part of what keeps oppression alive.

One of the great challenges of attaining universal justice is convincing those who have privilege...those who have power, those who have the resources...that the world would be a better place if everyone had equal advantage, equal access. Because when we're used to having more, sharing means not always having everything we want when we want it. When our culture is the dominant one, being a welcoming congregation means that we have to be open to being changed by any 'difference' that enters our doors...and not to assume that our culture is desirable to others.

I have to wonder why we are prone to behave as if the best world is the way things are now. In our vision for a better world, for a more just and sustainable world, might other things be of higher value than our privilege...whatever that privilege might be? What if we valued impermanence so much so that our grasping for things and for status didn't matter? Wouldn't there be less entitlement, and therefore less vulnerability, and less fear in our hearts?

What if we valued growth and change so much so that we willingly exposed ourselves to discomfort and experiences that would stretch our understandings? Wouldn't our lives be richer?

What if we valued hearing the stories of other, hearing their pain, more than protecting ourselves from any feelings of guilt or responsibility? Wouldn't we then be able to live with all of our neighbours, and to have the relationships for which we long?

What if we let go of our privilege, and in so doing were freed from the jail of hatred, prejudice and narrow-mindedness? Wouldn't that be a balm for our broken spirits?

What if we chose to use our arbitrarily-awarded power to help re-construct socio-economic

systems in our society? Wouldn't we then be working for a just and sustainable world?

Please know that I don't preach this from a place of having it all figured out, or because I have mastered my white privilege, or that I'm an expert, for surely I'm not, surely I haven't. I'm not even sure what doing away with white privilege would look like. I'm not sure what a just and sustainable world would look like. But I do know is that what IS is neither just nor sustainable. What I do know is that a better world can be. I invite you to join me in the ongoing effort to close the gap between what IS and what OUGHT to be.

We begin by changing ourselves.

May it be so.

RESPONSIVE READING *When I Change...* ~ Theresa Gustilo Gallardo

Leader: We are here to derive meaning in our actions

All: When I change, the world changes

Leader: We are here to win our power back over our areas of powerlessness

All: When I change, the world changes

Leader: We are here to deepen our understanding of ourselves in order to strengthen self-discipline

All: When I change, the world changes

Leader: We are here to abolish prejudice with an appreciation for our diversity and differences

All: When I change, the world changes

Leader: We are here to feel our personal power and our capacity to affect the lives of other people

All: When I change, the world changes

Leader: We are here to become teachers to each other

All: When I change, the world changes

Leader: We are here to spend time away from the usual influences and re-learn reality

All: When I change, the world changes

Leader: When given the desire, I am also given the power and means to achieve my goals.

All: When I change, the world changes

Leader: I am here to see that my singular life is a gateway to countless possibilities.

All: When I change, the world changes

***CLOSING WORDS** ~ Kathy A. Huff

Our time in this place may have ended, but our connection to each other and this community remains.

Together may we walk the path of justice, speak words of love, live the selfless deed, trod gently upon the earth, and fill the world with compassion.

Until we meet again, blessed be.

EXTINGUISHING THE FLAME