

**JUST TO BE CLEAR...I AM WHITE!**  
The Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough  
Rev. Julie Stoneberg  
February 10, 2019

**OPENING WORDS** *More Love: A Call to Worship* ~ Nancy McDonald Ladd<sup>1</sup>

We gather in community every Sunday in a state of conflict for our very souls – a state both expansively hopeful and restrictively confined.

We are hopeful that we might rise to meet a new day for those who seek and who serve the spirit, hopeful that each and every one of us might encounter the sacred within, among, and beyond every human soul, and hopeful that such an encounter might work through us to topple the idolatries of our age.

And yet we also gather as a people who are not yet free – a people confined, unfree, contained.

We are confined, unfree, contained because in this culture of division built upon the pain of the people at the margins, even the decent people hold our love too tightly.

Putting it in boxes, prefacing it with qualifications: I will love you if – I will see you if – I will bear the truth of my soul alongside you if – and only if...

*You agree with me, you look like me, you stand like me, you think like me, you act like me, you sing like me, you wear your gender on your sleeve and produce it upon demand.*

I will love you and meet you in the sanctuary of our heart – If and only if...

*You give me evidence of your good liberal virtues.*

If and only if...

*You never fail to speak the language of the movement and never weep upon a street corner out of grief for your sheer inadequacy and the vastness of the struggle that you cannot even name.*

We are imprisoned by these ifs and these only-ifs. We are confined by the smallness of our loving even as our souls remind us that we can only get free if we all get free together.

And so today, as we intersect in honest work, let our hopefulness mingle with our conviction.

Let our willingness to love beyond our expectation or experience break down our long-held barriers.

Let our willingness to be honest about the hardest questions open us to new truths.

May there truly be more love,

With no labels  
And no binary  
And no preface  
And no qualification  
And no arithmetic

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<sup>1</sup> To Wake, To Rise: Meditations on Justice and Resilience (Skinner House Books, Boston: 2017)

And no limit.

May there be more love to liberate us all, and may we keep on, today and every day,  
until we find it, and share it, inch by precious inch, with one another and the world.

**STORY FOR ALL**

*I Yam a Donkey!* ~ Cece Bell

*(A donkey insists on using bad grammar to proclaim "I yam a donkey" and a Yam tries to correct his blindspots.)*

**MEDITATION**

*A Prayer of Risk* ~ Tamara Lebak<sup>2</sup>

[Spirit of Life and Love...]

Today we remember to

Breathe deeply

To rest

To take in

To pause

Before we act...

And then to take in another deep breath poised on the edge

And risk jumping in

Risk taking action

Risk speaking up

Risk using the gifts we have been given

So that at the end of our life we can say with absolute clarity that

No part of our existence was wasted in fear of failure

Or fear of success.

Hold us,

Prepare us the way to begin to offer the gift of our

Awakened presence

Full of love and light today.

These and the prayers of our hearts we lift up now

In the *silence*...

Amen

**READING**

*"Dear Student"* (abridged) ~ Julia Donnelly Spiegelman<sup>3</sup>

*Julia Donnelly Spiegelman came across something she had written in 7<sup>th</sup> grade about how she would respond to Apartheid had she been in South Africa at the time. She said that she would not get involved...that while she knew she should be an activist, she'd rather live a life of injustice and safety than justice and constant fear and danger. "It's not right, but it's how I feel," she wrote. Her teacher had simply written "good" on her paper. And this is what she now wishes her teacher had said to her:*

Dear Student,

You're white. So am I. We didn't choose the color of our skin, and there's nothing wrong with it. What is wrong, though, are the systems that have been set up in our world that value certain skin colors and physical traits over others. And the scary thing

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/prayer/prayer-risk>

<sup>3</sup> <https://teachingwhilewhite.org/blog/>

is that this isn't just about apartheid in South Africa. Racism exists here and now, in our country and in our state and in our school, and the fact that it's so hard to see tells us just how deep it runs.

The thing about being white is that we are never the victims of this system. Even though it is unjust and utterly ridiculous to assign value to something as meaningless as race, our society does just this. For us white people, racism is something that we get to think about if we want to, and not think about the rest of the time. The color of our skin doesn't make our intentions or skills suspect in the eyes of authorities, or make us the targets of violence, or make us less likely to get a job or a loan or a home. This unearned privilege feels as natural to us as breathing because we are so used to it, but that doesn't make it any less unfair or its effects any less devastating.

Whether we want it or not, we are part of a racist system. The truly awful part is that we white people actually benefit from the oppression of people of color, with advantages that accumulate while others are disadvantaged. Once you start to notice and pay attention to the inequality around you, it can feel really scary and sad. ... That discomfort, though, is actually a good thing, because once we begin to understand the injustice around us, ... We can be part of a change.

Remember that even though we might feel helpless, the privilege we benefit from makes us anything but helpless. ... We can help to make marginalized voices heard in spaces in which they are not represented. We can advocate for change in our political system. We can urge others to donate their money to fight racism and benefit people of color. ... as Desmond Tutu once wrote, "If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor."

Know, too, that fighting injustice can look like lots of different things. ... It can start small: by educating yourself, by learning about current events and about history, and by listening to people share experiences that are different than yours. By speaking up when you disagree. By telling the truth, even when it's hard. Because in order to change this unfair system, we need to challenge it. I hear you say, in your answer, that you couldn't stand a life of violence and fear. I want you to know that not all resistance is violent but that oppression always is. Your honesty and self-knowledge are a sign of strength, and I think that you are braver than you know. I know that you can be a force for change.

Let's keep talking.

In solidarity, Your Teacher

**MESSAGE**            *Just to be Clear...I am White!*            ~ Rev. Julie

One might think, when we've encouraged each other to 'bring a friend', that we would today be showcasing the very best of our faith and this congregation. What is the best of this congregation? There are a lot of possible answers, including our sometimes-heroic strivings to be welcoming. Or our ability to be involved in multiple projects at the same time... like Many Windows, One Light yesterday, and our Family Fun Nite on Friday. And, this morning, our

'best' is our willingness to bravely walk into the unknown with open minds and hearts.

In that spirit, I offer these reflections to you.

My parents had a piece of folk art (I use that term very loosely) that resided on a living room side table. It was often the object of conversation; people would wonder about it... who made it...what it meant. It was a kind of trick, and the game was to challenge a person to look at it until they understood it. People would pick it up, turn it on its side, step back and stare.

Of course, there was a point when I was among those who couldn't quite understand it. But even after I 'got it', I would still stare at it, trying to get my eyes to 'unsee' it. I couldn't.

Can any of you guess what I'm talking about? It was wooden...about 10 inches long and 3 inches high, and it was built of small strips of light-coloured wood set on a darker-wood background, arranged in a seemingly random pattern. I wish I had it to show to you, and I didn't have time to build one; the best I can do is to show you pictures of a couple of versions I found on the internet.

Now, I expect some of you have seen this before, and so you are 'pre-enlightened'... please give others a chance to look before giving it away.

Anyone still stuck? If so, try focusing on the background instead of the lighter bits. Get it?

The 'object lesson', as I recall it, was that we were to help others see and know Jesus.



Well, today, it is my task to look at another 'optical illusion'...this one in our western society, one that I believe must be seen and known from a different perspective if there is ever to be a more just world...a new perspective I believe is critical for the well-being of our very souls.

For most of us, living in this settler culture, we don't see white...it is invisible to us...because we have been acculturated to see ourselves as the 'normal'. It's like looking at that wooden puzzle, and seeing it only one way. It is the water we swim in; it's the standard by which we understand and see other people. (And to any in the room today who don't identify as white, I do apologize for using 'we' to refer to white people.) When we white people speak of the problems associated with race, we assume that 'race' refers to people of colour...as if white weren't also a colour.

But in the last few decades, scholars and other wise folks have been studying whiteness itself. What does it mean to be white? We know that whiteness is a white invention that developed during the height of the European colonial era. But, now, how do we experience ourselves, and move through the world, as white? How has whiteness shaped us?

My intention today was to share my own experience of whiteness, and while I thought it would be a worthy venture, I found myself flummoxed; it's difficult for me to see it, and how it affects me. As Larry Gillman suggested to me yesterday, I'm experiencing a white out!

So, what I'm about to share feels unformed and almost subterranean. I'm grasping at images and words that might have shaped me as a white person. Part of the challenge is that this

learning was delivered in implicit and insidious ways. Its power lies in the fact that it is unspoken. It is accepted as so normative that it doesn't need to be explained, yet its fingers have me in a kind of death grip, with the main message being its desperation. I have been taught how important it is, without being taught what the 'it' is.

What does it mean to be white? Please understand that I'm not saying it's bad to have white skin, or a sin to be white. What I'm critiquing here is 'whiteness' as the foundation of our racial constructs. Whiteness, in other words, is critical to the survival of racism.

So...I've been digging for stories from my life that might help me to understand how I became white.

I was born in a suburb of Milwaukee. Before I was four, we moved to rural South Dakota, where we lived until I was twelve. We then moved to a small city in northern Minnesota. My parents didn't intentionally keep us in white-only communities, but the truth is that I have virtually no memory of any 'real' non-white person in my life. Well, there was one 'milado' boy in my high school. This word - milado - was meant to be whispered.

Actually, all references to race were to be whispered. One of my cousins married a Black woman - and the fact that they became estranged from the family was blamed on her colour. To this day, that couple isn't mentioned without naming her blackness...again in a whisper.

There's a story about a cross-country train trip I took with my mother to go to her mother's funeral in California. I was just three. I was told (and there's actually a bad photograph to prove it) that I spent a lot of the trip on the lap of an Indian in full headdress. You'd think my mother would know more about that man...who he was, and why he was travelling...maybe even something about his headdress...but if she did, she never shared any of that with me. What I did learn is that I had somehow been both bad and good in showing interest in him. Oh, and that 'Indian' was another word one should whisper.

As many of you know, I am the daughter of a Baptist minister. So, I grew up singing that Sunday School song...Jesus loves the little children. You know? (*sing...red and yellow...*) It was always sung so sweetly, with such assurance that this Jesus was gracious and loving. Today I perceive this to be a song sending the white missionary out to save the heathen coloured folks. (But I also know that this song unintentionally planted some of the earliest seeds of inclusivity and racial justice in me.)

My parents were Swedish Baptists, and both the children of recent immigrants to the US. This was a proud legacy...to be a pure Swede (although I suspect that only goes as deep as a few generations.) But, my father was a 'black' Swede...dark hair with a coarse 5-o'clock shadow, and he came from farmer stock, whereas my mother's family were educated city people. At extended family gatherings, this white-on-white racism was present, but the surface.

My great grandfather, my father's grandfather, settled on a parcel in central Minnesota...purchasing it from a man named Smith in 1899. And my grandfather then purchased a small 40-acre farm up the road from that homestead in 1915. One day I'll research more about this, but that land, land my family farmed and lived off, was likely part of the original territory of the Mille Lacs band of the Chippewas.

This got me thinking about how I was drawn to working with Native Americans beginning in high school. I spent many weekends on the Mille Lacs Lake reservation, with no awareness of treaties or that my father's family had settled on their land. From today's vantage point, I think that I carried within me a white savior identity...I wanted to 'save' those poor people from their abject poverty and illiteracy, while working with AIM, the American Indian Movement, for their liberation. From what, I did not know.

My family traveled every summer...driving cross-country to the Baptist General Conference wherever it might be...camping along the way and stopping to see relatives. Given that this was the Swedish Baptist conference, we didn't ever dip below the Mason-Dixon line, but it surprises me that for all of these long car trips, we still really only experienced a white world. With rare exception, we moved in a kind of gelatinous white bubble...a bubble that protected us from exposure to difference.

I do remember one exception when we travelled into New York City...it must have been the late 60's and just on the heels of the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. My father very intentionally drove through Harlem because he wanted us to see Negroes as real people. His intentions were honourable, I think, but the impact wasn't. It was a very hot day, our car was not air-conditioned, and yet we were instructed to keep the windows rolled up. I can only imagine what we looked like; a car full of sweating, midwestern hicks, gaping, wide-eyed. Whites under glass. Protected. Separate.

*(Sing a verse of Hush??)*

Even from this handful of stories, I can begin to see how I was enculturated as a white person...how I was trained to see white as the norm, the standard against which to judge all else. Everyone not white was 'the other'.

Even in this sparsity of memories and awareness, I can see whiteness as a construction of separateness and superiority...a protected class that never has to defend itself or be concerned for its rightful place.

But I also feel such sadness in these stories. So much regret for what I didn't experience, for not learning to be at home in the presence of difference, for the tamping down of curiosity about the other. Lillian Smith, one of the first white southern authors to speak out publicly against the evils of segregation, said that racism is a fragmenting of knowledge...that it blocks us from sensible contact with the world we live in<sup>4</sup>; my upbringing confined me to one small way to experience life, one small corner of the fabric of humanity.

Of course, there are huge privileges inherent in being, or appearing white, in a white-dominated culture. I don't have to worry about being followed around a store, about being stopped for driving while black, of being assumed to be stupid or unable to manage money...you know the list...all of those things we carry around in our invisible backpacks of

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.abbeytennis.com/racial-justice-and-multiculturalism.html>

Killers of the Dream, Lillian Eugenia Smith, p.21-29

Also: <https://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/adults/btwwda/workshop7/handout2>

privilege.<sup>5</sup>

Privilege requires an underdog...it requires someone else to be underprivileged, right? And I just have to wonder what kind of a world we are missing out on by continuing to carry that privilege.

Remember that folk art I showed you when I began? My life is like that. For most of my years, I have looked at my life without even seeing that it was a white existence. I didn't have the eyes, the capability, to see it in any other way. This is not the sermon in which I explore what has made me open my eyes, but suffice it to say, that now I can't look at myself without seeing my whiteness. When I insist on perfection, when I watch the clock, when I look for facts to back me up, when I think I'm right, when I assume I should be served, when I look at my face in the mirror, I see my white privilege. I can't un-see it.

And now I believe that I have an obligation to examine that privilege, that whiteness, and to work to undo it. I believe that we can unlearn how to be white. It's what some are calling the 'abolition of whiteness' because it is only in that way that racism can be eliminated. That's why I keep talking about it. That's why we have an Undoing White Privilege team, which I invite you, implore you, to join. Because what we know is carried in the DNA of our communities, and if we can open our eyes and change what we know, we will also change our communities, and our world.<sup>6</sup>

I am just at the beginning of this journey to understand myself as white. James Baldwin wrote that the white experience is that of not knowing and not wanting to know.<sup>7</sup> I want to change that. I don't want that to be my experience. I want to live a life with my eyes, my ears, my mind, my heart...all wide open to receive the blessing of right relationship with all people. Red and yellow, black and white, all are precious.

You are precious. All are precious. The inherent worth and dignity of each person is our first principle, though in truth it is an aspiration statement rather than a reality. Also central to our Unitarian faith is a pull toward wholeness through an ever-widening love. But racism gets in the way of us ever realizing these promises, these beautiful possibilities.

My prayer is that each of us continues on this uncomfortable and unsettling journey, toward the abolition of whiteness, so that we may dislodge that which blinds us, and that we may see ourselves and each other, every other, ever more clearly.

So be it.

**READING**                      *Connecting* ~ Tricia Knoll<sup>8</sup>

I'm white space

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<sup>5</sup> White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack, Peggy McIntosh  
<http://hd.ingham.org/Portals/HD/White%20Priviledge%20Unpacking%20the%20Invisible%20Knapsack.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Not Somewhere Else, But Here, Rebecca Parker  
<https://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/adults/btwwda/workshop7/handout2>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.abbeytennis.com/racial-justice-and-multiculturalism.html>

The Fire Next Time, James Baldwin, 1963

<sup>8</sup> To Wake, To Rise: Meditations on Justice and Resilience (Skinner House Books, Boston: 2017)

between black dots.  
I grew up catching tigers  
by the toe. School books  
came with unbroken backs.

No one ever called my people X.  
Families on TV looked like mine.  
I believed money could get me  
where I wanted to go.  
I own the land I live on.  
I was never a melting anything –  
fondue, chocolate, molten pot,  
hot lava lamp, or zombie brain.

A bubble surrounds me,  
shimmer-soap surprise  
I thought would never pop  
until it did.

\* **CLOSING WORDS** *A Simple Change of Heart (adapted) ~Carrie Newcomer*

There has never been a day when the world wasn't new  
When the sun didn't rise or the light didn't break on through  
Still...the world holds its breath to see where we'll incline this time  
Has something shifted? Has the story changed?  
Courage doesn't always shout.  
Courage whispers and reminds us to get up one more morning  
And try one more time.  
Look inside yourself, and remember that  
The greatest revolution is a simple change of heart  
The greatest revolution is a simple change of heart

Viva la revolucion!  
So be it. Amen.

**EXTINGUISHING THE FLAME**