

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York
“Racial Healing”

Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore January 17, 2021

Reading

From The Introduction of the book, *The Racial Healing Handbook, Practical Activities to help you Challenge Privilege, Confront Systemic Racism and Engage in Collective Healing* by Annaliese Singh.

Racism is a system of oppression that relies on beliefs that one race or group of people is superior to another based on biological characteristics, like skin color, facial features, and hair. White supremacy, the key driver of racism, designates White people as superior to people of color—which is just not true. There is no one race that is better than another...

...[Americans] all grow up in a society steeped in racism, everyone learns explicit and implicit stereotyped messages in families, schools, and communities about who People of Color and White people are. We end up learning these racialized stereotypes and acting on them consciously and unconsciously without much opportunity to unpack or critique them. In this manner, racism has created—and continues to create—wounds of pain, grief, and loss for everyone in society, both those devalued by racism and those who are in the dominant, privileged group...

Healing [from racism] means you begin to unlearn the stereotyped racial messages you internalized about your own race and the race of others. It means you as an individual learn to recognize the wounds that racism creates in you, whether you are White or a Person of Color. And whether you are conscious of these nicks and tears to your psyche or not. Healing means you open your eyes to the costs of racism, which are pretty much everywhere, and work to stop participating, either knowingly or actively, in the system of racism and white supremacy that was designated to favor some people and not others. You learn to notice how your race drives the differential privileges and access to needed resources you might receive.

The good news is that healing from racism is a process of proactive individual actions and strategies you can practice throughout your lifetime. And the even better news is that as you begin to heal from racism, you can learn to give folks in your personal and professional circles the opportunity to heal from racism too.

Sermon

Rev. Sam: If we had any doubt that White Supremacy was still a driving force in America, we saw it in video and pictures with the attack on our nation's Capitol. The attack was the culmination of four years of Trump's support for the attitudes and stereotypes embedded in the lost cause narrative of the Confederacy translated into Jim Crow in 1871 that has colonized the Republican Party with Trump's support.

I have no doubt about what our congregation affirms in this regard. We oppose white supremacy wherever we encounter it. We want to be part of creating an egalitarian, pluralistic and inclusive America; An America where everyone can thrive, find meaning and experience fulfillment. It is what we want in our congregation when we say as the first line of our mission statement: “We welcome everyone.”

Yet I must *also* say, our willingness and commitment has been *more often* in our minds than in our voices, hearts, and feet. There is a gap between our aspiration and our action.

This has been an area of concern for me throughout my years of ministry. I’ve felt the struggle of leading the congregations I’ve served to translate our UU aspirations to action. So has the Unitarian Universalist Association. And the place you can experience that struggle each year is at our annual meeting, General Assembly, at the end of June.

In preparation for this morning, I reviewed a video I recorded of the 1995 General Assembly Diversity Day. The goal was to engage the emotions of the delegates rather than their heads. It acknowledged the emotional barriers that prevented them from engaging in what was then called racial diversity work. The focus was on the welcome and inclusion of our congregations rather than working for racial injustice in society.

Some of you will remember Thandeka who worked with our congregation a few years ago. She spoke during Diversity Day about the barriers in our congregations as heart work, grounded in emotional work. Heart work is a critical frame for the work that can’t be accomplished by the head as we strive to dismantle white supremacy.

The UUA dedicated an entire day of programming to anti-racism work because of a monumental blunder that happened at the 1993 GA. Charlotte, North Carolina, part of the former Thomas Jefferson District, was the location. The GA Planning Committee had come up with what *they thought* was a *wonderful theme* for evening entertainment: have a traditional southern ball and have people dress in period costumes from the time of Jefferson. The President of the District, a White woman named Barbro Hansson, was excited about the ball and had bought an expensive dress from that period to wear. The Black delegates had a different take on it. Were they expected to dress in their period costumes of rags and chains? Would they be asked to serve the drinks and sweep the floors? The symbolic issues of a southern ball *celebrating the pleasure* of an era of slavery *hadn’t occurred* to the Planning Committee.

That southern ball *clearly framed for me* the barrier White folks encounter again and again. The White Planning Committee members, which I believe was all White back then, who thought up the idea of the ball or worked on organizing it, had *any idea* that this might be harmful to Black UUs. *Even if* it came up, which I doubt it did, it was brushed off because everyone would know that it would be *just good fun* and there wouldn’t be any *bad intentions*.

I hope you know what I’m about to say. If you don’t I encourage you to listen extra carefully.

Intention *does not* equal impact. It is a phrase I could tattoo on the back of my eyelids. In the area of race relations, it is better to just drop intention altogether and focus intently on impact. It just doesn’t matter *what* your intention is. The *only thing* that matters is your impact. The impact here

was very, very bad. Bad enough to energize four years of work at all levels of the UUA culminating in a resolution passed in 1997 called “Toward an Anti-Racist Unitarian Universalist Association.”

There is a personal note to this controversy. It changed my heart.

My heart was lifted by listening to Hansson reflect on the controversy at the 1996 General Assembly. In the middle of that 1993 GA, Hansson convened a group of delegates to see if they could work out a solution. The meetings were tense, voices were raised, tears flowed, sparks flew. No one was comfortable. And truth was spoken. And intense feelings were expressed. And lives were changed. Hansson was so transformed by that experience; she felt and followed a call to UU ministry.

As Hansson spoke at the podium, I sensed the spiritual power that can be released when we consciously dismantle internal and external expressions white supremacy. It has been a guide for me ever since that GA. What I heard from Hansson and others that day, and what I have experienced since then, inspire my faith that if we seriously and consistently engage in this work, we too will be transformed - and healed - as we strive to create Beloved Community.

Jaye: “You don’t act Black.” Those words four words stung.

It wasn’t the first or last time I had heard such a sentiment. It isn’t terribly uncommon for misguided white people to say similar things, thinking they are offering me a compliment or that somehow denying my heritage was something to which I would aspire.

The sting in these words came from the fact that they were uttered to my 7th grade self by another 7th grader - another Black girl. We were at Linwood Middle School in North Brunswick, NJ. There were only about 6 other kids of color in the entire school. It was spring and Sabrina’s family had just moved there from Georgia; mine had moved from Illinois at the beginning of the school year. Sabrina and I had very different challenges in adjusting to the new environment.

Decatur, Illinois, the city I was born in, was an incredibly diverse and multicultural place. My family was engaged in all kinds of activities with all kinds of people. My elementary school had students from every walk of life. My dad worked as an engineer at General Electric and had interns from all over the world that studied with him; they often became semester-long members of our family. My parents were involved in the League of Women Voters, the Democratic Party, the Urban League, the NAACP and more. And then there were people like Father Trojac, the French Canadian priest who had a passion for social justice work, and Mr. Pedroso, the Cuban baseball player who defected to America when he came to play for the minor league team in Decatur. They became extended members of our family, too. With such an eclectic mixture of people in my world from the time I was a baby, I was comfortable with just about anyone of any race, including myself. What made me feel like a fish out of water when I got to Jersey wasn’t being with people of a different race. It was the big hair and bigger attitudes; I struggled to find common ground with my new classmates.

Sabrina struggled in a different way, I think. She had come from a majority Black community. Finding herself in very white North Brunswick was frightening for her, I believe. She was relieved to spot me - the only other Black girl in the 7th grade - and immediately began hanging out with me as

much as she could. She seemed annoyed when I tried to include her in my group of friends; she wasn't interested in their company. She was seeking the familiarity of culture, of identity and belonging. She was seeking the comfort of not having to explain who she was. This is what author Annaleise Singh calls Emersion for people of color - "You experience a greater need to connect with people of your own race and other people of color so you can feel comforted and validated..." It wasn't the big hair that bothered Sabrina. It was being dropped in a sea of whiteness that caused her to seek me out like a rescue buoy.

That afternoon in the schoolyard when she said to me, "You don't act Black" I was shocked. Sabrina's words stung because they placed me uncomfortably between two worlds -- clearly, I didn't fully fit into the white world, but it had never occurred to me that there was a "right" way to be Black and that somehow I might not fit into that world either.

This notion that there is a way that white people or Black people (or Asian people, or indigenous people, etc...) are supposed to act is deeply engrained in our individual and collective thought processes. And of course, it's not just about race. There's a "right" way to behave like a straight man or a gay woman. There's a "right" way to be a good daughter or bad husband. We humans like nice, neat boxes for things. We like those boxes so much that when people fall outside our boxes, we create new ones. For example, a lazy, white, young man is boxed up as a "slacker". Healthy, white, young men aren't supposed to be lazy, so they get a separate box. Generally speaking, healthy, young, Black men who are seen as lazy are not called "slackers" ... because lazy is perceived to be the norm for them. No additional box needed.

We tend to believe these boxes are necessary for organizing our world - who is friend and who is foe? But these boxes are often crushing. We hurt ourselves and each other when we insist on putting people in boxes. In order to heal, we have to examine how we created the boxes of racial identity. What purpose were they meant to serve? Do they get in the way of us building strong connections to one another? And if they get in the way, how can we dismantle them?

In "The Racial Healing Handbook" Singh calls us to look at early experiences in our lives that helped shape us. If I could speak to the wounded 7th grade me, I would tell her that because she is Black, to be herself is to "act Black." I would tell her that individuality is the source of her power. And I would tell her that she will find healing when she breaks free of the boxes.

Rev. Sam: Thank you Jaye.

I had just a small taste of not being white enough in 1968. My family moved to England for a year that summer so my father could have a sabbatical at a research laboratory. My parents put me in the regular school. I didn't do very well. I didn't know any English history. I struggled to manage their odd currency in math problems, (made up of guineas, sovereigns, crowns, florins, shillings, pence and farthings). And I couldn't play soccer. I got teased mercilessly and called "Yankee" derisively. It was a painful but enlightening experience I'd never had before as a popular kid back home. Here, I was an outsider.

In need to emphasize there is no equivalency here between my experience and Jaye's. The harm white folks experience in white supremacy culture is different in magnitude, frequency, and threat,

from Black, Indigenous and People of Color. Yet both experience harm, that unaddressed and unhealed, keeps white supremacy firmly in place.

The thesis of Annaliese Singh, the author of the book Jaye quoted for our Reading, is that we can do that healing work together. Yes, some healing work we can't do together and we need to recognize there are limits that need to be respected. And there is mutual benefit to doing that work together. And dealing with the personal harm racism causes *together*, as happened at the 1993 GA, can be transformative.

Healing the personal harms of racism and white supremacy is good and beneficial. And incorporating personal efforts to interrupt and dismantle white supremacy is critical too. Otherwise, we're just stocking up on Band-Aids for the next wound. Efforts to interrupt and dismantle racism are prophylactic. They are likely to prevent future emotional injury for oneself or others.

I know how good the intentions are of so many people in our congregation. I know how highly we value inclusion, putting it first in both our mission and vision statements. It is discouraging, even heartbreaking, when I hear from People of Color about the negative impacts of good intentions.

The single best thing we can do is abandon the "I had good intentions" or "I'm not a racist" defense when someone says "Ouch, that hurt." Let us abandon establishing right and wrong in race relations and attend to how we can work toward mutual healing.

Benediction

In "The Racial Healing Handbook", Anneliese Singh writes:

“...the calls for change and the number of antiracists working toward this change have escalated in the last fifty years or so based on the efforts of folks who were just like you - people who wanted to make what Representative John Lewis called “good trouble” when it comes to racial injustice.”

Facing the rising sun of our new day begun,
Let us march on till victory is won.