

#UUWhiteSupremacyTeachIn

Readings: 'I, Too' by Langston Hughes
'Within Two Weeks the African American Poet Ross Gay is Mistaken for Both the African American Poet Terrance Hayes and the African American Poet Kyle Dargan, Not One of Whom Looks Anything Like the Others' by Ross Gay
From a Facebook post by Kenny Wiley

Today, we join with 600 other Unitarian Universalist congregations in having a service that addresses white supremacy in ourselves and our institutions. Today, we answer the invitation of Aisha, whose video we saw, and Kenny, whose words Dyrk just read, along with many others.

Today, as we do this, I want to tell you that this is hard for me. Like many white people of my generation, I was taught not to talk about race. By the time I was born, the civil rights movement was over and equality was achieved – at least on paper if not in life. No one told me directly not to talk about race as far as I can remember, but I certainly learned, mostly through the discomfort of white adults, that it was not to be discussed.

I know this is a particular white experience. I know that my peers of color had to start talking about race almost as soon as they could talk. Their elders had to talk with them about to help them understand how to navigate a culture of white supremacy, to keep them safe.

The problem with white silence is that not talking about something doesn't solve anything. And we know that things are not solved, that we are not yet living in a world community with peace, liberty and justice for all. I hope that this can be a community, where we talk about important things – things like race, but also meaning, death, and truth.

It that spirit, I want to tell you a story. It's a hard story, a heart story, a vulnerable story, a messy story.

To understand this story, you need to know that I am a white, upper middle class, cisgender woman. I am currently able-bodied. I am married to a man. My husband and I have a son, a little white boy named DeForest. One day, about a year and a half ago, I was in my kitchen listening to National Public Radio. There was a news feature about a study on discrimination in hiring practices. If you consume a news diet like mine, you hear about one of these studies fairly regularly. The researchers sent off batches of resumes in response to job listings. All of the resumes list similar qualifications. The only difference is that some resumes had stereotypically white-sounding names and others have stereotypically black-sounding names. The resumes attached to the white-sounding names receive invitations to interview dramatically more often than the ones with black-sounding names. Because these studies are well designed, we know that the fact that some resumes had black-sounding names attached is why they were not invited to interview.

What made this story stand out to me from the similar stories is what the researcher said while she was interviewed. She listed some of the white-sounding and black-sounding names. As she listed the black-sounding names, she said 'DeAndre, DeShawn, and names like that.' And I immediately thought to myself, "DeForest." I mentally added my son's name to the list.

I want to approach this moment from a number of different angles this morning, as this moment had a lot to teach me.

The first angle is my immediate response in the moment, there in my kitchen. I thought, "oh my god, what have I done to my son? Will he be able to get a job?" I didn't want anyone to accidentally think that my son is black. In 15 years, when he's submitting his first resumes—or whatever the equivalent of resumes is then, will he face discrimination because his name sounds black? Have I disadvantaged him somehow? Did I hurt my son's chances of success by giving him a name that might lead someone to assume he's black?

It's hard for me to tell you this, tell you that my first response to all this was that I feared my son would look black on paper and I worried that I had failed him because of that. It's a vulnerable story and a messy story, but I want this to be a community where we are real with one another and we practice all the messiness and vulnerability that is part of being real and honest, that is part of living a life of integrity. Integrity doesn't come easy. It is something we have to work toward every day. And there is no way that we can encourage one another on this journey if we aren't willing to risk being truly known by one another, messiness and all.

This story stirs up a mix of guilt and shame. It's uncomfortable for me – I went back and forth all week about if I was really going to tell you this story, name this part of myself. Twelve step programs tell us, 'we're only as sick as our secrets.' I believe that is often true.

If you are a white person who finds yourself in that place of secrets or guilt or shame today or in other conversations about race and white supremacy, I invite you to notice it and hold it lightly. Think, "huh, I wonder why this is how I'm feeling? How did I learn this response? I wonder if there is another way I can feel about this?" Sit with it. Reflect on it. Come talk to me or members of the Anti-Racism Anti-Oppression, and Multiculturalism Committee about it. And if guilt and shame are not stirred up for you today, that's just fine too. You aren't doing it wrong if you don't have that experience.

So my first reaction to that radio story was personal fear and recrimination. Have I done everything I can to make my child safe and successful? I think everyone who cares for children asks themselves this multiple times a day. But this was that and different too – as that personal fear was, at its heart, a fear that my child would be perceived as black and lose opportunities. I worried I had jeopardized my son's privilege because of a naming choice I made.

It's a thought rooted in seeing the world as a highly competitive place, as a place of finite resources and opportunities. It's a thought rooted in wanting my son to maintain unfair advantages because of his race. It's a thought rooted in the culture of white supremacy. It's not a thought rooted in our Unitarian Universalist values.

Here, we believe in the inherent worth and dignity of all people. One of the implications of that is there is no such thing as other people's children. All children are ours. When we live out our values, we work for the good of all children. We do this when members of our community volunteer in our religious education program, as is happening at this very moment. We do this when we promise to help raise the children in this community, learn with them and grow with them. We live our values when we send volunteers and books and money to support Lincoln Elementary or the ISAAC early childhood education task force, and in so many other ways. And having all these examples helped me remember, when I was so worried about maintaining my son's unfair advantage, that there is another possibility. Thank you for reminding me of

what it means to live our values. This is what we do here, remind one another of what it means to live our values, live lives of integrity, and close that gap between what we say and who we are.

The Rev. Karen Quinlan, a white woman who you all helped form as a minister, as she was your intern minister, writes, 'I'm learning true change happens only when we take the time and the risk of sitting with something hard. True change in the world is intimately related to our internal transformation, which is intimately related to our presence to ourselves.' Great right? You all get to take some credit for that.

And so, while that moment listening to the radio could have been one moment, with a passing thought and nothing more, I have chosen to sit with it and see what it has to teach me, see what I have to learn.

And as I sat with this experience, I learned more about myself, and more about race. A next response was recognizing that, when my husband and I named DeForest, we did not consider the racial assumptions that people might make about his name. We chose to name him after my grandfather, my beloved Grandpa De. When we were thinking about the name DeForest, I spoke with friends who had unusual names about their experiences growing up with a name that was never included on the hanging rack of personalized keychains at gift shops, names that one always had to spell out in full. We sought reassurance from them that an unusual name was not a terrible burden. Race was not part of our decision making.

And the fact that race never crossed my mind is a piece of white privilege. Aisha Hauser spoke about noticing the water that we're already swimming in. Often, those of us who are white don't notice the oppression, white supremacy, and racism in our world. We are like fish who do not notice the water that they're in, because that's all they've ever known. This Sunday call us to notice. So much of white privilege and the white supremacy culture that creates and perpetuates it allows those of us who are socialized as white to not see it. John A. Powell writes "White people have the luxury of not having to think about race. That is a benefit of being white, of being part of the dominant group. Just like men don't have to think about gender. The system works for you, and you don't have to think about it."

That's what I put the image of the white supremacy culture iceberg on the cover of our order of services. There are the overt pieces that are easy to see and there is so much below the surface, covert. What does it take for us to surface the iceberg a little further, or see water in which we're swimming. Other people's stories and my own moments of clarity help me notice that water that surrounds us. When have you seen the water?

Peggy McIntosh wrote the classic text on white privilege—on this not seeing that my fellow white people and I are so easily able to do, that we have been taught to do our whole lives. In 'White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack,' she lists over 50 ways that white privilege manifests, over 50 ways to notice the water. The list includes 'I can choose... bandages in flesh color and have them more or less match my skin tone,' 'I can be late to a meeting without having the lateness reflect on my race' and the following, which feels particularly relevant in this week that the passage of a bill by the House of Representatives, which, if it becomes law, will result in millions losing their health insurance, 'I can criticize our government and talk about how much I fear its policies and behavior without being seen as an outsider.' It's a classic text, published in the 1980s, but one I return to again and again.

This one moment of radio listening taught me about my fear—and my privilege. It can also teach us about structural injustice. The way white supremacy is perpetuated in systems. The conclusion of the study is not that everyone should have names that hold no clues about race. The conclusion is our system is

broken. That discrimination, whether conscious or not, is regularly and consistently hurting well-qualified people of color in employment. My ultimate lesson from that moment is not about my name choices for my child, but that we live in a culture that consistently hurts people of color and that needs to change. Because that hurts all of us. All of us are worse off because of white supremacy.

And that's why Aisha and Kenny and other UUs of color have asked us to spend our Sunday on this topic. Our UU siblings in spirit who are people of color have said we are not living our values. There is a mismatch between our words and our actions. At a recent gathering of UU religious professionals of color, some people spoke about how they have been invited into the most prominent volunteer positions in our denomination, including serving on the UUA board of trustees, but when they apply for equivalent paid positions, positions matching their skills and talents, they often made it to the final round of interviews, only to be told again and again that they were not the right fit. This is not an isolated case or two. It has happened again and again. And this pattern stretches beyond our UUA headquarters. Unitarian Universalist ministers of color consistently have a harder time in the search process and are less likely to find congregations that want to call them as their minister – and then when they are called, ministers of color, on average have a shorter length of tenure than white ministers. This is not a new problem. For generations the Unitarian Universalist Association and its predecessor institutions have actively discouraged ministers of color and congregations created to serve people of color. It's a disheartening legacy and it is ours. If you want to learn more about this, I encourage you to read the books *Black Pioneers in a White Denomination*, which is available in our church library and *Darkening the Doorway*, which isn't. Both are by Mark Morrison-Reed, who is a minister and scholar of the black experience in Unitarian Universalism. These stories are not unique to Unitarian Universalism; most liberal institutions can tell similar stories, share similar histories.

There is a long history of the ministers and other people of color who have not been welcomed in our congregations drifting quietly away after a series of disappointments.

That is not what happened this time. There were open letters. There were viral facebook posts. There were analyses of hiring practices, recognizing that about 80% of senior staff at the UUA are white, while 80% of lowest paid staff are people of color. There was a call to live out the beautiful words we say we believe. I am grateful that these people, our UU siblings in spirit have trusted us enough to share their truth, have faith in us that we can be transformed into a new way of being.

While some in leadership have welcomed this chance to do better and are sitting with this hard something and risking change; that is not the only responses they have received. Peter Morales, the UUA president responded poorly to these criticisms – calling the critics 'hysterical.' When people responded to his response, he resigned, with three months left in his term. Senior staff at the UUA have resigned as well. We now have three interim co-presidents until a new UUA president is elected at the General Assembly next month. All of the presidential candidates are white women.

And there was the call to do real and important work to dismantle the patterns of white supremacy, to devote a Sunday service to this topic, and work beyond today. The calls asked us to use the words 'white supremacy.' In their invitation, Aisha, Kenny, and other leaders wrote, 'White Supremacy' is a provocative phrase, as it conjures up images of hoods and mobs. Yet in 2017, actual 'white supremacists' are not required in order to uphold white supremacist culture. Building a faith full of people who understand that key distinction is essential as we work toward a more just society in difficult political times." There is no one in white hoods making the hiring decisions at the UUA or in our congregations – and yet these patterns

continue. All of the covert pieces of white supremacy, everything below the surface on that iceberg on the cover of the order of service, continue.

It continues in part because of the culture of white supremacy. The culture of white supremacy includes perfectionism, the right to comfort, defensiveness, either/or thinking, and power hoarding. Carolyn Heineman has prepared the handout in your order of service that goes into more detail about this. Please read it. These patterns are often what we are talking about when we talk about "fit" in a hiring process. You are invited to join Carolyn for a conversation about this following the service in Room L2. I want us all to see these patterns so we all can start naming them here and in other parts of our lives. I hope all of you will help me see the water in which I, and other white people, so often, obliviously swim.

How I wish I could close with a three point plan or one simple trick and white supremacy will be dismantled. As our anti-racism, anti-oppression, multiculturalism committee members remind me when I get impatient, "no one has ever successfully dismantled institutional racism in America before." There is no quick fix. This is generational work. We will not live to see the end of institutional white supremacy. It will not all be fixed before my son is sending out those resumes in fifteen years or so, but it could be better, depending on the choices that we and so many others make today.

On this continent, racism, oppression, and white supremacy have had over 500 years to become part of our institutions, our communities and the patterns in our minds. It won't be fixed quickly, but we can take up the work that our siblings in spirit have called us to do and make our policies and practices reflect our values. This is some of the most important work we can do.

I want to close today with words from Rev. Joe Cherry, who serves a UU Congregation in the Cleveland area:

If we have any hope of transforming the world and changing ourselves,
we must be
bold enough to step into our discomfort,
brave enough to be clumsy there,
loving enough to forgive ourselves and others.

May we, as a people of faith, be granted the strength to be
so bold,
so brave,
and so loving.

May it be so. May we make it so. Amen.