

White Supremacy is a Hard Place to Start and a Worse Place to End
June 18, 2017

Thought to ponder at the beginning:
I think that what people have failed to talk about is white supremacy.
– Henry Giroux, educator

Opening Words by Audre Lorde

And I dream of our coming together

encircled *driven*
not only by love

but by lust for a working tomorrow

the flights of this journey
mapless *uncertain*

and necessary as water.

Reading *Dear Liberal Allies*, by Trungles

You and I learned very different things in very different ways. If you didn't live an experience, then step aside. We students of color, gay students, trans* students, children of immigrants and refugees knew this stuff before our professors told us what to call it. We learned it from the bottom up.

You learned it another way. You received a set of key words and a list of definitions. Your learning was, in all likelihood, "Here is this word. This is what this word means."

For you, it was “Xenophobia: a strong fear or dislike of people from other countries.”

For us, it was “Xenophobia: the time that boy in my kindergarten class spat on me because I couldn’t speak English yet. Or when I saw that clerk yell at my mom in the grocery store because her English wasn’t clear enough.”

For you, it was, “Racism: unfair treatment of people who belong to another race; violent behavior towards them.”

For us, it was, “Racism: that one time I saw that manager tell that sales girl to follow my dad around at Kohl’s. Or that one time my neighbor’s kid got shot by the police and they tried to cover it up by convincing everyone he was in a gang because he was Hmong, but we knew he wasn’t. Or the time my dad told me I shouldn’t roller blade to the library because I’m not white and it’s not safe for me.”

For you, it was, “Homophobia: a strong dislike or fear of homosexual people.”

For us, it was, “Homophobia: that time in the sixth grade when Ryan shoved me against a glass door and banged my face in it while yelling, ‘faggot!’ at me until the teacher stopped him. Or when my Catholic high school’s president told me that, though he loved me as a child of God, he still believed I was sinful.”

For you, it was: “Classism: prejudice or discrimination based on social class.”

For us, it was: “Classism: the time when my best friend came over to hang out and her parents didn’t want her to come over again because they didn’t like our neighborhood. Or that one time when my friends had no idea what food stamps looked like and I was too embarrassed to explain what they were.”

So while you were learning that these academically-framed phenomena were real problems, we were getting figurative name tags for awful things that we already knew. Your weekly vocabulary list was, to us, just a hollow shadow of our lived experiences.

When you step out of class, you get to say, “Oh, awesome. I’m learning how to be a good ally and a better human being. This will help me.”

For us, it’s more like, “Ah, so that’s what they’re calling it nowadays. When exactly did they say change was going to come for us?”

Trungles is a Vietnamese-American comic book artist and illustrator working out of the Twin Cities in Minnesota. See his website [Trungles](#) for more information.

Reflection, Part One

(c) Rev. Sylvia Stocker

What Supremacy is a Hard Place to Start and a Worse Place to End

Friends, the Unitarian Universalist Association is in crisis. The UUA's world exploded when, despite job applicants from marginalized groups, a white, straight, cisgender, able-bodied male was chosen to fill a District Executive position. He would have been the fifth of five white District Executives. A firestorm of protest took over social media, especially Facebook. UUA President Peter Morales resigned. Chief Executive Officer Harlan Limpert resigned. Director of Congregational Life Scott Taylor resigned. Don Southworth, Executive Director the the UU Ministers Association, resigned. The whole story is sad, infuriating, complicated, confusing, and perhaps even unknowable.

People say with crisis comes opportunity: The UUA is now sailing a sea of opportunity. To that end, Black Lives UU (BLUU) has asked UU congregations to teach about white supremacy. This sermon is part of my response to that request.

When I first heard the request, I objected to the term, “white supremacy.” But my

colleagues of color – both laity and clergy alike – were expressing such pain and urgency, I realized something inside *me* needed to shift; I needed some new understanding. So I grudgingly accepted the words, “white supremacy.” But if you want to know the truth, I thought “white supremacy” meant the KKK, or Steve Bannon, or Donald Trump. Well, that's not what Black Lives UU means by “white supremacy.” They mean the American phenomenon that defines *white* experience, history, and culture as most worthy, as normative, and marginalizes the experience, history, and culture of everyone else.

To help me think about this, I turned to Kareem Abdul-Jabbar's book *Writings on the Wall*. Kareem points to a 2015 Gallup poll that reveals both “a 15-year low in American's satisfaction with the way blacks are treated,” *and* a significant discrepancy between the ways whites and blacks perceive that treatment.

“While only 33 percent of the black respondents were satisfied with how blacks are treated in society, 53 percent of whites were satisfied with black treatment” – a 20 point difference. (p. 51)

Kareem says, “*It's understandable why so many white people believe there is no racism. The most important reason is that most are not personally racist. They harbor no ill will toward people of color, they probably have some close friends who are of a different ethnic background, and they undoubtedly would go out of their way to help a minority person in trouble. To them, saying racism is rampant in America, or lumping them in with haters, is not only inaccurate but also personally insulting.*”

“*The second reason they deny racism's existence is that it has never been directed at them. They don't experience the humiliation and frustration; therefore, they don't see ... how prevalent it is.*” (p. 52)

They don't see what Trungles describes in his essay. Whites do not experience pain, fear,

rejection, physical and emotional violence, increased risk of incarceration, inferior medical care leading to shortened life expectancy, voter suppression, or inequitable access to housing, jobs, or employment. White people don't experience those things. I don't experience those things. Most of us in this room don't experience those things.

Kareem reminds us that, actually, the idea of race is a myth created to distinguish tribes and foster tribal loyalties among people. But, biologically, all people are alike. There is no such thing as race. He goes on to say: *“The word 'race' is ghettoizing language that perpetuates seeing people of color as a different species. The word encourages fear and distrust. Language is the fuel that feeds the great racist generator, so to dismantle racism, we'll need to start with selecting more accurate words.”* (p. 56)

When I read that, I asked myself, “If there is no 'race' or 'racism,' what is there? Because clearly there is something. If we need more accurate words, what are they?” Those questions led me to radicalcopyeditor.com, which defines “white supremacy” this way:

“A system or social order that keeps power and resources consolidated among white elites, using an ideology that holds up whiteness as being best or 'most normal.'”

“It's not necessarily hatred of people who are not white or active belief that white people should rule over everyone else. It's not limited to the most overtly racist fringe elements of society...”

“It's the water most white people swim in without realizing they are wet. It's a basic fact of U.S. culture and everyday life and a foundational truth of this country.”

(<https://radicalcopyeditor.com/2017/04/21/white-supremacy/>)

When white experience is normalized, it can be pretty hard for white people to recognize the privilege they carry. It can be pretty hard even to discern one's own culture.

Here's an example: When I went to Brandeis University, a secular Jewish college, I was a WASP surrounded by Jewish food, dance, music, and religious rituals; Yiddish expressions; amazing and tragic family histories, and so on. I used to joke to my Jewish friends, "I don't have a culture." Compared to their seemingly exotic backgrounds, it truly seemed that way to me. I *do* have a culture, though, only living inside it is like being in a haze, a miasma, that creates a particular kind of blindness.

Perspectives like Trungles' are so important because they help to fill in what I cannot see on my own. The more I can hear the experiences of those at the margins, the closer I come to clearing away that miasma, the better grasp of reality I can attain, and the more effectively I can work for justice.

Reading *Black Women Worry More*, by Rosemary Bray McNatt

He phoned more than an hour ago to say he was on his way home. But I have yet to hear the scrape of the iron gate, the rattling keys, so I worry. Most married women fret about a tardy husband: black women like myself worry more. I fear white men in police uniforms; white teenagers driving by; thin, panicky, middle-aged white men on the subway. Most of all, I fear that their path and my husband's path will cross one night as he makes his way home.

Bob is tall, dark, with thick hair and wire-rimmed glasses. He carries a knapsack stuffed with work from the office, old crossword puzzles, Philip Glass [music], *Ebony Man* and *People* magazines. He cracks his knuckles a lot and wears a peculiar grimace when his mind is elsewhere. He looks dear and gentle to me — but then, I have looked into those eyes for a long time.

I worry that some white person will see that grim, focused look of concentration and see the intent to victimize. I fear that some white person will look at him and see only [their] nightmare — another black man in sneakers. In fact, my husband is another black man

in sneakers. He's also a writer, an amateur cyclist, a lousy basketball player, his parents' son, my life companion.

When I peek out the window, the visions in my head are those of blind white panic at my husband's black presence. I see myself a sudden, horrified widow.

Once upon a time, I was vaguely ashamed of my paranoia about his safety in the world outside our home. After all, he is a grown man. But he is a grown black man on the streets alone, a menace to white [people] — even the nice, sympathetic, liberal ones who smile at us when we're together. And I am reminded, over and over, how dangerous white people still can be, how their fears are a hazard to our health. When white people are ruled by their fears of everything black, every black woman is an addict, a whore; every black man is a rapist — even a murderer.

So when it's ten o'clock and he's not home yet, my thoughts can't help but wander to other black men — husbands, fathers, sons, brothers — who never make it home. Even after I hear the scrape of our iron gate, the key in the lock, even after I hear that old knapsack hit the floor of the downstairs hallway and Bob's voice calling to me, my thoughts return to them.

The Rev. Rosemary Bray McNatt is president of Starr King School for the Ministry and a contributing editor of UU World. She is the author of Unafraid of the Dark: A Memoir (Random House, 1998)

Reflection, Part Two

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What Supremacy is a Hard Place to Start and a Worse Place to End

Rosemary Bray McNatt attended a service here a little more than a year ago. I had never met her before, but when I saw her sitting in the room, I recognized her from pictures I had seen. Here's the funny thing: For that service I had nearly chosen her essay *Black*

Women Worry More for the reading. At the last minute I chose instead a reading from Ta-Nehesi Coates' book, *Between the World and Me*.

That Sunday, I described my white son, whose job used to require him to walk downtown in relatively unsafe Richmond, Indiana, in the middle of the night to load updates onto the computers at the company where he works. I said I worried about him a little, but not that much. I *never* worried about police harassing him – or worse, killing him. I remarked on how different a black mother with a young black son might feel in similar circumstances. (You can see why Rosemary's reading would have fit perfectly!) After the service, when I conversed with Rosemary, I told her I had nearly chosen her reading. She described how her worries have shifted to young black men, and she told me some more current stories from her life. I listened and listened and listened.

That's *the first tool*, the first step to take, in eradicating white supremacy: White folks need to listen and listen and listen. That's true of any liberation. The closer one is to the center of the narrative – the more normative one's experience is – the more one needs to listen.

White folks need to listen to black folks. Men need to listen to women. Rich folks need to listen to poor folks. Able-bodied folks need to listen to disabled folks. Straight and cisgender folks need to listen to LGBTQ folks. That's how liberation begins.

Trungles says, “If you didn't live an experience, step aside.” Here is an image that helps me to remember to do that. Where white supremacy is concerned, sometimes people say white experience and culture need to be “de-centered.” The word, “de-centered,” makes me imagine a circle, where white folks are in the center, and everyone else at the margins. And the white folks need to step out of the center.



This is the off-centered cross, symbol of Universalism. When the Unitarians and Universalists merged in 1961, they chose the Unitarian flaming chalice as their symbol. Some chalices show the flame off-centered, as a nod to Universalist history. Universalists understood themselves as Christians. But they viewed their religion as one of many. For them, the circle represented the world, with all its various religious faiths. The cross represented their own location – but it was off-centered to leave room or everyone else.

The Universalist cross reminds me to step out of the circle's center. Actually, from that new location at the edge, I can see everyone else.

And at the center? Well, here are a few things I would put at the center: curiosity, respect, connection, justice, equality.

Or how about this: The Universalists made famous the expression, “God is Love.” How

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the Spirit of Love, right at the center? How about that? Come and go with me to *that*

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