

We Will Make Them Feel Us:  
Allyship to People of Color  
Beacon UU Congregation  
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“If they refuse to hear us, we will make them feel us,” writes Sybrina Fulton, Trayvon Martin’s mother, in the open letter to Michael Brown’s family after he was shot in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014. “Some will mistake that last statement as being negatively provocative,” Ms. Fulton remarks “ But feeling us means feeling our pain; imagining our plight as parents of slain children. We will no longer be ignored.” This morning, I am going to do what I can to “feel them” and help you do the same. It’s uncomfortable, but that’s part of the process. In truth, I have given sermons shockingly similar to this one in the past. Same grim statistics, same call to action. And what have I truly done since? Crafting this sermon has been especially challenging because it has left me nowhere to hide as I reckon with myself, ponder the meaning of solidarity, and examine the difference between well-meaning support and truly conscious allyship behavior as a white person.

As a minister in our denomination, I was asked in 2017 to join a nationwide effort called “A White Supremacy Teach –in.” Beacon was one of the participants, too. When I heard this term applied to us, I winced and resisted, but I’ve been learning since then why that verbiage was chosen.

Am I a “white supremacist” as organizers of the 2017 teach-in suggest? Are you white supremacists? Egads. That term conjures images of lynchings and robed Klansmen. Here’s the definition that helped me understand: “white supremacy is the water we swim around in without even realizing we are wet.”

The Black Lives UU steering committee assumed leadership of this effort, as they should, and have also crafted an 8<sup>th</sup> principle to be considered by GA delegates. It reads: “We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote: journeying toward spiritual wholeness by working to build a diverse multicultural Beloved Community by our actions that accountably dismantle racism and other oppressions in ourselves and our institutions.”

To be clear, I have no interest in making you feel bad or making myself feel bad either, for that matter. But I’m not willing to coddle us or ignore white fragility or privilege.

Compassion for self is a prerequisite for deep awareness and change. I am not here to blame or shame you or lecture you or scold you from some high holier-than-thou pulpit. I wasn’t even sure I wanted to join the White Supremacy teach-in several years ago. But here we are, and I have no regrets, and I ask for your

presence, if not your full agreement, here in this Sanctuary.

I am not an expert. If I tried to pass myself off as “woke,” I would fall far and right onto my face. My objective is quite the opposite - I am one of those well-intentioned liberal white people I’ve been reading about who still isn’t quite sure what solidarity looks like to people of color. I’ve been bewildered as I’ve immersed myself in blogs and articles and opinion pieces and Facebook posts from just about every angle since the day George Floyd was killed on that Minneapolis street following in depressingly short order (most recently) by the deaths of Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Aubrey.

Since 2017, I have sought out dialogue with African-American activists who were willing to listen to my confusion and questions without labeling, dismissiveness or contempt. And, I’ll tell you, I’ve learned a lot these past few years about intersectionality in racial justice work.

I recall reading a fierce blog several years ago, admonishing white people to stay away from a BLM march – only people of color were welcome. This baffled me until I was made right sized by the response that black people don’t owe me a place in the march. My friend went on to note that there are plenty of multi-racial marches and groups and protests and vigils to be part of, including UU congregations throughout the country are forming their own groups, and in some cases, the protesters are all white, and that’s fine. as long as its authentic.

All we need to do is pick a corner and show up. You can find links for Black Lives Matter events, protests, marches and initiative here in in Flagstaff on Facebook and the internet. Hundreds of people have been peacefully gathering and protesting in our mountain town for the past week. And you can chose to join them. You can read and ponder and importantly, locate yourself in the system and get right-sized. I’ve gleaned some valuable insights from several thought provoking, consciousness raising articles and blogs with titles that are increasingly poke-in-the-eye provocative.

In particular, the comments of blogger Ryan Dalton on his page “Thought of Brown” entitled “Types of White People who comment on Black Experience and Pain.” I took a deep breath. It what follows makes you uncomfortable, then we will be uncomfortable together. The only way out is through!

Dalton is a perceptive and talented writer who doesn’t pull any punches. He starts in the cesspool with Overtly Racist White people (Ino explanation needed) and moves on White Privilege Apologists who begin sentences with “I’m not a racist, but,” and express ideals of color-blindness and a pseudo-equality (“we are all the same” “everyone can succeed in America” ); a discourse that is far-removed from reality.

As Dalton ventures into the last two categories: Well-Meaning White People and Conscious White People, I begin to feel an odd prickly sensation all over like

my conscience might have suffered a sudden onslaught of hives. Why? Because, well, I want to find myself in the most enlightened category, of course. And Unitarian Universalists, like myself, like to place themselves there without much self interrogation. About well-meaning white people, he says: Most “Well-Meaning” White People will admit that racism and white privilege exists and is a problem, but maybe aren’t fully aware of how to address the topic or reality.

Some “Well-Meaning” White People embody what’s termed the White Savior Industrial Complex, which, whether intentional or not, positions them in the place to be the “savior” of (often poor) black people (this is frequently found in and amongst the white church, missionaries, some white teachers in “urban” schools, etc). In situations like the death of George Floyd, “Well-Meaning” White People usually try to speak out against the injustice but sometimes overstep their bounds.” I am relieved that he notes the good intentions. And I recognize my own muddled thinking about how to demonstrate solidarity in his description. In some ways, this sounds like me and I’m going to own it in order to transform it.

This is a steep learning curve for me, and perhaps for you, too. So many rocks on the inclining path. I’m reminded by the Rev. Nadia Bolz-Weber that “white guilt does nothing. It just makes us look for exoneration. White guilt leads to changes of only optics in which people of color are the object and not the subject. This leads me to figure out how to alleviate my white guilt and once again, it centers my white feelings and whiteness.”

My colleague, the Rev. Meg Riley (at one point the head of social justice advocacy for us in DC) admits to her own stumbling in a piece called “What We Do When we don’t know what to do.” “I don’t know about you,” she writes, “but times of not knowing aren’t my favorite. As a white person, I am used to feeling in charge. I like to feel well-informed and smart. And it is particularly unsettling to realize anew, almost every day, how deep my unknowing goes.

Some days, I walk around feeling pretty smart, as white people generally do, and then I hear a story like the ones African-Americans have been telling these past weeks, and I am stopped in my tracks, recognizing anew how totally and completely I will never know anything but my own (white) experience. But the gift of not knowing, says Riley sagely, of knowing we don’t know, can motivate us to learn. Maybe in our time of not-knowing, we who are white can realize that we should not try to be in charge for a change, that we should support the leadership of people of color, the experts in this movement. Maybe we can try to take a few steps forward together. I don’t know what will happen, but I’m willing and ready to enter a new day. “

Like Meg, perhaps like some of you, I am ready to enter a new day, and commit myself to moving up to a higher rung – “Conscious White Person.” I am partially there and perhaps you are too. Here’s what Dalton has to say –

**“Conscious White People**, he writes, actually “get it,” as much as a white person is able to. They are aware of the various degrees of racism within us all, and within our society. They have committed to going through the continuous process of acknowledging their own privilege and checking their own prejudices and biases.”

“Most of this category’s knowledge of the black experience is based in authentic, loving relationships with people of color, spending their time listening to and learning from the actual voices living the black experience—also aware that no one individual represents an entire race of people.”

“In situations like the death of unarmed black men, Conscious White People are committed to seeking justice, actively call out systemic racism, value and validate (in a way that is not patronizing) the voices of people of color and allow *them* to determine the trajectory of the narrative, and they realize that white-on-black racism is not a “black problem.”

I’ll add that Conscious White People will examine the discomfort (possibly even resentment) they felt when I read the proposed 8<sup>th</sup> principle. They will challenge pushback to “Black Lives Matter” by asserting, “Yes, all lives matter, but right now we are talking about black lives and that they matter.” One African-American preacher lifted up a passage from Luke 15 to explain. He points out that there are 100 sheep and 99 are safe but one is missing, so Jesus goes after it. Nobody asks, all offended, “well, what about the 99, because it’s the one who is lost.”

While we’re on this subject, Black Lives Matter doesn’t suggest that white lives don’t matter. White privilege isn’t a Scarlet “A.” But, let’s be clear that the color of your white skin doesn’t make life harder for you every minute of every day. It means that you don’t have to give even a fleeting thought to the “rules” parents teach their black sons for living in an America of tacit white supremacy, such as: never leave home without an ID, don’t wear a white tank top (or wife beater) in public, do not loiter on the street or even stand outside to make a phone call, do not play loud music in your car, never stare at white woman, do not touch anything you aren’t going to buy, always have a receipt when you leave a store.

Or live like Shawn Droomgoole, the African-American man who expressed fear about taking a walk in his gentrified neighborhood. He shared his fears on a local website and more than 75 neighbors (white and black) walked with him. Heartwarming? Yes. But, honestly, can you even imagine having to catalog and review these rules or check these fears in order to get through the day alive? Ponder it. Can you feel it?

And our comfort doesn’t matter more than their black lives. In his searing book, “Tears We Cannot Stop: A Sermon to White America,” Michael Eric Dyson cites kneejerk responses to the Black Lives Matter Movement as a key example of white willful denial.

Dyson preaches: "When black folks say "Black Lives Matter," they are in search of simple recognition. That they are decent human beings, that they aren't likely to commit crimes, that they're reasonably smart. That they're no more evil than the next person, that they're willing to work hard to get ahead, that they love their kids and want them to do better than they did. That they are loving and kind and compassionate. And that they should be treated with the same respect that the average, nondescript, unexceptional white male routinely receives without fanfare or the expectation of gratitude in return."

As for BLM banners, the cause of so much handwringing amongst even the most self-identified progressives? Well, they have been defaced and replaced and hung higher and bigger and prouder at many UU churches around the country. As a result, these banners are attracting new members who recognize that commitment, courage and solidarity live within that congregation. Will we join them?

As far as the pathway to becoming a Conscious White Person, the element that really jumps out for me is the action of listening and learning in authentic, loving relationships. Or, slightly rephrased, in empathic relationships, ones in which we attempt to feel on another in the way Sybrina Fulton describes in her open letter. "If they will not hear us," she writes, "we will make them feel us." Feel us. Feel. Developing empathy is an essential component to demonstrating appropriate solidarity in all relationships and encounters and a key component for social justice. When we cultivate genuine empathy and can be truly present to another's suffering, radical connections can be built and barriers transcended that might have otherwise seemed impassable.

And then, us Conscious White folk need to flex our privilege as respectful but reliable allies. To cover all aspects of allyship here, we'd need to be in church all day like the early Unitarians, breaking for lunch at the Tavern across the green. No fears. This sermon is a call to more, to deeper, to engagement. I've left you plenty of breadcrumbs to do the work. No one will do it for you, not me, and least of all, a person of color.

Our website has a growing list of resources such as the downloadable "75 Things White People Can Do for Racial Justice" and the "Guide to Allyship." I'm inviting you to read and study the bestselling book, "How to be an Anti-racist" by Ibram Kendi with me.

There are YouTube talks and blogs aplenty, and excellent learning programs that we can engage in together and I hope we will, including a webinar series called "White Privilege: Let's Talk – A Resource for Transformational Dialogue" created by the United Church of Christ. Look for notices and links in the e-news and other communication channels at Beacon.

And so very, very crucially - we can VOTE and apply pressure to local leaders to reform the role of police unions in setting rules for discipline and dismissal. A great website to view is called 8can'twait which calls on police departments to:

Ban chokeholds and strangleholds

Require de-escalation

Require warning before shooting

Exhaust all other means before shooting

Ban shooting at moving vehicles

Require use of force continuum

Require comprehensive reporting

Like me, you might wonder with some astonishment and horror how are these 8 things not already required or expected? And as we know, people of color are at receiving end of chokeholds and trigger finger shootings and rapid escalations to a horrifying degree.

We must do better. These places of social inquiry are uncomfortable, but they also act as crucibles for self-growth and for reaching out to others without any sense of paternalism or privilege. Radical connection requires that we be self-critical about our own roles in perpetuating any processes that cause harm to others and bear witness to the trauma. The key is to let the other person define that suffering and pain as we stand as allies and take an appropriate role in the struggle.

Will we call each other in? Or call each other out in a Cancel Culture? Will we stick around as allies once the dust settles again? Once the news cycle moves on from George Floyd and the protesters that "said his name"? Can we/will we tie our very nerve endings to the plight of people of color in our country? And, I believe that if we can internalize the notion that empathy, humility, and inquiry form a foundation for solidarity and radical connections, the next time we are asked by persons from an oppressed group whether they made us **feel them**, the answer will be "Yes, you did. I am opening my eyes and my heart. Now, what can I do to show you and demonstrate strength in unity, as we fly up, all together."

So may we rise. Be brave. Amen.

#blacklivesmatter

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