

Can We Talk About White Fragility?©

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For the Unitarian Universalist Church of Annapolis

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More than twenty-five years ago, I was participating in an ecumenical and multi-racial clergy community organizing group. I was maybe thirty-two years old, 18 months into my first ministry and very eager to show this group of seasoned ministers that I was willing to work hard on our upcoming gathering. I remember one meeting in particular, because I was the youngest, the only white person and the only woman at the table. It appeared to me that these older, African American clergymen were dragging their feet on this project; taking way too much time with discussion and joking and laughing among themselves, and not enough focus on the task at hand. So out of irritation and impatience, I said out loud ***“Look, I don’t mean to be a slave driver here, but we’ve got to get moving on this project.”***

No one said a word to me, either then or later. I thought I saw a few of the men raise their eyebrows and look knowingly at each other but they politely and kindly continued to work with me on our community organizing. I didn’t realize until sometime afterwards, just how harmful those words were. Back then, had someone challenged me on my choice of words, I probably would have said, “it’s just a phrase; I didn’t mean anything by it; maybe people are too sensitive.” I do not have that response now; but back then, I was pretty certain of my wokeness.

“The heart of all anti-racism work begins with confession,” writes Ibram X. Kendi, the author of a new book entitled: ***How to be an Anti-Racist.***” I believe in the wisdom of Kendi’s words – that all meaningful anti-racism work must begin with the self. For a lot of liberal-minded folks, dissecting the words and deeds of our nation’s most blatant racists has become a national pastime; but looking at the ways racism and white supremacy inflict and infect every aspect of our lives – and our

own complicity in it – well, that’s a much harder pill to swallow.

So that’s why today’s sermon will be part information about Robin DiAngelo’s book “White Fragility” and part confession. I first have to acknowledge that the people of color in this room are likely already had plenty of experience with white fragility. I am grateful that you’re here and hope you will attend the People of Color Caucus, held in the library, after today’s service.

So, let’s dive in together. DiAngelo begins her book by stating: “This book is intended for white progressives who so often – despite our conscious intentions – make life so difficult for people of color. I define a white progressive as any white person who thinks he or she is not racist, or less racist, or in the “choir” or already “gets it.” White progressive can be the most difficult for people of color because, to the degree we think we have arrived, we will put all of our energy into making sure that others see us as having arrived.

None of our energy will go into what we need to be doing for the rest of our lives; engaging in ongoing self-awareness, continuing education, relationship building and actual antiracist practice.”¹

What happens then, when those of us who believe ourselves to be white are made aware of our own implicit biases; our own embodied racism? What happens when white people are confronted – or called out – or called in – are some predictable behaviors. She names this as white fragility and describes it in this way:

“We consider a challenge to our racial worldviews as a challenge to our very identities as good, moral people. Thus, we perceive any attempt to connect us to the system of racism as an unsettling and

¹ DiAngelo, Robin. “White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard for White People to Talk about Racism. Pg. 5. Beacon Press: Boston, MA 2018.

unfair moral offense. The smallest amount of racial stress triggers a range of defensive responses. These responses work to reinstate white equilibrium as they repel the challenge, return our racial comfort and maintain our dominance within the racial hierarchy. I conceptualize this process as *white fragility*.”

I’ve read DiAngelo’s book at least three times, and I must tell you, my first response was not favorable. I was...uncomfortable. Then, at some parts of the book I experienced shock and then denial.

I got angry at the book and had to put it down for a while; and then I started making arguments in my mind about the ways in which she was wrong. But, I kept reading and then got to one of her most important insights” what she describes as “the good/bad binary.”

DiAngelo posits that in our modern post-civil rights society, the most effective adaptation of racism in recent history is to believe that to be a good moral person and to be complicit with racism is mutually exclusive. In other words, you could not be a good person and participate in racism; only bad people were racist. By setting up this binary, people are not willing to admit that they can be progressive, educated, open-minded and well-intentioned and *still* harbor racist thoughts and by extension, participate in racist actions. “Within this paradigm, to suggest that I am racist is to deliver a deep moral blow – a kind of character assassination. Having received this blow, I must defend my character, and that is where all my energy will go – to deflecting the charge, rather than reflecting on my behavior. In this way, the good/bad binary makes it nearly impossible to talk to white people about racism, what it is, how it shapes all of us, and the inevitable ways

that we are conditioned to participate in it.”²

What kinds of behaviors is she talking about when she describes white fragility? DiAngelo has been working in this field for well over twenty years, and she’s assembled a long list of responses she’s experienced as white people grapple with their own reactivity and defensiveness about racism. She identifies feelings, behaviors and claims.

SLIDE WITH LIST HERE. Just think for a moment – about a time you were in a conversation and maybe you said something which exposed your unacknowledged racism and a person of color or a white accomplice brought to your attention. How did you feel? You – like me – probably exhibited one of those feelings listed by DiAngelo. Maybe your next step was to making claims to justify your feelings. All of this is natural when we feel that WE are personally being called out for being a racist. The problem here is not to have feelings; the problem is weaponizing your own feelings so that you don’t have to deal with the realities of white supremacy and racism in yourself. But what if, those of us who consider ourselves to be white, what if we flipped the focus and said “given the overwhelming reality of white supremacy in this culture – yes, I guess I can’t be anything BUT racist AND I intend to do everything in my power to actively combat that.” Instead of the constant denial (such as Joe Biden declaring “I don’t have a racist bone in my body,” I would be relieved to hear politicians as diverse Joe Biden to Donald Trump simply own up to the fact that as white people, they – we – benefit from the system of white supremacy -and we’ve drank the Kool-Aid of racism – because that’s what we’ve been given to drink for our entire lives!

What if acknowledging your own unconscious racism had no more shame

² Ibid, pg. 72.

than – say – discovering you had something on your face? Or spinach stuck on your teeth? You didn't want to have that piece of spinach on your teeth – but you also didn't notice it. So you wouldn't think that someone telling you “hey – you've got something on your teeth” meant that you were a bad person? Their critique isn't a character assassination. In fact, they were doing you a FAVOR – giving you the agency to take care of it before it becomes plaque and requires the moral equivalent of a root canal to excise.

At the beginning of this sermon, I quoted Abram X. Kendi, who said that all anti-racism work is confessional. So, I must take that seriously and offer you a case study from my work with you last year and what I learned about race, racism, white supremacy, white solidarity and my own white fragility. It's my hope that by taking a real life example and looking at it through the lens of white supremacy and white fragility, maybe we can all go a little deeper into this practice.

As some of you may know, our Black Lives Matter sign has been stolen and replaced many times. That has happened to UU churches all over the country – that's nothing new. But what was new was that we were able to catch the perpetrator – who was an eighteen year old white male from St. Mary's, who took it down on a dare from his teen-age friends.

We, the church, then had a decision to make. We could begin a process of prosecution of this young man for trespassing and vandalism; we could engage in a process of restorative justice or we could engage with him and his family and reprimand him personally and privately.

Rev. John met with the young man at least twice, asked him to read the book that the church was reading at the time, “Waking Up White” by Debbie Irving and to discuss the book with him. Members of BBC were disturbed that we, the ministry team of the church, were not considering any other form of punishment for this young man other than a one-on-one conversation and a written

apology to the church. After meeting the young man and his family, we felt that this teen had come to understand the gravity of what he had done; that it wasn't just a teen-age prank, but that he hurt people in this church and that his action could be felt in the wider Annapolis community. We felt that this kid “got it,” and that showing mercy and compassion was a better approach than engaging in a longer, more complicated process of restorative justice. Restorative justice is a process whereby the perpetrator of a crime and the victims sit in a room together and, through a thoughtfully facilitated discussion, can heal the wounds created by the perpetrator's actions.

I thought the request from some members of BBC to engage in restorative justice was, to be honest – overkill. I thought if they just met this young guy, they'd see not a racist, but a kid who got caught up in the moment and did a stupid thing. I've done stupid things – most of which I didn't get caught. Let's give the kid a break, I thought to myself and let's move on to the business of running the church and being spiritual and doing our anti-racist work.

Does anyone else see the disconnect here? The irony of that statement? What I missed was that members of our own community, both white and black, were asking us to de-center the needs and concerns of a white kid and listen instead to the voices of people of color. I thought those voices were being over-reactive and that we get drawn into this elaborate process of restorative justice over a “simple prank.” (quotes are deliberate here)

What I missed because of my whiteness was to understand that his crime had implications far beyond the stealing of a sign. What I missed was that when the Black Lives Matter sign was taken down from outside of St. Phillips Church – a black Episcopal church just down the street from us – by an angry white woman, it created fear and trauma in that community. They decided not to reinstall their Black Lives Matter sign because of the emotional impact that event had on the church and on the wider community of color.

So my whiteness said “it's just a sign” just as I can look at a piece of rope and say “it's just a rope,” but to a person of color, a rope can have an

entirely different symbolic meaning because of our country's history with racism and with lynchings. So do you see how white supremacy and white solidarity works and serves to protect white people from a reality that people of color have known in their bones for centuries? What I missed is the necessity of de-centering whiteness to listen to the experiences, the hopes, and yes, the demands of people of color.

What happens then, when a white person in power responds to people of color by saying not only "you're making too much of this event," but then gets defensive and angry at having her authority challenged? White Fragility happens. And yep, that would be me. When confronted by my approach to this, outwardly, I was very reasonable; but inwardly, I was seething. I was angry. I was hurt. After all, I was the Interim "Senior" Minister, who has worked for the last twenty five years on antiracism work; I have been to anti-racism workshops, led marches; I work alongside a black minister; I even wear a Black Lives Matter pin for God's sake! How dare you challenge my authority, my intentions, my integrity?

When one of the white members of our congregation suggested I might be exhibiting signs of white fragility, I couldn't stand it. I was embarrassed and ashamed, but I had to prove that she was wrong and I was right.

I argued with her in my mind for days until I finally wrote it all down, because that's often what white people like to do – we write stuff down because if we write it down, it can wield a certain type of authority which is well known in a culture that values the written word above everything else. I read my thoughts out loud at a BBC meeting at which I insisted that I speak and be heard and the members at that meeting, I think out of respect for my position as one of their ministers, allowed me to continue.

The meeting was one of the most painful experiences of my life and created a breach of trust between me and the group. I can only imagine that pain that I caused the people of color in the room. I exhibited one of DiAngelo's classic white fragility behaviors; demanding and insisting that my opinion

be heard and respected above and beyond the voices of people of color who were in the room. I hurt people whom I respected while doing the very work of anti-racism that I deeply care about.

I tell you this story not just as a public confession but as an illustrative story of how white supremacy, solidarity and fragility can all work together even in a person who considers herself to be pretty woke. I tell you this story to remind myself and you that no white person is exempt from this work – not even if you marched in the 60th for civil rights or live in a black neighborhood or have bi-racial or black grandkids; not even if you have attended anti-racism workshops or wear a Black Lives Matter pin.

I tell you this story with the hopes that it will inspire in you the ability to take seriously the work that is being here at UUCA on the 8th Principle and to examine every assumption you have about race.

I'm telling you this story so that you can approach all conversations and encounters with race with a degree of beginner's mind and a stance which says "I am not the expert on racism here. People of color experience it every single minute of every single day." I tell you this story so that if a person tells you "hey, you've got a little bit of racism stuck on your teeth," instead of arguing you say "thanks, I'll check it out," and then, you do.

The purpose of the 8th Principle and the work of Building the Beloved Community is not to shame and embarrass us as white people, but to help you see in the clearest way possible, what white supremacy has done and to develop the spiritual muscles needed to defeat it. No one bench presses 100 lbs because they want to. It takes practice and sustained effort. No one defeats white supremacy by simply reading a book, or joining a discussion group, but it's a first step. It's an important first step. It builds resiliency so that when a person of color or a white ally calls you in on your own racism, your own unacknowledged privilege or your own white centered assumptions, you won't crumble, or cry, or even get mad. You won't write long treatises defending yourself.

You won't point bring in other issues such as "this is about freedom of speech," this is "political correctness," this is "reverse racism," (which for the record is just bunk so don't go there) you instead will take a deep breath, sit quietly for a minute, allow whatever you've heard to sink in, and say "thank you." And then you do it again, and again and again. That's why this is soul work – spiritual work – heart work. It's not a one and done; it's an ever evolving – ever unfolding journey of discovery which is the hardest and the most important work you will ever do.

And then, maybe, someday, you find yourself smiling and laughing and lighter – not because racism and white supremacy have gone away, but because you find joy in the work and you find your own capacity for racial resiliency and the ability to recognize your own white fragility and say "yep, there it is again," without defensiveness or rancor. When you can do this, you will discover some brave and startling truths. This is what Maya Angelou knew, and wrote about in her poem of the same name: "A Brave and Startling Truth." Sit with her words for a moment:

A Brave And Startling Truth

We, this people, on a small and lonely planet
Traveling through casual space
Past aloof stars, across the way of indifferent suns
To a destination where all signs tell us
It is possible and imperative that we learn
A brave and startling truth
And when we come to it
To the day of peacemaking
When we release our fingers
From fists of hostility
And allow the pure air to cool our palms

We, this people, on this small and drifting planet
Whose hands can strike with such abandon
That in a twinkling, life is sapped from the living
Yet those same hands can touch with such healing,
irresistible tenderness
That the haughty neck is happy to bow
And the proud back is glad to bend
Out of such chaos, of such contradiction
We learn that we are neither devils nor divines

When we come to it
We must confess that we are the possible
We are the miraculous, the true wonder of this
world
That is when, and only when
We come to it.

~ Maya Angelou ~