

Racism and White Privilege: A Unitarian Response

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May 17, 2009**

On behalf of my wife, Patricia Trudeau and my son Donovan, we are pleased to be with you this Sunday morning. Being a Unitarian is important to Patricia and me. Hanging out with Unitarians is a joy; we share a common bond and a commitment to the Seven Principles that defines who we are. My talk will relate to three specific Principles:

- (1) the inherent worth and dignity of every person;**
- (2) justice, equity, and compassion in human relations;**
- (6) the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;**

On Friday, May 14, The Toronto Star reported on a new study of multiculturalism by Jeffrey Reitz of the University of Toronto and Rupa Banerjee of Ryerson University. The study

“...provides disquieting evidence that members of several visible minority communities don't feel at home here. In their survey of 41,666 Canadians, the two researchers found blacks felt highly stigmatized and South Asians experienced some degree of discrimination.

What was most disturbing was that these feelings didn't subside over time. They got stronger. Second and third generation immigrants, identifiable by race, felt less attached to Canada than their parents.

The study used data from Statistics Canada's 2002 Ethnic Diversity Survey. In the last seven years, said Reitz, "attitudes have improved in race relations. But they aren't reflected in reduced discrimination. Better is not good enough."

Crunching thousands of numbers from 41,666 people interviewed in nine languages, the just-published study found skin colour – not religion, not income – was the biggest barrier to immigrants feeling they belonged here. And the darker the skin, the greater the alienation.”

Lesley Ciarula Taylor. (May 14, 2009 04:30 AM). **RACISM IN CANADA. Darker the skin, less you fit.** Toronto Star.com, <http://www.thestar.com/article/634117>

Let me start with race. In multi-racial society like Canada, no matter how we try to avoid it, race matters. It can be positive or negative. For most people with darker skin and people with African heritage, the differences in most multi-racial societies and within nations that are predominately Caucasians is negative. We see it today in Europe including Italy, South America, Cuba, Australia, India, Japan, Russia, Mid-east and Northern Africa including Israel. There are traces in other parts of Africa that were colonized by whites. A number of reasons or rationales can be found for the differential treat and prejudices toward blacks. As a Unitarian, you are no aware of what I am speak, so I will not spend time this morning identifying reasons and rationales in which societies or nations use to oppress and discriminate against black people.

Perhaps racism has been around from the first sighting between different races. It is clear that racism predates William Shakespeare's era; how do you explain Othello. I can not recall any mention of Othello's race within the play, but race is present throughout the play and within English society then and now.

For me, the origin of modern day racism comes from the founders of the newly formed country that was separated from the Canadian French and English settlements in North America. African slaves were found throughout the colonies and settlements in North America.

African slaves were well-suited to labor in North America: unlike the Aborigines, they were resistant to European diseases; they couldn't easily run away; they were not Christians (and hence unprotected by English law); and they were skilled semi-tropical farmers. In the late 17th century, African slaves became available in large numbers just as the English indentured servants, the original labor force for North America, began to rebel and immigration from England slowed. Over time, the degradation of slavery became identified with blackness, giving white Americans the idea that Africans were a fundamentally different kind of people and could be treated less than people who were white.

Thomas Jefferson, (a quasi-Unitarian) can be credited to writing racism into the new nations foundation. He **was the first American public figure to suggest "as a suspicion only," that black people might be inherently inferior to whites.** Thomas Jefferson was the first prominent American to speculate that black people might be innately inferior to Europeans. Until then, most

Enlightenment figures believed that differences between groups were not inborn but due to environmental factors. It wasn't until Jefferson introduced the radical new ideas of liberty and equality that slavery had to be justified and prejudices against the enslaved began to crystallize into a doctrine of white supremacy. American freedom and the idea of innate racial difference were born together.

As historian Barbara Fields notes, the new idea of race helped explain why some people could be denied the rights and freedoms that others took for granted (The Race Literacy Quiz was developed by California Newsreel, in association with the Association of American Colleges and Universities, www.newsreel.org).

For most Canadians, when they see me or any other black person for the first time, one of the assumptions made is that this person needs to be treated differently because of skin color. There is a prejudgment being made. This prejudice is at the core of racism. It forms the bridge for seeing black people as unequal and for sufficiently justifying inferior treatment. Discrimination then results when that prejudgment is acted upon either actively or passively, and sometimes without direct intent to do harm. It is this judgment that causes black people in Canada to be victims of discrimination. When a person is discriminated against whether it is because of race, gender, ethnicity, religion, or you name it, the harm has negative impacts on the quality of life and life choices of the person being discriminated against.

Thus for, I have touched on race, racism, prejudice, discrimination and white privilege. White privilege is fourth point I want to draw your attention. **White privilege** is the unearned racial advantages that whites as a group and as individuals have that result in disadvantaging blacks as a group and as individuals --- oppression. This is not to be confused with earned privileges, such as formal education. In Canadian society white privileges are more about attitudes and informal practices of whites, other non-black ethnic groups, and blacks that put blacks at a disadvantaged..

White privilege is locked into the norms of our community culture. People on both sides of the race line have come to accept incidents as just part of getting along. White privilege is often hard to describe, but once you identify it you know what it is or was.

Most of us can identify white privilege at institutional and macro levels. Let me give you a few examples: Bay Street; our legal system, especially, who are lawyers and judges; MPPs and MPs; Canadian major corporations and large businesses, especially boards of trustees; our large and powerful labour unions, especially in leadership positions; teachers in our public and Catholic school systems; need I go on. The common occurrence in all of these and other sectors are the very few black faces. Regardless, of the many legitimate reasons and rationales for each case one may cite, one factor that rings out is having white skin has something to do with it. With white skin come privileges that few blacks can acquire.

The Worst White Person In The Neighbourhood.

That is what I mean by white privilege. I am certain in Canada I would win. But there would be a number of votes for the worst white guy. How do you explain it? White privilege!

This example moves to the most resistance form of white privilege: within the individual. All the societal institutions and businesses I just identified have taken an official stance against racism, discrimination and prejudice. But there remains an absence or very few black people. Here is how white privilege at the individual levels work with the institutions and businesses. The individual(s) who hire, appoint or select a person for a position for the most, will be white. Often it is the case, when a choice is to be made, the person selected will be much like the person(s) during the selection. There is an abundance of research that indicates that race matters and white privilege is one of the underlining factors.

There is more that can be said, but I need to bring my talk to a close, with a few challenges.

- 1) Whatever you are currently doing to end racism, prejudice and white privilege, keep doing them.

- 2) Look for ways for you to increase your contact with black people.
- 3) Educate yourself about how black people see the concerns opportunities and quality of life.
- 4) Read and really listen as to what black people are writing and saying.
- 5) Look around at members of Hamilton First Church and seek out opportunities for you within the congregation to examine and do the necessary work with each other to address racism, prejudice and white privilege. Just talking with each other is an important step.
- 6) Step forward with your relatives, your close friends, and people with whom you work. Let them know that you disagree when a racist comment or a clear instance of white privilege has occurred. You need to pick and choose your battles. Understand me, some battles are not worth the fight. My point is that the line now is not necessary the institutions and , but on the personal level. White people need to confront each other. It does more good for you to speak to your relatives, friends and co-workers about their behaviour and attitudes.

As the civil rights turned to the black struggle, we asked many whites that were on the protest lines and the freedom buses, that were victims of violence on our behalf... we asked them to leave the black community as we needed to develop our own identity in absence of whites. They were offended and took it as rejection. If a fourth of them had gone back home and spoke of their experiences while changing the racism and prejudices of their parents, their siblings, their uncles and aunts, and their closest of friends, I believe in 2009, we would have gone a lot further in addressing racism, racial prejudice and white privilege than we have gone. If you as Unitarians take my challenge, I know Canada will move faster and further in

**Respecting the inherent worth and dignity of black Canadians;
Ensuring that justice, equity, and compassion is real for black Canadians;
Reaching the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;**

Thank you for inviting me and I look forward to your comments after service.

