

RACIAL IDENTITY JOURNEY

THE CONCEPT OF RACIAL IDENTITY JOURNEY

One core assumption of this section is that everyone living in the United States has their own personal racial identity journey. This journey is related to their local community, their religious community (Unitarian Universalism) and our nation's history (The History of White Supremacy in the United States).

We live in a culture which has historically racialized people into racial categories: White, African American, Asian American, Pacific Islander, Hispanic American (Latino/Latina) and so on. We will be learning more about this when we do the session on the history of white supremacy.

And while these racial categories are more fluid today and we have more mixed race peoples, every one born in the United States is still put into one of these categories.

Everyone who immigrates to the United States is put in a racial category.

People come from many different countries in Asia but they are lumped together as Asian Americans. It is the same for people coming from Latin or Central America – they are lumped together as Hispanics.

When they do a census people check a box. When you give blood you check a box. Congressional Districts are in part shaped by these categories.

Everyone who lives in the United States – whether they are white or a person of color is impacted by his process of racialization.

Because of the racialization process whites and people of color go through everyone in our country has a racial identity journey. And we all have a personal story of our racial identity journey.

THE THREE POWERS OF RACISM

In our Unitarian Universalist Association Jubilee Two analysis of racism program we define the power of racism in three ways:

POWER ONE

The first kind of racial power is the power to oppress, control, and destroy people of color. Historically we have seen this power manifest in the extermination of Native Americans, the enslavement of African peoples, the exclusion of Asians, and the internment of Japanese. Today this power one oppression continues in the disparities between whites and people of color with regard to education, health care, the criminal justice system, access to housing, and accumulation of wealth.

POWER TWO

Power two is the power to provide power, privilege, and benefits to those of us who are white. This is the power of racism that we explored in our first session on white privilege. The purpose of systemic racism is to provide power and privilege to those of us who are white. This is the end goal of racism. The oppression of people of color through the power one form of racism is the means to the end.

POWER THREE

Power three is the most dangerous and insidious power of racism. This is racism's power to shape racial identity. Power three is racism's power to socialize whites into being racists and people of color into being victims.

Here we are talking about the centrality of the process of socialization and how we internalize messages from our socialization process.

As children we are socialized into a society which has been and continues to be based on race. Racism permeates the social institutions of our society: media, schools, and religious institutions. No matter what our racial identity we are socialized by these institutions. The schools educate us. The media bombards us with messages. And the most segregated hour in America is still Sunday morning at 11:00.

No matter what racial group we belong to we are socialized and encouraged to internalize the messages that we receive. People of color often internalize messages of inferiority. Crossroads Ministry, an organization dedicated to dismantling racism and building multicultural diversity, calls this process internalized racist oppression and defines it as follows:

“A complex multi-generational socialization process that teaches people of color to believe, accepts, and lives out negative societal definitions of self and to fit into and live out inferior societal roles. These behaviors support and help maintain the race construct.”

Similarly, those of us who are racially identified as white aren't born believing ourselves superior to people of color. Rather we are socialized to become white and accept white superiority. We are taught it. We believe it. We internalize the messages we receive about it. And for the most part we go along with it and accept it. Crossroads calls this process internalized racist superiority and defines it as follows:

“A complex multi-generational socialization process that teaches white people to believe, accepts, and lives out superior societal definitions of self and to fit into and live out superior societal roles. These behaviors define and normalize the race construct and its outcome- white supremacy.”

SETTING THE CONTEXT FOR THE VIDEO

We are going to use the video entitled “Class Divided.” We use this particular video because it demonstrates in a very powerful way how as children we internalize racial superiority and racial oppression.

The video was originally named “Eye of the Storm” and is popularly known as “Brown Eyes, Blue Eyes”. Jane Elliot was teaching a third grade class in Riceville, Iowa in 1968. This class experience was filmed in 1970. This is a video of the class reunion fourteen years later. We are going to watch the first twenty minutes of the video which depicts the classroom experience that was filmed in 1970.

Key points to think about:

What were the children on top experiencing? Happy, confident, we can learn easily, and we can be mean.

And what were the children on the bottom experiencing? Depression, sadness, shame, anger, and their learning process impacted in a negative way.

What did you notice about the body language of the children? The superior children stood upright and proud.

How does the teacher shape the children?

- She categorizes a whole group of kids.
- She uses her power and authority to assert that one group is better than another group. Jane Elliot's authority comes from the school system.
- She demeans the "lesser" group. And she reinforces the superiority of the "better" group.

Socialization takes place at an early age. Louise Derman Sparks, expert on racial identity development in small children, claims that racial identity starts to develop by the age of three.

The children are already socialized into racism. Note the children's comments at the beginning of the video. The rapid acceptance of roles reflects prior socialization of the white children in the class.

Brian is a resistor. He is the student who pulls on his collar. How does Jane Elliot break his resistance? She intimidates him. She notes that his behavior is why he is inferior. She isolates him so he can't recruit others. Note that while Brian resists the majority of students go along.

EXAMPLE OF BILL GARDINER'S PERSONAL STORY OF BEING SHAPED INTO A RACIST

This example is not necessarily to be shared with the participants but serves as a model for the leader or leaders who will tell their own personal story.

I was an adolescent in the 1950s. I lived in a virtually all white world in the Boston suburb of Framingham, Massachusetts. Back in the late 1950s there was only one student of color when I went to high school.

I went to college and to theological schools that had a handful of students of color.

So I grew up in a pretty segregated world (this was de facto rather than de jure segregation.) People of color were intentionally excluded from my life because of housing patterns and segregated schools. I lived in cultural isolation.

This was not very good preparation for my becoming an assistant minister at the All Souls Church (Unitarian) in Washington, DC in 1967. I went to serve as a community minister in the African American neighborhood near the church.

One of the first things I discovered when I went to be a minister in this inner city community is how racist I am. I had just about every prejudice a white person could have about African American (and other People of Color communities). I had negative stereotypes about their intelligence, their work habits, their ways of talking, their ways of worshipping and so on.

But more than this I had a sense of racial superiority. I felt superior to the people I was working with. I felt that I was better than them.

Where did I learn all these prejudices? How did I internalize these feelings of superiority?

First was what I learned about race in my family. I did not grow up in a family where people of color were disparaged or spoken of in negative ways. Mine was a family where there was a lot of discussion of political issues. My mother and father were Roosevelt Democrats intent on preserving the legacy of the New Deal. The significant thing is that the needs and aspirations of people of color were never part of our conversations about important political issues. What I learned from my family is that their concerns for justice and equity of people of color are not important. So people of color were largely invisible to me as I was growing up. There are situations where what is not talked about is as important as what is talked about.

As a youngster growing up in the 50s I saw too many John Wayne movies, too many TV programs about the Lone Ranger and Tonto, and too many episodes of Amos and Andy. The messages I got from the media is that people of color are inferior to white people. They are savages, pagans, heathens and other than those of us who are white. We white people are better and more civilized. Our way of life and our culture is superior. As white people we need to kill people of color when they act up. If people of color are peaceful we need to civilize them by converting them to our way of life.

All of the messages I got from the media were reinforced by the games I played as a child. When my friends and I played cowboys and Indians you never wanted to be an Indian, but you always wanted to be a cowboy.

When I was in grade school, around Thanksgiving time, we would take a class trip to Plymouth. There we learned the stories of the Pilgrims and the first Thanksgiving. We learned that there were Native Americans at the holiday feast. But we didn't learn that the Native peoples had been in Massachusetts for 10,000 years. Or that the early settlers of Massachusetts drove them off the land. Or that there was a terrible war (King Phillip's War) fought between the English settlers and the native peoples. These important facts were never taught to us.

I was a history major in college. The text that we used for American history was titled Empire for Liberty. Basically the text was about how white people took the land, set up a democratic government, and brought "civilization" to the new world. In these classes, I didn't learn anything about the lives or perspectives of people of color or women. But the important thing is that at that time of my life (ages 18-21) I believed all that I was taught. I took it all in and I thought to myself I am so glad I am a white male. Look at all the great things we white males have done for our country. My learning about American history further increased my personal feelings of white racial superiority.

And my church also shaped me into a racist. I grew up in the Unitarian Church in Framingham, Massachusetts. There I learned that I need to be concerned about those less fortunate than me. I learned I need to help the poor and the underprivileged people that in those days we called Negroes. That is why I went to Washington, DC when I first became a minister so I could be involved in all kinds of programs to fix the poor and save the oppressed.

But my church never taught me that white people benefit from the racist social system and the ways that white people benefit from white power and privilege. So my church also made me into a racist.

These are the ways I was made into a racist by my family, my schools, my church, and the media. This is how racism told me who I am. This is how racism shaped my life. These are the messages I received and internalized in a very deep way. And it is these learnings that I have been struggling to unlearn ever since.

EXAMPLE OF MELISSA CARVILL ZIEMER'S PERSONAL STORY OF BEING SHAPED INTO A RACIST. Melissa is currently the minister in Kent Ohio.

I was born in 1973 in Yonkers, NY, just outside New York City. According to the 1970 census data, Yonkers was then about 80% white with sizable African American and Hispanic/Latino/Latina minorities. I conclude from that information and from vague memories that my earliest experiences took place in a largely multicultural context. When I was five years old, we moved to rural Piney View, West Virginia. According to the 1980 census data, Piney View was then about 99% white, though the nearest city did have a significant African American population. I conclude from this information and from vague memories that my formative school age experiences took place in a primarily monocultural context.

It was in that context that I had an experience which I remember still as my first conscious encounter with race. I was in the third grade in a small, rural school. Each class in the school had been given a country to study over a period of time. We learned what language the people spoke in our country, what the weather was like, what sorts of clothing they wore – the sort of stuff you would expect grade school kids to learn. The end result of this study was an all school festival to share our countries with one another. Each class was to make a presentation and prepare a dish native to our country for everyone to try. My class had been studying a country in Africa (I can't remember which one) and we had learned a traditional dance from our country which we spent a lot of time practicing. When the big day finally came, we were all excited. Shortly before it was time for us to go outside for the festival, my teacher began calling us forward one at a time. In a bowl she had a mixture of Crisco and cocoa powder and she was smearing a bit of it on each of our faces and forearms. Though I remember little else about the day, I remember the greasy feel of the brown shortening on my skin and the scent of the cocoa growing stronger as it warmed in the afternoon sun.

I have thought about this experience several times over the years and I still don't really know what to make of it. Did the teacher "darken our skin" as part of an intentional effort to get us to think more about differences in skin color? If so, why didn't she talk about what she was doing? Did she just think that our dance would come off better if we looked the part a little more? Or was the move simply a thoughtless effort to play with race because she could? If we had been assigned a country in Asia would she have taped our eyes? As a child I knew that whatever her motivation, it didn't feel right. I didn't say so at the time. I didn't have any words to name my complicated feelings. Looking back it seems to me that this experience was part of my early training in racism. The message: white people are free to decide when and how to interact with race.

A couple years later my family moved again, this time to Pittsfield, Massachusetts, a community whose racial and ethnic demographics reflected a majority white population with small pockets of communities of color. In the fifth grade I met my first best friend. Her name was Thuy, she was Thai-American and she lived right across the street. I was aware that there were significant differences between Thuy's family and mine - most noticeably differences in language and food - but these differences did not complicate our friendship which I remember as easy and innocent. Within a year my family moved again, this time just across town, but that put me in a different school from Thuy and our friendship faded in the distance.

I soon made a new best friend whose name was Lisa. Lisa was Vietnamese-American. Lisa's dad had been a US soldier in Vietnam. That is where he met and married Lisa's mother. Sometimes Lisa and I asked her mom to tell us what it had been like in Vietnam. She showed us some beautiful pictures and jewelry while she told us her stories. I liked to be at Lisa's house with her and her family. And yet, back at my house, I was getting a very different kind of message from my mother's boyfriend. We lived in the lower level of a big old house that had been turned into a duplex. Upstairs there was a family of two adults and several children who had recently emigrated from Vietnam. My mother's boyfriend disliked the family for no reason I could discern except that they were not like him. He complained that they didn't know English and that he didn't like the smell of their food. He made assumptions about their character and their motivations and used racist slurs to describe them in casual conversation. I rejected his language and told him I thought he was wrong. And yet there was the message every day: white people are better than people of color.

The summer before I was to begin high school, I realized that I had a choice. There were two high schools in my town and I lived right on the dividing line. Somehow, without anyone ever explaining it to me, I knew that it would be better for me to go to the one where more of the kids from well off families would be going. Turned out that also meant that was the school where more of the white kids in the town would be going. As a result, race kind of faded into the background for a while. Almost all of the teachers and the vast majority of my peers were white. I cannot remember any conversations even acknowledging the religious or cultural differences between the white students and the few students of color in my classes. Two contradictory messages: white is just normal and we should all be colorblind.

But I wasn't colorblind. I noticed race and ethnicity and I was interested in the difference it makes. My first week on the campus of Westfield State College, a small, predominantly white state school in Western MA, I saw an ad for a meeting of a student club called the Third World Organization. I attended the meeting by myself and decided within minutes that I had made a mistake. I was the only white person in the room and I quickly deduced that this group must be the group for people of color on campus. I didn't go back. I figured it wasn't my space.

Two years later when I transferred to Smith College, I was required with all the other entering students to attend a day long anti-oppression training led by the National Coalition Building Institute. For the first time in my life I was invited and encouraged to have conversations about race and class and ability and sexual orientation in an open and structured environment. I remember that day as a day of epiphanies and I count that day as the day I decided I would learn a new way.

OVERT RACISTS

These are the people who are aligned with the Klan, the militias, or hate group.

A good place to find information about hate groups is to go on the web site for the Southern Poverty Law Center. The Center monitors white supremacist organizations, militias, and extremist groups. In a May 15, 2007 search of this site I learned that there are 845 hate groups in the US in 2006. Hate groups have grown 40% since 2000 because of issues of immigration.

For many people the attitudes and action of race haters defines what racism is. We think of Benjamin Smith who killed several people of color in Chicago or the men who murdered James Byrd in Jasper Texas.

These men committed horrific acts. But if this is the only lens that we see racism through, we will miss the larger systemic forces which also have terrible consequences.

Some of us have relatives who fall in to this camp. And we think well I am not like Uncle Charlie so I am not a racist. Which leads into a discussion of other ways of being racist.

HAPPY RACISTS

This is a category the Janet Helms describes in her book A Race is a Nice Thing to Have. Happy racist are white people who live in isolation from people of color. There are vast areas of our country like northern New England and the Dakotas where this is true. Also millions of white Americans live in suburban area of large cities where they have little contact with people of color.

People who live in such isolation don't see race. They don't experience living with people who are different for them. They don't think of themselves as being white but simply being normal.

Janet Helms estimates that half of the white people in America live like this and think this way. According to the Census Bureau in 2008, there are three hundred and four million citizens in the United States. Sixty six percent are white, thirteen percent are African American, fifteen percent are Hispanic, five percent are Asian/Pacific Island, and one percent is Native American. Sixty six percent of three hundred and four million people – the number of white people - is one hundred eighty two million four hundred thousand white people. If half of them are "happy racists" this ninety one million two hundred thousand indifferent white folks.

MAINSTREAM RACISTS

Mainstream racists are not overt haters. These are white people who are filled with a strong sense of racial superiority. They enjoy the power and privilege that comes from being white. They are glad they have such power and privilege.

These are the people who were running our government during the administration of President Bush. They pushed back on affirmative action. They did not enforce civil right laws. They tried to prevent school desegregation. They cut programs that would help poor people. And they have willingly manipulated the political process against people of color by preventing felons to vote and challenging voter lists. We have seen the consequences of these acts in states like Florida and Ohio.

LIBERAL RACISTS

When we talk about liberal racists we are getting closer to home. This is territory that is more familiar to us.

As liberals we assume that our way of life is the norm. We welcome people of color into our communities as long as they will act like us, speak like us, follow our cultural norms, and believe the way we do.

As liberal whites, we may be aware of the many ways that people of color have been oppressed throughout our history. We are concerned that these patterns continue today. But we have little awareness of how we as whites benefit from a racist system. And we don't take action to dismantle the systems of power and privilege that we benefit from.

Many of us are involved in helping programs that help people of color – programs like adopt a school or a shelter for the homeless. But our ways of helping don't change the systemic imbalance of power between whites and people of color in our society. So the programs that white liberals create often end up dealing with the results of racism and not racism itself. Often our best efforts are only ways of fixing, helping, or saving people of color.

GENERATIONS Y AND D

Generation Y is the generation after generation X. It is the 77 million Americans in their twenties and younger who were born between 1977 and 1997. These are the twenty year olds in the work place. If you Google Gen Y you will find 41,000,000 sites.

Generation D refers to those most attuned to the digital age using computers, cell phones, and iPods. They include all ages but they tend to be younger people.

Eighty percent of white students still go to predominantly white schools. White students are the most racially segregated group in America.

In her book Beginning to See White, Dr. Pamela Perry does a study of white racial identity in students in two high schools in the state of California.

She calls one school, which is in a predominantly white community, Birchwood. The students in Birchwood are still largely in the categories of happy or mainstream racists. They do not think of themselves as being white, since being white is normative. When Dr. Perry asked students in the schools to talk about their racial identity they can't do it because they don't think they have one. Indeed, they don't talk about race in general. And they have little awareness of the impact that race has on people of color.

The other school, which she names Clavey, has students from several different racial groups. Whites are a minority. Unlike the students of Birchwood, the white students at Clavey realize that being white is not the norm for their school. Though they certainly realize that whiteness is the norm for the larger society. Each racial group in the student body – including the white students – has their own forms of music, dress, and dance. Even the white students form groups to create their own cultural identities.

But because of their close association with youth of color they see at first hand the difference that race makes in people's lives. The white students at Clavey are much more reflective than the Birchwood students about racial inequality and white privilege. Many have a strong commitment to work for racial justice and many become activists in later life.

Pamela Perry shows us that context and relationship are critical in shaping racial identity. She notes that many of the students – whether white or students of color – develop a multi-racial self. A multi-racial person is able to incorporate someone who is considered to be an "other". As Perry says, "white is in black and black is in white."

Perry believes that integrated education is working to bring much needed change. But this does not mean that Clavey is a racial "Kingdom of God." There are still racist structures in place. The schools' hierarchical structures communicate scarcity and stratification. There is academic tracking. White cultural values of individual responsibility and future orientation are also operative.

ANTI-RACISTS

This is another way of being white.

White anti-racists do not see whiteness as the norm. They are willing to challenge white power and privilege. They strive to be allies with anti-racist leaders from people of color communities.

We are going to say more about being an anti-racist white person when we do the section entitled “Developing a Positive White Identity.”

CONNECT YOUR PERSONAL STORY BACK TO THE “DIFFERENT WAYS OF BEING WHITE”

It is helpful to make a connection between your personal story about how you learned to be white and the different ways of being white.

In my personal life (Bill Gardiner) I see how I changed over time moving through these stages.

As I grew up in my family I was a “happy racist” being oblivious to the issue of race.

As I moved into college I became a mainstream racist with a tremendous feeling of internalized superiority.

When I went to serve at All Souls Church I was a liberal racist.

In more recent years I have been exploring how to live like an anti-racist.

REFLECT ON THE DIFFERENCES OF GENDER, SEXUAL ORIENTATION, AGE, AND CLASS AS VARIABLES IN SHAPING WHITE IDENTITY

White women have a different experience of whiteness than do white men. They are oppressed due to their gender but are oppressors because of their race.

Members of the bisexual, gay, lesbian and transgender community have a different experience than do straight people. If they are white, they are oppressed due to their sexual orientation, but are oppressors because of their color.

Poor and working class white people are oppressed because of their class but are oppressors because of their race.

And these differences can lead to some interesting combinations. Consider a white lesbian from a working class family for example.