

Weaving Our Stories: Beyond Black and White

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Sermon Delivered at First Parish Cambridge, November 19, 2017

So, I had a different idea for this Sunday's sermon. I don't believe in telling someone else's story and therefore I had originally planned to engage Rev. Danielle, who identifies as bi-racial Native American/European American if she would participate in a dialogue...kind of a question and answer riff about race. I was looking forward to basically bringing a bunch of questions to her here in the pulpit and letting her come back with her lived experience of bi-racial identity. But alas, it was not to be. She or more specifically, her dog Aldash will be on the Today Show at 9am on Monday! It was a last minute opportunity for them that I felt was important and I just couldn't ask her to drive from the dog show she was at on Saturday in Philly...back here and then back to New York. I think you all would agree. So, we are very happy for Danielle, and hope you will tune in, but disappointed for me. Nevertheless, I realized that this is an opportunity for me to come to you in a different kind of way. Rather than trying to be some kind of font of knowledge or authority, I get to come to you with my questions and to welcome you into my own awkward process of wondering and trying to figure out how multi-racial voices, blended families, trans-racial families and those who may not know their racial biology are welcomed into the conversation about white supremacy.

Last year, I had the great privilege to work on a project at PolicyLink that was all about racial and ethnic identity. The official title of the project was **Making the Case for Data Disaggregation to Advance a Culture of Health**.¹ The human and understandable title should have been "How the way we look at race messes with people's health". This was and still is an amazing project that has brought together an incredible array of policy makers and academics as well as stakeholders and community leaders to talk about the way the "official" lines of race and ethnicity are drawn in our society and what some of the long reaching effects of those lines are. The series of studies done on African American, Latinx, Asian, American Indian, White and Multi-national populations reveals some incredible data.

I'm starting my message today recalling this project because it was one of the places where I most recently had that experience of being entirely out of my depth and knowledge in the conversation on race. Sometimes, people look at me, see a black guy and assume that I'm going to be the authority on race. Not always the case. It was remarkable to sit in a room with a scholar of Filipino decent and listen to them describe the exhaustive nuances of culture, communication and understanding that happen between what we lazy Americans would call "Asian" cultures. Not just on the Asian continent spanning from Turkey to the Aleutian Islands in the Pacific, but Oceania, the South Pacific, Indian Ocean and even the West Coast of South America and Antarctica. Not only did I realize that I am utterly clueless about a population that makes up more than half of the planet, but I realized that the American influence of pseudo-scientific classification of people by "race", is pathetically inadequate. What we call race is laughable criteria for anything, let alone structures of health and economic wealth and life and death.

Yet, we continue with our rather small minded racial discourse. The other reason I want to start with mentioning this project on racial data is because the entire project faced a quandary that I find myself in today. How to talk about multi-racial identity in the context of white supremacy? Okay, race is totally arbitrary, but I'm not of the "color-blind" camp of racial apologists. Race and racism is very much a thing...even if it is entirely man made. People are dying because of it and people are willing to die for it. It

¹ Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and PolicyLink. Making the Case for Data Disaggregation to Advance a Culture of Health. Accessed November 24, 2017. <http://www.policylink.org/node/44886>.

is not ever going to be as simple as “oh, I don’t see race.” We opened the box and now we have to make the best of trying to tame Pandora’s gift to us. So, this makes my job as someone who identifies monoracially as black/Caribbean American pretty difficult when I want to talk about multi-racial identity and when I want to explore the impact of having a larger conversation about “White Supremacy” on multiracial identities.

My point is this: what we are working on as a congregation, as a denomination, as social justice leaders, as a progressive community and as a global movement is not just about the black/white conflict. I know first-hand how the enslavement of blacks, the resulting dehumanization and the fight to carve out some kind of semblance of equality has been all consuming. And I am not willing to avoid referring directly to White Supremacy because it is a real byproduct of what we know as “race” in this country. But I feel like there is even more at stake when I look at the spectrum of our families as Unitarian Universalists and why some people come to our doors and not others. We have the unique opportunity and a spiritual obligation to lift up and embrace so much more.

So, without Danielle as my foil, I’m left with my mono-racial perspective and only being able to ask questions from that location. But questions are good things. Asking questions got me thinking and being a research buff, it got me reading and, I hope, learning. I will also apologize for any language that I use that someone may receive as an ouch. In the reading I’ve been doing there are a variety of terms used...mixed race, multi-racial, bi-racial, racially mixed, etc. and when possible, I’ve tried to use the author’s choice. One of the most helpful books in this area has been one that is titled *What Are You?: Voices of Mixed-Race Young People*.² This is a question (what are you) that I’ve never had to answer in terms of my race and as such, this book has been a revelation. It has been a window into a world that not only makes me want to know more, but humbles me to an experience and voice that is extremely powerful. It is a reminder to me as a black person that I do not own the copyright on racial marginalization.

Throughout the book there are titles like: *I Don’t Think of Being Biracial as a Burden; Are You This? Are You That?; The Color of My Skin is Not The Color of my Heart; Check One Box; My So-Called Identity; Are You Dating Me or My Hair?* They are all by young people (25 and under) who identify as bi-racial, multiracial, mixed-race, racially mixed. Although it is a relatively old book (published in 1999), the messages are extremely clear and still relevant. I read these and I have more questions. But they are complicated. For me as someone who identifies as monoracial black, when I read that the first story involved a black teacher, I wonder what is the toxic racial stew that we as adults are brewing? When I read the second story, I’m reminded that there are empowered responses to our racial language and world that I can’t possibly imagine from my perspective.

Still I question how young people are understanding the language we are using to de-center whiteness and how we can still accomplish our goal of equity without sending a message to someone who is bi-racial that one part of them is bad and the other good. Like everything else human, this is not about binaries.

Have you ever asked yourself how much we all try to “place” people racially, consciously and unconsciously. Are we always looking for some kind of personal reference point for our own identity? Is this something that is hardwired into us as human beings?

In a New York Times op-ed from earlier this year, Moises Velasquez-Manoff who identifies as a multiethnic person (the son of a Jewish dad of Eastern European descent and a Puerto Rican mom) states:

² Gaskins, Pearl Fuyo. *What Are You?: Voices of Mixed-race Young People*. New York: Holt, 1999.

I can attest that being mixed makes it harder to fall back on the tribal identities that have guided so much of human history, and that are now resurgent. Your background pushes you to construct a worldview that transcends the tribal.

You're also accustomed to the idea of having several selves, and of trying to forge them into something whole. That task of self-creation isn't unique to biracial people; it's a defining experience of modernity. Once the old stories about God and tribe — the framing that historically gave our lives context — become inadequate, on what do we base our identities? How do we give our lives meaning and purpose?³

I know that for me, I have definitely been able to lean on what Velasquez-Manoff refers to as “tribal.” My Caribbean roots give me comfort and grounding and are a part of me that I see reflected in everything from the way that I look to the way I was brought up. It is a hard earned comfort in a world that doesn't readily tell me to value this identity. But I own it lock stock and barrel.

Comfort is a big part of all the questions I have and a big part of the question of race. We all have to be willing to step outside of our comfort zones in the conversation on race and some more than others. Right now, I'm reading *Waking Up White and Finding Myself in the Story on Race* by Debby Irving, who identifies as a white woman. In it she says “*Choosing to engage in the effort to dismantle racism promises to bring with it discomfort.*”

My hope is that everyone in this congregation will read this book, but I believe that it will be particularly informative for anyone who identifies personally with white culture. I am reading and receiving its message in a way that is unique to my identity for sure, but there are a few passages that I think are particularly important and refreshing to hear from its author. This one passage, speaks to the question of racialized comfort directly:

“In our racialized social scheme, white people have been given not only better access to America's goods and services but disproportionate amounts of comfort, safety and choice including the ultimate choice: whether or not to deal with racism.”⁴

What are the choices that are being presented to our multi-racial communities when we insist on driving the conversation about race from primarily a black/white perspective? How equipped are we to engage multi-racial identities, without forcing limiting choices on them when we talk about systemic racism? How and when have we been listening for those stories to be told?

Part of this is about language. I have to wonder what speaking explicitly about “white supremacy” feels like for those with racial identities that intersect with whiteness. Does it cause conflict? Is it a relief? The conversation about language has gone on since we began the “White Supremacy Teach Ins” earlier this year. But the resistance to the language has been dominated by white people who feel as if “white supremacy” is too strong or misleading or misrepresentative. In fact, I was recently part of a discussion about race attended by mostly white Unitarian Universalists where the language quickly and frequently veered away from talking about “white supremacy” to “white *privilege*” or just “*privilege*”. I was appreciative that the moderator, who was white, did bring us back, but the discomfort in the room was palpable.

³ Velasquez-manoff, Moises. "What Biracial People Know." The New York Times. March 04, 2017. Accessed November 24, 2017. https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/04/opinion/sunday/what-biracial-people-know.html?_r=0.

⁴ Irving, Debby. *Waking up White: And Finding Myself in the Story of Race*. Cambridge, MA: Elephant Room Press, 2014.

How would it help us all to listen to multi-racial response? The most I can offer is, again my own perspective. I have seen and experienced first-hand how white skin *privilege* can work for someone who identifies as black, where “light is right”. My entire early performing career was shaped by losing out on jobs to actors who were often bi-racial but identified as black. I was considered too dark and I was told this to my face by numerous casting directors. But the lighter skinned black actor, is still a black actor because of white supremacy and he will never be cast opposite Gwynneth Paltrow. In theater and media back in the day (and today) white was set up as the unattainable pinnacle for someone who is even part black.

So, it is not a priority of light over dark, but rather about navigating an entire scale based entirely on whiteness, meaning that in some ways, there is no dark (let alone black) and only shades of white. The entire system of racial marginalization is built around whiteness. *That* is what I mean when I refer to white supremacy and it requires no hood or swastika to do its damage even to people who are mixed-race. This is affirmed in an NPR CodeSwitch piece from Alexandros Orphanides, who identifies as being of mixed race decent. In *Why Mixed-Race Americans Will Not Save the Country* he says,

“...when it comes to systemic barriers, experts point out that instances of racial discrimination for mixed-race people may not be very different from the experiences of people who identify as belonging to a single race.”

He goes on to quote [Tanya Hernandez](#), professor of law at Fordham University who says that:

“many mixed-race people find themselves discriminated against, not explicitly because of their mixed-ness, but because of their belonging to a non-white group.”

He concludes that:

The fact that mixed-race people who present as non-white face discrimination because of their proximity to a non-white group reinforces the idea of racial discrimination emphasizing categorization with one group, rather than hybridity.⁵

So, if we are engaging in the project of dismantling white supremacy and if not only people who are monoracial but those who are bi and multi-racial are also suffering at its hands, does that mean the world is against white people?

No. The world is against the arbitrary marker of whiteness as the sole scale against which everything else is measured, both physically and culturally. Although *Mixed-Race Americans May Not Save the Country* (much too hefty a burden for anyone to carry alone) we may be able to learn a thing or two from them about how we can move forward into a new reality.

UUs have the opportunity and the capability to step up. We are not bound by a creed and we are not restricted to one expression of the divine. Imagine that our spiritual goal is to throw our embrace open as wide as the planet. It is up to us to use our big brains (and one would hope our equally big hearts) to recognize that in the embrace, some will want to be held tightly and others lightly, while some may not want to be touched at all but still be reassured that the embrace is out there. The embrace we must learn to provide is not one size fits all and that is our mission and our challenge. History means that there are many who will be suspicious of the embrace so we must constantly ask those who we are reaching out to for guidance as to what works for them. We have to learn new ways to touch them and to allow them to feel safe.

⁵ Orphanides, Alexandros. "Why Mixed-Race Americans Will Not Save The Country." NPR. March 08, 2017. Accessed November 24, 2017. <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2017/03/08/519010491/why-mixed-race-americans-will-not-save-the-country>.

Those who have assumed that there is only one way to embrace those who are different than them, must not rely on a status quo that was developed in a racial vacuum. What I'm talking about is a radical embrace that cannot be restrained by the history of white supremacy that only knows one color, shape, size or smell of success. The radical embrace recognizes beauty unto each individual, it understands voices and language that are unique, it knows that shape and size are expressions of the miracle of being human and feels the color of skin first through the warm throb of a heartbeat.

The radical embrace is capable of touching us all. Like the ribbons woven in and tied to a wreath, the radical embrace lets each color be seen and each texture be felt. There are long ribbons and short ones and they touch each other in random places and random ways. Our work as Unitarian Universalists is not to define the limits of the embrace, but to challenge its ability to expand. Let us continue to weave our stories, listening and learning from them and opening ourselves when we feel most vulnerable to growing into a new understanding.

Blessed Be.

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