

## **Rethinking the Good Liberal**

January 17, 2021

Rev. Adam Lawrence Dyer

How often do you think about race?

How often do you talk about race?

How often are you asked to talk about race?

How often are you forced to talk and think about race in your professional or personal life?

These are the questions I wanted to begin with because we would not have MLK day if it were not for this country's legacy of racism.

It is sad but true that for many of my white colleagues this is the only time when they will talk about race from the pulpit. They will be praised for their "bravery" and passion and how they make people think.

That's nice...

If I ask myself (or probably any other person of color) the questions that I posed, the answers go like this:

How often do you think about race...many times in a day.

How often do you talk about race...almost as many times as I think about it.

How often are you asked to talk about race...many times a week.

How often are you forced to talk or think about race in your professional or personal life...constantly.

I'm sharing this with you, not as a point of guilt, but as a reflection on the reality. The reality of the vast cavern that exists between the experience of black and white when considering how race works in our day to day lives.

And yet most of you engaging this message today might call ourselves “liberal”...good liberals even.

“Liberal” that word means starkly different things depending on what skin you travel in.

I think in our “good liberal” circles, we actually don’t know enough about these kinds of stark difference. I’ve had the great fortune to know and work with some pretty conservative people...both black and white. What may surprise you (as good liberals) is that the white conservatives have a much easier time talking about race and placing themselves in that conversation first hand. They have a much more nuanced and deeply processed concept of what their whiteness is. For better or worse, they have a language and priorities and they have clear boundaries between their whiteness and everything else.

It is less common for me to encounter a white liberal who has the same kind of racial self-awareness or investment.

As we face the aftermath of January 6, I want you to consider the following quote from Martin Luther King, Jr.

*I think America must see that riots do not develop out of thin air. Certain conditions continue to exist in our society which must be condemned as vigorously as we condemn riots. In the final analysis, a riot is the language of the unheard. What is it that America has failed to hear?'*

King was speaking about the riots that were erupting in the black community as a reaction to inaction on civil rights legislation that had been passed in the previous years. But the same is true for what happened the other week and what may yet happen in the next few days. I fear that white America does not know how to hear itself.

That mob of mostly white people who stormed the capitol, no matter how wrong it was, feel unheard. Yes, they have been lied to and yes, they have been fed a poison of misinformation by one person in particular and the people enabling him, but there had to

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<sup>1</sup> “The Other America,” accessed January 16, 2021, <https://www.gphistorical.org/mlk/mlkspeech/mlk-gp-speech.pdf>.

be a receptor for that poison. Far right, white supremacist, hard line conservative were not the only identities in that crowd. In fact, both of the leaders of the “Stop the Steal” rally and the Proud Boys are men of color. What is more, it is clear that the rioters received help from people who at first glance would not fit any of those descriptors.

And what is the response of the good liberal?

- Focus on specific individuals and individual crimes...
- Focus on the “rule of law”
- Focus on the one individual who whipped up the crowd and had the biggest megaphone.
- Focus away from systems of limited access, exclusive privilege and selective non-accountability.

And this response is as much of a failure as the overall crime itself. I fear that these other words from Martin Luther King, Jr. are still applicable:

*Whites, it must frankly be said, are not putting in a similar mass effort to reeducate themselves out of their racial ignorance. It is an aspect of their sense of superiority that the white people of America believe they have so little to learn.<sup>2</sup>*

From my vantage point, what we witnessed and what we will continue to witness is a massive failure of understanding cultural whiteness:

- The whiteness that believes it has a right to storm the capitol
- The whiteness that let people do reconnaissance before hand
- The whiteness that looks to pin this primarily on one person
- The whiteness that refuses to sign the anti-lynching bill into law because it threatens personal liberty
- The whiteness that points at these failures and says “but it wasn’t me”

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<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther Dr King Jr, Vincent Harding, and Coretta Scott King, *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?*, Illustrated edition (Boston: Beacon Press, 2010).

More and more, I'm coming to the conclusion that white supremacy has less to do with race hatred and more to do with protecting a very specific brand of individuality that people of color have limited or no access to.

White supremacy is captured best in the way that if one is white, you usually only have to answer to your individual self. Your success belongs to you as an individual; likewise your crimes and failings only belong to you.

Yet if you are a person of color and specifically black, you are asked to answer for all black people...unless you carry certain trappings of whiteness that grant you limited access to the inner circle (Ivy League, wealth, celebrity). Even then however, your black skin and features...your black embodiment...keeps you out of the real center of power and makes you a target.

The equation is brutal but dead simple: white never has to answer for or to whiteness itself while non-white always has to answer to it. So many people of color spend entire careers answering to whiteness navigating it, working with it, understanding it. We are PhDs in cultural whiteness along with our PoC identities.

I'm sharing this today not as some random screed. I'm sharing it as a wake up call. If you are a person of color, I hope that I have put to voice or captured some of what you may be thinking but maybe haven't had the platform or opportunity to share.

If you are white, I want you to hear this as something of a gauntlet. I refuse to tolerate a lack of introspection, accountability or self-exploration of whiteness from my white siblings on this planet. Being white is as complex and diverse as being a person of color and contrary to the way it works in our society, it has never been and cannot be passed off as being invisible. I...we all, need you to own that. People of color cannot dismantle white supremacy. But then neither can white people if you aren't willing to own it in some way...good and bad. It will never end if you're not willing to figure out what needs to change or worse if you always need people of color to point you in the right direction.

One of the reasons I went into ministry is that I sincerely believe that faith organizations and people centered around ethical and moral life can make a difference. And so, I'm

calling on Unitarian Universalism in this moment to make that difference. I want Unitarian Universalism to lead a spiritual movement to unapologetically exploring whiteness. I am asking that the Unitarian Universalist Association, my own professional organization the UUMA, all of the other professional organizations and congregations of the association come together to work toward cultivating places and ways to understand a non-toxic whiteness.

We've adopted the language of talking about white supremacy culture (albeit with quite some resistance), but we haven't given white people any way or platform to talk about whiteness outside of that context. That's a bit like only discussing blackness in the context of slavery in the American south. Black people aren't wholly defined by one brutal manifestation of racism despite how much it impacts our lives. Neither should whiteness be defined only by white supremacy even as it is held fully accountable.

Ironically, too often, "good liberals" only give white people the opportunity to talk about whiteness in the context of oppression...which we need to do, but there must be a way to also encourage a better non-centered whiteness.

Where are the conversations and the learning about the intricate interplay between being white and conservative and white and liberal? And I'm not talking about class and economics. That is a valuable conversation, but it is completely different. I'm talking about the whiteness that enters the room before economic, political or social leanings are shared.

If the Unitarian Universalist movement is actually committed to seeing an equitable world, understanding whiteness must mean more than the absence of oppression and white supremacy.

But this is not my job.

I am immersed in my blackness...I am intimate with it so that it is a part of me, obvious wherever I go.

- The ways in which I challenge the black church on sexuality and inclusion even as it was the foundation for my early life.

- My commitment to understanding my genetic roots in Africa outside of the context of Europe and colonialism, while also recognizing and respecting the fact that I am not African.
- Black music, art, writing, science, law, politics, theology and more (Miles Davis, James Brown, Ella Fitzgerald, Louis Armstrong, Nat King Cole, Inge Hardison, Geoffrey Holder, Carmen Delavallade, James Baldwin, Langston Hughes, Audre Lorde, Toni Morrison, Anthony Pinn, Rev. Kelly Brown Douglas, Nell Irvin Painter, John Lewis, Corey Booker, Kamala Harris, Cory Bush, Mondaire Jones, Ritchie Torres) – I know their work because they resonate with my blackness as inspiration. I know them outside of whiteness.

If you are indeed a good liberal and you are white, the time has come to complete your education. That will require finding a way to meet me and every other person of color as a true equal. We are not perfect, or monolith, but we understand ourselves, we know ourselves. Over time, we've been forced to interrogate, question and doubt ourselves and still survive and thrive. We hold our whole histories and as a result we are ready for the future whether that is a fantasy or a fight.

How often do you think about race? As a tribute and a commitment to your growth, ask yourself that question this Martin Luther King, Jr. day.

And as you reflect on Dr. King's legacy, remember that one of the biggest questions that he was asking America still remains to be answered: what does it mean to be white?