

“What Does It Mean to Be White?”

Rev. Shawn Newton
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N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

All of my life,
I have been learning to be white.

Since I was a child,
I have taken in lessons, some explicit, though most not,
about *how to be* white.

It has only been as an adult
that I have been learning what it *means to be white*,
to see that there is this thing called whiteness
that is different from my British and Irish heritage,
and that isn't solely about the colour of my skin,
but is, instead, about everything—
the benefits and the burdens—
that comes with the colour of my skin.

Things I can readily see.

And things I can sometimes see
only after they're pointed out to me.

And things that I still struggle to see
even when I read about them or am told about them,
because some part of me feels defensive and reactive.

* * *

Each of us here has a story
about how race has shaped our lives and our identity.

These stories have a million tiny chapters,
some too short or too small to easily see.

Some so dramatic we can't ignore them.

Some so impactful we carry the weight of them for years.

And some so insidious that we are ignorant
to the fact these chapters even exist at all.

Each of us has a story of how race has made us who we are.

One of the benefits of whiteness is rarely, if ever,
being asked to tell that story,
to examine how race has shaped us.

So, here is my story, at least a few of the highlights.

It is a story of being white,
and of coming to see my whiteness.

* * *

A starting point for any such story
is the moment of our first awareness of race—
that moment when, for the first time,
we come to realize humans come in many different colours—
and, most importantly, that moment we come to know
that people often assign meaning and power
to those basic human differences.
My earliest memory took place
in the back seat of my family's car.

It's the early 70's. I'm four or five years old.
We are driving the downtown streets
of Birmingham, Alabama.

My father, seeing a black man on the sidewalk,
lowers his window as we pull to a stop sign,
and yells out "Hey," followed by the N-word.

What I next remember
is my mother's fast and furious intake of air.

In an instant, she seems to suck all of the oxygen out of the car.

I don't understand much,
but I understand something is horribly wrong.

It was one of those gut-wrenching moments
that seemed to last a lot longer than it actually did.

A moment broken only, and finally,
by the man on the street,
a man it turns out my father worked with,
yelling back, "Hey, Honky!"

A friendly chat ensued between them,
until the car behind us beeped its horn,
and my dad and his co-worker waved goodbye.

Over forty years later, I still struggle
to make sense of that day in the car—
there on the streets of Birmingham,
just a short space in time and distance
from the jail where Martin Luther King, Jr.
wrote his famous letter a decade before,
just a few short years removed
from fire hoses and police dogs
being turned on peaceful protestors nearby,
just a few blocks and a few years away
from the 16th Street Baptist Church,
where four young girls were killed by hatred
while sitting in Sunday School.

More than four decades later,
as a son of the American South,
I find myself trying to somehow understand
that odd exchange of racial epithets
my father and his colleague had adopted,
if not as terms of endearment,
at least as the terms of engagement
in an uneasy and ongoing negotiation
of race, identity, and power.

Were it not for my mother's deep gasp that afternoon,
for the fear she conveyed in a single breath,
I might have remained oblivious there in the back seat,
unaware that anything troubling had just happened.

But, in that one breath was a lesson
that has touched my life in ways I can barely explain.

I learned that day that there is danger
in discussing race and racism, and I learned
that sometimes it seems safer to not talk about it at all.

As a child, what little I knew of the Civil Rights Era
led me to think of it as ancient history.

What I now know is that I was raised, for a time,
near the epicentre of the movement.

I was among the first wave of kids in those early years
to attend schools that had only recently been desegregated.

Though the U.S. Supreme Court had ruled
school segregation unconstitutional in 1954,
it took further rulings into the early 70's
to force resistant communities to finally integrate their schools.

One strategy used at the time to avoid integration
involved the creation of private schools—
what were called “Segregation Academies.”

I suspect the new private kindergarten I attended
was one of those schools.

It had only recently been established
by my family's Southern Baptist Church.

While the motivation may have been to ensure
the kids in the church were given a Christian education;
the location, the timing, and, frankly,
the history of the Southern Baptist Church—

a denomination founded in a split with other Baptists over the Civil War and the question of slavery—all lead to my deep and enduring suspicion.

With the emphasis on the word “Southern,” the history of racism is, quite literally, written into the name of the religion in which I was raised.

In Sunday School, we sang:

*Jesus loves the little children,
all the children of the world,
Red and yellow, black and white,
they are precious in his sight,
Jesus loves the little children of the world.*

Troubling lyrics aside, based on what was happening beyond those walls, every other day of the week, there is reason to wonder if the pews were packed with people who didn’t quite believe it.

People who somehow didn’t believe they were likewise called to love everyone, regardless of their background.

Thought it would take me decades to realize it, the lesson I was being taught is that there can be a disconnect between our words, our attitudes, and our actions.

Looking back on my childhood, I’m mindful of the degree to which racist attitudes were so often conveyed through humour—most often in jokes told within our circle of friends and by members of my extended family.

What’s funny, after all of this time, is that I don’t recall any of the jokes or their punchlines.

What I remember was a pattern of demonstrating difference.

Of pointing to the “other” and suggesting in a not-so-subtle way

that we were better because we were white.

The beauty of using humour to make the point
is that things never had to be said so plainly.
A knowing laugh was enough to get the message across.

* * *

As formative as these years were,
Alabama is not where I started out.

I was born in rural Oklahoma, in a tiny town called Coalgate.

Both sides of my family
had come to Oklahoma in the late 19th century
with the waves of white pioneers
who settled what was then called Indian Territory.

There is family lore of our ancestors
lining up along the border of this territory,
waiting for high noon on the day of a Land Run,
when they could, with thousands of others,
claim land on a first-come, first-served basis.
Finders keepers.

They paid the U.S. government for the land they claimed,
and, per the treaties in effect,
that money was passed on to those
who had previously held claim to the land:
the people of the Choctaw Nation, the Indigenous Peoples,
originally of the Southeastern United States
who, six decades earlier, had been forcibly removed
from their traditional lands along the bitter “Trail of Tears”.

I never recall that last important detail
ever being part of family conversation.

While I lived in Oklahoma only for the first two years of my life,
the displacement of Indigenous Peoples
was never part of what I heard discussed over the dinner table,
when I visited later, or while spending summers

on my extended family's farms and ranches.

We never heard that the land that had, in some cases,
been in the family for generations,
had only become available
because it was taken by the federal government
when smaller tracts of land were doled out to the Choctaws
on an individual basis, so the rest could be sold off
for a discounted price to white settlers.

It was never discussed,
even though, by all accounts,
my great-great-grandmother was Choctaw.

Which makes it all the more ironic that, as children,
when we would play "Cowboys and Indians,"
it was never questioned that it was better to be a cowboy.

I suppose I, and most every other kid around me,
learned that lesson clearly enough by watching
"The Lone Ranger" and those TV westerns
that showed such a predictable pattern of winners and losers.

Of course, we could have learned that lesson
from our very own family's story,
if only the full history had been passed down.

If only we had been asked to grapple with what it meant
to see ourselves as the "good guys"
and to see the "Indians" as "bad guys," as savages, as other.

If only my family's history had not been whitewashed.

If only I had not been taught, by sins of omission,
that to be white is to pick and choose
which parts of the story we tell.

* * *

Because my family moved around quite a bit
while I was growing up, I spent Grades 3 through 8 in Dallas, Texas,

and finished out high school in New Hampshire.

In Texas, the racial equations were different
from those I had known.

In my largely white suburban school,
my awareness of race expanded,
as I learned a new set of names:
Rodriguez, Garcia, Martinez.

Here I became aware that economic differences
often go along with perceptions of race.

Though everyone was from the same middle-class neighbourhood,
and everyone lived in similar-sized houses,
the Mexican-American kids in my school
were uniformly thought of as poor.

There was a narrative—
again so often performed with humour—
that belittled Mexican people,
by questioning their immigration status,
even though the land where we all lived
had actually once been Mexico,
and some of these kids' families had lived in the region
for generations before we gringos arrived.

The implication of our ignorance
was that white people were entitled to the land.
And that people of Mexican heritage were the interlopers.

* * *

When my family moved to New Hampshire,
I was suddenly in an almost all-white high school.

Now, my classmates' names were
Bouchard, Levasseur, and Lemieux.

The students in my school were overwhelmingly
from French Canadian and Catholic backgrounds.

And as a Southern WASP, I stood out.

From that experience, I learned
that even in a seemingly homogenous racial environment,
there seems to be something in the human psyche
bent on drawing distinctions between people.

We were all “white,” but there was still a competition for status.

* * *

When I went off to university,
I chose to attend Oberlin College in Ohio,
a bastion of liberalism, that had been
on the progressive end of things since the 1830s,
when it was the first school to admit women and black people.

The school and the town had been an important stop
on the Underground Railroad.

As a newly-out queer person,
who thrived in Oberlin’s progressive atmosphere,
that history meant a great deal to me.

It was there that I first studied sociology and philosophy,
and began to be confronted by theories of race and racism.

It was there, at nineteen,
that I first encountered the work of Audre Lorde,
the black, queer feminist writer
who upended so much of my thinking.

But what I most readily remember about whiteness
from my short time there,
came from a friend, a black woman,
who, in a late-night rump session,
told me I still had a lot to learn.

I don’t remember what specifically sparked her comment.
But she was right.

Her pointed comment was an important milestone on the path to raising my consciousness about racism.

I am grateful that there have been so many other such moments along the way:

- Like years ago, when a friend and I were followed through a department store by a guard who kept looking at my friend suspiciously because he is black.

- Like last summer my being repeatedly followed by department store guards in Mexico because I am white.

- Like being in Kenya a couple of years ago and having people react with surprise at seeing such a pale and pasty person— with kids calling out “Mzungu!” the Bantu word to describe white people. It can be a term of affection or it can be an insult.

- Like being ordained by Arlington Street Church, whose endowment, which helped to pay my salary for almost ten years, is surely tainted with money given by wealthy Bostonians in the 18th and 19th centuries who profited off of the slave trade. A historic Unitarian church that in 1842 essentially ousted William Ellery Channing, the “Father of American Unitarianism” and their minister of almost forty years, when he asked the board for permission to host the funeral of a colleague who was a prominent opponent of slavery.

* * *

I’ve shared these few highlights from my own complicated story, because I believe these stories need to be told.

And I’ve shared my story in hopes of calling you to reflect on your own, to see the ways that race and racism have been written into your life,

and even to see the ways that your life has been racialized.

I say that in the belief that race is a social construct.

I say that with an awareness that race
so often intersects in complicated ways
with class, and gender, and other dimensions of who we are.

And I say that recognizing that race
continues to hold a central and often unspoken place
in determining how power and resources
are distributed in our society.

I've shared my story because you need to know
I've spent much of my life trying to dismantle racism,
including that which I carry within myself.

For all the work I've done, I'm not done with the work.

I know I will spend the rest of my life
guarding against bias in my thoughts and actions,
and needing to notice the prejudice that impedes racial justice.

I realise so much of the experience
I've shared with you is American.

But these same dynamics,
though sometimes different in their details,
are alive in Canadian society, too.

We need only look to the disparities
in the criminal justice and social-welfare systems
to find evidence that contradicts
some of our most beloved national myths of fairness and equality.

This is why the Unitarian Universalist Ministers of Canada
are putting forward to our congregations
a call to take up the work of racial justice.

A call to sever the roots of racism
that entangle our lives in so many unwelcome ways.

If we are ever to get at those roots—
within us, in our congregations, and in our society—
I've come to believe that there is little progress to be made
without first engaging the question of what it means to be white.

I say this because all too often,
those of us who are white spend so much of our time
unconsciously unaware of the implications
of our own racial identity,
oblivious to the ways in which whiteness
shapes so much of how our society is structured.

The personal story I've shared with you today
can be told in many different ways.
I could tell the story of my life—
and I almost always have—
without needing to include any
of the messy details I lifted up today.

Such are the benefits of whiteness.

That I can tell my story
without having to engage questions of race and racism
points to one of the greatest privileges of whiteness.

White people frequently fail to see about ourselves
what is so patently and painfully obvious to non-white people.

The great novelist Toni Morrison
speaks of whiteness through the metaphor of a goldfish bowl,
with whiteness being the bowl itself,
the seemingly invisible container that holds together
our ways of thinking without our even being aware of its presence.

It just is. It's normal.
So much so that the container we swim in
is simply taken for granted.

And too often, as a result, the meaning of white identity
is left unexamined and unchallenged,

as though racism is a problem
that belongs only to people of colour.

As though white isn't also a colour.

Woven into the story of race
has always been the story of a struggle for power—
for power over others.

This has been especially true of the history of whiteness,
which didn't even emerge as a concept
until the end of the 17th century.

Before then, people were known primarily
by where they had come from.

But when and where people have had the ability
to claim a white identity,
whiteness has often brought with it
higher social status and greater economic power.

So much of that power has been used to build
a system that rewards and reinforces whiteness,
often in completely unconscious ways.

The pressing question for our time is
what, then, do we do with this system?

I believe that we need to find our place within the system,
and get to work to tear it down,
to take down the walls of division.

To do so, we need to face up to our personal and shared history,
figuring out where we're situated in the structures of racism,
and then devote ourselves
to dismantling those systems around us,
from the inside out.

If we are serious about working toward racial justice,
we have to start somewhere.

And, as is so often the case, that somewhere is with ourselves.

This is especially true for those of us who are white.

We have an obligation to examine our own privilege,
and to challenge the notion of whiteness as the invisible norm.

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As citizens of the 21st century,
whether we like it or not,
we are enmeshed in systems of oppression
that perpetuate injustices that are often contrary
to the highest aspirations of our faith.

None of us likes to see this,
but the difficult truth is that the shape of our lives
may not match the deepest hopes of our hearts.

Fortunately, there is a way out.

As the Laguna Pueblo writer Leslie Marmon Silko says:
“The only thing that can beat a story is another story.”

And so it falls to us to determine, as best as we can,
the part that is ours to play in that unfolding story.

May we use our power,
may you use your power,
to bend the plot of that story
toward more love and more justice.

Amen.