

“Seeing through New Lenses” * 20 October, 2013
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The way I choose sermon topics -- rather, the way they choose me -- boils down to three methods:

1. The call of Spirit
2. The requests of my parishioners
3. The insistence of our wider culture

That last one is to blame, or credit, for today’s exploration.
As I’ll explain, I couldn’t *not* use today to reflect on the notion of privilege, and how we can be real, lasting allies in our promise to “stand on the side of love,” honoring all people’s lives, including those on the margins.

Let’s start with this reflection: **Joy DeGruy, CrackingTheCodes.org**

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wf9QBnPK6Yg>

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Who wouldn’t want to “make right a situation that was wrong”?

Who among us doesn’t want to be an ally? to be a voice for justice?

As Unitarian Universalists, we stand on the side of love
expressed as the inherent worth and dignity of every person.
As anti-racist, anti-oppression, multicultural movement,
we UU’s are summoned to act, to speak, to advocate for those who are marginalized.

I’m going to go out on a limb here
and presume that most of us here want to be justice-makers.
In fact, I’m just going to flat-out assume that in the past year someone here has:
called or written to a government official
held a sign on a street corner or a city hall lawn
or even been arrested for civil disobedience.
(You all get gold stars -- in “Standing on the Side of Love” saffron.)

When we justice-loving, neighbor-helping, warm-hearted people jump straight to the action of social justice, we risk skipping a few important steps that, ignored, prevent us from being truly effective.

Before we act, we need to start by:
acknowledging whatever **privilege** we have

learning to **listen** to those who need to speak
and watching our culture for where we can be better allies....
to African-Americans, to the gay, lesbian, transgender community;
to Native Americans, or Muslims,
or anyone who doesn't walk through the world as easily as some of us do.

Let's start with *privilege*.

Among the great paradoxes of growing up Hewitt is this:
my parents, while thrifty in the extreme -- for example, as an adolescent,
I was constantly embarrassed to wear cheap, uncool clothes --
my parents scrimped and saved so that they could introduce my brother and me to other
cultures and other countries.
I was the dorkiest-dressed kid in my high school, but by the time I was eighteen I had
lived in two foreign countries and had visited six more.
By the time I was in college, I had studied four foreign languages
and made friends from Japan, Germany, Chile, England, Greece, Costa Rica.
(It's no accident that ten years later, I wound up in an Anthropology PhD program.
It's also no accident that my brother is a travel author, and lives abroad three months of
every year.)

The thing about the lenses we wear --
the way we see the world, move through it,
and interpret the things and people we encounter --
is that we don't notice we're wearing lenses at all.
It's just "how it is."
In my family, we didn't have HBO or cool clothes or new cars,
but we traveled to other countries and learned about other cultures.
That's just *how it was*.

One day when I was in college, I stopped by my local bank branch.
While the teller was sifting through my paperwork,
bored, I looked over her shoulder:
on the counter behind her were stacks of brightly colored bills.

Because I had a collection at home of Mexican pesos, Haitian gourdes, British pounds,
and so on, I knew that only in the U.S. do all bills look alike.

"What country is that currency from?" I asked her.
She turned, distracted, then peered at me. "What are you talking about?"

"That money." I pointed. "What country is it from?"

The teller followed my finger, then turned to me with a look that I couldn't interpret. "Those," she said, "are food stamps."

I didn't know what food stamps looked like;
for all the coupon-clipping and rebate-mailing that my mom oversaw,
we always had a full fridge and cupboards.

Even when we're wearing lenses that give specific shape to the way we see the world,
we don't know it.

On that day, my lenses led me to see exotic foreign currency
in the place of a marker of poverty --
and up until that day, they had protected me from seeing them.

I still don't know what Food Assistance debit cards look like --
because I've never *needed* to know.
I don't know how Maine's Food Supplement Program works...
because I don't need to know.

I've had to struggle to get by, at times, to pay bills and buy food
but at the worst times, I had private resources to draw upon.

That's privilege: not having to see certain things, or hear about them.

Privilege is not having to experience or know about certain things --
like hunger and empty kitchen cupboards.

It's not just economic, of course: the lenses that color our view
can come from being white, or straight, or able-bodied, or gender normative.

In the extreme, privilege is not having to *care* about certain things.

Privilege is abused when people don't see something,
and -- because they don't experience it themselves, declare that it couldn't possibly exist.

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One of the most powerful ways of taking off our lenses, or -- to switch metaphors --
agreeing to walk in someone else's shoes -- is to listen.

In our culture, though, we pretty much stink at doing this.
We don't often listen in a way that allows someone else's truth to stand on its own,
valuable and vulnerable -- especially when it jostles the lenses that we see through.

When someone's story, as an expression of their truth,
collides with someone else's privilege (and it pains me to say this),
all too often that truth gets minimized, dismissed or altogether denied.

I believe that the fabric of the human family is torn
every time we deny another person's truth --
especially when that truth entails being not seen, not heard, not included, not honored.

Here's where popular culture comes in:
regularly and relentlessly, we who have privilege that takes the form of being white --
or passing for it, as described in our video --
are invited to take part in national conversations about race.
By and large, we fail miserably to be ally or advocate
for those who don't have the same power and voice.

Over the past four months,
the following incidents sent ripples of agitated discourse through the U.S. media
(in some cases, these conversations are still unfolding):

- * In June, celebrity chef Paula Deen, who is white, admitted to referring to African-American staff members with the N-word (repeatedly), and to once asking them to dress up as slaves at a theme party she was planning.
- * In July, Florida resident George Zimmerman, who is both white and Hispanic, was found not guilty in the 2012 shooting death of Trayvon Martin, an African-American teenager.
- * In August, entertainer Miley Cyrus, who is white, performed at the Video Music Awards with African-American women dancers, some of whom she smacked on the bottom, and "twerked," a form of dance that arose in the African-American community.
- * In September, upon visiting Hong Kong, evangelical pastor Rick Warren, who is white, posted on Facebook a smiling figure of the Chinese Red Guard, a symbol of Mao Zedong's Great Leap Forward, during which an estimated 15 million people died.
- * This fall, members of the Oneida Indian Nation are leading a formal, national campaign to change the name of the Washington Redskins football team.

(If you haven't heard of any of these incidents, you might be feeling relieved.
I would suggest, however, that there's room for you to be more engaged with our
culture, and how your fellow Americans are dealing with racism.)

This pattern alone disturbs me to the point of anger.
What I can't be silent about is the conversation that unfolded
around each of these incidents.

In *every single instance*, people of color voiced their pain, claiming the action or behavior is offensive, dehumanizing, and racist.

And in *every instance*, the white perpetrator or community addressed that pain by saying, “It was a joke,” or “You’re too sensitive,” or “You’re wrong -- that’s not racist,” or even that passive-aggressive non-apology: “I’m sorry you feel that way.”

This, friends, is how privilege is maintained. Our system reinforces privilege (once on, our glasses stay on via cultural inertia). *Racism is reflected in our national conversations because it’s embedded in our collective structures.*¹

Let me pause here, and invite you to reflect on a time when a very real and painful part of your truth was denied. Has there ever been a time when you dared to speak a piece of your truth -- and you were not only *not* heard, but judged, or smacked down, or told that you didn’t actually feel the way you feel?

We all have a place that hurts that badly.

And as your minister, let me go on the record as saying that everyone here, just like everyone in this great big complicated and beautiful patchwork world, deserves to feel seen, and heard, and allowed to stand in their truth. *That’s* the place where listening creates relationship, allowing two different perspectives to take up the same space, sliding off one pair of lenses to see the world in a new way.

Rarely can anger be righteous and generative, but in this case it has been so for me -- which is good, because it gives me energy.

“As long as the isms are functioning,” says blogger Mia McKenzie,²

and they are functioning at full capacity every hour of every day – then...allyship must function just as perpetually, just as fully, just as tirelessly....

“Ally”... [is] not an identity. It’s a practice. It’s an active thing that must be done over and over again, in the largest and smallest ways, *every day*.

¹ Not a unique thought, but here assisted by Andrea Smith, *The Problem with Privilege*

² <http://www.blackgirldangerous.org/2013/09/30/no-more-allies/>

Sounds like a lot of work, huh? Sounds exhausting. Well, yeah, it ought to. Because the people who experience racism, misogyny, ableism, queerphobia, transphobia, classism, etc. *are* exhausted.

Experience tells us that something will happen “out there.”
It will happen soon: next week? The week after that?
and it will prompt conversation about racism, homophobia, or another “ism.

When it happens, practice your commitment to Unitarian Universalism
and to creating connection and compassion by taking these small steps:

Acknowledge that your privilege grants you permission to not care
-- and care anyway, that someone is being hurt.

Take off the lenses you wear, and try on someone else’s.
Trust that their story of feeling disregarded is true.

Show up for someone who’s marginalized
by using your privilege to free both of you.

In our call to worship, we spoke the words of Rev. Theresa Gustilo Gallardo
over and over: “When I change, the world changes.”

When I acknowledge that I --
a straight, white, able-bodied, middle-class, graduate-degree-wielding woman --
walks through the world differently than someone who’s Black, or gay,
or Muslim, or disabled, or on Food Assistance,
I am changed, and the world starts to change.

When I use my own privilege to give voice or power to others,
I change, and the world changes.

When I use my power in the service of freedom, the world changes.

Go into this beautiful, complicated, colorful world --
but go changed, and changing, so that together we make each other strong.