Uncovering the Crisis of Being White in America
By Julie Kain

To begin by always thinking of love as an action rather than a feeling is one way in which anyone using the word in this manner automatically assumes accountability and responsibility. - bell hooks

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the United States of America is a nation deeply divided by racial disparity. A century and a half after the end of slavery, and a half-century after the passage of the Civil Rights Act, an ideology of inherent white superiority, central to the founding of our nation, continues to operate in American society. Even after the election of a black president, the top positions of institutional power remain disproportionately white in relation to the full American demographic population. In his book Becoming an Anti-Racist Church (2011), Lutheran pastor Joseph Barndt, past director of the anti-racism Crossroads Ministry based in Chicago wrote –

Remember the sentence I have used repeatedly in this book to describe institutionalized racism: every system and every institution in the United States society – including the church – was created originally and structured legally and intentionally to serve white society exclusively.

If someone we see is being hurt or brutalized, we know it is wrong not to offer some kind of help. Most of us do offer help in situations like these. But it is much more difficult for us as individuals to respond to an oppressive system. Those of us who take seriously the ethical and religious principles we claim to live by are then challenged to find ways to resist a system of oppression that causes injury and deprives others of their rights.

People of faith affirm their commitment to justice, including racial justice. In a society founded in white superiority that structurally privileges white people, most often racial injustices are rationalized so that racial disparities can be explained by innate and socialized differences between racial groups. With four hundred years of negative socialization to accept an American racial hierarchy, how can white people of faith be persuaded to confront a painful reality and history in the name of justice? How can we see beyond the material benefits and short-term comforts that help us to ignore painful truths? How can we summon our best selves as white people of faith to challenge a pathological ideology of white superiority and take action to dismantle an oppressive system?

Many people think of racism as individual acts of prejudice and discrimination between members of differing ethnic groups. Systemic racism points to an interlocking web of social institutions, embedded with unquestioned norms, habits and symbols that often elude individual awareness. American social institutions such as religion, government, education, and economy have been embedded with a history and ideology of white European superiority. My social location as a white Unitarian Universalist parish minister since 2001 calls me to the ongoing task of deconstructing racism in its myriad and mutating forms within myself, within our religious movements and in American society.

Unitarian Universalists have a long history of social activism for racial justice throughout the Abolition and Civil Rights movements. For many years we have worked to establish lines of accountability with marginalized people of color within and beyond our religious communities. For a number of years, we have looked to people of color to provide the answers and leadership for dismantling systemic racism. A more recent trend in anti-racism work within Unitarian Universalism and in other predominantly white communities of faith challenges white people of faith to probe white racial identity of internalized superiority on their own. We are being asked to engage in a personal process of facing the historical and contemporary legacy of white supremacy in terms of social power, and systemic racism as multiple injustices faced by American people of color.
We must face the sad fact that at eleven o’clock on Sunday morning when we stand to sing ‘In Christ there is no East or West,’ we stand in the most segregated hour of America.
- Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Just days before his assassination, King preached these words in a sermon on March 31, 1968 at the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C. Why has so little changed over the past fifty years? Granted that while some significant changes have taken place in American society, mainline Protestant and Roman Catholic churches are still predominantly white. When James H. Cone wrote Black Theology and Black Power in 1969, he challenged white Christianity to address America’s legacy of systemic racism which had gone largely unrecognized, even by the most influential of Christian theologians. Cone reflects in his most recent book The Cross and the Lynching Tree (2011), that when he did his earliest writing he had Reinhold Niebuhr in mind. Although Niebuhr acknowledged “we have failed catastrophically only on one point – our relations to the Negro race,” Niebuhr failed to comment on the indigenous people of America and justified U.S. imperialism referring to America as chosen by God for its fateful history. Cone points to Niebuhr’s most profound theological failure as not having engaged America’s greatest moral problem of the race issue in any practical way. Niebuhr was America’s most influential theologian of the twentieth century whose influence carried over into the secular political world.

Tragically Niebuhr was similar to the majority of American whites who have remained mostly unaware of the social conditioning of white superiority, the social location of increased power and its resulting social privileges. There are incentives to maintain the status quo and to remain unaware. Most whites collude with white dominance because of the profits gained as individuals and members of privileged groups. The liberal ideology of dominant knowledge encourages us to see differences in groups as inherent rather than as the result of unjust power relations between groups. In her book The Reconciliation of Classes and Races: How Religion Contributes to Politics and Law (2008), Christian ethicist Sharon Tan makes explicit connections among religious concepts, ethics and political realities. She shows how religious traditions help to inform our political processes, including our notions of justice and reconciliation. Therefore our social analysis needs to apply prophetic critique and religious inquiry to the public square. The Jewish and Protestant traditions of prophetic critique are based on the biblical prophets who called society and its leaders to account for injustices, especially on behalf of its poorest and marginalized members.

Tan asserts that the liberal political theory which guides the United States fails to recognize the influence of culture, and in particular ideals of group identity in political life, and in fact has actually contributed to racial tensions in America with its ideal standard of individual rights as a guarantee of political equality. This critique aptly applies to liberal religion in general, and to Unitarian Universalism in particular. In Dismantling Privilege: An Ethics of Accountability (2000), the basic premise of Christian ethicist Mary Elizabeth Hobgood is that privileged elites are morally damaged and spiritually impoverished. Furthermore, white elites are subject to increasing physical risk in a global society that is structured to give unfair advantage to a few, at the expense of the rest whose needs are dismissed. These structural advantages are often obtained at the expense of environmental sustainability, and increased competition for basic resources. Tim Wise, a prominent public intellectual and antiracist educator, agrees. Wise asserts in his book Dear White America, Letter to a New Minority (2012), that whites need to address their “issues” regarding race in America, or institutional inequities will continue to build and escalate.

Systemic racism in America has been identified as a social evil creating injustices that demand a thoughtful and compassionate response from people of all faiths. Within the larger framework of liberal Christianity, Unitarian Universalists are challenged to participate in the prophetic critique of our own tradition and of American society at large. The South African experiment for racial reconciliation is one that highlights the role of religion and faith communities working together to make a positive impact in a national setting. In No Future Without Forgiveness (1999), by Episcopal Archbishop Desmond Tutu from South Africa, we can see how religious concepts were directly applied to a national reconciliatory process and how faith communities participated. The goal of personal and collective healing falls in the domain of religious life, in contrast with the parameters of legal justice. People of faith are trying a number of approaches and models for increasing our capacity and abilities to engage in social action and public witness for racial justice.
I do not pretend to understand the moral universe;  
the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but a little ways... - Theodore Parker, 1853

The moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice.  
- Martin Luther King, Jr., 1967

But here is the thing: it does not bend on its own.  
It bends because each of us in our own ways put our hand on that arc 
and we bend it in the direction of justice. - Senator Barack Obama,  
40th Anniversary of Martin Luther King, Jr. Assassination, April 4, 2008

The Flip Side

In a provocative book Honest Patriots: Loving a Country Enough to Remember Its Misdeeds (2005), Donald Shriver writes as a Christian social ethicist probing the central question - How does a human society deal with its negative past for the sake of a more positive future? Shriver challenges us to look at our American history with a renewed moral sensitivity and take into account Native Indian removal and genocide, enslavement of Africans and subsequent discrimination of Native and African Americans. He identifies the educational task of developing moral empathy, critical thinking and decision-making as skills that are being intentionally cultivated in young people who are studying the history of America’s difficult past in order to equip them to become thoughtful citizens who are committed to civic participation as adults. These same skills can be objectives in adult religious education for racial justice.

Systemic racism creates psychological impacts on both people of color and whites. Just as internalized oppression is a psychological impact on people of color as a result of systematic discrimination and prejudice, white privilege is based in an ideology of white superiority and supremacy that fosters internalized entitlement. Privilege is as much a psychological matter as a material one. Privilege and a deep sense of entitlement are the flip side of discrimination. How do we address these impacts on white people of faith with understanding and compassion, but also to present a psychological challenge as notions of identity are examined? Cognitive dissonance among whites is likely to be experiences as our awareness about white privilege and supremacy is expanded. Cognitive dissonance is a term developed by the Afro-French psychiatrist and philosopher Frantz Fanon, whose writing is influential in the fields of post-colonial studies and critical theory.

Sometimes people hold a core belief that is very strong. When they are presented with evidence that works against that belief, the new evidence cannot be accepted. It would create a feeling that is extremely uncomfortable, called cognitive dissonance. And because it is so important to protect the core belief, they will rationalize, ignore and even deny anything that doesn't fit in with the core belief.

Socialization of white people in white supremacy includes a notion of white moral superiority or white “virtue.” This is an assumption that we are “good” people and so information that challenges that assumption is difficult to hear, let alone acknowledge. The psychological impacts of privilege and entitlement represent barriers to racial justice that can only be removed with conscious and committed intent.

Within the larger framework of liberal Christianity, Unitarian Universalists are challenged to participate in the prophetic critique of our own tradition and of American society at large. This commitment to prophetic critique then also can be applied to addressing systemic racism and an ideology of white supremacy. We are inspired in scripture by the religious model of the Hebrew prophets and of Jesus of Nazareth. This ongoing process of critique and prophetic action is grounded in our tradition’s assertion that revelation is not sealed. We are constantly learning and expanding our human understanding of justice in the world. We draw from the Biblical passage of Micah 6:8 – “He has told you, O mortal, what is good: And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”
Systemic racism in America demands a thoughtful and compassionate response from people of all faiths. Unitarian Universalism as a tradition that is founded in the theological concept of covenant has an imperative to address the broken covenants in our midst, including the continued presence of racism within our predominantly white denomination and in the larger context of the United States as a global power. Unitarian theologian and ethicist, James Luther Adams wrote, “How shall we not feel …’the heartbeat in the heart of things’? A hand is laid upon us.” The phrase that Martin Luther King, Jr. often used to describe this process is “The moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” King was drawing from a Unitarian minister, Theodore Parker, who used the phrase with this image as part of his abolitionist activities in 1857. King’s doctoral dissertation compared the work of Henry Nelson Wieman, Unitarian process theologian, and Paul Tillich, one of the most influential theologians of the twentieth century. Wieman’s concept of “creative interchange” within process theology introduces an inherent metaphysical interdependence, which appears in King’s words, “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”

With the inherent metaphysical freedom and the relational power of love as recognized in process theology, there is always an opportunity for unexpected leaps and shifts in human thought and action. What the Civil Rights movement accomplished, many thought was impossible. While true racial justice and racial reconciliation is far from current reality, within a conceptual framework of process theology, it is still a real possibility. The relational power of love, the possibility of creative transformation, and the willingness of whites to work for justice will help us develop the moral maturity to achieve reconciliation through a mutual accountability to and with American people of color, regarding both a national history of white supremacy and our current relationships.

In The Cross and the Lynching Tree, father of Black Liberation theology, James Cone shows how these two images are intertwined in a history where white and black Americans are bound together by stark variations of a Christian faith and by terrible tragedy. Cone asserts it is a full time occupation of struggle for blacks to survive in a white supremacist society. He urges Americans to confront the question - have we truly left behind our capacity for hate, cruelty and silent indifference in a lynching past? In particular, a probing look at the current reality of our criminal justice system raises this question with its disproportionate prison population and the selective use of the death penalty. He says we are a nation in danger of forgetting its past. Until whites confront this history they cannot separate themselves from the culture that supported lynching. Opportunities to confront this history and the current capacity to continue it periodically emerge. Recently there have been a number of high profile cases with lack of judicial prosecution in the killings of unarmed black men by white civilians and police. These include the deaths of Oscar Grant in Oakland, 2009; Trayvon Martin in Florida, 2012; and three high profile deaths in 2014 - Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, Eric Garner in Staten Island, and of 12 year old Tamir Rice in a Cleveland park. Massive protests in the streets of major cities across the country followed the announcement of judicial decisions in these cases with expressions of moral outrage. Cone asserts that America’s greatest sin of white supremacy must be exposed and it has been a topic that has been conspicuously ignored by white theologians. He closes the book with these words “If America has the courage to confront the great sin and ongoing legacy of white supremacy with repentance and reparation, there is hope ‘beyond tragedy.’”

Crisis

There is a growing awareness among a minority of whites of white responsibility and the massive paradigm shift required to negotiate the breakdown of a misguided, prevailing worldview of white supremacy, a worldview which provides the foundation for practices of systemic racism. At some point, white guilt and the characteristic white detached analysis will give way to a heartfelt acceptance of responsibility and commitment to build new identities and relationships of mutuality, rather than the present arrangement of oppressive relationships maintained in systemic inequity.

White supremacy is a white problem responsible for untold harm to others and is deeply damaging to whites, impairing us emotionally and morally. Whiteness diminishes the relational capacities of white people who become numb to the suffering of others and in denial of their own relational suffering. Many
whites are morally evasive when it comes to systemic racism. While not responsible for creating the current dominant systems of oppression, whites are responsible for contributing, often unconsciously, to the reproduction of oppression through mechanisms of unshared power, the root of injustice.

Whites, individually and collectively, are responsible for both the benefits and the liabilities generated by the unjust system, especially in terms of concrete material rewards based on whiteness. By taking personal responsibility for thinking critically and actively challenging unjust power relations, whites can maximize our effectiveness as moral agents. Whites can begin repairing our moral integrity and our emotional capacity.

Where is the Hope?

*For me, forgiveness and compassion are always linked: how do we hold people accountable for wrongdoing and yet at the same time remain in touch with their humanity enough to believe in their capacity to be transformed?* - bell hooks

While individual whites are not responsible for creating the oppressive structures of racism, we are personally responsible for the ways in which we are complicit and therefore aiding the reproduction of unjust power arrangements. The longer we avoid our issues of social inequities, the more they will grow. We have a responsibility as a nation to change opportunity structures so that full equity is possible.

In *Dear White America*, Wise concludes, “Equity is the last and only hope for this experiment we call the United States.” He affirms that our redemption as a nation can only be met by building a more just society and that we cannot afford to rest on the progresses we have made thus far. He encourages us to lift up the history of white resistance to supremacy and recognize allies with people of color throughout the generations of Americans past and present.