

Privilege and Responsibility

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Unitarian Universalist Meeting House
February 21, 2016

It has happened again. A few days ago, police in Cincinnati shot and killed a Black man who had just been in a traffic accident. The police claimed he was brandishing a BB gun but they thought it was real. The whole scene was caught on not one but two videos. Only three hours earlier, police in the same city were called to a domestic disturbance and confronted a White man who was brandishing a gun which was in fact fake but appeared to be real. Although this man resisted arrest, police never considered using firepower and he was taken into custody without injury to anyone.

This is literally a matter of life and death. Many people will explain this difference in result, as an example of White privilege. A basic tenet of anti-racism work is that Whites are blind to the privilege we have and need to be led to be aware of it. What I want to explore this morning is whether White privilege is a useful concept, and suggest that a better question is White responsibility for dismantling racism.

What is privilege? I don't watch much TV, but I am totally hooked on Downton Abbey. Why is this? Partly it is the skill of the writer and the actors in humanizing all the participants in a profoundly unequal way of life based on hereditary titles and money, as that way of life becomes increasingly irrelevant in the democratic tides of the early Twentieth Century. The line between the members of the great family in the great house and all of the servants who wait on them hand and foot is not ironclad, for one character came into the household downstairs but made it into the family by falling in love with one of the daughters. Yet the stark economic fact is that the Crawleys, for all their good intentions and fussing, do not work for a living but have a staff of servants to feed them, to run the house, to help them get out of bed in the morning and put them to bed at night. That might be taken as a paradigm of privilege: having a status that is available to some people but not to others.

And that fits roughly with the American system of race. In the South, slave owning families tried to imitate the English social structure depicted in Downton Abbey, and we can see parallels between the erosion of privilege in Downton Abbey in the Twentieth Century and the partial disintegration of Southern White privilege after the Civil War depicted in "Gone With the Wind."

The Southern milieu in which I grew up had remnants of this system of privilege. At last week's conversation on race, we were asked to recall some of our earliest encounters with race, and a particular moment of shame and embarrassment popped up in my mind. My family lived in the white, postwar suburbs of Columbia, SC, and the only Black people we would normally encounter were the maids and gardeners who worked in those suburbs but lived closer downtown. We White kids would ride the public bus downtown to meet

our father at his law office, and he would take us to the barber shop for a haircut or we would go to see a movie. It seemed the most normal thing in the world that we White boys would ride at the front of the bus and the Black women who were coming off their shifts in domestic work would ride at the back.

On this particular day, I must have been about 10 or 12 and I must have had some White friends with me. We must have been joking about something having to do with the local radio stations, because what I remember saying, in a mock Black accent, was “Oh, I just love listening to WOIC.”

WOIC was the Black radio station. Right after I said this, I realized that I had said it in a loud enough voice that everyone in the bus would have heard it. I was making fun of Black people when there were Black people within earshot.

I told that story last week, and tell it here, not to simply relieve my shame but for what it says about the deeper relations which that shame marks. The culture in which I grew up had channels of communication and you didn't cross them. There was one way to talk when you were among Whites, and another way to talk when you were in mixed-race company.

I remember the family dinners in the 1950s. Sometimes, if there had been a civil rights incident in the news, it would surface during family dinners and elicit clucks of disapproval from my uncles and aunts. But at those dinners, there was often an African American maid in the kitchen, and when she would appear to serve food or take plates, the conversation would be suspended until she went back into the kitchen. Such times create and reinforce a sense of White identity and solidarity.

Is this privilege? In our conversation on race, one of our handouts last week was a classic essay on white privilege called “Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” by Peggy McIntosh of Wellesley, written in 1988. The gist of her argument is that Blacks suffer great disadvantages in multiple ways in contemporary society because of their skin color, and this means that Whites have a corresponding advantage, and that advantage amounts to a privilege which is invisible to most Whites most of the time. I read from a list of specific white privileges a few minutes ago.

Now it is obvious that this list is derived from Black disadvantages. Thandeka, our UU Black theologian, criticizes the notion of White Privilege on the grounds that it is a negative way of talking about Black disadvantage, and it is more straightforward to talk about how racism impacts Blacks negatively than about how it benefits Whites.

I am sympathetic to Thandeka's criticism. She is not denying that racism exists, she is not denying that White is an identity created by racism, she is just saying that privilege is not a useful category. Even Peggy McIntosh after listing the privileges I just read from, goes on to say “... the word ‘privilege’ now seems to me misleading. We usually think of privilege as being a favored state, whether earned or conferred by birth or luck. Yet some of the conditions I have described here work systematically to over empower certain groups. Such privilege simply confers dominance because of one's race or sex.”

Now I have always had an ambivalent relationship to privilege, as I suspect many of us do in this room. On the one hand, I profess to be a democrat and believe in the complete equality of all people, not just before the law but in society generally. And early on in childhood I became firmly convinced that Black people get a raw deal, that the social dominance of Whites was unjust. I have held that conviction for more than half a century.

But then there's my inner snob: I find myself drawn to all kinds of exclusive social groups.

I have degrees from two Ivy League universities, both of which I eagerly sought and chose. In both instances it might have been more practical and less expensive for me to pursue those degrees at other institutions but, among all the factors weighing in those decisions, the prestige of the places certainly counted in my decision. My degrees hang on my office wall, and though they are written in Latin, I think there is some language in them that admits me to all the "rights and privileges" of the degree. I have never found out what those privileges are – maybe getting a ticket to football games on alumni weekend.

But I did get a good education at these schools and a good education is a privilege which many in this society can't afford. Sometimes I think that critical thinking itself is a privilege.

I was attracted to Unitarian Universalism as the "thinking person's" religion, which had commanded the allegiance of the Boston Brahmins in the Nineteenth Century. Unlike the Universalists, the Unitarians never founded a college or university of their own because there was a strong though unofficial identification with Harvard.

We all partake in this kind of dual thinking. We assume that any social group we join is excellent because it has us as members, but then once we're on the inside, we must maintain that excellence by being careful about who else we would admit to the privilege of membership. Groucho Marx, who was Jewish, famously said at a time when many clubs were closed to Jews, that he wouldn't join any club which would admit him as a member. This is why churches like our stay small.

I like to list the blessings of which my life is full: that I live in a beautiful place, I am able to do the work I love and get adequate pay for it, I have family who love me and with whom I get along, I enjoy the support of a great congregation and I have generally good health. I could list my blessings at greater length, but you get the idea. Are these blessings also privileges? There are many people who do not have just these blessings, but I don't think that fact makes the blessings I enjoy into privileges. And blessings are in the eye of the beholder. If I wanted to look at the glass as half-empty, I could complain about how far Cape Cod is from the city, where life is really happening, or how I'm not making as much money as I did as a lawyer, I can find the underside of these blessing quite readily. I choose to look at the blessings.

But we're talking about White privilege, and so we have to ask, is my own skin color involved in these blessings? There are many people who do not enjoy the particular blessings that I have listed. There are millions of reasons why, for

the particular path I took had lots of false starts, runs of good luck as well as some bad.

But I suspect that is the wrong approach. The question is not whether anyone's skin tones bar them from the particular path my life has taken, but rather bar them from general prosperity, safety and comfort and justice – from being able to walk the streets without fear of being shot by the public servants who are supposed to keep you safe. If I widen the scope of my vision, the blessings I count all assume a certain level of acceptance in society for me when that acceptance is in question for my brothers and sisters of color.

Let me try to get at this another way. The word privilege for a lawyer often has a close tie to confidentiality and communications. Privileged communications are those between a lawyer and client, between a doctor and a patient, between a priest and a confessing layperson, between a President and his counselors. If the communication is privileged, courts and Congress cannot compel it to be disclosed.

As I think about the racial code of silence that I spoke about just now, I think there is a sense in which the communication sense of the word privilege is applicable in racism analysis. If there are words or topics which whites only speak to other whites, this might be considered a white privilege.

Is this white-only speech racist, then? Not necessarily. Anti-racism work has evolved techniques, which are being practiced in the conversations here, of having whites speak to whites about these sensitive subjects. This is because you only can advance in your understanding of the forces within you if you are willing to confront them honestly, and in the presence of Blacks Whites tend to say what we think we're supposed to say rather than what we really feel.

I have just seen the plans for the UUA General Assembly this summer in Columbus, and they are planning a large-scale conversation on race, but it is going to take place in three parts: among Blacks, among other people of color and among whites. The organizers of the event feel that it is necessary that the Black participants, in particular, have confidence that there is a safe space for their conversation.

I see the sense in this, although I think ultimately I would like to see us talking to each other across the racial divide rather than along it.

But let us get back to privilege in the common sense of a status which excludes certain people. I still think Thandeka's objections have not been answered, that it makes more sense to talk about Blacks being disadvantaged by American racism than that whites are advantaged by it. It is clear to me that while race itself does not exist in nature but exists only in our minds and in our culture, it is firmly entrenched there and racism continues to plague us after the institution of legally-sanctioned slavery for which it was fashioned has been dismantled.

Two weeks ago I discussed racism as America's original sin and I quoted a famous line in the Arthur Miller play, "Incident at Vichy," apropos of the holocaust: "it's not your guilt I'm interested in, it's your responsibility." It doesn't help dismantle racism for Whites to collapse in guilt. What is needed is a clear view of our responsibility for maintaining this structure of oppression.

A lawyer looks at that word responsibility and breaks it down into response and ability – the ability to respond. Not respond in the sense of answering a question, but respond in the sense of righting a wrong. When your car is smashed by the Coca Cola truck driven by John Smith, your lawyer will look for a responsible party to sue, and while John Smith may be covered by insurance, the lawyer will also add the Coca Cola company to the suit for extra assurance that whatever amount of damages are awarded will be paid.

A lawyer is trained to think of responsibility in individual terms, because that is the only way the courts can deal with it. A large part of the day-to-day business of the law courts on the civil side is sorting out who is responsible for particular injuries. As to each party sued, it must be proven that that party legally caused the injury in order for there to be an judgment for damages, that is money to be paid. If you sue the Coca Cola company, they may try to get out of it by claiming that John Smith was actually taking their truck on a personal errand at the time he smashed your car.

This kind of legal responsibility is distinct from moral responsibility. If you are walking along a pier and someone is in the water drowning and there is a life ring right beside you on the dock which you could throw to the drowning person, you have a moral obligation to throw it, but not a legal one. You could not be successfully sued for ignoring the drowning person unless you had caused them to be in the water in the first place.

So concepts of individual responsibility are where I start from, but they don't get us very far if we're trying to determine what responsibility we have as Whites to dismantle the many-faceted structure that is racism in the United States. The racism that makes life difficult for our brothers and sisters of color may be systemic; that may be no less real and no less damaging than overt racial hatred, but it is harder to assign individual responsibility.

One thing Whites do have are voices. We have the power of using words. One of the great powers of using words is to express what is just and what is unjust, what matters and what doesn't matter.

Let's get back to what happened in Cincinnati. I have said before that each police/citizen encounter has a complex matrix of facts and the fact that one citizen here was White and the other Black might be of lesser importance than other factors in comparing the two, but on just the facts I have stated, this White voice is comfortable calling strongly for an investigation.

It is not our responsibility out here on Cape Cod to investigate, to judge, to determine whether race or some other factor explains this result in Cincinnati. It *is* our responsibility to call the justice system to inquire and inquire fairly.

In a similar vein, it is not our responsibility what particular events are or are not racist. But I submit that it is our responsibility to declare our values. And one of the best declarations of our values in my opinion is the statement "Black Lives Matter."

It is appropriate to have a majority-White congregation make this statement publicly to ally ourselves with our brothers and sisters of color. And that is why I have proposed a banner proclaiming this. For all that has been done

by Black Lives Matter activists in different cities with which we may disagree, it still seems right for this little UU congregation in a town that is 98% White by the census figures to join with a growing number of UU congregations around the country, not to pronounce judgment, but to declare the quiet conviction which needs reinforcement from White voices, that as much as this false notion of race divides us arbitrarily on the basis of how much melanin we have in our skin, we are in the most profound reality all one people, connected in a living skein, that unjustified killings of Blacks hurt us all and must stop, and we must find ways to reach out to each other.

These words are the life ring we can throw to the drowning person. They are within our power. WE may not have the legal responsibility to throw them, but I think our moral responsibility is clear.

Pope Francis used his powerful voice this week to declare that a proposal from a Presidential candidate to build a wall on the Mexican border was not Christian. We can use our voice as well in witness to our values. Amen.

Opening words “Caged Bird” by Maya Angelou

A free bird leaps
on the back of the wind
and floats downstream
till the current ends
and dips his wing
in the orange sun rays
and dares to claim the sky.
But a bird that stalks
down his narrow cage
can seldom see through
his bars of rage
his wings are clipped and
his feet are tied
so he opens his throat to sing.
The caged bird sings
with a fearful trill
of things unknown
but longed for still
and his tune is heard
on the distant hill
for the caged bird
sings of freedom.
The free bird thinks of another breeze
and the trade winds soft through the sighing trees
and the fat worms waiting on a dawn bright lawn

and he names the sky his own
But a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams
his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream
his wings are clipped and his feet are tied
so he opens his throat to sing.
The caged bird sings
with a fearful trill
of things unknown
but longed for still
and his tune is heard
on the distant hill
for the caged bird
sings of freedom.

Reading from “Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” by Peggy McIntosh – elements of White privilege

1. I can if I wish arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time.
2. I can avoid spending time with people whom I was trained to mistrust and who have learned to mistrust my kind or me.
3. If I should need to move, I can be pretty sure of renting or purchasing housing in an area which I can afford and in which I would want to live.
4. I can be pretty sure that my neighbors in such a location will be neutral or pleasant to me.
5. I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty well assured that I will not be followed or harassed.
6. I can turn on the television or open to the front page of the paper and see people of my race widely represented.
7. When I am told about our national heritage or about “civilization,” I am shown that people of my color made it what it is.
8. I can be sure that my children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence of their race.
9. If I want to, I can be pretty sure of finding a publisher for this piece on white privilege.

10. I can be pretty sure of having my voice heard in a group in which I am the only member of my race.
11. I can be casual about whether or not to listen to another person's voice in a group in which s/he is the only member of his/her race.
12. I can go into a music shop and count on finding the music of my race represented, into a supermarket and find the staple foods which fit with my cultural traditions, into a hairdresser's shop and find someone who can cut my hair.
13. Whether I use checks, credit cards or cash, I can count on my skin color not to work against the appearance of financial reliability.
14. I can arrange to protect my children most of the time from people who might not like them.
15. I do not have to educate my children to be aware of systemic racism for their own daily physical protection.
16. I can be pretty sure that my children's teachers and employers will tolerate them if they fit school and workplace norms; my chief worries about them do not concern others' attitudes toward their race.
17. I can talk with my mouth full and not have people put this down to my color.
18. I can swear, or dress in second hand clothes, or not answer letters, without having people attribute these choices to the bad morals, the poverty or the illiteracy of my race.
19. I can speak in public to a powerful male group without putting my race on trial.
20. I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race.
21. I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group.