

## Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Redwood City

Sermon by Rev. Kurt A. Kuhwald

Sunday, August 16, 2009

### By our Sweat and Tears -- Centering Thought

The tendency to see the world in sets of opposites, either/or categories, is itself a core pattern of thinking developed in elite settings in Western Europe and the United States.

—Paul Kivel

Almost immediately upon Barack Hussein Obama's giving his victory speech on the night of his election triumph last fall, a peculiar commentary about race began to seep out of the media like some hidden toxin. The message? That we had now entered a "Post-Racial" society. If we needed any clear disproof of such vacuous ideas right here in the Bay Area by a current example of racist behavior, if we needed some present time concrete example of the targeting of some people because they fit into a particular "race" category, we would need look no further than the murder of the twenty-two year old, African American man, Oscar Grant, at the Fruitvale BART station in Oakland on New Year's day of this year, and the continued raids on immigrant workers around the Bay Area. Oscar Grant's inexcusable death, as well as the indefensible slowness to respond by BART and Oakland officials—and the continued disregard for the destructiveness that is wrought on families and communities by the Immigration police, cunningly given the acronym ICE, are examples enough that racism is alive and well here in our blessed Bay Area communities. It, however, of course, does not stop there. The statistics about racial inequality in housing, education, imprisonment, in the negative effects of the current national and global financial crises, the continued damage to health of persons of color because of destructive environmental practices, the statistics are overwhelmingly clear that if you are a person of color in this country, in this state, this county ... far more often than others you will receive less than you need, or have a harder time securing it; you will receive disproportionately negative attention from the police, and less than an equal share from the political process; more than likely you will receive less adequate health care,

and more attention for your presumed likelihood to steal or be violent, and [ Put in Henry Gates Jr. Example. ] ... well, you know the litany. I have footnoted the sources.<sup>1</sup>

We here, and in Unitarian Universalist congregations around the Bay Area, are acutely aware of the disparities between the races, and, in the main, we are deeply disturbed by them.

That's a good thing. It's a good thing to respond in our hearts to the suffering of others. It's a good thing to identify with any people who are being targeted, left out, deprived of their rights, refused access to what is rightfully theirs, or otherwise kept in an unequal status. It's a good thing to stand in solidarity in our hearts with any of our sisters and brothers at any time there is unfairness toward them. It's a good thing because we need to confirm the exquisite sensitivity we humans are capable of in order to take our concerns one step further ... into the domain of practical solutions: by affirming an accountability to people of color organizations, we can join into the many efforts throughout the Bay Area for racial equity and the severe reduction of racist acts and practices. I can also supply information about those efforts after the Service as well.<sup>2</sup>

But I speak to you about all of this today, as we approach the first full church year a black president will serve the U.S., because there is a deep dis-ease in my heart, a dis-ease that is always stirred when I accept the opportunity to speak, or when I claim the right to speak, in public about the issues of racism ... and especially about the privilege that people like me, Euro-American, experience in this complicated nation of ours.

I have to say that when I started out writing this sermon, I was not entirely sure what I wanted to share ... beyond the deep well of emotions, all manner of emotions—from anger, to fear, to guilt, to sadness and grief, to extreme frustration—that I experience about the privileges that are given to me in this society simply because I am white—and

the inextricably related reality of the continued oppression of people whose skin color and cultural heritage are different than mine.

If we have learned anything in the last five plus decades of anti-racist work, it is that you can't have one without the other. You can't have the oppression of people of color without the elevation, and the granting of unearned privilege to their Euro-American oppressors. Seeing into that fact, into the reality of white privilege is what I want to expose today, expose to the good light of this sacred time, and in the company of you good people.

It's not easy to talk about all of this in just any kind of crowd because it stirs those same emotions in other white people—along with, often times, suspicion in persons of color who have every right to question and doubt my intentions and the level of my true understanding and empathy.

I could give you a list of my work over the years, that for most people would establish my "street cred," but I'm not interested, today, in standing on what is past. Today I simply want to give voice to what it feels like to live in this white life of mine, a life in which I take seriously my sensibility that we truly are one human family, that unity as well as the variety and differences between us are sacred expressions of the creativity of the Earth and its Source the vast Universe, of whose deep processes we are but one part, albeit an amazing one. I want to do that "voice giving" in honor of President Obama (not for his politics, but for his personal courage and honest ambition), and in honor of all those who have devoted so much of their lives to fighting Racism, no matter what their color—whose courageous efforts set the ground work for his Inaugural last January.

In order to explore my life experience as a white man, particularly focusing on how being white has advantaged me in this society, I want particularly to look at the dynamics and costs of what have been labeled the second and third powers of racism.

The Anti-racism training that I received from the UU Association, inspired and supported by the anti-racist training organization Crossroad Ministries, taught me that there are three kinds of power that make up the insidious, oppressive and increasingly subtle forms of racism that are in effect in the United States today. Breaking racism down into parts is of course simply a way to cognitively get enough of a grasp on its malevolent slipperiness so that we can understand and share person-to-person—share person-to-person some of what we experience when we are in its inhumane orbit. Breaking racism down into parts, however, like any reductionistic thinking we do, will never give us the full picture, will always do a certain violence to the full reality of how racism feels and operates when we are up against it. And the raw fact, the raw and painful fact is that we are up against it all of the time in this country . . . even though those of us who are white may not be, or choose not to be, aware of it.

Privileging some people over others is and has been, sadly, a part of the human experience for as long as we have had written records. Privileging some, and its corresponding oppression of others, takes all manner of forms, from gender to age to abilities, to affectional/sexual orientation to class, to, of course, race in all manner of cultures. It is particularly virulent, however, in large-scale civilizations, such as the industrial growth society we now live in, where vast power over others is held by a few, power that is maintained by military and economic forces far out of scale with human relationships and the delicate, fragile fabric of human culture.

The deeper reaches of how it affects the heart, seen in the raw and anguished grief of Oscar Grant's partner as she struggles to face the searing hole of his loss—seen too in the grief when a hardworking immigrant parent is separated from their children, treated like a criminal and then deported: unspeakable that grief; unspeakable the loss the children will experience by their parents' absence from their lives—seen as well in the vast tentacles of institutional racism that have woven themselves throughout our public services,

including, of course, BART and how such ugly weaving affects my sense of safety, my unwitting, arrogant understanding that I will be protected because the system's leadership looks like me and/or holds my rights as primary ... all of those heart-rending losses, all that intricate systemic layering of oppression and privilege can be missed at the heart level, the deeper gut level experience, when we break racism down into parts. My hope is that if I understand that, and keep that clear and frontal in my awareness as I work with teasing out the parts of this so very complex human system of control, oppression and privileging—if I keep conscious of that, then examining the different parts (or dynamics) of racism can offer some help in grasping the whole "phenomena."

The first power of racism is the power that directly assaults, directly attempts to subjugate people of color, punishing them, excluding them, targeting them in so many destructive ways. That direct oppression is what the vast majority of white people identify as racism: The targeting of a group of persons, and the consequences or results of that targeting.

Inside the second and third powers of racism, which are equally as important as the targeting of the first, however, is where I live as a white male in America—particularly a white male who is a committed Anti-racist and who tries his best to counter the oppression of racism both personally, internally, and in society. The second power is what overtly and covertly privileges me above people of color in this society. Most of the time, I am unaware of the fact that this privileging is operating: people defer to me; businesses offer me cheaper prices, more gracious services; my requests for help are considered sooner and more seriously, etc., etc., etc. And all of this most of the time without my even noticing that had I been a person of color, in a majority of cases and times, it all would have been negatively variant, differently pointing against me. The second power creates the circumstances by which I am meant to feel at home in America as a white man. The second power sets things up so that I will have a sense of security and comfort in the background of my mind and emotional life ... for the system was built

with my image in mind. The second power of racism represents those actions in society that make sure people like me get ahead, get the jobs, the education, the protection by the police, and am prominently visible in the media and in the seats of power.

The second power also serves to perpetuate the belief that in fact some people are inherently worth more than other people. And because this difficult belief powerfully seeps into the very identity of us all, because it is promoted, taught, enforced in both subtle and overt ways in all of our major institutions (the law, the schools, the medical establishment)—because of all of that, folks in the dominant class become very uneasy when any program dares to promote full and authentic equity: it assaults their/our image of what is right, and this process exists largely below their/our conscious awareness.

And that is where the third power of racism comes in: the internalization of the images and messages of the culture/system that are engaged in oppressing persons of color and privileging me. The third power manifests when I believe I deserve what I get, without realizing the costs it took to make that so. Power three means, that as a white person, somewhere in me, I carry a sense of superiority ... a sense that is so subtle, it is usually undetectable without strenuous inner effort, or because of external events I cannot control that expose my distorted beliefs. This is what is called Neo Racism, folks. After all, I am not a Ku Klux Klan member. I do not consciously espouse racist beliefs. I try to avoid racist language. I join with sisters and brothers of color to advance their rights in this society and in the work place, in particular. I have friends of color who I love dearly. But I carry that sense of superiority, none-the-less: I carry it in the crazy patterns of thinking that sets it up so that I will not see the generosity the culture has shown me over and over so that not just my family, but most of the social institutions I have had to deal with, acted in my favor—because I am a white person.

I don't think this is going to change because Barrack Hussein Obama has entered the White House—nor for one of the first times in U.S. history we have, especially in

Michelle Obama, public figures of powerful importance, being unapologetically a black person, a person of color. There is so much good that has come, and will come, from their example, yet in some ways, in fact, I think it is going to make it all more difficult ... more difficult to expose the privilege I carry because the argument is that the playing field has just become equal. Linn Washington, associate professor of journalism in Temple University's School of Communications and Theater, and the author of the book *Black Judges on Justice: Perspectives from the Bench*, recently wrote: "It is going to take more than having a family of color in the White House to change the [stereotypic] depictions of African Americans and other ethnicities in the media. If we take a look at political coverage alone, at a time when diverse view points are needed, we still [severely] lack ethnic or individual diversity in the media."

I offer this example because the media, more than any other institution, works with the very stuff of images and the very process of insuring their internalization. And that has, in the end, been my purpose today. To offer you a different image of a white male, professional person with significant advantages in the world who has made a commitment to be very, very clear about all the dimensions of power in the wretched phenomena of racism that so scars our country and our world. Perhaps if, by your support, and the support of so many other Unitarian Universalists across this continent, I can enter this little cabin of truth telling and voice what is too often unspoken.

Then perhaps ... just perhaps ... we will have justified our gathering here in this sanctuary in such safety and comfort, even while so many beyond these walls are bereft and without the means to live out their preciousness and their human genius simply because their skin color does not match the culture's ideal.

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<sup>1</sup> (a) Harvard School of Public Health: February 25, 2008: "Recent trend of disparities." (b) "Black Men, White Women & the Rest of Us," Wade & McNiece, St. John's University. (c) Institute of Policy Studies: "Race and Extreme Inequality", Dedrick Muhammad, June 11, 2008. (d) The Sentencing Project Report, July 18, 2007.

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<sup>2</sup> (a) Catalyst Project [<http://www.collectiveliberation.org/>] (b) East Bay Alliance for a Sustainable Economy: [EBASE@mail.democracyinaction.org](mailto:EBASE@mail.democracyinaction.org). (c) People's Institute for Survival and Beyond, <http://www.pisab.org/>. (d) Applied Research Center, [www.arc.org](http://www.arc.org).