

Divergent Voices in Anti-Racism Work
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UU minister Krista Taves writes: “My stomach turned when I first heard the term “white supremacy” used to describe the culture of Unitarian Universalism and our institutions. But I've reconsidered that response.

I understand the pushback: we’ve been trained to see white supremacy as an overt expression of racism, replete with burning crosses, white hoods, Confederate flags, lynchings, and angry white people shouting racist epithets. This allows liberal whites to distance themselves from racism and believe that we aren't part of it.

But white supremacy is way bigger than the way we've been trained to understand it. White supremacy is a way of thinking that devalues the experiences, insights and lived reality of people of color. The consequences of this thinking have the real-life impact of denying people of color a real voice with real power. Rarely is this culture explicit or even conscious in liberal white communities; it’s implicit and unconscious.”

Until a few years ago, “White Supremacy” was not a common term in our conversations about racial justice within Canadian culture or Unitarian Universalism. Like Krista, I have felt within myself and seen and heard from others that push back.

But just what is this White Supremacy culture that we speak of?

(Slide 1)

Kenneth Jones and Tema Okun¹ wrote 20 years ago an answer to that very question:

They begin: “Below is a list of characteristics of white supremacy culture which show up in our organizations. Culture is powerful precisely because it is so present and at the same time so very difficult to name or identify. The characteristics listed below are damaging because they are used as norms and standards without being pro-actively named or chosen by the group. They are damaging because they promote white supremacy thinking. They are damaging to both people of color and to white people.”

As I go through each attribute of White Supremacy culture as they describe it, I invite you to think about the ways that attribute shows up in your life and in organizations you are part of, including this one. It may be that some are much more prevalent than others, or you may find yourself defensive with as many or more caveats, “buts”, or counterexamples than examples. I invite you just to notice both your thoughts and any feelings they evoke and to let them be, not good or bad, no judgement... just sit with them for a while.

¹ From Dismantling Racism: A Workbook for Social Change Groups, by Kenneth Jones and Tema Okun, ChangeWork, 2001, <https://www.showingupforracialjustice.org/white-supremacy-culture-characteristics.html>, accessed March 2021.

(Slide 2)

Perfectionism:

- Mistakes are both negative and personal, i.e. they reflect badly on the person making them as opposed to being seen for what they are -- mistakes.
- Little or no appreciation for the work of others
- Making a mistake is confused with being a mistake, doing wrong with being wrong
- Little time, energy, or money put into reflection or identifying lessons learned that can improve practice

(Slide 3)

Sense of Urgency

- Continued sense of urgency that makes it difficult to take time to be inclusive, encourage democratic and/or thoughtful decision-making, to think long-term, to consider consequences
- Frequently results in sacrificing potential allies and good process for quick or highly visible results

(Slide 4)

Defensiveness

- the organizational structure is set up and much energy spent trying to prevent abuse and protect power as it exists rather than to facilitate the best out of each person or to clarify who has power and how they are expected to use it
- because of either/or thinking (see below), criticism of those with power is viewed as threatening and inappropriate (or rude)
- people respond to new or challenging ideas with defensiveness, making it very difficult to raise these ideas
- a lot of energy in the organization is spent trying to make sure that people's feelings aren't getting hurt or working around defensive people

(Slide 5)

Quantity Over Quality

- things that can be measured are more highly valued than things that cannot, for example numbers of people attending a meeting, newsletter circulation, money spent are valued more than quality of relationships, democratic decision-making, ability to constructively deal with conflict
- little or no value attached to process;
- discomfort with emotion and feelings

- when there is a conflict between content (the agenda of the meeting) and process (people's need to be heard or engaged), content prevails

(Slide 6)

Worship of the Written Word

- if it's not in a memo, it doesn't exist
- those with strong documentation and writing skills are more highly valued, even in organizations where ability to relate to others is key to the mission

(Slide 7)

Only One Right Way

- the belief there is one right way to do things and once people are introduced to the right way, they will see the light and adopt it
- when they do not adapt or change, then something is wrong with them (the other, those not changing), not with us (those who know the right way)

(Slide 8)

Paternalism

- decision-making is clear to those with power and unclear to those without it
- those with power think they are capable of making decisions for and in the interests of those without power
- those with power often don't think it is important or necessary to understand the viewpoint or experience of those for whom they are making decisions
- those without power understand they do not have it and understand who does and also are completely familiar with the impact of those decisions on them

(Slide 9)

Either/Or Thinking

- things are either/or, good/bad, right/wrong, with us/against us
- closely linked to perfectionism in making it difficult to learn from mistakes or accommodate conflict
- no sense that things can be both/and
- results in trying to simplify complex things

(Slide 10)

Power Hoarding

- power seen as limited, only so much to go around

- those with power feel threatened when anyone suggests changes in how things should be done in the organization
- those with power don't see themselves as hoarding power or as feeling threatened
- those with power assume they have the best interests of the organization at heart and assume those wanting change are ill-informed, emotional, inexperienced

(Slide 11)

Fear of Open Conflict

- people in power are conflict avoidant
- when someone raises an issue that causes discomfort, the response is to blame the person for raising the issue
- equating the raising of difficult issues with being impolite, rude, or out of line

(Slide 12)

Individualism

- little experience or comfort working as part of a team
- people in organization believe they are responsible for solving problems alone
- accountability, if any, goes up and down, not sideways to peers or to those the organization is set up to serve
- desire for individual recognition and credit
- competition more highly valued than cooperation
- creates a lack of accountability, as the organization values those who can get things done on their own without needing supervision or guidance

(Slide 13)

i'm the only one

- connected to individualism, the belief that if something is going to get done right, 'I have to do it
- little or no ability to delegate work to others

antidotes:

- evaluate people based on their ability to delegate to others;
- evaluate people based on their ability to work as part of a team to accomplish shared goals

(Slide 14)

Progress is Bigger, More

- progress is an organization which expands (adds staff, adds projects) or develops the ability to serve more people ... regardless of how well they are serving them or whether

they may be exploited, excluded, or underserved as we focus on how many we are serving

(Slide 15)

Objectivity

- the belief that there is such a thing as being objective
- the belief that emotions are inherently destructive, irrational, and should not play a role in decision-making or group process
- invalidating people who show emotion
- impatience with any thinking that does not appear logical to those with power

(Slide 16)

Right to Comfort

- the belief that those with power have a right to emotional and psychological comfort
- scapegoating those who cause discomfort
- equating individual acts of unfairness against white people with systemic racism which daily targets people of colour

They conclude: “One of the purposes of listing characteristics of white supremacy culture is to point out how organizations which unconsciously use these characteristics as their norms and standards make it difficult, if not impossible, to open the door to other cultural norms and standards. As a result, many of our organizations, while saying we want to be multicultural, really only allow other people and cultures to come in if they adapt or conform to already existing cultural norms. Being able to identify and name the cultural norms and standards you want is a first step to making room for a truly multi-cultural organization.” They also offer specific strategies to change culture for every characteristic above, which we can come back to again as we continue with this series and anti-racism work.

(Slide 17)

In her book “White Fragility,” Robin DiAngelo writes:

“White people raised in Western society are conditioned into a white supremacist worldview because it is the bedrock of our society and its institutions. Regardless of whether a parent told you that everyone was equal, or the poster in the hall of your white suburban school proclaimed the value of diversity, or you have traveled abroad, or you have people of color in your workplace or family, the ubiquitous socializing power of white supremacy cannot be avoided. The messages circulate 24-7 and have little or nothing to do with intentions, awareness, or agreement. Entering the conversation with this understanding is freeing because it allows us to focus on how--rather than if--our racism is manifest. When we move beyond the good/bad binary, we can become eager to

identify our racist patterns because interrupting those patterns becomes more important than managing how we think we look to others.”

White herself, DiAngelo challenges other white folks to move from a place of defensiveness and fragility to a place of eager identification and interruption of the racism present in each of us.

By contrast, Muslim Canadian author and speaker Irshad Manji writes, “White Fragility Is Not the Answer. Honest Diversity Is.”² (Slide 18) She continues, “White Fragility has become a bible for diversity advocates in institutional America and elsewhere. But DiAngelo owes answers to the executives who are now panic-buying her ideas. Take the central claim of her book: that white people’s entitlement to feeling comfortable makes them defensive, even hostile, when conversations about race need to be had. No doubt, many white people fit that bill. However, it is not because they are white. It is because they are human.”

Manji comes to this viewpoint through her own efforts to bring change to Islam after 9/11. She spoke to audiences worldwide to promote liberal reform in a pluralistic 21st century context. She says: “The “Muslim fragility” that I witnessed pained me. Most of my co-religionists did not want to hear about the need to change ourselves. Despite backing up my case with passages from the Qur’an, I was met mostly with denial, consternation, condemnation, and, on occasion, violent threats. It took me years to appreciate that humans, universally, respond badly to being blamed.” She continues: “The primitive part of our brains give rise to the ego, and the ego kicks in as a shield whenever we feel threatened. For tough conversations to succeed, emotional defences must be lowered all-around. Only then can people tap into the more evolved part of their brains, allowing reason to co-exist with emotion rather than being bulldozed by it. This is why shaming white people for being fragile is both misleading and toxic.”

She proposes an approach she calls “honest diversity” instead, wherein “humiliation [is replaced] with integrity, as in wholeness. It recognizes that each of us, whatever our labels, is a multifaceted plural.” She suggests that diversity is better achieved not by bringing people of different identities together, trying to get diverse representation, but by inviting diversity of viewpoints. She acknowledges: “Yes, that means so-called white straight guys instantly belong. Yet their belonging takes nothing away from everybody else because wholeness, by definition, is not a zero-sum game.” She contends that cultivating diversity of viewpoints naturally leads to more relationship and diverse representation, since “After all, those of us who have faced patterns of exclusion will naturally develop perspectives that others do not.”

She continues: ‘In fact, the pursuit of different viewpoints changes the power game altogether, especially for historically marginalized people like me. Us-against-Them tribalisms demand to know whose side I am on. I am expected to swap one form of

²Irshad Manji. <https://heterodoxacademy.org/blog/viewpoint-diversity-white-fragility-honest-diversity/>, July 7, 2020. Accessed March 2021.

assimilation — “theirs” — for another kind of conformity — “ours.” But viewpoint diversity values me for my individuality. It liberates me from having to be an avatar of somebody else’s narrative. And that is as it should be. Because even within identity groups, members will have varied backstories. As a result, they will also have different ideas and opinions. Recognizing this is the remedy for essentialism, racial and otherwise. ... Which is why it is not productive to snap our fingers, roll our eyes, and proclaim that white people should get over themselves. If leaders want to rise to this moment sincerely and sustainably, they would be wise to remember: People are humanized by being seen as individuals within communities, not as labels on legs.”

Interestingly, in Robin DiAngelo and Irshad Manji were invited by an organization that promotes dialogue to hold a “respectful exchange” about racism in 2019, before Manji wrote this article. Manji accepted the invitation. DiAngelo declined.

By contrast, Robin DiAngelo endorses the book (Slide 19) “My Grandmother’s Hands” by Resmaa Menakem, which offers yet another perspective anti-racism work. Menakem is a somatic therapist³ who offers embodied practices in a step-by-step process based on neuroscience and somatic healing methods. Inherent in his approach is belief that racism is the water we swim in, rather than the shark to watch out for, and that it enacts trauma on all of our bodies - Black, Indigenous, People of Colour, *and* White. He challenges any approach to racism that is intellectual only, writing: “for the last three decades, we’ve earnestly tried to address white supremacy in America with reason, principles , and ideas — using dialogue, forums, discussions, education, and mental training.... we’ve tried to teach our brains to think better about race. But white-body supremacy doesn’t live in our thinking brains. It lives and breathes in our bodies.”⁴

Menakem has worked extensively with the police and in his book addresses three groups separately: the Black, the White, the Blue. “To all my white readers,” he says, “welcome... let’s get to work.” To law-enforcement officers he gives the same welcome. And to his fellow African-Americans, he honours their lived experiences and affirms: “you are not defective.”⁵

I have not yet read his book - he says it is one to be experienced, not read, and that if you don’t have time for the practices, don’t read it. I am looking forward to creating that time once I have a physical copy in hand - I couldn’t bring myself to begin somatic work with a text on a screen.

Menakem directly challenges the progressive, liberal approach to anti-racism work. He says: “There is a racial hierarchy that happens in white communities, in white culture, especially those that see themselves as progressive and liberal. One of the first

³ <https://www.resmaa.com/>

⁴ ⁴ Resmaa Menakem. *My Grandmother’s Hands: racialized trauma and the pathway to mending our hearts and bodies*. Las Vegas, NV: Central Recovery Press, 2017.

⁵ Resmaa Menakem. *My Grandmother’s Hands*.

things that happens is that when you get white [people] ... into a room, they start to begin to do this thing that a colleague of mine, Rachel March says is elite-ification. White people love being the most 'woke' white person in the room. They love being the most strategy-oriented white person in the room. They all love being the most articulate white person in the room.”⁶ Can you hear the creeping in of some of the characteristics of White Supremacy culture? Perfectionism in a different cloak. “One right way” to do social justice. Competition instead of cooperation. Who is most woke, least fragile, the most widely read, the most eager and ready to do anti-racism work, the best ally?

He further contends that White people need to find ways of building a new culture around undoing White supremacy beyond “strategies.” By contrast, “The KKK, the devout racists, have a culture. They have symbols, they have colors, they have music, they have dance, ways of speaking, ways of standing, ways of being, all that different type of stuff. What does the white liberal have other than strategy and a racial resume, right?”

These are but three approaches to work that has many inroads and no one “right” way. As part of this series of services on anti-racism as a spiritual practice, we’ll continue to explore other ideas and practices of the mind and body and heart.

For now, I want to take a moment and note that this is a word-heavy, head heavy service and take a moment to breathe.

Feel your breath move in to your body, and out.

There is more than one right way.
There is more than one starting place.
More than one instigating moment to spark engagement in anti-racism work.
There is more than one way to understand our own lives and culture,
And more than one way to create change.
Thankfully so.

I have quoted before and will do so again, John Michael Greer’s words: “Knowing many stories is wisdom. Knowing no stories is ignorance. Knowing only one story is death.”

And so let us find our way forward,
With openness and curiosity,
Gentleness and humbleness,
Into deeper relationship and understanding.
Deeper relationship with and understanding of ourselves
Deeper relationship with and understanding of our own culture and cultures

⁶University of Arizona Centre for Compassion Studies Podcast with Resmaa Menakem: <https://compassioncenter.arizona.edu/podcast/resmaa-menakem>

Deeper relationship with and understanding of those with very different life experiences, including experiences of struggle and brutality that some of us can only imagine.

Deeper connection with our bodies and our breath, interdependent as they are with all humans and all life.

Deeper connection with the divine of many names.

That we might build a more just, equitable, and compassionate world.

So may it be,

Now and always,

Amen.