

DEVELOPING A POSITIVE WHITE IDENTITY

INTRODUCTION

In the struggle for racial justice I think we need to be clear about what we as white people want. We might ask ourselves: What are the goals we are trying to achieve? As the school of Non-Violent Communication would say, what are our real needs?

As white people many of us want justice and an end to racial oppression. We want to live our full humanity. We want to live in right relationship with all people. But it is difficult for us to live our full humanity when the unearned privileges of white skin color come at the expense of others. So it is in my self interest as a white person to find a different way of being white in the world.

Coming back to an earlier observation, historically whiteness and white supremacy pervade our culture, our institutions, and our personal relationships with people of color. We are socialized by white institutions and we internalize white superiority. One of the difficult challenges we face as white people is to **identify a positive way of being white** while recognizing we live in a culture based on white supremacy.

For me to affirm my whiteness in a culture of white superiority I may end up affirming or supporting white supremacy. But I abhor white superiority and all it stands for.

I want to have a racial identity that is not based on the oppression of people of color. I want a racial identity that is not based on the deification of whiteness or white supremacy. I know that I can't reject my white skin color – I can't take off my white skin. And white society will continue to give me unearned privilege. The challenge I face as a white person is to feel good about being white without asserting that as a white person I am superior to other people, or oppressing people of color.

Janet Helms writes "The task for whites is to develop a positive white identity based on reality not on assumed superiority. In order to do that each person must become aware of his or her whiteness, accept it as personally and socially significant, and learn to feel good about it. Not in the sense of Klan members "white pride" but in the context of a commitment to a just society." (Quoted in Beverly Tatum *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting together in the Cafeteria Table?* P.94")

Here are some steps we think we can take to enable us to move in that direction. This is not meant to be an exhaustive list, but a starting point for further reflection.

- Be an accountable ally to People of Color.
- Work to change racist institutions.
- Learn to live as multi-racial people.
- Take responsibility for our own racial identity journey.
- Learn the truth about the racist history of our country.
- Nurture a positive anti-racist white identity in children.
- Build a White anti-racist collective.
- Honor our heritage of white anti-racist resisters.

CURRENT STRATEGIES FOR DEALING WITH RACISM IN THE WHITE COMMUNITY

First we want to take a look at current strategies for dealing with racism in the white community including prejudice reduction, colorblindness, and multi-cultural diversity.

PREJUDICE REDUCTION

Prejudice reduction is an approach that is used in educational institutions and church settings. I think there is an important insight in the strategy of prejudice reduction. That insight is that every person who is born in the United States learns prejudices and stereotypes about other groups. And we learn these things whether we are white or people of color. I know that I learned all kind of prejudices when I was growing up. Some of these I am ashamed to talk about. And I agree with the advocates of prejudice reduction programs that I need to take responsibility for my prejudices and learn new attitudes.

But there is an important limit to this approach. The problem is that it doesn't deal with the historical, institutional, and cultural dimensions of the issues of race and racism. I believe that we could have every person in America go through five years of prejudice reduction programs – but that would have little impact on the racism that permeates our culture and the racism that is embedded in the power dynamics of our institutions.

COLOR BLINDNESS

Advocates for colorblindness say the critical issue in race relations is that people should be judged by the content of their character and not the color of their skin. They take this wording from Dr. Martin Luther King- and even claim they are following Dr King. They assert that if we look beyond color and treat everyone the same then we can bring racial healing.

There is a positive value that lies behind this assertion. What I like about this perspective is the affirmation that whatever our racial community we have a common humanity and a shared destiny. But there are also problems with this approach Do white people NOT see color? Of course we see color. And, if we really don't see color then we don't see another person's history, community, or identity. If we don't see color then we don't have to deal with how people of color are oppressed by our white racist society

The strategy of color blindness permeates white run board rooms in white run organizations. The good news is that those of us who are white in these settings no longer talk about people of color in negative ways. People of color are no longer the butt of our racist jokes. The bad news is that in these settings we who are white no longer talk about people of color. They are rendered invisible. When we don't talk about people of color then we no longer talk about racial oppression because that conversation might lead to a discussion about white power and privilege. And we don't want to go there. So color blindness and the silence it creates preserve the racist status quo.

For further information on this perspective, see Jeff Hitchcock's exposition of this issue in his book [Lifting the White Veil](#).

MULTI-CULTURAL DIVERSITY

Again the good news is that people of color are working in the mainstream institutions of our society. The bad news is that whites and people of color are not getting along very well in these settings. Millions of dollars are spent every year in corporation and universities on diversity training. How many of you who are

reading this essay have participated in such training? Lots of us have. How many of you are trainers in such events? Some of us are

I have talked with lots of diversity trainers. They tell me some of the accomplishments they are making. But they also point out how difficult it is to make lasting change in institutions that are still led predominantly by white people and by white cultural norms. Little change happens when the people of color are absent from the tables where critical decisions are made in an organization. Little change happens when the purpose of institutions is to serve white people primarily.

FINDING ANOTHER PATH

I think there are other steps we can be taking to develop a positive white racial identity that take us beyond prejudice reduction, color-blindness, and multi-cultural diversity. The first step in developing a positive white identity is developing accountable relations with people of color.

In our race-based society, where white controlled institutions and culture dominate, those of us who are white have not been accountable to people of color. Moreover, because of the racist nature of our institutions few of us who are white have experience in being accountable to people of color.

Historically, if whites had been accountable to people of color, there wouldn't have been slavery, or segregation, or lynching. And, there wouldn't have been relocations, or massacres, or reservations. So our first responsibility it to establish new accountable relationships with people of color

BEING AN ACCOUNTABLE ALLY TO PEOPLE OF COLOR

A white ally tries to be in accountable relations with people of color. The first thing we who are white need to ask ourselves is: Are we in relationship with any people of color? In our society which is so segregated along racial lines the answer is often no. We are racially isolated or no effort has been made to enter relationships across racial lines.

Then the question becomes for those of us who are not in relationship - how we can enter such relationships? White congregations have used a variety of strategies to try to overcome such isolation. This includes forming a partner church relationship with a people of color congregation, becoming part of an interfaith coalition, or connecting with the local NAACP.

If we are in some kind of relationship with people of color then the next question is: Are our relations with people of color accountable relations? This question takes us beyond the familiar phrase "Some of my best friends are..."

The critical issue here is: Are we in relationship with leaders in people of color communities who are working to make change on the issues that affect those communities. These may be people of color in our congregations or the wider Unitarian Universalist Association. They may be people of color in our local communities. Or they may be people of color in our places of work. The important question is: Are we willing to follow people of color as they provide leadership in the struggle for racial justice?

DEFINING ACCOUNTABILITY

The context for the discussion of the issue of accountability is the imbalance of power that exists in our society because of racism. In talking about accountability we are talking especially about the relationships

between white people in our society and those who are oppressed or marginalized because of their race, class, or gender.

According to Webster's Dictionary the root word for accountability means "giving an account; being answerable; being explainable (as in providing a justifying analysis or explanation)."

As white people we have a lot of experience of being accountable to other white people in white run institutions. In our work world we spend considerable time on reports, goal setting, strategic planning, and budget management. We have quarterly reviews and annual evaluations. Some of us have the experience of spending so much time in these meetings and evaluation processes that we can't get our jobs done. So those of us who are white have a lot of experience with accountability to other whites.

However, as white people we have been socialized to not follow the leadership of people of color. We are acculturated to find a place in life where we are in charge and are unaccountable. This is both an individual and a collective issue for those of us who are white.

WHAT STANDS IN THE WAY OF WHITE PEOPLE BEING ACCOUNTABLE TO PEOPLE OF COLOR?

The internalized superiority of whites coupled with the inordinate institutional power that whites have stand in the way of achieving accountability. We who are white "come to the table" with the upper hand. We control the resources and often we assume that we have the answers to the problems at hand. We assume that the white way is the right way. Moreover, white people don't have a lot of personal experience following the leadership of people of color.

Another factor is that our identity as white Unitarian Universalists emphasizes freedom, individual expression, and personal exploration more than it does justice making, community building, and living in accountable relationships. In some predominantly white communities, we find it hard to identify who to work with. Then there are theological barriers to working with other religious communities who have more conservative theologies.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR WHITES TO BE ACCOUNTABLE TO PEOPLE OF COLOR?

Accountability to people of color refers specifically to white allies being accountable to people of color in the context of a multiracial coalition whose work is grounded in (or accountable to) a power analysis of racism.

A good white ally does not see whiteness as the only norm. As white people we are raised to believe that "the white way is the right way." But people of color have other ways of viewing the world. We can learn a great deal from their perspectives. As we learn from people of color we can develop a more highly textured, multi-colored, less white-centered view of the world

A good white ally trusts the experience of people of color. Too often as whites we deny or minimize the experience of oppression which people of color experience. Please don't discount or discredit people of color leaders just for the sake of doing so. Be open to understanding their first hand experiences of racism.

A good white ally is open to critique from people of color. In our relations we need to be engaged in deep listening. There is no need for us to be defensive. When a person makes a critique, determine what is helpful in this critique and try to learn from it. Welcome this critique.

SPECIFIC EXAMPLES OF ACCOUNTABILITY STRUCTURES

The accountability structures we work with in the Unitarian Universalist Association are many and varied. They include:

- People of color who are members of transformation teams that exist in districts, congregations, and organizations.
- Members of a local chapter of Diverse Revolutionary Unitarian Universalist Multicultural Ministries (DRUUMM)
- The Unitarian Universalist Association's Journey Toward Wholeness Transformation Committee

In Brewster MA the congregation's transformation team developed an accountability relationship with the local NAACP chapter. This had an impact when they dealt with the history of the church and the fact that the sea captains whose pictures are on the walls of the sanctuary were involved in the slave trade.

Members of The Unitarian Universalist Church at Washington Crossing in Titusville, NJ have invited local activists of color to participate in an accountability structure for their anti-racism transformation team.

The Unitarian Universalist Church of Norwich CT participates in an anti-racism collective that provides a source of accountability. The Norwich Area Anti-racism Collective is based at the Norwich Unitarian Universalist Church and is working in coalition with the Norwich branch of the NAACP and a new spin off organization called the Norwich People of Color Coalition for Change. Their work has been geared toward increasing people of color participation in city government either as elected officials or as appointments to city boards, commissions, and agencies.

Allies for Racial Equality (ARE) is an organization of white anti-racist Unitarian Universalists. ARE was organized in response to a series of racist incidents that happened at General Assemblies held by the Unitarian Universalist Association. ARE works in a direct and accountable relationship with Diverse and Revolutionary Unitarian Universalist Multicultural Ministries (DRUUMM).

In addition to people of color leaders in our own congregations, we need to support leaders in people of color communities who are striving to make anti-racist change.

THE QUALITIES OF ACCOUNTABILITY RELATIONSHIPS

Whether accountability relationships are inside an institution or in relation to leaders of a People of Color community there are certain qualities for these relationships that are very important. The Rev. Chester McCall writes,

"I find it interesting that when it comes to the issue of accountability for most people it means having authority over someone or something. The kind of accountability I am speaking of is an accountability of "right relationship". It is the accountability of the integrity of ones word. No we are not perfect, we break our word daily and we are not always in right relationship – but we have a covenant to be in right relationship and to expect each other to uphold this commitment, so that when we are not in right relationship those around us are empowered to say so, to point out to us that we have broken the covenant. For me accountability is relational – not authoritarian – it is about being in relationship and acknowledging when what you have done be it intentional or unintentional has caused hurt and/or harm"

Accountability implies significant working relationship and a real covenant to work together.

- Such relationships must be grounded in trust and transparency.
- Emphasis needs to be given to clear communication and providing good feedback.
- Hopefully there is clarity about the goals and objectives that are to be achieved.
- Along with accountability goes the commitment to make things different.
- In the ideal situation the accountability is a two way process.

WORK TO CHANGE WHITE RACIST INSTITUTIONS

Developing accountability to people of color is critical but it too is insufficient if we who are white don't take responsibility for changing the institutions that we presently control. The system – the schools, media, religious institutions, and family – is what made us into racists and victims. The racist system is what creates so much injustice.

If we want things to be different then we who are white need to be leaders working to dismantle white power and white supremacy in our core institutions. We need to shape our institutions so they will socialize young people to be anti-racists.

Here we get to the issue of power. At times those of us who are white will need to relinquish the overwhelming power that we have. At other times we will need to empower people of color in our organizations. And we need to work together across racial lines to develop new ways of sharing power and creating accountable relationships. We have a responsibility to work in the institutions that we live in and participate in to shape an anti-racist identity and practice.

Many of us have had the experience of demonstrating and boycotting, working from the outside to change institutions. These actions have brought some needed changes in society. But while we continue to act in the world we also need to address the racism that exists in the structures of our association, districts, and congregations. That is why the organizing task for transforming institutions and systems is an internal change process within the institutions where we live and work.

For me that means working with people in the Unitarian Universalist community. Racism permeates just about everything we do in our congregations. So there is plenty of work to do. I want to work with others to equip Unitarian Universalists to work for anti-racist change in their congregations, their communities, and their workplaces.

In the late 1990s the Unitarian Universalist Association staff did a review of its work in religious education, publishing, and ministry and found it had to make important changes.

EXAMPLES OF WHERE RACISM CAN BE FOUND IN UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CONGREGATIONS

In congregations the challenge is to do everything that we normally do in the life of the congregation with an anti-racism lens: worship, religious education, membership, and social justice. Places where white racism often shows up are:

- Music
- Art and pictures on the wall
- Hearing the voices of people of Color in readings

- Cultural appropriation
- Dealing with issues of racial identity for children of color and white children in our religious education programs

Some predominantly white institutions create authorized transformation teams to lead anti-racist change in the organization. Since what the transformation team is doing is an “inside job” its work is endorsed and mandated by the leadership of the organization involved (e.g., a district board or congregational board). By endorsing the transformation team the leadership gives the team the special authorization it needs to function for the organization. Once the team is formed it becomes accountable for its work to the leadership structure of its organization. In fact the ideal is to create a mutual accountability between the leadership group and the transformation team.

Such transformation teams now exist in congregations like Springfield, MA, New Haven, CT, Titusville, NJ, Annapolis, MD, Oakland, CA, Long Beach, CA, and St. Paul, MN. There are also district teams in Joseph Priestley and Metro New York.

There are tools and resources to empower us in this process. In another session we made reference to the continuum resources provided by the Unitarian Universalist to support the making of anti-racist change, and the use of an assessment tool.

LEARN TO LIVE AS MULTI-RACIAL PEOPLE

We need to de-center whiteness at the same time that we need to move toward those who have been traditionally marginalized. WEB Du Bois talked about African Americans living with a bi-racial awareness. This meant they could communicate with folks in their own community and navigate the world of whiteness as well.

As whites we have an opportunity to live with a multi-racial awareness. This involves learning to live in authentic relationship with people from a variety of different racial communities.

TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR OUR OWN RACIAL IDENTITY JOURNEY

I must be willing to take responsibility for my whiteness. This means I must do deep personal reflection. I need to understand how racism has impacted on my personal life, my family, my religious community, and my country.

Remember, we are socialized by white institutions. We internalize the messages of white supremacy and the notion that people of color are inferior. It is my personal responsibility to understand how this socialization happened and what the messages were that I internalized.

I need to discern the impact that schools, the media, religious institutions, and the activities I participated in as a youth - like scouting - formed racial prejudices and internalized racial superiority. Understanding these patterns I can then discard old thoughts and behaviors and learn new ones.

This is work we whites must do for ourselves, and for the sake of our communities. We can't expect people of color to take on the issues of identity and racial superiority that we who are white have. These are the pieces we must take responsibility for as white people. We need to create spaces (often times called caucuses) where those of us who are white can go deep to confront our issues of internalized superiority as white people. And we need spaces where people of color can go to confront their internalized oppression.

Then we can come together as whites and as people of color – stronger for our powerful internal work – to work together to dismantle the racism in our society.

LEARN THE TRUTH ABOUT THE RACIST HISTORY OF OUR COUNTRY

I also need to learn the truth about the history of America. Ours is not a historically oriented society. In the section we did on the history of white supremacy we noted that few of us have a deep grasp of the history of our country. Or if we are taught history it is often erroneous or misleading. This is what author (and Unitarian Universalist) James Lowen describes in his book Lies My Teacher Taught Me. As a result, we suffer from historical amnesia.

For most of us who are white this means we need to reengage the history of our country. We need to unlearn the many lies and misconceptions that we were taught. We need to study history from the perspective of people of color. And we need to understand the history of white supremacy. Many resources are available including:

Howard Zinn	<u>A People's History of the United States</u>
Ronald Takaki	<u>A Different Mirror</u>
Frank Wu	<u>YELLOW: Race in America – Beyond Black & White</u>
David Davis	<u>Inhuman Bondage</u>
Annette James	<u>The State of Native America</u>

NURTURE A POSITIVE ANTI-RACIST WHITE IDENTITY IN OUR CHILDREN

There are many issues of racial identity that go on for all children – youth of color or white children in our church schools. We can remember what a difference it might have made if our religious communities did a better of addressing issues of race and white identity when we were growing up.

Beverly Tatum's book Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? Has some very useful insights on the issues of racial identity development for white youth and youth of color.

Louise Derman Sparks and Patricia Ramsey's book: What if all the Kids Are White: Anti-Bias Multicultural Education with Young Children and Families is a very useful resource for those of us concerned about racial identity development in white children.

WORK TO BUILD A WHITE ANTI-RACISM COLLECTIVE

We have a responsibility as whites to work with other white people to dismantle racism and create beloved community. We can't expect people of color to do all of the work to end racism. And we can't expect people of color to take on the responsibility for working with our white brothers and sisters on the issue of internalized white superiority. Again this is our responsibility. This is not about blaming or shaming other white people. It is about inviting people who are white into a different way – an accountable, anti-racist way – of being in the world.

A related area of work for white people who want to live as anti-racists is to develop communities of white anti-racists. As white people, we can't be antiracist or dismantle racism by ourselves. For one thing racism is too powerful. For another, no individual white person is smart enough, or wise enough, or strong enough to dismantle racism by themselves.

Collective action by white people is needed to dismantle systemic institutional and cultural racism. In multi-racial communities, congregations, or places of employment – and on multiracial transformation teams – we are fortunate to have caucuses where we who are white can do our internal work. Doing this reflective work empowers us to be better allies for people of color.

But many of our Unitarian Universalist congregations are solidly white. Here we need the formation of white anti-racism teams to provide leadership for change.

We need to acknowledge this is easier said than done. Unfortunately our white American culture emphasizes individualism because we are the dominant racial group and as such we can impose our viewpoint. But as soon as the individualism of white people in our society is threatened, we go to our “United We Stand” philosophy.

Our Unitarian Universalist culture – with its focus on the worth and dignity of every person – is also highly individualistic. In working to build anti-racist community and especially white anti-racist community we are definitely going against the grain of our society and our faith community. So one of the critical issues for those of us who are white is working to create a community of anti-racist white people to develop our collective capacity to dismantle racism.

In the Unitarian Universalist Association we are fortunate to have such a community. It is called Allies for Racial Equity. You can learn more about this important organization by going to www.uuallies.org

These last pieces I have mentioned -taking responsibility for our internalization; learning the truth about the racist history of our country; studying whiteness so we can change it - are not forms of naval gazing. They are work that we as whites need to do so we can be equal partners with people of color in dismantling systemic racism.

HONOR OUR HERITAGE OF WHITE ANTI-RACIST RESISTORS

Another piece that can sustain us is to honor the memory of white Unitarian Universalists in our history who have been worth allies in fighting racism.

The Rev. Theodore Parker was an ardent abolitionist minister in the city of Boston. The greater leader of the movement for women’s right to vote, Susan B. Anthony, started as an abolitionist organizer. Laura Towne was the founder of the Penn Center in St. Helena Island in South Carolina – a school for African Americans started during the Civil War. James Reeb and Viola Liuzzo were martyred in Selma.

One of our great living heroes is The Rev. Jack Mendelsohn. Jack was a member of the Black Affairs Council and a leader in FULLBAC. Another is The Rev. Victor Carpenter who did so much to document the history of the Empowerment Movement from 1966-1970 in the Unitarian Universalist Association. He has written a very helpful resource entitled [The Long Journey](#).