

**Transforming Whiteness
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August 9, 2009**

I once spent the day with a Rubik's cube. Perhaps you remember that multicolored plastic cube? The objective is to twist and turn the little cubes so that each side becomes a solid color. [A picture of Rubik's cube was on the cover of the Order of Service.] The day spent with a Rubik's cube took place when I was in my 20's and was working for a private investigation company.

I was conducting surveillance on someone suspected of insurance fraud. It would be a long day because he never left his house. For eight hours on a sweltering Los Angeles day, I sat in my car, kept one eye on his house, and fiddled with the Rubik's cube. I wish I could tell you that I solved the Rubik's cube puzzle, but alas, some wishes do not come true. The closest I could get was a cube with each side predominantly one color but not exclusively one color. The effort to gain color uniformity was more trouble than it was worth.

I noticed color uniformity during my recent vacation in Door County, Wisconsin, where I visited family. At most, I saw half a dozen people of color during my eight days there. The trip to Door County came fresh on the heels of my taking an online course entitled "Transforming Whiteness" so I was sensitized to who belongs, who does not, who deserves what, and who is capable of what. White people of Scandinavian descent clearly belonged. Norwegians told "Ole and Lena" jokes upon themselves, but Norwegians and Swedes set the cultural norms. Others, including other white people, were outsiders. Italian cuisine was almost as exotic as Chinese cuisine. ;)

Until recently, I might have chalked up the color uniformity in the Door County Rubik's cube to an accident of history. However, while there *are* accidents of history, history is primarily about social forces larger than the individual. Yes, we need a sense of self to function in the world. We might as well see ourselves as the hero – or at least the protagonist – of an adventure story called our life. However, our "social location" is largely responsible for the set, the costumes, the props, and the lines we speak.

Returning to the Rubik's cube metaphor, our challenge is not to finagle color uniformity (that is, white supremacy). Our challenge is to help change the cultural aesthetic and help change the social power dynamic so that white is no longer overemphasized. Engaging in this work means engaging with history in a committed way for "racism is fundamentally a theory of history," in the words of Matthew Frye Jacobson. "It is a theory of who is who, of who belongs and who does not, of who deserves what and who is capable of what."

"Transforming Whiteness" was offered through the Unitarian Universalist Association's Church of the Larger Fellowship. It was taught by Rev. Melissa Carver-Ziemer and Rev. Bill Gardiner of the Unitarian Universalist group called Allies for Racial Equity. This fall, I will lead an adult religious education course on white identity development based on this Allies for Racial Equity curriculum. If during my remarks you think to yourself, "Yes, but . . ." or "Hey, it is way more complicated than that," I will feel delighted for I hope to pique your interest in taking the course.

"White people are raised to be confused about their own color," notes Janet Helms. "While [people of color] are taught to be aware of other people's color, polite white people do not mention color in public – especially their own." It will be a step forward when white people are as conscious of being white from moment to moment as people of color are conscious from moment to moment of not being white.

It will be a step forward when white people know how and when their ancestors became white. White people did not become white at the same time. White racial identity developed over a span of some 400 years, roughly from the 1500's to the 1900's.¹ The racial formation process in one place could become the precedent for the racial formation process in another place. In particular, the English thought of themselves as white before they came to the Americas. The conquest of Ireland by the English created a template for the conquest of the United States.²

¹ The information in this section comes from "History of White Supremacy" by Rev. Dr. William Gardiner.

² In his book *The Invention of the White Race*, Theodore Allen describes how the racial formation process that was developed in Ireland set a precedent for the relation between Africans and Europeans in the American colonies.

The treatment of the Irish by the English was of personal interest because of my Scots Irish background. Last summer, I traveled to northeastern Ireland and southwestern Scotland to research the Scots Irish branch of the family tree. In contrast to other trips focused on different branches of the family tree, last summer the protocol was to whisper the Stewart surname, not to proclaim it with pride. It was not quite “mum’s the word,” but almost. *Now* I understand why. As I continue, I will show images from that trip as I summarize Theodore Allen’s views from his book *The Invention of the White Race*.

“The English treated the native people of Ireland as an inferior race in the six northern counties of Ulster. The English referred to the Irish as savages –just as they described the Native Americans later. In Ireland, loyal Scot settlers were made into a landlord class to provide social control over the Irish people using the Penal Laws of Protestant Ascendancy. The Penal Laws were the forerunners of the slave codes that were developed in the new American colonies.”

“In the American colonies, a buffer social control group – like the Scots in Ireland- was needed to stand between the mass of slaves and the numerically tiny class of slaveholders . . . In Ireland the English destroyed the tribal and kinship identity of the oppressed Irish peoples, took their land, and exploited their labor. These were the strategies that were used by the English colonists in their relations with Native Americans and African peoples.”

“So concepts of whiteness, white superiority, and the inferiority of other peoples were already in place when the English colonist arrived in North America. And strategies for social control had already been developed in Ireland that would be used in the Americas. The belief in white superiority was strengthened and reinforced during the colonization of the Americas and the encounter with Native Americans and African peoples.”

It will be a step forward when white people are as conscious of being white from moment to moment as people of color are conscious from moment to moment of not being white. It will be a step forward when white people know how and when their ancestors became white. It will be a step forward when white people decide which way of being white is *their* way of being white. A

helpful way of understanding ways of being white is this set of alternatives: Overt racist, “happy racist,” mainstream racist, liberal racist, and anti-racist.

Overt racists might be members of the Ku Klux Klan, hate groups, segregationists, and white nationalists. “*Happy racists*” live in communities isolated from people of color. They assume that being white is the norm and don’t think of themselves as being white. They don’t acknowledge white privilege. In contrast to “happy racists,” *mainstream racists* do see racial difference. They believe that white people are superior, and people of color are inferior. They enjoy the power and privilege that white people have in his society, and they blame people of color for their problems. They are not interested in working for racial justice but will do things to keep the peace.

I experience white privilege as a granddaughter of farmers who employed seasonal workers they called "pickers" to harvest cherries. I am proud that those 40 acres in Wisconsin have been in the family since 1874. I don't think much about the indigenous people who lived in the Door County peninsula before the arrival of the Europeans. I don't think much about how the modest wealth of my grandparents (which is working its way through the generations) is related to the wages paid to "pickers" or related to the cherry tree shaking machines that put the seasonal workers out of work.

To have white privilege does not mean that life is easy. For example, the distinction between city kids and country kids was not lost on the kids. Economic class matters. Last week, I attended a grade school reunion as a guest. Silverdale Elementary School was one of 37 one-room schools in the southern part of Door County. One teacher taught around 40 children ranging from first grade through eighth grade. My mother, aunt, and uncle are Silverdale graduates. In 1942, Silverdale received a basement, a furnace, and running water courtesy of the WPA. For a few years, it was “cushier” at school than it was for them at home. Electricity reached the home in 1938. Running water arrived in 1942!

I have mentioned overt racists, happy racists, and mainstream racists. “*Liberal racists*” assume the white way of life is the norm. They value multicultural diversity but on their own terms (“I

will accept you if you think and behave like me”). They understand the oppression of people of color, which is one dimension of racism, but they act by trying to help, fix, or save people of color. For some, image is important (“See, I am not prejudiced. I am trying to help.”).

Anti-racists do not see whiteness as the norm, they value racial and cultural diversity, they are willing to challenge white power and privilege, they strive to be allies with anti-racist leaders from people of color communities, and they develop accountability structures with people of color leaders. The primary difference between liberal racists and anti-racists is that besides understanding the oppression of people of color, anti-racists also understand two other dimensions of racism. Anti-racists understand that another dimension of racism is the power to provide privilege and benefits to those of us who are white. Racism is not just about oppression of people of color. It is also about privilege and benefits for white people.

Anti-racists also understand that a further dimension of racism (and possibly its most dangerous and insidious dimension) is the power to shape racial identity. This dimension of racism socializes whites into being racists and socializes people of color into being victims. You may be thinking “Yes, but . . . “ or “Hey, it is way more complicated than that.“ And it is. Yet to untangle the complexities of racism, it helps to have a conceptual framework.

I signed up for “Transforming Whiteness” in large part because I wanted to understand more fully what Allies for Racial Equity meant by the accountability of whites to people of color. I felt accountable to something broader, deeper, more inclusive than to people of color regarding anti-racism. I felt accountable to what is highest and best within us and outside us, something which cannot be reduced to skin color.

This philosophical reservation regarding accountability initially kept me from joining the Allies for Racial Equity group. This reservation felt like a knot that I was unable to untangle. Within the “container” of the course, I could relax enough to see where the philosophical threads were jumbled and tight. For me, untying the accountability knot depended on slowly and reluctantly coming to understand that people of color know white people, in many ways, better than white people know ourselves.

I have come to see the importance of accountability of whites to people of color. Allies for Racial Equity is in an accountable relationship to Unitarian Universalist people of color in DRUUM, an acronym which stands for Diverse and Revolutionary Unitarian Universalist Multicultural Ministries. To be in an accountable relationship does not mean to do whatever someone or some group says. It does not mean to agree with whatever someone or some group believes. Here, it means to listen as people of color share their feelings (including hurt feelings and angry feelings). It means listening to people of color talk about what they want. It means not assuming that whites know what is best for people of color.

I conclude with an observation by Scott Malcomson: The past is beyond the reach of forgiveness. “The past can only be understood and integrated into the present – its effects on the present recognized and incorporated into a daily practice of repair that cannot have an ending any more than the past has an ending. This is not apology but a moral life in a tragic world.” We might quibble about whether to call the world a tragedy, a comedy, or a farce. ;) Nonetheless, we are called to live a moral life.

Living a moral life means learning new skills, not merely acquiring greater insight. Learning new skills means practicing new skills. Practicing anti-racist skills is easier when there are other practitioners with whom to commiserate regarding disappointments and with whom to celebrate regarding progress. On a Rubik’s cube, color uniformity may be a sign of diligence. In our world, color uniformity most often means white supremacy. May this congregation be a place of nurture for anti-racists. May this congregation be a place of challenge for anti-racists. May it be so!