

First Unitarian Church

September 25, 2016

Terrence Crutcher. Keith Scott. Two more black men killed by police. Refugee children and mothers and grandmothers, and fathers and grandfathers, compared to a bowl of skittles.

This week Donald Trump Jr. tweeted a picture of a bowl of skittles that said, “If I had a bowl of skittles and told you that just three would kill you, would you take a handful? That’s our Syrian refugee problem.”

And this week a person on Facebook, Eli Bosnick, posted a response to that that went viral.ⁱ He said, “Are the other skittles human lives?... Is there a really good chance I would be saving someone from a war zone and probably their life if I ate a skittle?” He says if that’s the case he would “gorge” himself on skittles. And if he died, he’d leave behind a legacy of children and friends who also ate the skittles until all the skittles were gone.

Because the real question behind the “inaccurate, insensitive, dehumanizing, racist little candy metaphor” Bosnick says, is “is my life more important than thousands upon thousands of men, women, and terrified children... and what kind of monster would think the answer to that question is yes?”

Others pointed out that the odds of being killed by a terrorist are actually one in twenty million, not three in however many skittles fit in a little bowl. So if you’re worried about your own likelihood of death, you might consider giving up driving, removing all the furniture from your home, or supporting diabetes research—because cars, fluke furniture accidents, and diabetes are all way more likely to get you. And who knows? Maybe the refugee you befriend will give you the Heimlich one day.

Why do we place some lives above others? And how did it come to be so closely correlated with race? Because race is, after all, imaginary. It’s an illusion.

Obviously, people look different from each other. We see this every day with our own eyes. But we humans are not, and never have been, organized into distinct races.

We are accustomed to thinking we are: Black, White, Asian. Hispanic or Latino is not a race, but many people think it is and a particular look comes to mind when we say any of these words.

But think about it: in reality, if you were to travel across land from sub-Saharan Africa to Egypt, to Greece, to Scandinavia, what you would see is a gradual change in

typical skin tones. The farther north you go, the lighter skin gets. The closer to the equator, the darker. In between, skin tends to be in between. There is an array, basically a color wheel, not a set of just a few skin colors and hair types and eye shapes. Not only that, people are always intermixing, and they always have.

Attempts to classify races with subcategories inevitably end up breaking down into chaos.

Several years ago, when I went to register my son for middle school, I was asked to check a box. White, or Hispanic not white. Neither of those was a good fit. I am what we call white, my husband is what we call Hispanic not white. My son is both, and neither. I returned the form to the school receptionist. "You have to check a box," she said. "I can't," I told her.

Where did these racial categories come from?

It used to be that when people spoke of races, the notion wasn't tied to skin color at all. On the European continent, for example, people used to think of each other as different races. There were tribal names: the scythians, the celts, the gauls, the germani, the Saxons. Later there were the Greeks, Romans, Francs... races were tied to place and culture, not color, even though color differed. Likewise, looking beyond Europe, ancient Greeks spoke of place and believed skin color was influenced by location. The Greeks themselves were darker than their neighbors to the north.

Of course, humans have always found ways to dominate, oppress, and enslave each other. But the word "slave" comes from "Slav," people of Slavonic tribes who were taken prisoner by Germans and sold to Arabs in the Middle Ages.ⁱⁱ Slavery wasn't based on skin color, and people didn't think of races that way either.

The idea of race, as we know it today, here, developed in connection with the founding of the United States. In particular, it had to do with American slavery challenged the young country's reputation as the land of the free.

Now, you might be surprised to hear that at first, the kind of slavery and freedom that occurred here had nothing to do with skin color either.

The first US census counted "free white males over 16" and "free white males under 16," "free white females," "all other free persons by sex and color," and "slaves." It specified free white people because not all white people were free.

In the early years of the colonies, before Africans were dragged to North American shores, much of the labor was done by indentured servants. 100-130,000 of the Englishmen who came to America were indentured servants, people who were not free until they had purchased their freedom by working off a debt.

Now indentured servitude is not exactly the same as slavery, because it theoretically wasn't lifelong, and it wasn't inherited by children. But indentured servants weren't free. They did not have the same rights as others, and additional time could be added to their tenure if they violated any rules, for example, getting pregnant. And you can imagine how vulnerable a young woman in that situation would be to sexual assault.

Most telling of all, though, was the harshness of their lives. Two-thirds of indentured servants died before achieving their freedom.

Colonists tried enslaving Native Americans—they desperately needed their farming expertise and more workers—but they were hard to track down when they escaped, disappearing as they could into the local native population.

With slaves from Africa, Virginia colonists found a group of people they could easily track. Africans and their children, who inherited their slave status, could not easily blend into the landscape of lighter skinned European descendents, Native Americans, and others.

Still, despite the contrast of light skinned people and Africans slave, peoples we now think of as simply “white,” did not think of themselves as one group. Not even close.

Those who claimed English heritage, for example, often compared the Irish to apes, not only in behavior, but in appearance.

And the influential Scottish essayist and philosopher, Thomas Carlyle, described them as a race of people designed to be dominated.ⁱⁱⁱ Those same kinds of comments would later be made against black people.

Frederick Douglass, who bought his own freedom from slavery and went on to become one of the great public intellectuals of our nation's history, visited Ireland during the famine in 1845, and even he compared the Irish to enslaved blacks in America, describing their similarities both in behavior and physiological appearance right down to the shapes of their foreheads, ankles, and feet. (143 Painter).

Similarity or dissimilarity was more about status and perception than skin color

But you know who didn't buy that comparison? The Irish in America. Seeking to distance themselves from blacks, they supported the pro-slavery democratic party and spoke out against blacks. Meanwhile, the Irish reframed their Celtic Irish cultural history with pride, using, ironically, some of the same logic against the English, who identified as Saxons, that abolitionists would against slavery. Saxons were “natural born thieves” who violently oppressed other peoples with a level of savagery that blatantly contradicted their self-image as civilizers of the world. Their behavior was evidence against them. Touché.

Meanwhile, it wasn't just the Irish who were excluded. In 1848, commenting on a failed Hungarian revolution, Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, “The paddy period lasts

long. Hungary, it seems, must take the yoke again, and Austria, and Italy, and Prussia, and France. Only the English race can be trusted with freedom.”

Light skinned people had been sorted according to heritage and social status. At the same time, in the US, indentured servants worked alongside slaves of African descent, socializing with and even marrying them.

For people in power, this was a problem. If oppressed peoples got together, they might stage an uprising. So a concerted effort was launched to make light skinned people see themselves as better than dark skinned.

Also at that time, the existence of slaves in America was becoming hard to reconcile with our reputation as the “land of the free.” As the anti-slavery movement began to grow strong, the pro-slavery side had to come up with new arguments.

Inspired by Thomas Jefferson’s reflections that there surely must be a deep down fundamental difference between black and white people, they turned to science for proof that Africans were naturally destined for oppression, and that they were inherently inferior not only to the English, but to all “whites.”

This is when the modern idea of race was born.^{iv} The idea of race as biologically distinct groups of humans, evident in skin color.

For the next two hundred years, scientists studied black bodies intensely, measuring heads, ears, feet, and more, and publishing a heap of damning articles.

Their opinions were compelling enough that the so called science that white Americans developed was later used by the Nazis to support the Holocaust.

But for all their effort, they never actual found any proof.

What about Native Americans? Where did they fit in to the racializing? In his famous work “Notes on the State of Virginia,” Thomas Jefferson described Native Americans as being like whites. He admired how they had fought to maintain freedom and land. The problem, he said, was culture. They had not been “civilized.” In order to avoid an Indian war along the entire frontier, whites set out to civilize them by converting them to Christianity and sending their children to boarding schools. Richard Allen, a policy analyst in the Cherokee Nation, says, “the civilization policy was to make us brown white men.”^v

Obviously, race categories have changed over time. Mexicans, too, were classified as white until 1930.^{vi} A Mexican or Mexican-American person who is 86 years old or older has had their race changed—by our government— during their lifetime. Another example of *Yo no cruzé la frontera, la frontera me cruzó*: I didn’t cross the border, the border crossed me.

And during Jim Crow, the legal definition of “black” was left up to the states. In one state, having one black grandparent made you black. In another state, there was a

“one drop” rule—any African American ancestry *at all* would do it. So you could literally cross a state line and change races.

I want to return for a moment to the racial battle that had ensued within light skinned America, and especially to Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Emerson was vocal in his opinions about these things, strongly favoring the Saxons over all others. We tend not to be familiar with these writings of his. We are more familiar with him as a lover of nature, a critic of American society, and a father of transcendentalism. He was deeply influenced by philosophy from India, particularly the belief that all is one. In his essay the Oversoul, he wrote these beautiful words:

...within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related, the eternal ONE. ... We see the world piece by piece, as the sun, the moon, the animal, the tree; but the whole, of which these are shining parts, is the soul.

Although he abandoned the Unitarian faith, Emerson had a profound influence on our tradition. The existence of an interfaith mural in a Unitarian Universalist church can be traced, in part, to Emerson’s theology and his curiosity about world religions. His words are among the readings in the back of our hymnals.

And yet, for all his words about the unity of all things, what we don’t remember about him is that when Emerson spoke of Americans and wrote so eloquently about their place in the world, what he really meant was a particular kind of white men.

I wish we could say he was merely a man of his times, not enlightened enough to rise above his era. But he helped to shape the ideas of those times, not only denouncing Austrians, Italians, Prussians, and the French, as in his words I shared a few minutes ago, but also black people. He was against slavery, but for racism. In particular, he elevated, and at length, the English ideal of beauty: tall, blonde, with a red and white complexion and blue eyes—norms of white beauty that we still see dominating fashion magazines today. Norms that I aspired to as a little girl—how I wished to be taller! So close. But my people were Irish.

He wrote a book called “English Traits,” and essays called “Genius of the Anglo-Saxon Race,” and “Traits and Genius of the Anglo Saxon Race” and “The Anglo-American.” Oof.

Nell Irvin Painter, emerita professor of American History at Princeton, calls him “the philosopher king of American white race theory” (151).^{vii}

Let us build not just monuments to the good works of our heroes, but movements from their failures.

Here’s the thing, friends. We now know that we all come from Africa. And that, while the ethnic heritages that developed across the globe over the 100 or 200,000 years

since created an amazing array of diversity, *race* as distinct categories of people, is an illusion.

No significant genetic differences exist between people of different “races.” Thanks to science today, we now know that there is no marker that all people of a certain race share, and that others outside their race don’t have. No such thing exists.

And we know that your DNA differs as much from someone within your race as it does from someone of another race, and you are as much of a match for someone of a different race as you are for someone of your own.^{viii} The biological differences that create visible difference—skin, hair, eyes—truly are only skin deep.

Race, including whiteness, is a state of mind. But it is a state of mind with profound consequences.

Nothing could illustrate this better than the story of Gregory Williams. Williams is a law professor and has been the president of two universities. He looks about like the kind of guy Hollywood would cast as a university president: white, balding, glasses, suit. Until age nine, he says, he lived “a comfortable life as the son of a wealthy white Virginia restaurant owner.”

He attended whites only schools, skating rinks, and theaters. He bought what he wanted when he wanted it, and felt sure he would be able to make his life whatever he wanted it to be. There seemed to be no barriers for him, and he took that for granted. Until the year he turned ten. That’s when his father’s alcoholism and physical abuse became overwhelming to his mother, and she fled with as many of her children as she could handle, which was just the two youngest ones, leaving Williams and his brother in their father’s custody.

The fall from there was precipitous. His father lost his entire fortune. They lived on the run from debt collectors, and when they couldn’t scrounge up a meal from dumpster diving, the father begged for quarters to buy the boys a school lunch, and that would be their only meal of the day. Harsh, harsh poverty.

Eventually they boarded a bus from Virginia to Muncie, Indiana. Williams was relieved, thinking they were going to see their mother’s mother, who would take them in and save them from this poverty.

But as they approached their destination, their father leaned over said quietly, “Remember Miss Sally?” Williams did. She was the black woman who cooked for them sometimes.

“She’s my mama, and she’s your grandmother,” he told the boys.

Williams couldn’t believe it at first. He’d been taught his father was Italian or Greek. Well, it was always kind of fuzzy, now that he thought about it. Looking more closely now at his father he realized it was true: his father was the son of a black woman.

And according to America’s “one drop” rule this made Williams black, too.

And so, when they pulled into Muncie, it was to the black part of town.

Now Williams and his brother were black. They lived in a black neighborhood, and went to black schools and black pools. They had access to the same resources, or lack of them, that other black people in that town had, and, like other black people, Williams and his brother were shut out by that white grandmother they'd so hoped would help them. She even called them the n-word.

Miss Sally was too angry and hurt by their family's earlier rejection of her, to tend to the boys who had landed in her care, and she didn't have enough money to feed them. When they applied for government assistance, they were told the boys had a father who could work and provide for the kids, and it wasn't the government's fault if he didn't. They boys often went hungry.

Eventually, it was Miss Sally's friend, Miss Dora Serene, who showed them love and kindness, and though she couldn't fix their poverty or her own, she shared the bits of food she brought home from her work for a white family. And that's how Williams carried on through the remainder of his childhood.

In the Hebrew scriptures, in the section called Judges 12, there is a story about an ancient battle. In it, the leader Jephthah rallies his fellow men of Gilead to fight the Ephraimites. Ethnically, the two groups were related. The Gileadites and the Ephraimites both had semitic ancestry. Their heritage was so close, that no one could tell who belonged to which group, just by looking.

So after the men of Gilead had prevailed, they had to come up with a clever way to figure out which survivors were friends and which were the enemy. Here's what they did; Guarding the way to Ephraim, they set up a checkpoint. Whenever a man tried to pass through, the soldiers made him say the word "shibboleth." Shibboleth, shibboleth, the men said. But when one said "sibboleth," he was killed on the spot. You see, the Ephraimites had an accent. Sibboleth was the way they would say it, in their regional dialect.

Shibboleth has come to mean a password, or a catchword or formula adopted by a group for the purpose of including their followers and excluding all others.

Race has become a shibboleth, a formula for excluding people who are actually like the excluders. We see it playing out today in white norms of beauty, in economic and criminal justice discrimination, in access to healthcare and education. Prohibition was rooted in racism against Irish and Germans who were displaying their culture via pubs. Today the racism is reflected in the fear of "a taco truck on every corner."

There is a name for all this: it is white supremacy. That's a hateful phrase, isn't it? It sounds to my ears like something that is far away from me. When I hear it I think of some of the boys and men I imagined I was getting away from when I left the small, rural Oregon town where I grew up. White men with violence in their eyes. But that outward violence is only one manifestation of white supremacy.

And we still have, long after Jim Crow was the *explicit* law of the land, some de-facto segregation. Churches are still some of the most segregated spaces in the country. Our church is part of that, too: we have proportionally more people here who think of themselves as white, than you'll find in the community outside our doors. We haven't figured out how to overcome it. And I know you want to! How often I've heard members of this congregation express a longing for more diversity here, for our congregation, which is gathered out of reverence for life and deep love for fellow humans and for this world, to deeply reflect the human community of which we are a part.

To that I say, that if we truly value diversity, then the first task is not convincing new people to show up. The first task is for this congregation to become deeply committed to dismantling racism. In society, and especially within ourselves. We all have it, including me, because we have been steeped in it since we were born.

We've begun that work. Sermons like this are a part of it, and over the last couple of years, our diversity task force has held workshops, book groups, and other events, with a total attendance of nearly 150 people.

But we could use some more members, especially people of color, on this team. If you could see yourself in that role, I'd love to talk with you.

I did my ministerial internship in Concord, Massachusetts where Emerson lived, at First Parish in Concord, where Emerson's grandfather pastored, and which Emerson attended. I stood at Emerson's grave there, in Sleepy Hollow Cemetery. All around it lay the headstones of the other townspeople, and if you know some of the backstories, what is striking about it is how many of them hated each other, only to wind up being even closer neighbors in death than they were in life.

We humans are all in this together. Let us devote ourselves to learning and loving one another in the time we have together, that we may leave a better life for the generations that follow.

ⁱ You can see Bosnick's post here:

https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=10105359509007789&id=838277

ⁱⁱ Race: the power of an illusion. *Background reading.*

http://www.pbs.org/race/000_About/002_04-background-02-12.htm

ⁱⁱⁱ Painter 134

^{iv} For more about the relationship between slavery, abolition, and race, see:

http://www.pbs.org/race/000_About/002_04-background-02-09.htm

^v Race: The Power of an Illusion, ep. 2.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NGLsn80_Lvk

^{vi} http://www.pbs.org/race/000_About/002_04-background-02-12.htm

vii Painter, Nell Irvin. *The History of White People*. W.W. Norton and Co.: New York, 2010.

viii *Race: the power of an illusion*. PBS.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B7_YHur3G9g