

First Unitarian Church

October 7, 2018

Can you believe it's October? Our theological theme this month is *formation*. Formation, as in giving shape to, molding, or developing. Formation is a deeply spiritual theme because it goes right to the questions What Am I? And What Are We?

We are always changing. Forming, re-forming, growing.

One of the foundational principles in Buddhism is impermanence—everything is changing all the time. The practice of mindfulness helps us to be present with what is instead of obsessing over the past or future.

We too are changing. We are in formation all throughout our lives. This can be both exciting and distressing. We may or may not be conscious of all the formation taking place. Alice Walker names that in this morning's reading.ⁱ "We may feel hostile or angry or weepy and hysterical, or we may feel depressed," she says. "It would never occur to us, unless we stumbled on a book or a person who explained to us, that we were in fact in the process of change..."

But it's also wonderful of course. It's wonderful to be in formation because there is always unfolding potential, and we may become, as Walker puts it "larger, spiritually, than we were before."

In some ways we form ourselves—for example by the kind of information or education we seek out, how open we decide to be to change, and the influences we build into our lives.

And we have a formative influence on others. There's a saying in Spanish, "Dime con quién andas y te diré quien eres." Tell me who you hang out with and I'll tell you who you are. The wisdom in that saying is that the people around us have a formative influence on us. We don't become exactly like the people around us though. Some relationships teach us a lot about what we are not, or don't wish to be.

Sometimes we choose formative influences in our lives, and other things are beyond our control.

Race is a formational influence that touches all of us. It is relational. It operates beyond our control. I want to talk about that today. In particular, I want to talk about something that people of color often notice but that is hard for white people to put a finger on. I want to talk about some patterns of behavior white people exhibit around race and racism, and why they do so.

So, easy sermon today. (Well, not easy. But important. Really important.)

First, a word about this “they” I just mentioned. I am white. When I say “they” about white people, I am talking about a group to which I belong. I cannot speak from another racial perspective.

But when I say “we” in this pulpit, I want that “we” to be everybody. And so I’m going to speak of white people and people of color, you’ll hear me say “they” for each even though I myself am in one of those groups. When I say “we” I want to be talking about all of us who are here this morning. But yes, I am white, and the patterns I’m going to describe are certainly familiar from my own life.

In the years I have served as a minister here at First Unitarian, I have heard from many of you, and often, that you wish our congregation were more racially diverse. It was one of the longings expressed in last year’s ministerial search process, when about 450 of you filled out a big survey expressing your hopes and dreams for our congregation.

I, too, would love to see our congregation grow to reflect the community in which we live, and not reflect, as Malcolm X and James Baldwin and Martin Luther King Jr put it, “the most segregated hour in America.”

But a group that is ninety- to -ninety-five percent white, as I think this congregation is, has its work cut out for it if it wants to diversify. The reason has to do with the way white people navigate race and talk (or don’t talk) about racism.

By talking about it in the way I’m about to, I’ll be naming some things that are likely familiar to those of us who are people of color. But I’ll bet it’s going to push a few buttons for those of us who identify as white. And... well, the fact that white people have those buttons and they are so touchy is kind of the point.

White people, including progressive white people, tend to be really averse to hearing themselves generalized as “whites,” and to receiving feedback about their race-based behavior.

Robin Diangelo is a long time antiracism trainer who has seen this aversion in action a lot.ⁱⁱ Organizations hire her to come in and do anti-racism trainings for their staffs. Often the companies are looking to diversify, and hope the trainings will help. Diangelo starts with some theoretical information about racism and the way being white comes with a lot of privileges white people may not think about.

That usually goes okay, although inevitably some whites will argue that they do not see race or benefit from their whiteness. The group discussion is where it gets really tricky. A pattern emerges. Diangelo has seen it countless times.

It goes something like this: A white person in the group makes a comment that is racially insensitive. They may not mean to do it and they may not know what is wrong with the comment. Sometimes the problem with their words has to do with the larger context or history of racism, of which they may be totally unaware.

When Diangelo gives them feedback about what was problematic, they become upset. They say she has misunderstood them. They say they feel attacked. Often they will present “evidence” that they cannot possibly be racist, such as

- having marched for civil rights in the 60s,
- or having worked or lived in a diverse context,
- or being poor,
- or already having studied racism at some point,
- or having friends who are people of color,
- or having experienced a different kind of oppression in their own lives, such as gender oppression
- or having come from oppressed ancestors, such as the Irish

Diangelo says when confronted about their racism, white people often become angry, anxious, or withdraw. They may cry, or accuse her of being the racist one, or of making them feel guilty.

They’ll say things like “I guess I can’t say anything right then! I’m just going to stop talking!”

Okay, I know what she’s talking about. Do you? I’ve seen this happen. I’ve *done* these things. I’ve said things to the effect of “I’m not like the other white people!” Which, it turns out, is a super white thing to say. It’s part of a pattern of behavior that white people do.

Diangelo used to find these responses flabbergasting. Even in workshops where people voluntarily sign up to learn about racism, they exhibit tremendous resistance to hearing when their own behavior reflects the influence of racism or has a racist impact.

Why is that?

She came to see that white people think in terms of *intent* when they think of racism. White people think in terms of *intent* when they think of racism. They tend to think that if a person doesn’t intend to be racist, then they aren’t racist.

And they also think of racism in binaries. Racist is bad. Not racist is good. Racist is associated with violence, hatred, and openly avowing white supremacy. Not racist is associated with equity and caring.

According to this binary, for a white person to acknowledge their racism is to place themselves in the same camp as the KKK. Hence, most white people react with moral outrage when their racism, which is often unconscious, is pointed out. They take it really personally. This is true even in spaces—such as Diangelo’s classes—designed to help white people learn about these things.

Diangelo coined a phrase for this pattern of behavior: white fragility. The fragility is an emotional fragility: freaking out, instead of being curious and committed to ongoing formation.

These defensive behaviors have the effect of shutting down important conversations in which white people could learn to see racism happening, and to interact more thoughtfully with people of color. Without those conversations, we are prevented from moving forward as a society.

To recap: white people's desire to not be racist leads them to become very defensive when their own unintentional racism is pointed out, which actually protects racism by making it undiscussable. That is a major reason why when you get a lot of white people together, it can be hard to diversify.

Case in point: At least a couple of times per year, I hear a story from a person of color who visited or is part of our congregation, who experienced unintentionally racist behavior from white people here. The visitors typically do not return. These are just the stories that someone has the courage to share with me.

Right now, some of you are probably wishing I would not acknowledge that from the pulpit. Isn't saying this unwelcoming to people of color? But I doubt what I'm saying is surprising to people of color.

White people are the ones who have a hard time recognizing it when it happens. That's why I'm talking about it this morning, even though it's super uncomfortable to do so. There has not been one case when the person of color who experienced it reported that a white bystander intervened. And I know this congregation cares a lot about these things. So there is some learning to do.

Maya Angelou said, "Do the best you can until you know better. When you know better, do better."

If we wish to live less segregated lives and have a more diverse church, then those of us who identify as white must learn to talk to each other about this. Those of us who are white have to develop a capacity to be with our racial discomfort so that we can grow beyond it.

Undoing racism is the work—the ongoing conversation—of a lifetime. It's an uncomfortable one. It takes humility. It takes inner strength and some grace. It takes presence, and self forgiveness, and forgiveness of others, and community, and compassion. If these are starting to sound like spiritual values, they are. That's why church is a good place to talk about these things.

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I want to say a few things about the bigger context in our country. About the context in which white people learn to be white. It's helpful for understanding why the patterns seem to be so intractable.

In her book by that title Learning to Be White, the Unitarian Universalist theologian and race scholar Thandeka recounts stories euro-Americans have shared with her about when they first became conscious of having a race (whiteness).ⁱⁱⁱ Diangelo notes that people of color usually can't recall a time when they weren't aware of race. They were already aware of it in their earliest memories. But most white people do remember a time when they learned about it. Why is that?

It has to do with the experience of belonging. From birth, white people are surrounded with a culture that presents whiteness as the norm. From the faces on TV to the ones on the cover of parenting books and billboards, whiteness is presented as the default. Dolls and cartoon characters are almost all white. School teachers are almost all white- 82%. If something is called "flesh colored," like bandaids or nylon stockings, white people will find that to be accurate.

Characters in children's and young adult books—almost all white. White people aren't typically referred to as "white people." They're just people. When hearing a story, the assumption is typically that the person in the story is white unless the storyteller says otherwise. In this way, whites are presented as normal humans while people of color are presented as special kinds of human. And many whites live in highly segregated lives, interacting with few if any people of color.

The effect of this is that most of the time white people don't have to think about race. They don't have to think of themselves as part of the group called "whites," nor do most whites get routinely reminded of it. People of color do get reminded of their race, regularly, when they do not experience the same sense of belonging. This is why people of color tend to have been aware of race from their earliest memories, while white people can usually remember their first awareness of racial difference.

My earliest memory of race is of hearing a story I've been told about myself. I heard the story told many times as I was growing up. In the story, I was about four years old and my family had just moved into the home I would grow up in. My family was all white. Our new neighbors across the street were Mexican American. One day, not long after we had arrived, my mom saw me lying outside in the sun, and told me to come in so I wouldn't get a sunburn. I replied that I wanted to stay out there "until I can speak Spanish."

Apparently, I believed the family across the street could speak Spanish because of their brown skin color, and that if I could make myself more tan, I'd be able to speak Spanish, too. Adults always laughed at this story.

What was so funny about it? The mistaken guesses children make about the way the world works are certainly cute. But I also think they were laughing at my sideways way of pointing out something that *nice* white people would otherwise consider impolite: that the neighbors had brown skin. The adults' reaction clued me in that there was something to learn, and I should pay attention to it if I didn't want to be childish. I absorbed that message. So much so that today I find it very uncomfortable to tell this story.

The lessons white children absorb about race are often subtle, but their impact is huge. Here's another example: as a teenager I was warned not to drive through black neighborhoods in the nearest city because they were "dangerous." The neighborhood my family lived in an hour away was sometimes disrupted by street fights, drug busts, and audible if not visible domestic violence. It was rife with sexual abuse and sexual violence. Guns were widespread. But no one expressed much alarm about where we lived.

The real message was clear.

Meanwhile, no white person I knew ever described the absence of people of color as detrimental. The town I lived in was mostly white, but this was not considered a problem. This absence of concern also conveyed a lesson about race.

People there did not seem to worry that we were missing important perspectives or possible friendships. In fact, so many parts of public life are all or mostly white, it seems normal for people of color to be absent.

Diangelo provides some statistics that reveal the extent of it:

- US congress: 90% white
- US governors: 96% white
- Top military advisors: 100% white
- US presidential cabinet: 91% white
- People who decide which TV shows we see: 93% white
- People who decide which books we read: 90% white
- People who decide which news is covered: 85% white
- People who decide which music is produced: 95% white
- Teachers: 82% white
- Full time college professors: 84% white

In addition, the ten richest Americans are all white, and seven of them are among the ten richest people in the world.

The groups she lists are some of the most powerful groups in the country for shaping laws, culture, and what Americans consider it worthwhile to study. The result is a society in which people of color are more likely than whites to face a host of obstacles, including poverty, incarceration, failing schools, inadequate healthcare, or barriers to voting, just to cite a few examples.

But we don't accuse congress of "identity politics."

The civil rights movement changed the laws but it did not end racism. This is what racism looks like nowadays. And this is meant by the phrase "white supremacy culture." Many white people take offense at that phrase because it evokes the image of violent hooded men in the Jim Crow south.

But the notion that whiteness is supreme, best, first, is manifested in the way power works in our society and in what is idealized. Which is to say, the way power is held mostly by white people, and whiteness is held up as the norm.

For white people, it is very hard to become conscious of all of these things that have been presented as so normal, and it is hard to see how a comment that is not intended to be racist could reflect the racism around us that white people cannot see.

Tough topic, right? Brings up a lot of feelings. It gets messy fast. As I prepared this message, I kept thinking of the words of the writer Willa Cather. She said, "There are some things you learn best in calm, and some in storm."

This is a really stormy time in our country for race relations. That also makes it a great time for learning and formation.

In her workshops, Diangelo, who is white, says she has often asked people of color how often they've given white people feedback about their behavior, and how often that has gone well for them. She says this question leads to head shaking and sometimes laughter. Then she asks, "What would it be like if you could simply give us feedback, have us graciously receive it, reflect, and work to change the behavior?" Recently, one man of color sighed and said, "It would be revolutionary."

Revolutionary! Well. This is achievable. At First Unitarian, we are going to keep working on this, and other issues of diversity and dismantling racism.

Here's an opportunity for today: we're going to hold some study groups that will read Diangelo's book, which is called *White Fragility*. The groups will meet for about six sessions. In the Social Hall after this service, you'll find a table with sign up sheets where you can put your contact info down to receive more info. Anyone who wants to read and reflect on the book is welcome to join one of the study groups.

If you are a person of color, you may also be interested in another kind of group. Our ministerial intern Jane Davis, my husband Carlos Herrera, Dan's wife Emily Kuo Lillie, and First Unitarian member Gil Gutierrez are interested in forming a group just for people of color at First Unitarian. If you would also be interested in exploring this idea, add your name to the contact list on the connections table (that's the table you pass before you get to the social hall). (Or email jdavis@uuabq.org). The group will decide what it wants its mission to be, and will have access to lots of resources fellow UUs of color have developed across the country.

Together, let's create as many opportunities as we can to grow in spirit, in service, and in love.

ⁱ From Walker's book *Living By the Word*.

ii Stories and info about Diangelo are drawn from her book White Fragility. Beacon Press: Boston, 2018.

iii Thandeka. Learning to Be White: Money, Race, and God in America. Continuum: New York, 1999.