

## Justice Doesn't Have a Snooze Button

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August 27, 2017

All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City

There was a lot of news this week, as usual in these times. Our week started with Charlottesville and the violent display of white supremacists or Nazis that led to the death of Heather Heyer. And then the glorious celestial event of the solar eclipse. What a contrast to the Saturday before with people gathering with strangers in parks and on the street, sharing special glasses and sharing a once in a life time experience.

And then there was 45 who tweeted a meme, which is something like a cartoon or image that makes a statement, in four panels of 45 eclipsing President Obama and calling it the best eclipse ever. I am not sure who created the meme but the science was probably not exactly what 45 meant to say. But it did convey other messages, one of which is clearly racist.

Some people I have talked to don't see the racism in a White man moving to block out a Black one. Which reminds me of a rally I was at last Sunday in Asbury Park. Several hundred liberal folks gathered together to protest anti-racism, anti-Semitism, and the violence of the neo-Nazis in Charlottesville. I could tell by some of the statements said that some folks still don't understand the depth of the problem in America and that Charlottesville is not a result of 45's election but a long, long history of a country founded on racism.

This was not unfamiliar to me. Before I found Unitarian Universalism, I am embarrassed to say, that I lived a very sheltered life in the sphere of my parent's conservative, military world. My parents are from poor families in West Virginia and to make a life for themselves my father worked hard to get one of two positions at the Naval Academy. In his mind, it was either that or the coal mines. He graduated in 1964 and together they served our country in the Navy for 27 years first as an officer and then as a diplomat. My world growing up was sheltered, as I said. I didn't know about gay people. I didn't know about transgendered people. I had little knowledge of Black or Brown people. I had little understanding of oppression or discrimination. I didn't know people were poor. I had no idea about oppression or injustice. Not really. I was quite naïve.

But then I found Unitarian Universalism, and it was here, in this faith, that the scales were pulled from my eyes and for the first time I saw clearly how grossly unfair and unjust the world has been and continues to be to people of color, to LGBTQ folks, to poor people, to women. I saw how people who were not white or men or straight were marginalized, oppressed and kept silent. Here is the irony, at least for me, of Unitarian Universalism. Unitarian Universalism, a religion predominately made up of white folks, woke me up to my privileges as a white person and led me to seminary where I woke up even more.

At church, many of my new friends helped me to wake up. I also had a mentor, Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley, an African-American minister at Community Church where I was a member. She introduced me to musicians, poets, activists, and writers I never knew existed. She'd say, you know Stokely Carmichael or Bayard Rustin or Angela Davis and when I looked at her blankly she'd hand me a book or tell me stories or instruct me to do some research. After one particularly intense workshop at the church before I even considered seminary she looked me squarely in the eye and asked me to promise her to stay at the table, the table of dismantling racism. I did. And every time I think I might sit something out or not speak my convictions, I hear her voice in my ear telling me to keep at the table, to keep on.

My mentor in seminary was Professor Dale Irvin. I started seminary in 1993 and one of the first classes I was required to take was called Critical Interpretation. The professor asked us a not so

simple question- how does our race affect how we see the world, approach ministry, affect our relationships, or understanding of the Bible? I am still to this day embarrassed to say that I wrote that my being white had nothing to do with how I read the Bible or saw the world. I had no idea!

Well, I got a B on that paper and went to see this professor to talk about it. Professor Irvin was very gentle with me as he slowly talked me through how by being white comes with certain privileges and advantages that other people don't have. He talked about racism and our culture. On and on he talked. He sat with me for two hours and patiently explained to me that how I saw the world had a direct relationship to who I was as a woman, a white person, a daughter of a Naval officer, and on and on. He explained how everything, everything about who I am influences how I see the world. Then, he sat there patiently as I cried because how could someone be so ignorant at the age of 28? I still cringe when I tell this story. I felt like a terrible person for not knowing about the society, the world I lived in.

David R. Williams, a Harvard sociologist, writes, "As an American raised in this society with negative implicit biases against black people, you are not a bad person. You are simply a normal American. We have to come to grips with the reality that this racism is so deeply embedded in our culture that it shapes how we see the world, it shapes our beliefs, our behavior, our actions toward members of other groups..."

Our society and white supremacy is like the story David Foster Wallace tells of the fish swimming in the water. They have no idea what water is even though they are swimming in it. We are swimming in a culture of white supremacy but because it is so deeply embedded in our culture and in who we are we do not necessarily see it.

I woke up to it with the help of this religion and patient, kind mentors like Dale and Marjorie. And, in fact, others who were less patient and kind.

Other people have woken up in different ways, right? Or maybe you were awake your whole life because of the circumstance of who you are and where you were born and how you were raised. However, and whenever it happens, we must all wake up, we must wake up and we must stay awake.

In 1966, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. gave the Ware Lecture at the Unitarian Universalist General Assembly. He began with the story of Rip Van Winkle who fell asleep under the rule of King George the Third and awoke 20 years later when George Washington was president. Rip Van Winkle had slept through the revolution. In his speech, he admonished his listeners to not sleep through the revolution he saw coming.

Well, that was fifty some years ago, and perhaps we have been asleep. Or we have simply tried to ignore it. Or perhaps we have suffered in ways that had us put aside what we were seeing. But Charlottesville was yet again another wake up call. I say another because the alarm has been going off for decades and yet we keep pressing the snooze button. But, we cannot sleep through what is going on today. We cannot sleep through the boiling tension in our country. Justice doesn't have a snooze button. So we must stay awake as Martin Luther King asked us to do. Or in the language of the #Blacklivesmatter movement: #staywoke

**So, today we must still stay awake, #staywoke:**

Racism is who we are. Charlottesville was shocking and terrifying because the racism was right in our faces and a person lost her life. But this racism is not new. We should not be shocked.

John Metta who wrote a challenging sermon called "I, Racist" which was delivered shortly after the church shooting in Charleston said,

*But here is the irony, here's the thing that all the angry Black people know, and no calmly debating White people want to admit: The entire discussion of race in America centers around the protection of White feelings. Ask any Black person and they'll tell you the same thing. The reality of thousands of innocent people raped, shot, imprisoned, and systematically disenfranchised are less important than the suggestion that a single White person might be complicit in a racist system.*

*This is the country we live in. Millions of Black lives are valued less than a single White person's hurt feelings. White people and Black people are not having a discussion about race. Black people, thinking as a group, are talking about living in a racist system. White people, thinking as individuals, refuse to talk about "I, racist" and instead protect their own individual and personal goodness. In doing so, they reject the existence of racism.*

*... people are dying not because individuals are racist, but because individuals are helping support a racist system by wanting to protect their own non-racist self-beliefs. People are dying because we are supporting a racist system that justifies White people killing Black people. We see this in the way that one Muslim killer is a sign of Islamic terror; in the way one Mexican thief is a pointer to the importance of border security; in one innocent, unarmed Black man is shot in the back by a cop, then sullied in the media as a thug and criminal. A white person smoking pot is a "Hippie" and a Black person doing it is a "criminal." It's evident in the school to prison pipeline and the fact that there are close to 20 people of color in prison for every white person.*

*Racism is so deeply embedded in this country not because of the racist right-wing radicals who practice it openly, it exists because of the silence and hurt feelings of liberal America. All the Black voices in the world speaking about racism all the time do not move White people to think about it... Black people can't change it while White people are silent and deaf to our words.*

*White people are in a position of power in this country because of racism. The question is: Are they brave enough to use that power to speak against the system that gave it to them?*

### **Today we must still stay awake, #staywoke:**

Because Black Lives Matter is not about lifting one group up at the expense of another. It is about focusing on one group that has been consistently oppressed so that this long-marginalized group of people are treated with fairness, inclusion and equity.

Because police brutality towards Black and Brown people is not new but historical. Because the old Jim Crow of suppression is now the new Jim Crow of incarceration. Because poverty and drugs and violence are too familiar a world to one group of people more so than any other.

Because when someone sees a house on fire they don't go save every house on the block because all houses matter; they focus on the house that is burning. Because when there is a cancer in the body the doctor doesn't treat every other ailment of the patient because they all matter; they focus on the cancer.

### **Today we must still stay awake, #staywoke:**

Politicians like 45, Paul Ryan, Mitch McConnell do not respect the inherent worth and dignity of all people but rather encourage through their words, actions, and blatant inactions violence towards those who are deemed "other:" Hispanics, Black and Brown people, LGBTQI people, immigrants, and on and on. We need to hold them accountable when their words diminish the humanity of any person.

### **Today we must still stay awake, #staywoke:**

Because disliking or even attacking “political correctness” should never be an excuse to deny another person their dignity and respect. And while freedom of speech is an important and treasured part of our lives as Americans, freedom of speech should not be misused so that one can say whatever they want about people because this does not strengthen community but weakens it. Political correctness at its worst suppresses freedom of speech but at its best it helps us establish and maintain the worth and dignity of all.

**Today we must still stay awake, #staywoke:**

Because our democracy matters. And faith matters.

There is a story of faith that equates life to a state of darkness. Faith comes in when we walk into the darkness and believe there will be a place to set our foot. Faith also comes in when we believe that there will be others around to aid us through the darkness. These two kinds of faith are what we need in today’s political climate.

First, we need to be optimistic that we can affect change and that our voices matter. We cannot let cynicism prevent us from showing up at the voting booth, showing up with our signs of protest, or showing up to aid a neighbor. Hope matters! And while hope and optimism are not the same thing, they walk hand and hand.

Second, nothing worthwhile gets done alone. We need each other to make a difference in our communities and in our country. We like to talk about rugged individualism as a hallmark of being an American but that is a myth. Anything of lasting importance and value has happened because people came together to make it happen.

**Today we must still stay awake, #staywoke:**

Because religious freedom should be not about discrimination or separation or subjugation. Because our religion calls us to be radially inclusive and to stand by love and to open wide our doors and our hearts and to put our hands and our feet to work until everyone, everyone knows justice, equity and compassion.

Social justice is a long conversation. We each must stay at the table and continue to have the conversations and as we do we will begin to change people and create the world we dream about into one that of reality. I believe change can happen. I believe people can change their hearts and minds through conversation and relationship. I have seen it happen.

One last story. Two years ago, many people, including Unitarian Universalists, from around the country went to Selma, Alabama to honor and remember the march across the Edmund Pettis Bridge. I was there that day, too. After the march, I talked to my father, who wanted to know why it was important for me to be there. I told him ultimately it was an act of solidarity and a commitment to those who are oppressed in this country. With a catch in his throat he said he wanted to do that too, as did my mom.

On a very hot day in July, my mother, leaning on a cane and walking on her two new knees walked across the bridge. When we returned, I rolled dad out into the 104 heat in his wheelchair. He told me not to touch the chair; this he wanted to do himself. And he did, tears in his eyes, determination in his jaw, in two minutes less than my mom.

Justice will come, my friends, one step at a time. Amen.