**It’s Always the Right Time**

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**Unitarian Society of Hartford 8/30/15**

**www.ushartford.com**

*The “reading” for the day was John Gorka’s song “Ignorance and Privilege.” You can watch and listen here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vp\_Yez3ZhJs*

I don’t know many songs by white musicians singing about white privilege. This song is not about guilt or shame or denial, but a telling of Gorka’s life story through song.

*“I was born to ignorance, and lesser poverties*

*I was born to privilege that I did not see*

*Lack of pigment in my skin, won a free and easy in*

*I didn't know it, but my way was paved” (Gorka)*

What Gorka sings rings true for me. My way was paved with white privilege and class privilege, that my family has accumulated over many generations.

Some of you may know the exercise where everyone starts on the same line, then the facilitator reads out statements and asks people to take a step forward if they are true for you. Things like:

* It was assumed from a young age that I would go to college.
* I am not followed when I enter a store.
* I feel good about how my culture is portrayed by the media
* I grew up in a house owned by my parents.

You can imagine what begins to happen in a diverse group – some people end up at the front of the room (like me), and some never take a step forward. It becomes a visual, embodied image of inequality and how it accumulates across generations. The group becomes spread out by advantages and disadvantages that the individuals involved did nothing to earn, but were simply born into – into these things that have a huge impact on our lives. This is what privilege looks like.

Most of these privilege aren’t bad, they’re things everyone should have! I want to live in a world where EVERYONE has access to quality education, the ability to do one’s daily activities without being followed or harassed, and safe and comfortable housing they can afford. But that’s not the world we live in. We live in a world where too many people – people of color, immigrants, poor folks, queer folks, and disabled folks don’t have these privileges. Some of us here don’t have these privileges that everyone SHOULD have.

*“If the wind is at your back and you never turn around*

*You may never know the wind is there*

*You may never hear the sound”* (Gorka)

Some of us have wind at our back, while others are running headlong into the wind. For those of us with white privilege, we have the luxury to not think about the wind. To simply let it propel us forward without turning around to see it pushing others back. Today, I invite us to turn around, and to talk to one another about racism and white privilege. To talk about how it pains us that the world is so unequal. About what we can do to ensure that everyone has the privileges that the cosmic roll of the dice gave me – and many of you- upon birth.

Ta-Nehisi Coates, national correspondent at *The Atlantic* was here in Hartford to receive the Stowe Prize a couple months ago. John Dankosky asked him, “How did you time your landmark piece on reparations in The Atlantic to be so relevant?” Coates answered, (to paraphrase) “it is always the right time.”

It IS always the right time.

“There have only been nine days this year when the police have not killed somebody.”[[1]](#endnote-1)  Blacks are killed at twice the rate of whites. It is always the right time.

Richard Leslie spoke a couple weeks ago about his own (white) family’s experience with the prison system, and how different that is from the experience of the majority of people of color who are arrested. It is always the right time.

Here, the Sheff case is in its 26th year of addressing the problem of schools that are still separate and still unequal in the Hartford region.[[2]](#endnote-2) 26 years! It is always the right time to talk about racism.

Those of you here who are people of color, and who have family members who who are Black, brown, Asian, native, and mixed, you know this. It is always the right time.

Some of you live with the fear that your sweet and rambunctious child may someday say or do something that evokes a violent response from police. You endure a thousand paper cuts of slights, insults, and misunderstandings because of your race – some of them right here in your spiritual home.[[3]](#endnote-3)

To the folks of color here: I want you to know that we are beginning to create opportunities specifically for people of color here. I’m working with Gloria Mengual and Vanessa Gonzalez-Rivera, our new Social Justice Council Co-Chairs, on some possibilities for spiritual deepening and support specifically for people of color here. And today, I ask your patience, because this sermon is primarily for the white folks here.

White folks: we need to talk!

Last week, we came home to our still-new house and there were three young men, all African American, sitting on our next door neighbor’s back porch. None of the three young white men who live there were home. All of a sudden, racism started exploding inside my head. “Why would my white, straight, male neighbors have 3 Black guys sitting on their back porch? What are they doing there with their backpacks? Is my neighborhood safe?” My mind raced as I drove off to do an errand. As I drove away, I reflected on the thoughts racing in my head. I got really sad that our society is so segregated that it seemed strange to me that my white neighbors would have Black friends. Really? In 2015?!

When I came back later, not surprisingly, the African American guys from the porch were inside hanging out with our white neighbors. Of course they belonged there! This is what racism does. It gives us myths that divide us using misplaced fear rather than connecting us. It teaches us to live in fear of the “Other;” it gnaws at our own moral integrity.

I’m ashamed and embarrassed and angry about my reaction. But it doesn’t help end racism for me to feel shame. It doesn’t help me be a better ally to simple swallow my embarrassment. What helps, I think, is to talk about the stranglehold that racism has on all of us, and then to work together to change the institutional structures that maintain it.

I want us to have a conversation about how we who are white can use the privilege that we have. And I want to invite us out of the silence. White privilege makes it easy to be silent about racism. And that silence is part of the scaffold that maintains white supremacy.

Tim Wise, a Southern white writer says, “Unlike hatred, silence bespeaks a *presumption of irrelevance*, a ho-hum kind of unaffected diffidence.”[[4]](#endnote-4) I want to start a conversation today because I know that none of us here actually think that racism is irrelevant, but our silence about it says otherwise. I want to start a conversation today because we here know that a better world is possible, and we are not content to be complicit with the status quo. And, perhaps more important, I want to start a conversation today because I need your help to step out of my own silence, and I expect that many of you need us to find your way out of silence too.

I want us to help each other have conversations about racism and white privilege – with one another, and with our families and neighbors.

On the way in, you may have seen or already taken a lawn or window sign that says “Black Lives Matter.” This is a tool that’s helping me break the silence. This is a campaign by Showing Up for Racial Justice, a national group organizing White people for racial justice. We’re kicking off the Connecticut chapter here on Thursday, September 10th.

The idea of these lawn signs is twofold: to break white silence at our homes with a lawnsign: to visibly and publicly declare support for the Movement for Black Lives, especially in predominantly white neighborhoods. And secondly, to inspire conversations with our neighbors about racism and the Black Lives Matter movement. It’s a tool, a way to bring up the subject.

When we were moving in to our home a few weeks ago, I met our neighbor across the street. Roger is a 60-something straight white man who asked me about the shirt I was wearing. I said it was for Moral Monday CT, or Black Lives Matter – not knowing what he would think. To my surprise and delight, he said: “Oh, great.” And then he helped me re-learn how to say ‘Happy end of Ramadan” in Arabic, since other neighbors were having a party to celebrate the Eid at that time.

By being visible, we strike up conversations with unexpected allies. Had I not been wearing that shirt, Roger wouldn’t have asked me about it and I wouldn’t have known where he stood – I probably would have assumed by his demographic that he didn’t support Black Lives Matter. This is the visibility that the Black Lives Matter lawn signs create. A visibility that shows to all where we stand -- that can help us into important conversations with our neighbors.

Would you consider taking a lawn sign or window sign home today? The sign comes with a commitment: the commitment is to talk to 3 people in your life about why you put the sign up – about racism or Black Lives Matter, and why it matters to you. I’m committing to this today too, and I need your help to keep it. I invite you to join me. We can practice conversations after worship in coffee hour and at the under the stairs conversation that Gloria and Vanessa are hosting.

If putting up a sign feels like too much, then join us under the stairs after worship to watch and talk about a 3 minute video. Or simply talk with someone in coffee hour about your honest reaction to this service – about your questions, fears, disagreements, and ponderings.

If putting up a sign doesn’t feel like enough, then let’s talk!

And finally, if you are white and find yourself shying away from white folks because prefer to talk with people of color about racism, then I invite you to pause and reflect on that. I do it – I find it easier to build relationships with people of color than to talk to white folks about racism. But the calls coming from leaders of the Movement for Black Lives, just as in the Civil Rights Movement, is for white folks to talk to our own people – because white people are best poised to organize other white people to take action for racial justice.

The Bottom Line is: let’s talk! Let’s break the white silence around racism!

Let’s talk about the unearned advantages that those of us who are white have. Let’s talk about how privilege looks different for those of us who grew up white working class or white upper class. Let’s talk about how racism subtly or overtly manifests itself here at USH. Let’s talk about what this sermon opens up in your heart.

I don’t care what the conversation is as long as we’re trying to talk about racism. It will come with mistakes and awkwardness. Some of us will need to process our guilt and shame and judgment. We’ll inevitably put our foot in our mouth, and people will have hurt feelings.

But we can also open up a powerful conversation about collective liberation. About our own wounded places. About our questions and fears. About the possibility of liberation for all.

“We will win,” say leaders in the Movement for Black Lives.

“We will win.”

They say this not just with deep conviction, but with joy and abundant love.

There is a movement building to end racism, and I want to be a part of it. There is a place for me, and for you.

Let us break the silence.

Let’s talk.

Let’s get busy.

1. http://www.joincampaignzero.org/problem/ [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Started in 1989 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. To borrow Margaret Cho’s analogy [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Tim Wise, White Like Me, p.81 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)