

“White Fragility”
Rev. Kim D. Wilson
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Poconos
January 15, 2017

A couple of years ago, a white male student at Princeton was asked by a classmate to “check his privilege.” He was highly offended, and pounded out a 1300-word essay for the campus newspaper. In it, he told about his grandfather who had fled the Nazis; his grandmother, who survived a German concentration camp, and the humble wicker basket shop they started in America. He accused his classmates of “diminishing everything [he’d] accomplished, all the hard work [he’d] done.”

Time Magazine reprinted his piece, “Why I’ll never Apologize for my White Privilege”; the New York Times interviewed him and he appeared on Fox news. Tal Fortang “became the darling of white conservatives across the country.” (Sam Adler-Bell)

Social justice writer Sam Adler-Bell comments, “What he did not do, at any point, was consider whether being white and male might have given him –if not his ancestors –some advantage in achieving incredible success in America. He did not, in other words, check his privilege.”

The tone of the essay is indignant, defensive, beside-the-point, and alternately self-pitying and self-aggrandizing. Multicultural educator Robin DiAngelo has heard this basic script so many times from white men and women in her workshops that she came up with a term for it: “white fragility.” DiAngelo, who herself is white, defines white fragility as “a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. These moves include outward display[s] of emotions such as anger, fear and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence and leaving the stress-inducing situation.”

DiAngelo does atypical work for a white person in that she leads primarily white audiences in discussions of race every day. This has enabled her to observe patterns. One of those, she says, is the “inability to tolerate any kind of challenge

to our racial reality.” Sometimes the reaction is an intentional push-back, but often the person simply cannot function because they become too emotional.

In an interview with Robin DiAngelo last year, Sam Adler-Bell asks, “What causes white fragility to set in?”

DiAngelo explains, “For white people, their identities rest on the idea of racism as about good or bad people, about moral or immoral...acts, and if we’re good, moral people, we can’t be racist –we don’t engage in those acts.”

White fragility is rooted in this good vs. bad duality. If a white person is “called out” on something they said or did, what they hear is, “You just called me a bad person and that’s intolerable to me.” It’s a deep challenge to the core of our identity as good, moral people. And I say “our identity” since I’m a white person.

Sometimes, DiAngelo will ask the people of color in the room, somewhat facetiously, “How often have you given white people feedback about our inevitable and often unconscious racist patterns and had that go well for you?” And they laugh. Because it never goes well.

So, one time she asked, “What would your daily life be like if you could simply give us feedback, have us receive it graciously, reflect on it and work to change the behavior?” One man of color looked at her and said, “It would be *revolutionary.*”

There’s a tendency by white people to think of racism as only something that individuals either are or are not ‘doing.’ A more accurate definition is to say that racism encompasses economic, political, social and cultural structures as well as actions and beliefs. These all work together to systematize and perpetuate an unequal distribution of privilege, resources and power between white people and people of color.

Let’s define “Whiteness,” too. Whiteness is not so much a skin color as it is a set of social locations that are produced and perpetuated by these structures that racism encompasses. White people are actively shaped, affected, defined and elevated by these societal structures, actions and beliefs. Whiteness is a

constellation of processes and practices and for whites, at least, it's often invisible.

There's a story about fish swimming in the water, and someone explains to them that they live in water. So when we see their mouths open and close in that unique fish way, they're really saying, "What's water? What's water?" Water is the world they live in. But it's so ubiquitous, they're not even conscious of it. Being white in our society is kind of like being a fish in water. Whiteness is so ubiquitous, it's hard for white people to be conscious of it.

We are taught that whiteness is the norm. Whiteness means automatic privilege and status simply by living in our society. The American social environment insulates and protects whites as a group through institutions, cultural representations, media, textbooks, movies, advertising, et cetera, which reinforce our identities as white people. We may not be conscious of it, but we are usually surrounded by protective pillows of resources and benefits of the doubt. We are usually comfortable being white. This protected status builds expectations for racial comfort and at the same time it decreases our ability to tolerate racial stress. That's why we have this phenomenon of white fragility.

Unlike people of color, who unfortunately get a lot of experience in dealing with racial stress, white people typically don't get a lot of practice with it. Our racial stress comes from an interruption of what is racially familiar. These interruptions challenge our beliefs and understandings. I want to share with you a list compiled by Robin DiAngelo of situations which typically cause white racial stress and why.

1. Suggesting that a white person's viewpoint comes from a racialized frame of reference. It challenges the white person's objectivity. If I didn't see it that way, how could it be so? Think of the town clerk who referred to Michelle Obama as "an ape in heels." She wasn't being racist, she said.
2. People of color talking openly about their racial perspectives in front of white people. It challenges white racial codes, which say this should not be happening. This is uncomfortable for me, so I shouldn't have to listen to it.

3. People of color choosing not to protect the feelings of white people with regard to race. This challenges white people's expectations that people of color will provide us with racial comfort.
4. People of color not being willing to tell their stories or answer questions about their racial experiences. It challenges historical norms from colonial and slavery times. We may expect a person of color to answer our questions and to reveal whatever we ask.
5. A fellow white not agreeing with another white person's interpretations. It challenges the notion of white solidarity. Think of a racist joke that doesn't get the expected laugh.
6. A white person receiving feedback that their behavior had a racist impact. It challenges white liberalism; the idea that we're the good guys so we can't be racist.
7. Acknowledging that access is unequal between racial groups. It challenges the myth of meritocracy, the idea that our country provides everyone with equal opportunity and that we are rewarded based on our ability.
8. Seeing a person of color in a position of leadership. It challenges the notion of white authority.
9. Seeing people of color in a movie in major roles. It challenges the idea of white centrality.

A couple of years ago, I attended a workshop for UU Ministers. Its goal was "to identify our ministerial growing edges in the work of antiracism, anti-oppression and multiculturalism." The group included ministers of color and white ministers.

I started off feeling pretty comfortable, because I've done a fair amount of antiracism and multicultural work. We each had a chance to share our perspectives. I don't remember the content of what I said to this group of ministers. But I remember starting to feel self-conscious as I spoke. Being my white, liberal, always-want-to-say-the-right-thing self, I wanted to sound intelligent and, you know, racially "enlightened."

When I was done muddling through what I was saying, I replayed what I said in my head. And I realized with horror that I could have been misinterpreted.

Even though the moderators had said that each person would have time to share only once, I raised my hand, desperate to correct and clarify my point. I was afraid that the others might think I was either ignorant or, worse, that what I had said was tainted with unconscious racism!

To the moderators' credit, they stuck to their guidelines and did not allow me to speak again. I had to sit with my discomfort. At the time, I figured I just had a little social anxiety. I now understand that what I experienced in that ministers' group was my own "white fragility." Not the only time I've experienced it, certainly, but probably the most uncomfortable.

So here's the thing: white fragility can potentially affect all white people, even white UUs and other liberals and progressive thinkers. I thought I had "done the work," which is so arrogant. We are never done with our antiracism work. We will make mistakes. We will have awkward encounters.

Coming to the Table, an organization I'm involved with, is a group of whites and blacks who are descendants of enslaved people and enslavers. We're doing what few groups in America are doing: having real conversations together about race and our shared history of slavery. It takes courage and patience and yes, sometimes discomfort to engage in these conversations. Sometimes white people get called out. Sometimes it's pretty painful. But we continue the work.

Racism is not the fault of people of color, nor are people of color responsible for fixing it. It was created by white people and it's maintained by white people. White people are responsible for undoing racism and ultimately the only group that can change the system. As white UUs who are committed to justice and compassion in the world, we need to work on overcoming our own white fragility.

We white people need to build our tolerance for racially stressful interactions. As some of you know, I have a neck injury. I've been doing physical therapy exercises every day for the past couple of weeks. It was uncomfortable at first.

Muscles in my neck and shoulders were weak and sore. But by sticking with it, those muscles now feel strong and more flexible.

We need to engage in honest conversations with people of color and be open to feedback, as uncomfortable as that sounds. Like physical therapy, the more we do it, the stronger we become. We need to “dare to face ourselves in our entirety,” as Mel Hoover said. Get involved with Black Lives Matter or another group that does similar work. What if, as Robin DiAngelo imagines, we could accept feedback gracefully, reflect on it and work to change our behavior?

It would be revolutionary.

It’s time for a revolution.