

“A White Mother’s White Privilege”
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I know a woman whose heart jumps into her throat every time her teenage son leaves the house. “Be careful,” she says. She prays he will come back safely. She can’t relax until he’s back inside, behind their locked door.

I worry about my son, too. I worry that he’ll be in a car or motorcycle accident, or that that he will fail a class, or that he’ll have trouble getting the job of his dreams after he graduates. But my heart doesn’t leap into my throat when he says, “See you later, Mom.”

Is this woman paranoid? No, not really. Actually, she is all too realistic. She is African American. I am white. And, there, is the world of difference.

As the white mother of a white son, I don’t worry that the police will shoot him. That if he gets pulled over, and he goes for his cell phone to call me, that the cop will shoot to kill. That if he’s in Walmart holding a toy gun, it’ll be mistaken for a real one and he’ll be gunned down, no questions asked.

My son is 6 foot 8 inches tall. Few people, if any, feel threatened by his size. He’s blond-haired and green-eyed. People don’t cross the street to avoid having to walk next to him; women don’t clutch their purses tighter. I don’t have to worry about educating my son to be aware of the many faces of racism for his own daily protection. I don’t have to teach him how to speak, how to act, and how to move in order to appear as non-threatening as possible.

I don’t worry that he will be accused of stealing while driving his own car or committing a robbery while entering his own house. I don’t worry that he will be stopped and questioned while he’s walking down the street or he’s shopping at any store of his choosing.

Another white mother, who writes an Internet blog and goes by the name, “Manic Pixie Dream Mama,” has three young sons. She notes that when her kids throw tantrums or run and shout, it’s “chalked up to being children, not to being

non-white.” People don’t assume that with three children, she’s trying to beat the welfare system.

Let’s call Manic Pixie Dream Mama “M.” for short. M. imagines her kids growing up, the three boys walking together through their suburban neighborhood. She says, “People will think, ‘Look at those kids out for a walk.’ They will not think, ‘Look at those punks casing the joint.’”

People will assume her sons are intelligent. No one will comment on how well-spoken they are when they “break out SAT words,” or call them “a credit to their race.”

When her sons are teenagers, M. says, “I will not worry about them leaving the house. I will worry that they’ll crash the car, or impregnate a girl, or engage in the same stupidity endemic to teenagers everywhere.”

There is a special kind of fear among white people when it comes to black teens and black men. I’m quite certain it’s a carryover from slavery times, when white people had to be hyper-vigilant about keeping black enslaved men under control at all times. The underlying fear, of course, was that the strong black men, who far outnumbered the whites on a plantation, would attack them, maybe kill them and escape.

The shootings in Ferguson, Missouri remind us all that fear of black teens and men hasn’t diminished much since slavery was abolished. Racial tensions haven’t disappeared. Most white Americans prefer not to think about this fact. But they are forced to remember at ugly flashpoints like the Rodney King beatings, Trayvon Martin’s killing, and the police shootings of Ferguson teens Michael Brown and, let us not forget, Vonderrit Myers.

M. believes that most white Americans who recoil in horror do so not at the crimes, as horrible as they are. They recoil because they are forced to “gaze upon the emotional roil of oppression-- the anger and fear and deep grief endemic to the black American experience.”

It is in the aftermath of these most despicable of events that, as M. puts it, “Black America holds up a mirror for us. And white America is terrified to look.”

And some white Americans refuse to look. A couple of months ago I was in the small waiting room of a doctor's office, along with a few other white adults. The conversation turned to the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson. An older man said, "Oh, well...I don't know, I heard he had a gun..." The woman next to me and I said at exactly the same time, "No! That's not true!" And we set him straight.

This white man has the option NOT to be informed. He has the option of justifying what happened, so he doesn't have to look at how he participates in upholding the system of white privilege. Those of us who identify as white have the unearned privilege of not being informed and not looking at the harsh reality of a life in which one encounters some form of racism on a daily basis.

This morning, I'm talking specifically about white privilege in the context of African Americans' experiences. But I think it's important to recognize that the same white privilege exists in relation to ALL Americans who are not part of the dominant white culture.

It's hard for white people to see their white privilege. In fact, white people are raised to be unaware of their privilege. Dr. Peggy McIntosh is the associate director of the Wellesley College Center for Research for Women. Her work has been instrumental in uncovering and understanding white privilege. She believes that white people are carefully taught NOT to recognize white privilege, just as men are taught not to recognize male privilege.

McIntosh, who is white, has come to see white privilege as an invisible knapsack full of unearned assets that she can count on "cashing in" on any given day. Those unearned assets include "special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas... tools, and blank checks."

I see McIntosh as a courageous woman. Once she began to recognize the parallels between male privilege and white privilege, she decided to try to identify instances of her own white privilege. In an excerpt from a much longer work, she identifies 50 daily effects of white privilege in her life.

I am active in anti-racism work. And, like everyone, I'm a work in progress. Reading this list had a big impact on me personally. There is nothing quite like

hearing privilege after privilege that I as a white person can take for granted. I'm going to read some of the list to you.

[Read from, "Daily Effects of White Privilege." NB: the text can be found at <http://amptoons.com/blog/files/mcintosh.html>]

How courageous are those of us in this congregation who are white? Are you, we, courageous enough to acknowledge our own white privilege? Because to acknowledge it is to admit a stake, however small, in ongoing injustice. We are part of the system which dominates, and, in doing so, keeps other people down. Are we courageous enough to admit that we are complicit in this American system of injustice?

I think, I hope, we are. And, are we willing to acknowledge that our awareness of injustice -- even if we ourselves are complicit in that injustice -- makes us accountable?

If the answer is "yes," then we might ask ourselves a question that Peggy McIntosh has asked herself: "What will I do to lessen [white privilege]?"

For myself, I can say that I have learned more about my own white privilege by having open and honest conversations with people who are not white, and reading articles and books by authors of color, than I have by sitting around inside my own head. I am interested in knowing what my fellow humans' struggles are, what their experiences are with unequal treatment. I am grateful that these friends, acquaintances, associates, colleagues and fellow UUs have been willing to share with me, so I can better understand what it's like to live in THEIR world and at the same time, be more aware as I experience the many privileges I have as a white person. And I talk with other people about my increased awareness.

So, those of us in this congregation who are white have their work cut out for them. And of those of us in this congregation who are not white, I would ask for patience if you're willing to grant it. For the willingness to talk about your experiences, if you can do it. And for the boldness to speak out when we white folks act clueless about our privileges, if you feel up to it.

We are all part of a system that we did not create. There is no need for guilt or blame. We are all in this together. But there is work to be done. Let us each do our own work, so that together we can build our religious community. "...for alone our vision is too narrow and our strength too limited...Together, our vision widens and our strength is renewed." (Mark Morrison Reed) Together, I believe we can make a difference.