

“Stand By Me: Tolerance is Not Enough”

by Veronica Froelich Adams

(Excerpted from a sermon delivered at the UU Church of Lehigh Valley in the summer of 2003.)

I am a European American woman who has discovered a true sense of freedom and joy through my involvement with anti-racism work. Although I was raised not to be prejudiced towards people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds, it wasn't until well into my adulthood that I learned that, as a white person, there is much that I can do to make an effective contribution toward overcoming racism. Upon learning the positive ways that I can leverage the benefits and influence society grants me as a white ally, it was as if a great burden – that I didn't even realize was there, felt lifted from me. And it continues to give me great joy to pass along this gift to other European Americans.

First, what is meant by being an ally? History is rife with examples: Abolitionists were not just freed slaves; that movement would not have lasted for long had it not been for the thousands of white people who dedicated their lives to the work. Many suffragettes were men, who helped to hold signs, produce the leaflets, and keep the home fires burning in support of the voting rights of women. And the labor movement would not have succeeded to the extent that it did had it not been for the sons and daughters of wealth and education who worked hard, alongside the working classes. Because these oppressions didn't directly affect them, none of these “privileged” people were forced to engage in the struggle, but thanks be to the Grace of the Spirit, they were all moved to become allies, and we have all benefited from their contributions.

In each of these examples, throughout history and in our current situations -- ***Those who have greater power in systems of inequity are in the strongest position to turn the tide around and can therefore be the greatest allies*** – once they become aware of the forms of their privilege and how they can help make a difference.

UU's have a strong record of being allies to those of various sexual orientations, to gays, lesbians, bi- and trans-sexual persuasions. We have much to be proud of in this regard. It is important that we understand that it is in great part *due to our efforts to support the human rights of gays and lesbians* that the UUA has become known as a welcoming denomination to those of varying sexual orientations. And, as a result, we have become a diverse congregation in this regard.

But, as many are painfully aware, our denomination has fallen behind in racial and ethnic diversity. We were far more racially diverse during the civil rights movement when many within our denomination were active proponents for the human rights of people of color. But then, something shifted within the UUA when we became less involved in the struggle against racism. When some of the more overt segregationist blocks seemed to be removed from society, many white people, my own liberal mother included, became afraid of the black power movement. Many European Americans became complacent, believing that the problem of racism in America was no longer urgent, no longer requiring their participation.

But on some deeper level, I believe that all of us know the work is far from being over. As the Rev. Dr. William Jones points out, what we have now is a far more insidious form of racism, that of “soft genocide,” which in some ways is more difficult to tackle, and which will require European Americans to go deeper within.

Not only have we lost many people of color from within our congregations, but many who would otherwise be drawn to our liberal religion may come to visit or attend for a while, but do not stay. They often report that they do not feel comfortable in our churches. Why is that? I assert that this is because many of our European American congregants do not feel entirely at ease with people of color – but do not know why. I know and understand that feeling myself.

I can now recognize that it wasn't until I started learning about how I could be an ally to people of color that I felt entirely comfortable with them. In hindsight, unconsciously, I felt “guilty,” (oh – there's that word!) – not because of anything that I was doing, but because of what I wasn't doing. I had been aware for much of my life that I had it easier for me to get by in our society than for people of color, and I knew that it wasn't fair, but I didn't know what, if anything, I could do about it. So, I think I pretended not to *notice* that people of color were different from me.

Or, on the other end of the spectrum, in order to prove just how non-prejudice they are, some white people will go out of their way to start talking to African American visitors at coffee hour about how much they admired MLK, Jr. or gosh knows what to the Latino couple! (And we wonder why they often don't come back?)

The key to all of this is in educating ourselves and learning about the pivotal roles that we as white people can play in seizing opportunities to end the ongoing scourge of racism. And, in the course of this, the comfort levels and conversations will shift. As in all things, the more comfortable we are with ourselves, the more comfortable others are with us. If we build it, a truly safe space where we walk the talk toward creating a fairer society, they will come.

Back to me: you see, I'd been raised to be a good little bleeding heart liberal, to fight for justice for the little guys and gals. My mother was a member of NAACP during the civil rights movement. I have fond memories of going to the interracial cookouts where positive changes were in the wind and the feelings were warm and fuzzy. Raised with a strong ethic that all humans are created equal, regardless of race or ethnicity, as an adult, I knew that racism still existed in our country, but it wasn't something *I* was contributing to... Right?

Then, when I was in divinity school, a handful of us opted to participate in a two-day workshop on racism. In it, I became exposed to the groundbreaking work developed by Dr. Peggy McIntosh of Wellesley College's Center for Research on Women, on "Understanding the Correspondence between Male Privilege and White Privilege." Her thesis asserts that although some men may be aware of the societal disadvantages facing women in our culture, many are not fully aware of the range and extent of the advantages that they unconsciously take for granted within this system.

This paradigm also applies to "Heterosexual privilege." Dr. McIntosh then extended her work to "Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack of White Privilege." I learned about all the ways that I benefit as a European American, with "privileges" I was not even aware of. For example:

- When I go into a department store, it doesn't even occur to me that I might be watched or followed as a shoplifting suspect.
- When I am asked my opinion on something, I am not expected to speak on behalf of "my people."
- When I behave badly, like talking with my mouth full, I do not carry the added burden that my actions reflect poorly upon my race.
- I can choose, as a white person, to be surrounded by people of my own race most of the time.
- I can drive anywhere that I want without fear of being stopped by the police.
- I can buy a house in any neighborhood that I can afford.

Now, just as a fish cannot be expected to be conscious of the water in which it swims, it is only natural that I have often been unaware of my privilege – because this is the water into which I was born. I had no choice in the matter; I didn't put that water in the tank.... But, the very water that supports and keeps me alive, also traps me at the same time... Now, some of my blindness is due, in part, because I am a good liberal, and I see what I *want* to see in assuming that all people are treated as they should be [at least more often than they are], in the same ways that I am and that I take for granted.

But the *good news* is that once we become more aware and fully recognize the manifestations of our privilege – then there is more choice in the matter and freedom to be found. As Bishop Desmond Tutu wrote, "The liberation of blacks involves the liberation of whites in our beloved country, because white people can never be really free until black people are free. There is no such thing as a separate freedom. Freedom is, and always will be, indivisible."

I learned that as long as I did nothing to speak out against institutionalized racism, I was complicit in it. My unconscious guilt came from doing nothing about the systems in place, while benefiting from it. I discovered, that indeed, as a white person in this society, I have greater influence with other white people in confronting white racism. In the same way that men who are advocates for women's rights have greater sway in fighting sexism than women do. In corporate America, a few enlightened men in positions of power who advocate for equal access for women can do far more to shatter the glass ceiling than any group of "hysterical" women's libbers."

I will never forget how moved I was several years ago when a young man spoke to our group at a UU Conference for Social Justice about the work that his men's group was doing to reach out to other men

who were potential women beaters and helping them find other ways to channel their frustrations. He spoke so passionately and with such emotion that I found myself in tears. I discovered how it felt to have an ally. This man was not directly impacted by violence against women. But he and this group of men cared deeply, and held far more influence with other men on this issue than any group of women could ever have.

And so, the question may be, what are some ways that European Americans can be greater allies to people of color? Well, the list is long and ranges from smaller to larger... But for example: Do we always speak up and say that we are offended when someone makes a racial or ethnic joke or comment? Is there more that we can learn about the current discrimination issues facing people of color in our own communities and finding what we can do to help? Are they facing “red-lining” from the realtors, banks, and mortgage companies who readily serve us, and with whom we have some leverage? Are we willing to speak out against the false logic being used to put-down affirmative action? What minority-owned businesses can we support in our communities? Why not write out a couple of more donation checks each year to support organizations such as NAACP, the Urban League, Latino, Native American, and hate crime organizations? And what is being done within our own congregation to increase our awareness in becoming better allies? How are we supporting these efforts?

UU leader Dr. Helen Bishop wrote that “our doors are open to everyone” is both true and false, and points to UU’s who say that “we don’t have anyone like that in our congregation, so racial justice is not our issue.” To the contrary, she says, “the work for European Americans is a profound, life-and-death understanding that this is our issue, whether or not a person of color is a member of our congregation.”

From a statement from our Faith in Action office, “Whether or not a UU church is 100% white... its members can sensitize themselves and start doing justice work. Until Euro-Americans are willing to connect with the pain, and the specificity of their own history... they cannot advance morally. ‘It’s not about having a lone person of color sitting in your pew. It’s about how you feel about your relationship to the world. When you go out and establish alliances with communities of color, you are not helping them... You are standing with them... This is about the feeling that we’re [all] in this together.’”

Our religious tradition has much to offer those from the full range of racial, ethnic, and social backgrounds. But I believe that Ally-ship is the first cornerstone, and through this work, diversity will grow. Leaders such as MLK Jr., Desmond Tutu, and Nelson Mandela remind us of the spiritual nature of racial justice work. We know deep in our bones that they are right, which is why they have gained such profound influence. This spiritual discipline, this journey, is a *way of life* that we must commit to. This work has been truly life enriching for me, and I hope that you will help to spread the “good news.” Plunge in... The water is fine, and freedom is found there!

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