

**Marilyn Schuler Human Rights Initiative event:  
From Hate to Hope: "How Idahoans Defeated  
White Nationalists—and How You Can Too,"  
Presented by the Kootenai County Human Rights Task Force  
Thursday, October 26, 7-9 pm, Simplot Ballroom, SUB, BSU**

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**THE HOPE AT THE HEART OF OUR FAITH  
A sermon by Rev. Elizabeth L. Greene  
Magic Valley Unitarian Fellowship  
September 17, 2017**

Hymn #1017, "We Are Building a New Way"  
Hymn #95, "There is More Love Somewhere"

**Call To Worship**

Right now, it is impossible to miss the lack of justice for black and brown humans. As long as there is work to be done, it will be the invitation of our church to join hearts and hands in doing that work. Our one issue is love, in whatever way we can offer it to a wild and hurting world. (The Rev. Pam Rumancik, *World* fall 2017, p. 10)

**Sermon**

My husband Gary and I are taking a three-session class called "A Short History of Racial Backlash in America," taught by Boise State professor Dr. Jill Gill, a respected American history scholar. Since I have been embarked these past couple of weeks upon the difficult task of writing this sermon—dealing with the complex subject of race, hopefully offering some Unitarian Universalist light on the subject—I anticipated last week's first class with hope in my heart.

Well, I was both heartened and not so heartened, as Dr. Gill (a white person) started the class. She said, “This is the toughest subject in all of American history.” She told us that she realized, at the very beginning of her scholarly career that she wouldn’t understand anything about American history if she didn’t understand race. She says that, 30 years later, she only understands a little.

So, as we predominantly white folks in Twin Falls, Idaho, begin today’s reflection on the subject of race, we can know that being confused and conflicted, even defensive, is pretty much the default position of progressive white people in America today. We can know that looking at the subject is very hard—both because it is complex, and because we are so often unconsciously complicit in racism.

In the United States today, and in the Unitarian Universalist Association, we have come to a new “plateau” of awareness, a much more heated awareness of what has been going on for a long time. We have the repeated tragedies of young black men being shot, sparking the Black Lives Matter movement—dedicated to addressing a system in which black lives have mattered less than white ones. In our own religion, Peter Morales, Hispanic Unitarian Universalist Association president, resigned last April, two months before his term was finished, in the middle of very heated accusations of white bias in UUA hiring. The last two issues of *UU World* are

full of articles, essays and poems addressing the race issue in our faith tradition.

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Let's stop here for a moment. I have already said a couple of things that could be triggering questions, even defenses, in our hearts. I am going to say some much harder things before I get to the hope part. So I ask us all to take a deep breath. Let us put our feet on the floor, feel our seats in our seats. Breathe deeply together again. Let us go to the place in ourselves where we know we are in a safe and loving community here. Let us feel free to disagree, yes—and also to open our hearts and minds, committing to honor and respect each other, committing to look honestly and compassionately at what is inside of ourselves.

And, since we usually find little to laugh at in this area, let me share one amusing statement I found. With sincere apologies to you Republicans in the congregation today, let me share a comment made in 2005 by Charles Rangel, a black Democratic congressman from New York. When he was asked on public TV about the president at the time (George W. Bush), he said, "Well, I really think that he once and for all shatters the myth of white supremacy."

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OK. Some hard stuff.

We have been an overtly racist nation since about 1700 (Gill). Enlightenment-oriented forefathers, dedicated to the proposition that all people are created equal, could only reconcile themselves to slavery by determining that dark-skinned people were really not people. They were more like animals, filled with savagery and passion, requiring oversight at best and torturous subjugation at worst. Whiteness was held up as a badge of honor, an indication that one was better than people of color.

We are the recipients of, and participants in, this legacy. There is much institutional, societal and structural bias toward whiteness. (For instance, the accusations are correct, the ones that caused our current UU heightened awareness of the issues. In 2016, four of the UUA's five service workers (80 per cent) were people of color, seven of the fifty executives and first managers (14 per cent) people of color. [Morrison-Reed])

As important as structural racism is, this morning I would like to spend more time being personal, talking about the horribly difficult topic of white privilege. How we progressive white people participate fully in privileges denied to people of color. Participate fully, but almost entirely unconsciously.

Most of us want to reject the concept that we automatically enjoy privileges black and brown people do not have. I get that. I want to reject it, too.

At the same time, I have come to see that it is true. I have been mightily persuaded by a lot of things, workshops and reading and introspection. Few have been more persuasive than an Internet article entitled, "What I Told My White Friend When He Asked For My Black Opinion On White Privilege," by Lori Lakin Hutchinson. She tells of a friend writing her, "To all of my Black or mixed race FB friends, I must profess a blissful ignorance of this 'White Privilege' of which I'm apparently guilty of possessing." He says he has spent his life treating people with respect and humor, and does not understand how he is complicit in the misfortune of others. Here are some of Ms. Hutchinson's stories and answers.

- Her family moved into an all-white upper-middle-class neighborhood when she was 3. They had a pool, not the only one on the block, but the only one into which the neighborhood white boys threw rocks. Her mother actually solved the problem by making connections, but: *we have white privilege if we can move into a nice neighborhood without harassment or vandalism.*
- When her sister was five, she beat a white boy in a race, and he called her a nigger. The little girl didn't know what it was, but knew it was bad. *We have white privilege if we never, in our childhood or our life, have a defining moment when we know that some people hate us because of our skin color.*
- Ms. Hutchinson had a black high school classmate, academically-excellent and hard working. He was accepted into UCLA. White classmates—friends—were angry that affirmative action had given him "their" spot, and it wasn't fair. *We have white privilege if we've never been on the receiving end of the assumption that when we have achieved something it's only because it was taken away from a white person who "deserved it."*

She has other stories, and I highly recommend you read the whole reply. (Sources at the end of this sermon, as always. You will receive it in your email.)

Another good commentary on the advantages we white people unconsciously take for granted in our lives comes from white professor, Peggy McIntosh.

- [We] can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty well assured that [we] will not be...harassed. [A white friend of mine married a black man and said she discovered for the first time what it felt like to be followed in a store.]
- Whether [we] use checks, credit cards, or cash, [we] can count on [our] skin color not to work against the appearance of financial reliability.
- [We] can swear, or dress in second hand clothes, or not answer letters, without having people attribute these choices to the bad morals, the poverty, or the illiteracy of [our] race.
- [We] can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to [our] race.
- [We] can choose blemish cover or bandages in flesh color and have them more or less match [our] skin. (McIntosh)

I still find all this uncomfortable, and I have participated in many, many anti-racism, multi-cultural workshops, especially when I served on the UUA's Board of Directors for 8 years. If you are uncomfortable, you are in good company. If you feel upset or mad, you are also in good company. If you feel conflicted, welcome to the white club. Forefather and slaveowner Patrick Henry was ardently anti-slavery, and yet he could not face the

“general inconvenience of living without [slaves].” Ambivalence and emotion have been with us for centuries.

So. Where’s the hope at the heart of our faith? I am glad to say I have discovered, in my reading, that such UU luminaries of color as Rev. Bill Sinkford and Rev. Peter Morales (both former UUA presidents) do not have easy answers, either. They do offer hope, though, as do I, a white minister who has served both individual congregations and our Association.

Let’s think of our fourth Principle: We covenant to affirm and promote a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.

This includes the inward search. We need to be honest with ourselves about being a complicit part of a culture that values white supremacy (not necessarily the violent, car-driving-into-a-crowd kind, but the insidious, implicit valuing of white over black). We do not have to wallow in a 60s-style kind of “liberal guilt,” for being who we are—but we need to quietly face that our unconscious biases contribute to the problem, and that it will probably take time and patience to sort it all out. This is not easy, for none of us wants to be part of racism. It involves dropping defensiveness, so incredibly difficult to do. It requires of us courage and compassion for ourselves and each other, openness to accepting change and difference in our lives.

Then there's the second Principle: We covenant to affirm and promote justice, equity and compassion in human relations. We need to continue working toward institutional justice. We need to write the letters, attend the rallies, hold our legislators' feet to the fire of our determination and outrage. We need to protect the rights of refugees in Twin Falls. We need to hold up the banner of liberty and justice for all.

And how about our fourth Source: Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves.

This doesn't mean just loving those who are pretty much the same as we are. It means taking all that introspection and social awareness and making of it a deep kind of openness, what Peter Morales calls "really listening—with an open heart and an open mind." (*World*, Winter 2016, p. 5) It probably means lots and lots of deep breaths, calling ourselves back into the moment, intentionally growing into our better selves. It means, in Morales' words, "[bringing] empathy, understanding, and healing...forming relationships with people with whom we most disagree." As he notes, this is really hard.

Yes, it is. At the same time, can we do less? Let me close by sharing from the Rev. Dr. Mark Morrison-Reed, a black Unitarian Universalist clergyman and scholar, a man who has spoken out on race in our faith

tradition for decades. These are the closing words of a scholarly, distressing and hopeful lecture he delivered in March of this year:

The time in Unitarian Universalism when black lives didn't matter has passed. Nonetheless, change is generational, incremental, and bruising.... We have fallen short and will again, and when we do we need to pause and pray and ask, "What does love demand of me?" and then stand up and try again. Impatience is not what sustains us, but rather dreams, hope, work, and companionship—the chance to pour out one's life for the faith, principles, and people whom we value.

May it be so.  
Oh, may it be so.

### **Closing Words**

If we—and now I mean the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks, who must, like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of the others—do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world. (James Baldwin)

### **Sources consulted**

McIntosh, Peggy. "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack," excerpted from Working Paper 189, "White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming To See Correspondences Through Work in Women's Studies" (1988), available for \$4.00 from the Wellesley College Center For Research On Women, Wellesley MA 02181.

"Denouncing the Evil Lie of White Supremacy," *Christian Century* editors. *Christian Century*, September 13, 2017.

The articles below were taken from an email sent on September 11, 2017, to *The New Yorker* subscribers.

"Inside the Trial of Dylann Roof," Jelani Cobb in *The New Yorker*, February 6, 2017.  
"Letter From a Region in My Mind," James Baldwin in *The New Yorker*, November 17, 1962.  
"Making America White Again," Toni Morrison in *The New Yorker*, November 21, 2016.  
"The Fearful and the Frustrated," Evan Osnos in *The New Yorker*, August 31, 2015.

"White Plight?" Hua Hsu in *The New Yorker*, July 25, 2016.  
*UU World*, Winter, 2016. Many articles, including Sinkford's and Morales'.  
*UU World*, Fall, 2017. Many articles, including Morrison-Reed's.

### *Internet*

<http://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/v1ch15s7.html> Patrick Henry on slavery

[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/what-i-said-when-my-white-friend-asked-for-my-black-us\\_578c0770e4b0b107a2415b89](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/what-i-said-when-my-white-friend-asked-for-my-black-us_578c0770e4b0b107a2415b89) "What I Told My White Friend When He Asked For My Black Opinion On White Privilege."