

The Tracks of Our Tears
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Martin Luther King, Jr. Sunday, and the national holiday that we observe tomorrow, are more than just a nostalgic exercise, a time to remember the work and words of Dr. King. For many, it's a day to reaffirm commitment to the vision of a just, equitable society that Dr. King called the Beloved Community, and to call ourselves and each other to the work of realizing that vision. It's a vision with profoundly religious and spiritual significance. For Dr. King the Beloved Community was the realization of the Kingdom of God, the fulfillment of the teachings of Jesus and Christianity. Creating that world of justice, equity, and compassion by weaving humankind into a single undivided family is at the historic core of our own Unitarian Universalist faith as well.

Fifty-one years after Dr. King's death, racism and white supremacy are still very much a reality in America. Progress has unquestionably been made, but not as much as we might have hoped in half a century. The Beloved Community remains an unrealized aspiration. To ask why and to seek ways to move the vision forward is a spiritual quest.

One sign that we haven't arrived at Beloved Community is surely the grotesque increase of racist and anti-Semitic language and actions, by people full of hate who are feeling empowered by a President of the United States who speaks and acts like their kindred spirit. But many anti-racism, anti-oppression scholars, activists, and organizers in recent years have argued that individuals acting from overt racial bias have not been the major reason for delayed progress toward the vision. Instead, they look for deeper patterns, structures, and systems built into American culture from the very beginning, which have made white supremacy so stubbornly persistent even in times when the vast majority of Americans believe that ending racism is a worthy, even urgent social goal.

One of those scholar/organizers is Robin DiAngelo, whose 2018 book *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard For White People To Talk About Racism*, published by the Unitarian Universalist Association's Beacon Press, has now spent 24 weeks on the *New York Times* nonfiction bestseller list.

DiAngelo opens her study with this vignette:

I am a white woman. I am standing beside a black woman. We are facing a group of white people seated in front of us. We are in their workplace and have been hired by their employer to lead them in a dialogue about race. The room is filled with tension and charged with hostility. I have just presented a definition of racism that includes the acknowledgment that whites hold social and institutional power over people of color. A

white man is pounding his fist on the table. As he pounds, he yells, "A white person can't get a job anymore!" I look around the room and see forty employees, thirty-eight of whom are white. Why is this white man so angry? Why is he being so careless about the impact of his anger? Why doesn't he notice the effect this outburst is having on the few people of color in the room? Why are all the other white people either sitting in silent agreement with him or tuning out? I have, after all, only articulated a definition of racism.

Robin DiAngelo argues that white people, especially in America, have been socialized in ways that make it very difficult for us to have open and honest conversations about racism and white supremacy. If we want to dismantle these pernicious evils, we have to look hard at how power, wealth, and influence have been concentrated in white hands. We have to explore how it is that white characteristics, tastes, customs, and ways of engaging the world have come to define what we think of as normal, good, or universally human. We have to look, not just at the ways racism hurts people of color, but at the ways it helps white people.

Again and again in her career as a University sociology professor and an anti-racism educator, DiAngelo has encountered white people—good, well-intentioned people—who fail to make this deep cultural and self-examination, because they are experiencing a powerful internal conflict. As white people in America, we're socialized into the prejudices and biases of American culture, whether we want to be or not, whether we believe them consciously or not.

"All people hold prejudices," DiAngelo writes, "especially across racial lines in a society deeply divided by race. I can be told that everyone is equal by my parents, I can have friends of color, and I may not tell racist jokes. Yet I am still affected by the forces of racism as a member of a society in which racism is the bedrock. I will still be seen as white, treated as white, and experience life as a white person. My identity, personality, interests, and investments will develop from a white perspective. I will have a white worldview and a white frame of reference. In a society in which race clearly matters, our race profoundly shapes us."

On the other hand, most white Americans, especially those of us who identify as liberal or progressive, are also socialized to believe that racism is wrong, and that only bad people are racists. Racism, in the white public mind, is Iowa Representative Steve King railing against "other people's babies" and complaining that he doesn't understand what's wrong with white supremacy or white nationalism. Racism is the travel ban and the border wall. Racism is tiki-torch thugs in Charlottesville; it's a gang of boys from Kentucky's Covington Catholic High School last Friday in Washington D.C., taking time out from protesting against women's reproductive rights to mock and threaten Native American elders who were participating in the Indigenous People's March.

That's racism, we think. I'm a good person, I'm not like one of them, so I can't possibly have racist attitudes or habits; I can't be complicit in racism in any way. The result of this internal conflict between our participation in a society riddled with racism and our belief that only bad

people are racist or benefit from racism is that when we're confronted with any suggestion that we are complicit, that we do benefit, we react with what Robin DiAngelo calls *White Fragility*.

“... if and when an educational program does directly address racism and the privileging of whites,” she writes, “common white responses include anger, withdrawal, emotional incapacitation, guilt, argumentation, and cognitive dissonance (all of which reinforce the pressure on facilitators to avoid directly addressing racism). So-called progressive whites may not respond with anger but still insulate themselves via claims that they are beyond the need for engaging with the content because they ‘already had a class on this’ or ‘already know this.’ All these responses constitute white fragility. . .”

White fragility arises when white people want to avoid the pain or shame of considering our own relationship with racism, but it isn't weakness—on the contrary, it's a powerful move. As in the example of her first vignette, it shuts down conversation. It shifts the energy of a group away from the difficult issue that might have been under discussion, away from the experience and needs of any people of color who might happen to be in the room, and turns it toward taking care of the hurt, angry, reluctant, or tearful white person. The power of white tears to pull a conversation, a presentation, or a workshop off track is something that anti-oppression educators and facilitators talk about often.

The problem is that if we're all busy following the tracks of our tears, we're not tracking down how racism really works, or how we all participate in white supremacy whether we believe in it or not, or how we can dismantle a pervasive, centuries-old system of structures, practices, and assumptions that functions regardless of anyone's intentions to deliver benefits to white people and to disadvantage people of color.

Let me offer another vignette of white fragility in action:

I am a white man. As the minister, I'm hosting a presentation by a knowledgeable and entertaining white speaker to an almost, but not quite entirely white audience at our congregation. The speaker is sharing fascinating information about the ways in which white musicians were influenced by black musicians, and how traditional African music came to be an integral component of American popular music. Suddenly the speaker veers off into a discussion of blackface minstrel shows that is highly problematic. He doesn't take into account the power differential between the white musicians and the black musicians whose styles they copied and exploited for profit without compensation. He doesn't acknowledge the ways in which the stereotyped caricatures of African and African American people promoted by popular white entertainers in black makeup shaped and distorted white American and European beliefs about black people for more than a century. I am horrified, but I am reluctant to interrupt the speaker, or to challenge him during the question time. Will a challenge derail his entire presentation? Will the speaker and audience be open to the new information, or will they resent a politically correct spoil-sport? Are any white people who don't know the actual history being

encouraged to support whites dressing up in blackface for parties and fashion shows against the objections of black people? Do I have the energy to start what might turn out to be a very difficult argument in front of people who are genuinely enjoying what up until then has been an excellent and informative presentation?

I decide not to speak—until now.

That's white fragility in action. The choice not to point out something that is very much a part of public discourse around race in contemporary society, in order to avoid the risk of causing discomfort for white people. The neglect of the possible discomfort of people of color either hearing the presentation or hearing about it later. The decision to avoid causing myself discomfort, at the expense of a potentially valuable piece of education about historic racism that has a modern impact. Allowing white fragility to direct my choices helped to reinforce white supremacy in that moment.

You see, it can happen to anyone.

What can we do about it? Robin DiAngelo offers a full set of strategies for overcoming white fragility, starting with our own. The first, and maybe the most important step is to give up the good/bad dichotomy. If racism is something that we are all socialized into, then ridding ourselves of its vestiges is a lifelong practice. When someone points out that we're being complicit, or expressing something in a way that shows our socialization, we're not being told that we're bad people—we're being given a gift, an opportunity to learn.

I won't try to cover all of Robin DiAngelo's strategies now; in fact, I'm hoping that some of you will want to spend some time together with me later this spring reading the book and exploring how we might put some of her ideas into action. For now, let me offer this sketch of what we can do to address our own sense of fragility and discomfort around the emotionally fraught subjects of racial injustice and white supremacy: We can gather our courage. We can accept our share of the discomfort that is already being borne by people of color in a society built on the assumption of white superiority. We can educate ourselves. We can accept that we are all always learning how to overcome our complicity in a toxic system.

We can tell the truth.

We've come a long way since this nation was founded on a promise of equal rights for all humankind that our founders never expected to extend to most of the actual human beings living here. But we haven't been to the mountaintop yet. We haven't arrived at the Beloved Community of peace, liberty, and justice for all that is the promise of our faith, not just for this country but for the world. Yet every step brings us closer. May we journey together; may we learn together; may we grow together.

So may it be.