

**ARE WE COLOR-BLIND?**

**(Are We a Post-Racial Society?)**

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UUFVB

MLK Sunday

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I'd like to begin this MLK reflection this morning by having you all to look at this picture...and tell me what you see?

**[PICTURE OF PREDOMINANTLY WHITE SWIM TEAM IS PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREENS]**



Besides a male swim team, what do you see?

**[SCOTT PAUSES TO GIVE THE CONGREGATION A FEW SECONDS TO VISUALLY TAKE IN THE]**

Well...if you're like me – first off...and instinctively – you see **one black swimmer** in the midst of a **bunch of white swimmers**. There is (to my American eye anyway) an unavoidable **“racial component”** to this photograph. I don't see how anyone living in America (in this highly racialized – and in many ways painfully divided society of ours) would fail to see the one black guy sticking out amidst all these white swimmers. And – what's more -- because of the stereotypic thinking many in our society have about Blacks not being good swimmers, you might even have said to yourself (before you could censure the thought), **“What is that Black guy doing on that swim team?...he looks out of place.”** Here in America, That's how **“race”** works on an unconscious, instinctive level...we immediately notice race and skin color.

**[PHOTO OF SWIM TEAM COMES DOWN OFF CHANCEL SCREENS]**

There was this well-meaning guy -- who was a member of the last UU congregation I served up in the Washington DC area – who used to say (particularly at social justice taskforce meetings...where he wanted to establish his enlightened “liberal” credentials) that **“when a**

***black person enters the room, I don't even notice the color of their skin...I just don't see it...I'm totally color blind.*** I guess he said this in an attempt to convince us that he was (as a good UU) personally ***"beyond racism"*** and totally ***"non-racist"*** as a person. But by saying this he did not convince me...nor (I doubt) many others that he was really "color-blind, nor devoid of personal prejudice. To say this – ***"I don't notice it when a Black person enters the room"*** -- is (I believe) total self-deceiving nonsense... and dangerous nonsense at that.

First -- just on the physical level, our eyes and brains (in this historically racially divided society) have been programmed to automatically work. I am persuaded that **no one** (absolutely **no one** who has grown up in America with all its centuries-old racial distinctions, injustices and prejudices) does not immediately see the color of a Black person's skin (nor – for that matter -- the skin color of a Latino or Asian or Native American when they enter the room). Not only do I believe that is it not physically possible to be ***"color-blind"*** in America, it is also foolish and dangerous (and in the end culturally harmful) to imagine yourself so.

In a helpful article on this subject in *Psychology Today*, (entitled ***"Colorblind Ideology is a Form of Racism"*** Dr. Monnica T. Williams writes:

***Racial issues are often uncomfortable to discuss, and rife with stress and controversy. Many ideas have been advanced to address this sore spot in the American psyche. Currently, the most pervasive approach is known as colorblindness. Colorblindness is the racial ideology that posits the best way to end discrimination is by treating individuals as equally as possible, without regard to race, culture, or ethnicity.***

***Now at its face value, colorblindness seems like a good thing — really taking Martin Luther King, Jr. seriously on his call to judge people on the content of their character rather than the color of their skin. It focuses on commonalities between people, such as their shared humanity.***

***However, colorblindness alone is not sufficient to heal racial wounds on a national or personal level. It is only a half-measure that in the end operates as a form of racism.***

***[A form of] Racism? Strong words, yes, but let's look the issue straight in its "partially unseeing eye."*** ***In a colorblind society, White people -- who are unlikely to experience disadvantages due to race -- can effectively ignore racism in American life, justify the current social order, and feel more comfortable with their relatively privileged standing in society. Most minorities, however, who regularly encounter difficulties due to race, experience colorblind ideologies quite differently. Colorblindness (to them) creates a society that denies their negative racial experiences, rejects their cultural heritage, and invalidates their unique perspectives.***

Let me give an example of how this works. A few months ago, some of the African Americans from our community who are active with our ***Coalition for Racial Justice*** were sharing (with the whites in the room) some of the painful day-to-day ways in which racial discrimination still

works here in Indian River County. In a moment of candor, one of them (who is an upper level professional with at least one master's degree and is always impeccably dressed) said, ***"I am so sick (when I go shopping in any one of the big box retail stores up on route 60) of being followed around...just because I'm black they think I am there to shoplift."*** As a white person (used to the automatic privileges and deference that come with my race)...and who (to my knowledge) has never, ever, been followed around in a big box store, I was flabbergasted, ***"Really...[I thought to myself] ...in the year 2018...store personnel follow you around because they think you're a criminal??? Really?"***

My point here is echoing that made by Dr. Williams. In America today...with its long legacy of racism and discrimination...we are NOT ***"all the same."*** Black people experience a far different social reality than White people do...and no amount of me (or anybody else) personally pretending to be ***"beyond racism"*** and ***"colorblind"*** will take that way. In America today, Black people are subject to a near constant barrage of personal prejudice, personal bias and discrimination.

And Dr. Williams goes on to point out that the idea of a white person being ***"colorblind"*** in fact means that they are purposefully ***NOT*** seeing real things. ***"Blind,"*** she writes, ***"means not being able to see things. I don't want to be blind. I want to see things clearly, even if they make me uncomfortable." Being colorblind, or claiming to be, deceives us into thinking that we ourselves have no personal racial prejudices.***

Dr. Ahmen Abdelmageed [**A-men Ab-del-ma-geed**] – a British Muslim and Dean at Manchester University in England has a similar perspective:

***"I'm color blind" is a statement employed by many to convey that they see everyone equally and that race plays no factor in how they treat others. They assume -- and I believe with good intention -- that by doing so, they are helping to improve race relations and that, by looking beyond someone's skin color, they are combatting some of the divisive race issues that continue to plague our society. Saying "I am colorblind" ...[Pretending] not to see someone's color, and [ignoring] how that color is perceived, viewed and treated [by the larger society] will not make the problems associated with it magically go away. You need to see the full spectrum of [skin] color and all that it entails; you need to acknowledge all of it, and you need to address it.*** [And then the good Doctor concludes] ***Each and every one of us has to work – in our own capacity – to [address] and contain [the racism] that continues to plague our society.***

**[PAUSE...]**

So...if, as the critics of ***"the colorblind approach"*** (the ideology that we are all the same, so I don't need to notice racial differences) are right – and that we are NOT even close to being a ***"post-racial society"*** where we can afford to ignore the many negative realities and discriminations that come with being a person of color in this society...then how should the White majority respond to racial differences in their midst? Well, sociological researchers

Robert Reason and Nancy Evans of Emory University call for people not to attempt to be “*color blind*” but rather “*racially cognizant*.” Being “*racially cognizant*” means that we need to acknowledge the powerful role that race plays in our everyday lives and in the lives of others and demand a “*continuous examination and reinterpretation of race*” and how it shapes the American consciousness.

And one key piece of being personally “*racially cognizant*” is being willing to personally acknowledge and work on the “*unconscious and inherent racial bias*” we share with every White person in this society – even the most well-intentioned and racially enlightened among us. Because we live in a society that has been systematically racist and discriminatory for centuries, we all have prejudice deeply imbedded in our psyches and perceptions.

Look, let me get right to “the bottom line” this morning, my dear Unitarian Universalist friends. We are part of a noble liberal religious tradition that has fought (for many generations) for racial justice and equality in our society. As well-intentioned people, we were on “the front lines” of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century battle to end slavery...and were right there marching and registering voters in the civil rights struggles of the 1960’s -- and since then have worked terribly hard as allies of people of color in their struggles against discrimination and prejudice and inequality. We naturally like to think of ourselves as good and fair and just people working toward a society where all are treated equally, respectfully and fairly, regardless of the shade of their skin. But – whether we like it or not, no matter how hard we have worked (in the past) on our personal attitudes and behaviors -- we are still part and parcel of a tragically racist and unjust culture...and so we must fearlessly acknowledge our own unconscious and unintentional biases.

Sadly, America (in these early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century) remains a racist (and racially divided) society...and these are not times for anyone to fancifully imagine that we are moving toward being a color-blind, post-racial society. What I am saying to you this morning, that both on the **MICRO LEVEL** (of our own imperfect perceptions, attitudes and behaviors) and on the **MACRO LEVEL** (of our society’s deeply-imbedded institutional racist habits and tendencies) we have a whole lot of work to do. And the first (and sometimes terribly uncomfortable) place to start, dear friends, is within ourselves...to work on our internalized racism. We are a part of the problem because we have grown up in racist America...and (no matter how good our intentions) we still have the encrustations of centuries of racism attached to our psyches. So...even as we actively do anti-racism work out in the society at large (challenging racist attitudes and confronting discrimination in others) let us also get to work on our unconscious and unintentional selves. There is no shame in admitting we have a long journey yet to complete in our individual hearts and souls. America needs all of us to be a part of the change – and the liberation of the mind and heart -- that must yet happen.

Amen.