

“Wrestling With Privilege”
Sermon by Sharon Wylie
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We’re going to talk this morning about being white and being privileged. Like walking through a minefield or being thrown into a briar patch, we are going to carefully pick our way through a talk about being white and privileged. We are going to take courage from knowing we are a community grounded in love and support for one another, we’re going to take a deep breath, and we’re going to talk about being white and privileged. Though there may be moments of discomfort or even confusion, I have faith that we will make it safely to the other side together.

This topic is important to me because I have felt so powerless about what to do about racial injustice in our country. I see that things aren’t fair. I see that despite housing laws to ensure that discrimination doesn’t occur, that people of color still tend to be lumped into neighborhoods together, as do white people. I see that despite antidiscrimination laws that ensure equal opportunity to employment, that people of color still make less money on the dollar than white people do. I see Shirley Sherrod vilified in the media for talking openly about her experiences with racism, her own and others. I see families in Arizona being ripped apart as parents are taken from their children for the crime of working in this country without proper documentation. I see the effects of racism all around me, but I don’t know what to do to fight racism. For me, learning about my white privilege and the history of white privilege in the United States has been a relief. It has been the starting point for work I need to continue to do. It has been the way for me to stay

in the struggle to achieve the world I dream of. I hope that this talk will be a meaningful starting point for you as well.

I want to talk about the power shuffle exercise we just did together, but first I need to clarify some terms that I'm going to use so we have some basis, hopefully, for clear communication. I'm going to refer to "white people" as "white people." I have been in discussions with people who were very uncomfortable with the term "white person," who felt that it was a negative term that unfairly lumped people together without recognizing their uniqueness and individuality. I don't mean the term to be a negative at all; it simply describes people who have the physical appearance of being what our culture recognizes as racially white. I am a white person, and I suspect that many of us in this room are too.

If you feel uncomfortable being lumped into a category that you feel devalues your individuality, then I would point out that people of color in this country are lumped into categories that devalue individuality all of the time, and it is a good learning experience for white people to feel what this is like.

I also want to note that we are not all of us in the room white people. The complexities of racial identity are not always visible, and I know there are people here who do not identify as white. I hope there will be parts of this sermon that are still interesting and meaningful, but I will acknowledge that I have written it with white people in mind. I apologize for this—I think too much in our culture is designed with only white people in mind—but I hope I will be forgiven in service of a larger cause.

And because we're talking about privilege, let me briefly give a working definition for us to start with. "Privilege" is when someone enjoys a benefit beyond the advantages of others. When we talk about "white privilege," we are talking about a system of benefits enjoyed by white people solely because we are white. Because we are white, we enjoy the privilege in our culture of NOT being stopped by the police indiscriminately. Because we are white, we enjoy the privilege in our culture of learning our history in our schools. Of seeing white faces in movies and on television, and in our government.

Some of our privileges are what are called "unearned entitlements," things of value that ALL people SHOULD have but don't: access to quality education, feeling safe in public space, being paid fairly for work. When the word "entitlement" is used, it frequently means that as white people, we are taking for granted something that everyone SHOULD have, but we're the only ones who do. And we don't see that people of color are NOT assured fairness in the justice system, NOT confident that complaining to the manager will get a problem solved, NOT guaranteed good health care from their doctors, NOT assured that the teacher will treat their children fairly.

It's frequently hard for white people to even RECOGNIZE the privileges that we have, which is why we did the power shuffle exercise a few minutes ago. Because our experience is largely that people trust us and feel safe around us, we have access to education, jobs, financial support...it can be hard to see and understand what the experience of people of color in our culture is like. For those of you who did

the walk, perhaps you noticed that as you took more steps forward, you became less able to SEE the people behind you. For those of you with candy, perhaps you realized how easy it is to focus on your own candy and not even know if anybody else has candy or how much.

Now, I hope the exercise was useful in several ways, and I hope it's something you'll continue to reflect on after today and in discussions with friends and family. I hope you'll come to the talk back after the sermon, so we can discuss it more there. It was important to me to do the exercise today because I wanted to bring home that we all have privilege of some kind. And at the same time, we most of us have oppression or marginalization of some kind also. The exercise we did today focused on race and class because that's what I'm talking about, but we could have whole other talks about gender, sexual orientation, and physical abilities. And we could do the power shuffle looking at those issues.

Let me say that again: we all have privilege of some kind, and we most of us have oppression or marginalization of some kind as well. It's not all or nothing. And the point of learning about our privilege is not to feel guilty. The point is to learn, to learn about the world around us and to learn about ourselves. When we are unaware of the privileges conferred upon us, then we are also unaware of the realities of the world around us. Men need to learn about their male privilege. Straight people need to learn about our heterosexual privilege. Able-bodied people need to learn about our able-bodied privilege.

And white people need to learn about our white privilege, to see clearly where we really are, WHO we really are. It is part of white privilege to not have to look around us and see these realities. Dr. Rebecca Parker, the president of Starr King School for the Ministry, writes about this aspect of white privilege in her essay, “A Struggle to Inhabit My Country.” She tells the story of driving with a friend through rural western Pennsylvania. She writes, “It had been raining hard, and as we neared a small town, we noticed blinking yellow lights warning of danger. We saw fields covered in standing water and passed several side roads blocked off with signs saying: Road Closed. ‘Looks like they’ve had a flood here,’ we said.” They drove across a bridge, noticing the high water and the sandbags by the side of the road. Everywhere around them was evidence of major flooding. It wasn’t until the road was impassable with water that they realized, as she writes, “the flood hadn’t happened yesterday or last week. It was happening *here and now*.” Forced to abandon their car on the flooding road, they made it to higher ground to wait out the storm.

Dr. Parker writes, “This is what is like to be white in America. It is to travel well ensconced in a secure vehicle; to see signs of what is happening in the world outside the compartment one is traveling in and not realize that these signs have any contemporary meaning. It is to be dislocated—to misjudge your location and to believe you are uninvolved and unaffected by what is happening in the world....To come of age in America as a white person is to be educated into ignorance. It is to be

culturally shaped to not know and not want to know the actual context in which you live.”

Now, it’s tremendously difficult in our culture to separate race privilege from class privilege, which is why I am talking about both today. To give you an example of how they go together, and to talk more explicitly about white privilege, I’m going to talk about my own race and class privilege. I thought it might be helpful for us to think about how I came to be in this privileged position of preaching here today. How does my race and class privilege bring me to this moment in time? To reflect on that, I’m going to start a little over 50 years ago. I could go back farther, but for today, we’ll start here.

In 1957, my parents were both 23 years old, and they bought their first house, where they would live for the next 30 years, in San Diego. My dad was working as a cabinetmaker, and his employer vouched for him and helped him secure the loan for the house construction. My parents were also able to obtain a second loan to buy the property they wanted. In 1957, antidiscrimination laws covering private housing were NOT in effect. It is unlikely that such loans would have been available to people of color, and even if they had been, those people would not have been able to buy and build in the neighborhood where my parents chose to live. The ability to own property and one’s own home is considered a cornerstone of prosperity and wealth accumulation in the United States.

My parents’ white privilege allowed them to own their own home very early in life, which contributed enormously to their financial stability. By 1970, my father

was able to start his own construction company with financial support and mentorship from white colleagues and fellow businessmen. The construction industry in San Diego was defined by a network of white men who knew each other, advised each other, and generally worked in friendly competition. It remains a hard industry in which to survive and thrive, and my father would not have been able to start his business or succeed without the support of that network. His white privilege certainly played a role in providing him with the support he needed to succeed.

The company was very successful, and by the time I was growing up, my parents were wealthy. Unlike my older siblings, I attended a private school. I traveled with my parents. We went to the theatre and the opera. My parents' white privilege had become class privilege, and I was the first in my family to attend college, a private college with an excellent reputation. My parents paid for my schooling, and I graduated college with no outstanding loans to pay. Their race and class privilege had now become MY race and class privilege.

It took me a few years, but I eventually ended up working at my parents' construction company, more race and class privilege handed down to the next generation. I was 29 years old when I bought MY house, later than my parents, but still much earlier than most of my peers. The house my partner and I bought was built in 1929, and the original title includes this provision: "that no part of said land shall ever at any time be used or occupied by any person other than one of the white or Caucasian race except such as are in the employ of the owner or tenants of said

property in the capacity of servants.” This provision would have been legal in California until 1963, when California’s first attempt at a fair housing law was passed. That law was immediately challenged by property owners and landlords, and it wasn’t until 1967 that the California courts upheld the constitutionality of it. It is no wonder that the neighborhood remains primarily white.

When I decided to attend seminary and to move to Northern California, I expected to take out student loans to pay my way, but my parents offered to pay my tuition, which I gratefully accepted. Because of this—because of the continued benefits of my race and class privilege—I have been able to attend school full time, and I have not had to work for supplemental income. This means I will be able to complete seminary in three years rather than the 4 to 5 it takes most other students.

You should also be aware that there is minimal financial support available for those of us preparing for Unitarian Universalist ministry, which means those of us in seminary are already a very privileged group of people, overwhelmingly white, overwhelmingly middle and upper-middle class. I am privileged among privileged.

This brings me to today, to the privilege of preaching to this congregation. I am able to physically be here because of the race and class privilege of having a car. To take public transportation from my home to this building on a Sunday would take me an hour and a half, including that rather unpleasant uphill walk at the end. It would take another hour and a half to get home. Because of your congregation’s own financial hardships, you are not able to offer the honorarium

suggested for a ministerial candidate. And because of my class privilege, I am able to accept these preaching opportunities for a smaller amount.

So that is how you come to have a wealthy, highly educated, heterosexual, able-bodied white woman preaching to you today. And because I am here, there is someone else who is not. Someone with a different background, different experiences, a different viewpoint to share. My privilege comes at the price of the silence and marginalization of someone else.

Remember! The point of examining all this is NOT to feel guilty. It's NOT to feel guilty. It's simply to see and know the world as it truly is. To OWN our realities instead of living in delusion. I don't feel guilty that my parents are able to pay for my school. It's an incredible gift. I wish all my classmates could attend school without loans. And it's important—spiritually important—for me to know that I'm not JUST lucky. My parents have worked hard to be successful, definitely, but they're not JUST hard workers. We have privileges, and our lives have been shaped irrevocably by those privileges.

And for us as Unitarian Universalists, the point of all this is NOT to become people that we're not. There is a lot of writing and discussion in our denomination right now about the challenges of becoming more diverse. It is discouraging and disturbing that in spite of our principles and our commitment to social justice—values and traits that we know should be attractive to people from all backgrounds—that we remain a predominantly white denomination. There are lots of theories about why this is and what we need to do to change it, but to me, our

inability to attract a greater diversity of people to our denomination indicates that as white people, we still have work to do. And I believe that learning about our white privilege is the place to start.

It would be easier for me to imagine that my hard work and natural intelligence got me here. It would be EASIER. But spiritual growth is not about what's easy. I believe this is some of the most important spiritual work that we, as white people, can do. It does not serve us to go through life wrapped in a cocoon of comfort that keeps us from seeing and knowing the world in which we live.

Like Dr. Parker, I want to look around me and know what's happening. What is the history of this land we're on now? Does this congregation have any relationship with the Coast Miwok tribe? What about the day laborers in the parking lot at Home Depot? Where do their kids go to school? What is it like for them to work in San Rafael? How did the history of racial segregation in Marin County lead to the creation of Marin City, which remains predominantly a community of people of color? And what about the public transportation system in Marin? Does it shut out people of color? Some people on the internet seem to think so. What do you think about it?

This Thursday, the immigration law in Arizona will go into effect, a law that demonizes undocumented workers and ALL PEOPLE OF COLOR. Protests, rallies, and vigils will be held in Arizona and around the country. Unitarian Universalists from around the country are travelling to Arizona this week to participate in nonviolent protest. As part of that nonviolent protest, it is expected that protestors

WILL be arrested. If you would like to learn more about what you can do to fight for immigrant rights, you can visit the UUA's website, or go to www.standingonthesideoflove.org.

This is soul work, my friends. This is the work of getting out of our comfortable and secure vehicle to feel the cold rain on our skin and to RISK the dangers of the flood around us. But here's what I need you to know: we are at RISK whether we stay in the car or not. The flood is *here and now*. We can get out of the car and see things as they really are, or we can take our chances while the water sweeps us away.

As with all sermons, this one is meant to be a starting point for your own self-reflection and learning. What I'm calling on you to do today is to commit to taking one next step in your learning. Dig into your own personal history and learn how race and class privilege has benefited you. Start a discussion group with friends. Read a book about white privilege. Learn the history of people of color in the United States. Learn the history of people of color in Marin. Watch a video about how "race" has been constructed. DO SOMETHING. Just one thing.

Get out of the car.

May it be so. Blessed be, Amen, Namaste, Salaam, Shalom, Peace.