

Whats Race got to do with it. Starting Wednesday February 1st at 7pm for five weeks, I will be leading an adult religious education watching the video Race the Power of Illusion and President Obama's primary speech on Race. We will share our thoughts and experiences with racial issues and how they impact us. I invite you all to join us. If there are a large enough group of people who would like to have a session during the day, please contact the office or myself and I would be willing to add a daytime class. The movie's initial focus is on the scientific study of the genetics of race.

The movie's conclusion is that except for the evolutionary genetics of skin pigmentation there are no other genetic markers amongst the human species that have a commonality only with skin pigmentation. Its conclusion is that skin pigmentation is the evolutionary effect of how close our ancestors lived near the equator.

Yet as the movie points out, just because there aren't other differences, does not mean that race doesn't impact our lives and our world. The movie goes on to tell the stories of the indigenous peoples of this country and other people of color and how we as a country often through the manipulation of science, media, and the law have oppressed these people. I will encourage all who attend our class to be open and willing to share their stories and even more so to be willing to listen to each others' stories. I believe that it is only by understanding other peoples life experiences that we can expand our view of the world particular on the issue of race and how it impacts society.

And by hearing each others stories we build relationships. And when we build relationships, we become emotionally connected to others. And when we become emotionally connected to others we cannot stand idly by when injustice prevails over them. So of course it is through my experiences that I view Race. It is my experiences being part of a multi racial family, and having to face how the ramifications of race impact my family before I was able to transcend my particular understanding of the impact that race has on all people of color.

So let me share with you just one seminal instance in my family that opened my eyes to What Race has to do with it. If any of you have travelled by air you know there is a requirement to take off your shoes while going through security. This is just one reason I have gone to loafers versus laced shoes in recent years. But this wasn't always so. I was travelling a lot after the shoe bomber incident that led to requirement to remove shoes, and I knew some airports at that time still didn't require you to take off your shoes. So it was with this in mind that on the way home from General Assembly one year with my older son William who was an older teenager at the time, as we were going through security, I asked the security guard whether I had to take off my sneakers. He said no don't worry about it, and passed me through. As I walked through security, I heard the security guard say to my son, "take off your sneakers". And my son in one of those pissed off teenager voices replied "you just told that man (pointing at me) that he didn't have to take his sneakers off, why do I?" and he refused to take off his shoes. Now, I have to admit that the first thought that flashed through my mind was "I really don't want to miss this flight, I have to be at work in the morning" I thought it, but with deep restraint I didn't say anything. For I heard my son. I listened. He didn't say to the guard "you just told my father he had to take his shoes off, he said you told that man. So for those who do not know my family, both my children are Korean, so it was not evident merely by sight to the security guard that he was my son or else maybe he would have gotten a free pass. It was not that my son didn't want to identify me as his father per se, although there have been those times as well, especially when I am dancing or doing some other foolish thing...that he may have wanted to deny a connection to me. But at the airport, it was that he didn't want to be judged as the son of middle aged white man in a golf shirt. He wanted to be judged for he was, as an individual, for who he was, including his identity as a person of color. He wanted to show the hypocrisy of profiling, and he wanted also in his own way to show a bit of defiance to a system that constantly subjected him because of his skin color to different treatment than white people. He refused to budge from his position and he forced them to take alternative measures to determine he didn't have a bomb in his shoe. Well we didn't miss the plane and I was unbelievably proud of him for standing up for himself, while at the same time unbelievably worried about the repercussions that awaited him if he continued on this path of defiance.

You see I was taught growing up to expect discrimination. I was taught that growing up Jewish, that without question Christians would discriminate against me. This was due to my parent's experiences, when they could not get into many colleges and many companies would not offer them opportunities. They lived under the shadow of the Holocaust, and were taught to always fear that one day Christians would try to exterminate us. I was taught to accept it. Keep your head down, Work harder. Be smarter, be resilient and survive...the Jewish People had over 2,000 years of experience of being oppressed by others, so I assumed there was some wisdom in that. But in my experience, although there were probably certain companies that wouldn't hire a person of the Jewish religion, my experiences have been that I had plenty of opportunities and only rarely did I ever encounter any overt animosity from Christians towards my Birth Religion. And I found that there was more to life than merely surviving. But because of my positive experiences, I taught my son that he should demand to be treated equally. And in his experiences that has just not been the case.

And I think I fell into a common trap that that is common to many humans. We take our own experiences and we extrapolate them out to the rest of the world and assume that everyone sees the world the same way we do, or at least should see the world that way, and if they don't then we often invalidate their experiences. What I learned at that airport after a very long discussion over dinner, as he shared with me some of his challenges and life experiences that I was unaware of or I passed off as normal teenage angst, was that I really had no idea of what my son's experiences were like as a person of color and how they impacted him.

And then it made me rethink and question why certain teachers at school were particularly hard on him, I re-looked at why certain girls stopped dating him after he met their parents, I re-examined all the pain and frustration that he felt each time he was stopped by police at the mall or while driving and how this frustration built up into the start of a resistance against discrimination that day at the airport.

I knew then and there, my life would not be the same. My eyes had been opened...eyes that I knew had seen things and rationalized them, an intellect that understood the need for justice but didn't feel the pain of injustice. But that day, that day I felt my son's pain, a pain he hid from me for a long time.

Racism is not just an intellectual exercise when it impacts someone you love. I think the UUA has spent a lot of energy on education regarding the history and existence of institutional racism. What I think we need to understand is how racism impacts people of color. We need to listen to stories of people of color and understand the pain that such life experiences have inflicted upon them. In the movie we will watch it tells the stories of individuals and one particular story that I raise up today is how armed service veterans of color were systematically excluded from receiving Federal Housing Loans after they returned from WWII and through the process of redlining were not allowed to move into certain white neighborhoods. This certainly impacted their ability to accumulate wealth for themselves and to provide opportunities for their children, opportunities many of us have benefited from.

Ok, so now what. This is all history. We can't change history. These things happened before many of us were born...Hopefully we have not personally taken direct actions that are racist. But we can learn from history. Pres. Barack Obama in his primary speech on Race which we will watch during the class, acknowledged that...in discussing the White immigrant experience says- "as far as they're concerned, no one's handed them anything, they've built it from scratch. They've worked hard all their lives, many times only to see their jobs shipped overseas or their pension dumped after a lifetime of labor. They are anxious about their futures, and feel their dreams slipping away; in an era of stagnant wages and global competition, opportunity comes to be seen as a zero sum game, in which your dreams come at my expense." And he goes on to speak about how politicians use both white and black anger to create fear and garner support. But I want to focus on his comment that "opportunity comes to be seen as a zero sum game" raising the question as to whether power is a finite thing that must be shared amongst all who exist, and there is only so much to go around, so it must be shared equally. Or conversely is power something that is unlimited, and every being in the universe can have it or tap into it. From a theological perspective, do we think the Universe is small and divisible or do we believe in a spirit of life that is universal, expansive and unlimited?

I choose the latter and believe that just as physicist have determined the universe is still expanding, we can view the concept of power as expansive. However in the society we live in, there is a systemic control of power and resources, so we need to work to let oppressed people have the power to lift themselves up. We should use our power to work collaboratively with those without power, without the fear that we will lose something in that equation. And in order to make our vision of a just and equitable society a reality we as individuals and as a religious organization have to be engaged in the larger community to make this happen .

But I think we must to start with the hypothesis that the world can change for the better. If there is only one thing that is constant in this world it is change. Now we have to keep working on the better part. In fact I think if we look at the overarching view of American history, I think we can see how much we have changed for the better already. Our country was founded some 235 years ago by mostly white wealthy landowners. Legalized slavery ended approximately 150 years ago...Women attained the right to vote just over 90 years ago. Historic civil rights legislation was passed just 40 years ago. Progress is not a linear equation, it is a fluid, dynamic, concept that requires constant adaptation.

So be encouraged...the actions we take today will impact the future positively. We may not see it tomorrow or next year or in our lifetime, but we have to keep working at it if it will one day become a reality. The UUA over the last number of years has provided educational programs on antiracism, anti oppression, and multiculturalism. And I was fortunate to go to a seminary in Florida that was truly a lived multicultural learning environment. All of this education has provided substantive background as to **why** we as a religion should work towards creating a more just and equitable society. This is embedded throughout our principles.

Throughout my educational experience, one of the questions that is consistently asked is to whom am I accountable. Ultimately I am accountable to all of existence, but specifically I am accountable to my children, and then I am accountable to all people who are oppressed, because all who are oppressed are someone's children. If it is not right to happen to my child, it is not right to happen to anyone's, and lastly I am accountable to myself, to uphold my own personal and religious integrity. To Act in congruence with my beliefs and values. But these were my stories, that I share with you. They are now your stories.

All I ask you to do is to think about these things, to start and continue to share your stories, and then to expand to whom you share your stories with, to widen your circle, to take a few risks, transcend your environment and engage with others who you do not know. You will find you have very few differences with others...People of color have the same hopes and concerns as anyone in our society, adequate housing, what do to with aging parents, will they keep their job, will their children get a decent education, can they afford medical care if they get ill. If you find out nothing else from watching the video it will be that we are more alike than we are different, not just physiologically but in our hopes and dreams. Do not give up hope.

Yes Race matters. But it matters less than it did 40 years ago and it certainly matters even less than it did 140 years ago. Let us stay vigilant, Let us stay connected, and let us move forward with love and openness in our hearts and minds so that one day one day our descendants when asked the question Whats race got to do with it, can answer, nothing. May it one day be so. Amen