

THE EMOTIONAL LIVES OF WHITE PEOPLE

The emotional life of white people is complex – to say the least.

The word guilt is often used to describe the emotional life of white people. In my experience, the emotional life of white people is far more complex than what is typically thought of with regard to that word. If we are to affect change we need to understand this complexity.

There are some difficult emotions that white people experience as a result of living in a racist society. These feelings are: fear, hatred, amnesia, anesthesia, indifference, denial, guilt, shame, loneliness, and hopelessness. And there are feelings that are related to racism we are required to repress like anger, grief, and sadness. These are feelings that white people have in the context of a society based on race and rooted in racism.

HATRED

Hatred is intense dislike, extreme aversion, or hostility (Webster's)

Those of us associated with the white liberal community have hard time thinking about the hatred that white people have shown for people of color. This emotion is foreign to us. We need to remember the power that the emotion of hatred has had in the lives of those of us who are white.

W.E.B. Du Bois describes hatred in his book The Souls of White Folk

On the pale, white faces ...I see again and again... a writing of human hatred, a deep passionate hatred, vast by the very vagueness of its expressions.....We have seen, you and I, city after city drunk and furious with ungovernable lust of blood, mad with murder, destroying, killing and cursing, torturing human victims because somebody accused of a crime happened to be of the same color as the mob's innocent victims and because that color was not white! We have seen...in the name of Civilization, Justice, and Motherhood...right here in America an orgy of cruelty, barbarism and murder to men and women of Negro descent. (pp 186-187 in Black on White edited by David Roediger

Hatred is the emotion that fed the lynching's and the destruction of cities like Tulsa. This is the emotion that motivated the millions that belonged to the Klan. And this is the feeling that fuels the hate crimes and the white supremacist web sites of today.

Frankly I don't understand why whites are so full of hate. Whites are the people who have committed the massive crimes against people of color – not the other way around. What have people of color done to deserve such hatred?

I don't understand this fury and this hatred but I do have an explanation for it. Because of racism we who are white have become irrational people – inhumane people – indeed “crazy” people.

This awful emotion is still alive – felt by millions of white people in America even today.

INDIFFERENCE

In her book A Race is Nice Thing to Have Janet Helms talks about those of us who are white who live in isolation from people of color. Think for example of those living in Northern New England, the Dakotas, and many white suburbs. In these communities whites do not have significant contact with people who are racially different. Often these white people are suffering from amnesia and anesthesia. But they are also unaware of and indifferent to the legitimate needs of people of color for justice and equity.

Ms. Helms estimates that one half of the population of white people has an attitude of indifference toward people of color. But even if it is only one third of the white population that feels this way that would be approximately 100,000,000 white folks who have this attitude.

In his book And We are Not Saved, Derrick Bell tells the story of Ghetto disease. In this story an amber cloud descends on white adolescents leaving them afflicted with a terrible disease – Ghetto disease. Youngsters who had been alert and personable become lethargic and withdrawn. Immediately the government mobilizes. National leaders spare no expense to find a cure for this dreaded disease. But when civil rights leaders seek to apply the cure to black youth they are met with rejection. In his story Bell describes the indifference of whites to the Ghetto disease among Youth of Color.

Paul Wachtel, author of the book Race in the Mind of America: Breaking the Vicious Circle between Blacks and Whites, describes the attitude of indifference that whites in America for the legitimate needs of People of Color communities.

Paul Wachtel writes,

What is perhaps most important for whites to acknowledge and understand is indifference. A great deal of what is often characterized as racism can be more precisely and usefully describe as indifference. Perhaps no other feature of white attitudes and of the underlying attitudinal structure of white society as a whole is as cumulatively responsible for the pain and privation experienced by our nation's black minority at this point in our history as is indifference. And at the same time, perhaps no feature is as misunderstood or overlooked.”

The white majority tolerates the misery in the midst our affluent society because of the belief that “they” are not like us and “they” are different. Most whites who feel little outright hostility - who even believe in fair play and equal opportunity - see little that has to do with them in the painful realities of people of color communities.

AMNESIA

The feeling of indifference is closely related to amnesia.

A person who has amnesia can't remember. They forget.

As white People we suffer from amnesia about the history of racism in our country. We are not educated to remember our history. James Loewin informs us in his book Lies my Teacher Taught Me we learn lies

about our history. The history texts that are used in our school omit and distort the experiences of people of color. They also exaggerate and distort the accomplishments of whites.

Were you taught that our Puritan ancestors participated in the massacres of Native peoples?

Were you taught that the abolitionists like Theodore Parker believed in the inferiority of African peoples?

Were you taught that White World War Two veterans benefited from the GI Bill and got financing for new homes in the suburbs while men of color who also fought did not?

Most of us weren't taught these important facts. And so we say that we don't know. We don't know because those running the white system of power and privilege don't want us to know. We don't know because these white people have included textbook writers and editors. We don't know because we are so conditioned by whiteness that we don't know that we don't know. So as white people we suffer from amnesia about the real stories of racism in our history.

There are consequences that we suffer as a result of this amnesia.

Diane Goodman writes,

“When people in privileged groups are only exposed to the ways and accomplishments of people like themselves, they develop a distorted worldview. When history is recounted from the perspective of the dominant group, they receive only a partial picture of our past. This ignorance leads to limited and skewed views of different lifestyles, viewpoints, perspectives and people.”
(From an article entitled “Costs of Oppression to People from Dominant Groups”)

ANESTHESIA

Amnesia is strongly connected to anesthesia

Webster's describes anesthesia as “want of feeling” and “general loss of the sense of feeling.”

Since we don't know the real story about the history of racism, we don't feel very strongly about it. You can't feel horror, outrage, remorse, and betrayal about something you don't know anything about.

If we are cut off from our feelings we aren't able to experience suffering and pain. And when we can't feel suffering and pain we aren't able to experience compassion and deep connection. This leads to the loss of our very humanity.

The anesthesia of whiteness stifles us as feeling people. Notice how many of us who are white are so shut down emotionally. Notice how we don't express strong feelings. Notice how we stay in our heads. Notice how we are cut from our bodies. Yes our whiteness is deadening.

When I talk about this emotional way of being as a white person I am describing myself. I am recounting how I have felt for a good part of my life.

Interestingly when we start to come out of our whiteness and start to become engaged in the struggle for racial justice we become in touch with our deeper feelings. We begin to feel more human. We experience ourselves as being more alive. And, we find joy in the struggle.

DENIAL

To quote a phrase “De Nile is not just a river in Egypt.”

Given the impact of amnesia and anesthesia, the socialization into whiteness, and the lack of awareness of white power and privilege it is no wonder that denial about racism is too strong among those of us who are white. Denial serves to lower our awareness and understanding.

There are many different forms of denial

There is denial about the real history of our country

There is denial about the injustices and suffering in people of color communities.

There is even denial of our own emotional capabilities, sensitivity, and mutuality. This stands in the way of our expressing empathy and developing connection.

The denial is often so strong we even deny we are denying!!!

Ask yourself – what are the consequences of all this denial?

GUILT

Guilt – this is what we who are white are most famous for.

The reader has probably wondered why it took so long for us to get to discuss the guilt that whites feel

I didn't start with guilt because I am aware of how many white people are locked into amnesia, anesthesia, indifference, and denial (what I call AAID for shorthand) I say this with the full awareness that for the first 25 years of my life that is where I was emotionally as a white person.

At least with guilt we have gone beyond amnesia, anesthesia, indifference and denial. From my point of view coming out of AAID is a positive thing because at least we are starting to feel something!!!

Since white guilt is a complex emotion in itself, I have written another short paper entitled “Anatomy of White Guilt.”

In this paper I describe the many ways that white people feel guilt including:

- Feeling responsible or not for the sin's of our ancestors.
- Feeling guilty about racist acts – sins of commission.
- Feeling guilt for not doing enough to stop racism – sins of omission.
- Feeling the moral pain of benefiting from an immoral system.
- Feeling overwhelmed by a sense of moral failure.

SHAME

Shame is closely related to guilt. We feel shame when we break the taboos of our society.

In her book Learning to be White, Thandeka describes how we are shamed into being white. She tells the story of a young white boy who wants to be friends with an African American child. But his parents forbid him from having a friendship with a child of another race. In forbidding this youngster from entering such a relationship they, probably intentionally, induce a feeling of shame in him for wanting to do this. Thandeka elaborates on the many ways we are shamed as whites to stay within the narrow boundaries of whiteness.

FEELING BAD ABOUT BEING WHITE; FEELING GOOD ABOUT BEING WHITE

Sometimes we may come to feel ashamed of our personal racial identity as a white person. We feel shame about the past crimes perpetrated against people of color. We feel shame about the current power imbalances between whites and people of color. So we don't know how to feel good about being white. In fact we feel bad about being a white person.

We decide we don't want to be white anymore – that we want to become a person of color. But given the dynamics of race, given the power of white skin privilege, given the subtleties of our history it is difficult for a white person to become a person of color.

I believe I can grow in my capacity to be in authentic relation with people of color. I can learn to have a “double consciousness” (WEB Du Bois). But I can't become a person of color.

The best I can do is to develop a positive sense of being white without having to feel superior to people in other racial groups. By striving to change our immoral racist system – by developing accountability to people of color – by building white anti-racist community - I can come to feel good about being white.

WHITE FRIGHT

I contend that at some level all White People fear People of Color. I know that I do.

White people fear people of color because of our history. When we look at the history of white supremacy we can see that white identity had been grounded in the experiences of fear, control, and violence. That is the consequence of our annihilating one people – Native Americans - and enslaving another – Africans.

The fear of people of color is a consistent theme in the history of our country. Fear of slave revolts. Fear of loss of political power as in the time of Reconstruction. Fear of declining property values when neighborhoods change. Fear of losing social capital when schools integrate. And most recently, the fear that whites will become a “minority” in the United States by the year 2050.

Contemporary news media play on the historic fear that white people feel for people of color. The media preys on our fears and feeds on it. In the evening, when we turn on the news we see pictures of men of color heading off to jail. If only we saw as many pictures of white corporate criminals being taken to prison.

White People fear the loss of power and privilege that comes from being white. One of the strongest and likely repressed beliefs those of us who are white have is that with racism we gain and with the end of racism lose. Why else would we talk about ending racism as a sacrifice?

Even our personal interactions with people of color are affected by fear. We fear that we will say the wrong thing or do the wrong thing. We fear that we will offend someone. We fear that if relations become broken they can't be repaired. We fear people of color will not see us as being good white people.

Maybe the deepest fear that we who are white have is that we will see things for what they truly are and we will see ourselves for what we truly are. If we did so we would have to face the injustice at the heart of our country. We would have to deal with the undue power and privilege we have because of the color of our own white skin.

As white people we often use unhealthy psychological mechanisms such as denial, false justification, projection, and disassociation to deal with our fears of people from oppressed groups.

Let's name the power that the fear of people of color has over us as white people. In some states, we spend more money on prisons to incarcerate people of color than we do on colleges and universities. We put up walls and live in gated communities becoming prisoners in our own homes.

So fear of people of color is a strong emotion among those of us who are white.

FEELINGS OF LONELINESS AND SOCIAL ISOLATION

Since we fear people of color, or feel guilty about our relations with them, we often take steps to avoid being with them. In this way racism leads to the loss and diminishment of relationships. .

Limited experience with and knowledge of others results in less human connection. And less connection leads to loneliness and social isolation.

Diane Goodman writes,

“One of the fundamental human desires is to know and be known. We seek relationships with others that allow us to see them fully and have those others see us fully. We want to be recognized for who we truly are. Oppression prevents this process of mutual recognition.” (Costs of Oppression to People from Dominant Groups”)

Not only do we feel cut off from people of color. We may also experience ourselves as cut off from other white people. In another part of the curriculum on The Internalization of Whiteness- I describe some different ways of being white including hate, indifference, mainstream, liberal, and anti-racist. Consider if you will the relations between whites that are haters and white liberals. Or think about the relations between indifferent white and ant-racist whites. These white communities are really divided from one another. Indeed they are antagonistic toward one another.

I have heard some white people who engage in anti-racism work talk about how they feel alone. They are struggling to create a new and different way of being white in the world. Other white people may not have

the same investment in making change. Other white people may put them down and put pressure on them to reintegrate into white society. Other white people may not welcome conversation about the complex issues of race, racism and white racial identity.

That is why I personally think it is critical that anti-racist whites create communities of white anti-racist activists where we can support one another and learn together. In the Unitarian Universalist Association Allies for Racial Equity is such a community. By building such communities we will not feel so alone in the work.

ANGER

Many of us who are white people are socialized to not feel very deeply. We are taught to not feel strongly about issues concerning racial justice. We learn to be rational and intellectual. We are socialized to be conflict avoidant.

In our socialization we don't learn to express "bad" feelings like grief, sadness, and anger. Yet when we who are white can't express these deeper emotions, we find ourselves irritable, impolite, and at odds with things. There are times when I personally feel frustration with the dynamics of white power and privilege I see going on all around me.

In addition, there is a strong taboo about white people expressing anger about the racist system we participate in. Express strong feelings of anger and you will be labeled and dismissed as a "crazy" white person. The threat of being labeled a crazy person has been a repressive force in our history so it is a good weapon against the expression of anger. Why is she so upset other white people will wonder? Why does she speak out for them (those inferior people) they ask? He is a "race traitor" others will assert. (Noel Ignatiev describes this experience in a book by that title).

The Rev. William Sloan Coffin, writing about anger, says, "Tolerance is a wonderful thing but joined by passivity, it is lethal. If we are not angry with the structure of power we have little sympathy with the victims of power. Here anger is a measurement of our love."

And social ethicist Sharon Welch observes

"we need to learn that failure to develop the strength to remain angry, in order to continually love and therefore to resist, is to die. The death we face is not as immediate as that faced by many African Americans. The Euro-American who gives up the struggle against war or against racism does not face physical death. The death that is experienced by those who turn from rage, who forego resistance is nonetheless real. It is the death of the imagination, the death of caring, the death of the ability to love. For if we cease resisting, we lose the ability to imagine a world that is any different than that of the present state; we lose the ability to imagine strategies of resistance and ways of sustaining each other in the long struggle for justice.. We lose the ability to care, to love life in all its forms. We cannot numb our pain at the degradation of life without numbing our joy at its abundance." (A Feminist Ethic of Risk p. 46)

I think there is plenty to feel angry about as we live in a racist society. We can learn from the Old Testament prophets who spoke from a sense of righteous anger and called their people back into right

relationship and just community. In white caucuses and white identity groups we have a safe place to get in touch with and express this emotion. Let's use these opportunities.

But to be effective white anti-racists we need to learn how to use our anger in productive ways. We shouldn't use our anger to batter other white people over the head with. We certainly need more nuanced approaches than that.

So let's strategize with one another about how to channel our anger into a life giving force. (My own personal anger at the injustices of the racist system has fueled a lot of the anti-racism work I have done)

GRIEF

I do believe there is a deep grief in America because of the tragic history of race and racism. So many horrible crimes have been done by white people to people of color. So many lives have been lost. So many people have suffered. I don't think we can comprehend the enormity of what has happened and what continues to go on. The cost is incalculable. I think this grief is felt among people's of color. Yet sadly, I believe this grief and sadness is largely unacknowledged in the white community. It is not even named.

This is another example for me of the failure of the religious community in providing leadership to address racism our society. We in the religious community have failed to name this grief or provide people with a way to express such grief.

One of the methods the religious community has for bringing healing is through liturgy. I think our cutting edge work is to create liturgies to help express the profound grief and sadness that lies at the heart of our racist culture. Such liturgies would provide a container where we could acknowledge the horrible things that have happened. Such liturgies would provide opportunities for confession, repentance, and reconciliation. Upon such liturgies we can build new ways of creating accountability and creating justice.

FEELINGS OF HOPELESSNESS

As white people we often feel hopeless about living in a racist society. There are several manifestations of our feelings of helplessness.

Historically, we think the past is too horrible to make amends.

Today, racism permeates every part of our culture, our institutions, and our own psyches. We feel it is too big and overpowering. We feel overwhelmed by it. We sense it will take too much energy to change it. This leads to feelings of hopelessness.

Some people in the white community don't have faith that other white people can change. Every time we try to make change whites push back with fierce resistance. Some of us may come to believe that we who are white are too evil to be redeemed. This creates a sense of hopelessness.

Personally, I have had feelings of hopelessness and helplessness. There are times in my life when I felt confused and uncertain. I have been so conditioned by my society to be racist that I often find it difficult to

change. Sometimes I feel shut down emotionally. I am afraid of doing the wrong thing and making matters worse.

But then I have to push through – to see how my feelings of hopelessness paralyze me – to see how nothing changes if I remain stuck in my hopelessness. What simple small step can I take to move forward? What relationship can I form that will help create anti-racist community? What conversation do I need to have that will get me unstuck? What action can I take that will get me motivated and empower me to work through my helplessness and hopelessness.

A PERSONAL REFLECTION: I don't think whites are too evil to be redeemed. Nor do I believe that whites are not capable of making change or leading change. Personally I am very mindful of the resistance that we as whites can express toward making change. In fact I see identifying and working with resistance as the core issue in anti-racism organizing. But I have met many white people who are important leaders in working for racial justice. They have shown me how much they have grown and changed and they are models of effective a white anti-racist living. I think also of the changes that I personally have gone through during my anti-racist journey over the past 40 years.

ACKNOWLEDGING THE COMPLEXITY OF OUR EMOTIONAL LIVES AS WHITE PEOPLE

We have addressed in a brief way some of the emotional dynamics of whiteness. We have touched on the feelings of fear, hatred, amnesia, anesthesia, indifference, denial, guilt, shame, loneliness, and hopelessness. We have noted the often repressed feelings of anger, grief, and sadness. I don't claim this is an exhaustive list. But it's a list that helps us get into the conversation.

With all these dynamic we are very confused about our feelings

No one of us as whites has the same emotional make up. Each of us has our own unique blend of all of the different emotions that comes from being white. Each of us has our own way of expressing (or not expressing) feelings, our own family history, our own class background, our own socialization as men and women.

Each of us has a history of emotional development around issues of race. We express different emotions at different times of our lives. For example, for the first twenty five years of my life my primary feelings were amnesia, anesthesia and denial. During those years issues of race and racial justice were of little concern to me. For the next ten years, as I had a greater awareness of the issues involved, my primary emotions were guilt and helplessness. In more recent years I have felt more anger and sadness.

THE EMOTIONAL COST OF WHITENESS:

Those of us who are white are imprisoned by our whiteness.

Paulo Freire in his book The Pedagogy of the Oppressed reminds us that oppression dehumanizes both the oppressed and the oppressor.

Personally I can't be in right relationship if I am caught up in fear and hatred. I can't express the full range of emotions as long as I am caught in amnesia, anesthesia, indifference, and denial caused by my socialization into white superiority. I can't express appropriate feelings of anger and grief in a white culture that suppresses them.

Becoming aware of the impact of racism on my emotional life, I see how racism distorts my emotional life and cripples me as a person.

I want to move beyond the deadening power of whiteness. I want to discover my full humanity. I want to feel the joy of living in right relationship with all people.

Wanting to "save my soul" I become empowered to work for change. I can then make a decision to dismantle white institutional power and be accountable to people of color leaders.

OWNING THE PAIN OF FEELING UNCOMFORTABLE ABOUT OUR WHITENESS

Janet Helms says that when we as whites break out of pre-contact (stage one) and have an encounter experience (stage two) we are thrown into guilt, confusion, fear, and uncertainty. We are cast out from our familiar ways. We lose our "superior knowledge." We feel uncomfortable and we often want to flee from the discomfort.

Yet if we can learn to stay in the discomfort that is where our greatest learning's can take place.

Here is where white caucusing and white identity group work can be so helpful. In these settings we should be able to express our feelings of discomfort in a safe place. Then our pain opens us to the possibility of new understanding.

FINDING JOY IN THE STRUGGLE

I have described the negative feelings associated with being white.

But there are certainly positive feelings as well.

We can feel the energy and new possibility when we break out of old patterns of whiteness and create new ways of being anti-racist.

We can experience solidarity when we join with other beloved brothers and sisters to address the truth of our situation.

We can sense the holiness of beloved community when we develop anti-racist community's intent on making change.

I will have more to say about this in another section of the curriculum.

Interestingly when we start to come out of our whiteness and start to become engaged in the struggle for racial justice we become in touch with our real feelings. We begin to feel more human. We experience ourselves as being more alive. And, we find joy in the struggle.

Personally this is what I have experienced. And it is the good news that I would like to share with others.