

“The Presumptive We”

Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull with Angie Swanger
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[Jan:] When did I first become conscious of being white? It’s a question quite different from: when did I first become conscious of race. How so?

I grew up in a small commercial farm town in western Iowa. We moved there during the summer that I was four years old, just on the cusp of beginning kindergarten. To my delight, we moved into a house right across the street from the school I would attend and that my brother would begin as a 3rd grader that fall. The days sped by and the scent of fall was soon in the air. Alas, kindergarten was but a half day. The rest of the day I played with new neighborhood friends and pined over not being able to go to school for a full day. From the vantage point of our front porch, I watched the big kids like my brother and the seriously big kids, the high school kids, cross the street in front of our house on their way to and from Carroll High School, as they strolled to and from a little Mom ‘n Pop store that sold soda and sandwiches and candy. I kept a close eye on them—the kids, though the wares of the store were appealing too. Early on I spotted this handsome boy who was different. His skin was dark brown, and he seemed especially quiet, though he often walked alongside his other buddies from high school.

Now for those of you who may be reading this sermon rather than here to see me, I’m a white woman. I don’t want you to assume that “different” necessarily meant brown or black, because indeed I could be brown or black speaking of my hometown where most folks looked like me and the different kid was white.

Back to my story. This handsome young brown man was African American. And I'm not just saying he was handsome to be PC—a phrase that I actually loathe—but because he really was drop-dead good looking. In those days, he would be described as a “Negro.” I even heard some folks say the word that I won't say this morning. When I asked my Mom about him, she remarked on how all the other kids were “so good with Jerry. Jerry Davis had lots of friends,” she explained. “The guys treated him just like anybody else.”

I later learned, not to my surprise, that the friendship accessible to Jerry didn't include dating girls—or guys for that matter, which was overtly counter-culture in those days. I learned that he was a good student, an excellent athlete, and an altogether polite young man. In other words, he was inoffensive. Jerry was my first encounter with a person of color, though I can't really call it an encounter except through my own limited filter, which was default white.

Angie, it's rare for two native Iowans to be here at this New England pulpit. I know that you grew up on a farm in that state that I wonder how many of the rest of you confuse with Ohio or Idaho. It really is Iowa, right smack in the center of the heartland. When did you first notice a person of color and what was your experience, as a young white child in a predominantly—*but by no means exclusively*—white state?

[Angie responds and tells her story:] Growing up in a small town of 830(give or take a birth or death. Populated by people of Scandinavian and German descent. There was really no class differences Everyone depended on agriculture. There were 2 bars, drug store, hardware store, but no grocery store. Thus my family trekked 50 miles to Sioux City (at the juncture of South Dakota, Nebraska, Iowa with Minnesota just a bit north) to stock up on canned and dry good about every 1 to 2 months. On one of these trips, as a young child, I noticed a Native American....darker skin tones, straight black hair....probably from the Sioux

Rosebud Reservation in South Dakota. My interest in his different appearance prompted questions –met by my parents immediately informing me of who he was with their standard adjectives reserved for “Indians”: Drunken, poor, lazy.

Nothing positive about that, but definitely reinforcing the concept that I was with the “right group”.

[Jan:] White privilege, being the norm, the “racial default,” stirs early on in the ponderings of those among us who identify as white—even, I’m guessing, for those of us who grew up in far more racially diverse locales than did Angie and I. A carefully tended climate of power ensures that comfort and security take root in the permeable minds of white kids. Allegiance to what provides that comfort and security is the price paid for not questioning the way things are. And the way things are—whatever set of privileges we’re talking about—is grafted into a soul-set of unspoken assumptions that I call “the presumptive we.”

In arenas of difference of which I wasn’t even vaguely aware during my childhood, I eagerly identified as young white straight Protestant Christian middle-class able-bodied smart and of sound mind. The grand and wonderful “we” was “me!” How easy, how appealing, how seductive. My unspoken privilege wasn’t just racial, but laced its way through most of the arenas of identity teeming with the tension between privilege and oppression.

But I wonder, Angie, if this was the case for you. We’re both women. We’re both white. We’re both from Iowa. And now we’re both from Connecticut. We’re both even Unitarian Universalists. How did the “presumptive we” evolve for you?

[Angie]: There was little to alter my perception of being part of a world with little to no discernable differences. While it was not labeled a “white or Eurocentric world,” looking back it was exactly that. And it was the only world I

knew. This “presumptive we” world that I lived in, was invaded in the 60’s (when I was 10, 11, 12) by the TV broadcasts of the civil rights movement going on in the South. While it didn’t shake my white world, because we were so removed; it brought “the other” into my house and began numerous conversations. My mother, a woman born and raised in North Carolina, was always quick to explain that the protests for African/American or then referred to as Negro Rights were unwarranted; as there were good “health reasons” for the separation of the races. Lessons she’d learned at her mother’s knee, within her southern society and during her first job at the North Carolina State Board of Health. If there were any disputes to her beliefs, she had a wide range of NC State Board of Health bulletins to back them up. All kept in a special book case in our basement.

[Jan]: As we’ve come to know one another, I believe that we fuel one another’s passion for social justice—through our own filters of course. It would be easy just to lapse into a mutual admiration duo, but we know that we each have blind spots, and I’m not talking colorblind. Surely we’re each capable of tuning out oppressions right under our nose and perhaps even trip over an elephant or two in the middle of this sanctuary. You know that circle that our youngsters drew earlier? It’s not easy to move toward its edge. And who knows what can happen if you or I or any of us move outside the circles we draw or imagine.

[Angie] I lived closer to the edge than most, as my childhood world blossomed into adolescence. Feeling but not allowing my sexual orientation to rise to the surface, I always felt a little out of the norm... closer to the edge of my world. Perhaps this is what made me fearful of straying too far from the norms that surrounded me, trying to not appear to close to the outside of the circle.

But what is in store besides fear, as we move outside the circle...I would like to tell you a story. I need preface it with letting you know how much I love classical music.....play it, listen to it, love it.

Last summer: While visiting my daughter's god mother in Kalamazoo, MI, Dave, my brother-in-law and retired professor of a local college, got tickets to a Classical Concert. I thoroughly enjoyed the production and while sitting over to the side of the audience, I looked out on a sea of gray and white heads. On the way home Dave commented on Classical music having no appeal to younger generations. He expressed fearing it would die out with those sitting at that concert...particularly the funding for live performances. As we talked an interesting idea occurred to me....if classical music gets less time, \$, etc. maybe there will be more room for music from other cultures. Yes maybe we'll lose some of that form of Eurocentric music, but maybe we'll gain so much more. That is my hope for the experience of moving out of my comfortable circle...

[Jan]: A core force that drew me to this congregation was your passion for doing justice and your seeming clarity about the distinction between justice making and charity. When I think of the issues with which you and many in this church align—I think immigration reform and radical hospitality; I think equal rights and uncompromised dignity for all among us who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer; I think of the commitment to universal health care; I think of the drive for full access to comprehensive mental health care; I think of reverence for this planet in the form of ethical eating; and increasingly I think of a commitment to anti-racism.

As long as any of us identify with the comfy “we” and continue to take refuge as religious couch potatoes in the inner sanctum of this church, we're missing out on the promise of a richer life. I know, Angie, that when I first read those words of my late friend and mentor Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley, you weren't

the only one who was stirred. Something struck a cord in what Marjorie had spoken:

“...Speaking personally, while I enjoy and appreciate a wide variety of cultural traditions, when I cannot find myself in a worshipping community, it drains the life of the spirit out of me, and I must go elsewhere to nurture my soul.”

What was it that struck you about Marjorie’s words, Angie?

[Angie]: I remember sitting in the back listening, as you read her words on Jan. 20th, agreeing with what was being read and recalling my own personal experiences during my first years in Unitarian Universalism--the emphasis on the intellectual. While I could hold my own intellectually; I often wondered about those, who were less educated, finding us off putting.

And then the same statement that struck you, Jan also struck a chord in me.

I could identify with this statement. Some of my most memorable, awe inspiring worship services have been in fundamentalist Christian services. Not because of the message, but because of the emotional response to the music, the freedom of movement, the freedom to respond with body and voice. While I love the old hymns, which bring back warm memories from my Presbyterian upbringing; the songs that stir me most are tambourine accompanied ones. AND sometimes I long to say “Amen or So Be It” right outloud when something is especially meaningful during the service. It saddens me to think that there may be visitors, whose religious experience and expression is less intellectual and is more lively than found here; that leave here not being able to find what they need....missing the richness of the liberal religious experience we here at UUMeriden offer.

[Jan] I don’t think I’ve mentioned that Marjorie was a woman of color. I can’t describe her as African-American or even black, because her heritage was a rich amalgam of ethnicity and race, though race is a social not a biological construct. Marjorie spoke and lived what I can only call a “large-soul” truth. It’s no accident

that the book she co-edited with another friend and colleague, Nancy Palmer Jones, is titled *soul work: anti-racist theologies in dialogue*. It's enough to work our souls into a heavy sweat.

In the very first chapter, James Cone speaks his mind. Rev. Dr. Cone is a scholar, an activist, an ordained minister in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and a longtime professor of systematic theology at New York City's Union Theological Seminary. We UU's—another presumptive we perhaps—don't commonly speak of “sin.” It's about as welcome a word as “hell.” I routinely say that I don't believe in original sin because there's nothing about sin that could possibly be original. Dr. Cone, on the other hand, holds up racism as “America's original sin and, as it is institutionalized at all levels of society, its most persistent and intractable evil.” Yep, soul work is not for the feint of heart or the parochial of mind.

He speaks of the rarity with which white theologians address matters of racism, and I should note at this point that Dr. Cone is African-American. As for the “presumptive we,” he remarks on the importance of separating his perspective “on common humanity from that of liberal theology or from what is expressed generally by a dominant group.”

“A dominant group,” he observes, “needs to use its own culture and history as the ‘common humanity,’ so that they won't even have to talk about anybody else except themselves and their history and their culture. When I speak about a common humanity, I am speaking about the cultures of everybody.

You can't find our common humanity until you search for it in ‘the other’! So it draws you to other people's particularities. That's what drew me to gender; that's what drew me to Latin America, to Africa, to Asia; that's what stretches me beyond my culture. I cannot be who I am until I am in solidarity with others.”

The “we/they,” the “us/them” bites the dust when solidarity kicks in. Celebrating diversity, holding up the accomplishments of black Americans, designating one

month as Black History Month, mark some steps forward for white America; but it seems that this nation has far to go before a communal consciousness of “we the people” morphs into a solidarity with segments of the population often identified as “those people.”

Several of you have been reading Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. Ms. Alexander exposes the racism driving this nation’s mass incarceration of people of color, especially men of color, through the contrived “war on drugs.” I hope there were enough hot buttons in this sentence to arouse your curiosity enough to plumb the riches of this book if you haven’t done so already.

Some of us know that the U.S. incarcerates more of its populace than any other nation. Thanks to the strategically planned war on drugs by this country’s power elite, the number of neighbors—and who isn’t our neighbor?—in prison has risen from 300,000 to over 2 million in the past 30 years. While a much greater percentage of white folks use illegal drugs as distinct from individuals of color, the prison population belies this reality. People of color, especially young men of color, are the target populace for mass incarceration. Jim Crow has been replaced by what Michelle Alexander calls “the new caste system,” and the hundreds of thousands of our incarcerated neighbors have become, in ways that she painstakingly documents, “slaves of the state.”

Can you think of a more pernicious way to effect a society of “we/they,” “us them?” It takes a hardy soul to identify with a young black man behind bars unless of course, you are his mother or father or sister or brother or wife or child. And then that young black man has a face and a name; sometimes his name is “Daddy.”

So why with all that we who are members and friends of this church have already taken on, is this the time to more soulfully awaken to racism and what it takes to resist it, both individually and communally? And what are some of us hatching? Angie? The last word is yours.

[Angie introduces the workshop planned for early June with Walter LeFlore and Josh Pawalek.] I believe that we have come to this place of interest in anti-racism out of our search for you, Jan. Two years spent looking at ourselves, good and bad, weaknesses and strengths.....Assessing what was and is important to us. Figuring out what we wanted in our next settled minister, but also what we wanted to see UUMeriden do and grow into.

I know one was to become a more multi-cultural congregation. There seemed much to do to get there, as we looked around at our predominantly white, well-educated, middle class congregation. And I'm not sure we had the first inkling of how to get there; but we seemed to want and continue to want this. Last summer I was approached about being a part of the formation of a Meriden Community Anti-Racism group, an attempt to gather community stake holders together to look at systemic racism in our community. I jumped at this opportunity as anti-racism is a personal passion of mine. When I brought this to the Social Responsibility Committee planning meeting in August, there was overwhelming interest for this Community concept and also for working on becoming an anti-racist congregation.

Thus began our planning for a program to awaken us, peel off the blinders of "the presumptive we" and begin the process of becoming the "BELOVED MULTI-CULTURAL COMMUNITY" that we aspire to.

To begin the process we have invited 2 facilitators, Josh Pawalek and Walter LaFlore to hold a 1 ½ day workshop: evening of June 7th and all day on June 8th. We will have childcare and hopefully a children's program running at the same time. This should give all of us interested enough time to get these dates into our calendars. I hope all of you will be able to come to this exciting event.

[Jan] To which I can only say, Amen.

Sources:

Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, The New Press, 2010.

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James Cone, “Theology’s Great Sin,” in *Soul Work: anti-racist theologies in dialogue*, Edited by Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley and Nancy Palmer Jones, Skinner House Books, Boston, 2003.