

Mr. Phil and the Folly Of Naïve Cynicism

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On the morning of July 7, my wife Mary and I were up very early to get ready for a trip to California. I dashed off to my office at about 4 a.m. to finish up a few things, and immediately saw the news that linked to that ghastly 9-minute Facebook video showing the horrible wrongful death of Philando Castile. I saw that Philando supervised the feeding of the kids at J.J. Hill School, right here in our church's neighborhood. I knew that Mary, an administrator for the district nutrition programs, probably knew him and I rushed home to break the news to her but it was too late. Mary already was in tears, as Philando's mother had called her to inform her that this man, her beloved son, known as Mr. Phil by the kids who also loved him, would not be at work that day because a policeman had shot him dead, after a routine traffic stop.

Both of us have long been committed and active in the great cause of economic justice and racial equity, and we try to be humble about what we can accomplish. We are certain, or certain as Unitarian Universalists can be, that inequality and climate change, social and environmental justice, should be topmost on our communal fixit list, locally and globally. And the death of Mr. Phil, brought a heightened and renewed intensity to our support for Black Lives Matter, in particular, and in general to the broader fight for racial equity, and a

deeper resolve to work harder and stay in this fight as long as we are able.

But first there was deep grief and even despair and cynicism, about the spate of killings that week of both unarmed black men and the killing of police officers in Dallas, on a department that was actually working on its profiling problem, and by the sense fed by the news media that things were worse than ever and never going to get better.

This hot mean angry summer has been aggravated further by the daily toxic tweets and fulminations from perhaps the most openly bigoted national political figure this nation has seen since George Wallace. He has exploited, enabled and unleashed resentment and fear and anger in the body politic like we have not seen in a long time. And this in turn has created a deeper festering hopelessness and weariness that really worries me. He expressed some humility at a black church in Detroit this weekend. I'm not buying it, but lip service is a start.

Here's what I suspect many of you good people secretly thought this summer, and I suspect this because I've thought it myself. These are dark incoherent ramblings from my inner pessimist and I'll affect a whiny voice because it's appropriate to this malaise.

So.

I'm recycling and bicycling and we have a Prius, but the glaciers are still melting and the earth just had the hottest July in recorded history. And those ethnocentric Brits just Brexited, and the family of humankind is DISintegrating, not integrating in the way I hoped.

Everything really is getting worse, despite my best efforts, which are puny. Seriously, why bother? The St. Paul schools' test scores are flat, the racial disparity data isn't budging much at all. Nothing seems to really work miraculously well, and isn't it just a little ridiculous for me to be marching around with these zealots who say we can END poverty or ELIMINATE racism, or REVERSE climate change? And you know what, I've tried really hard to engage with some people of color and I guess I said the wrong thing, and they hurt my feelings, plus some of them just aren't very polite, or grateful enough for what I'm trying to do here. Plus, you know what else, we're individually and collectively doomed. We're all gonna die anyway. Every person I see and know will be dead and rotting or reduced to ashes within a century, and almost all of us forgotten within two centuries. And you know what, nobody really gives a damn about anybody else, and maybe that goes for me too. Plus, I'm getting old, and nothing is going to get better for me personally, so even self-improvement is futile and striving after wind. I think I'll get another big bowl of ice cream and binge on some Netflix and watch the lives of people who are more depraved and depressed than I am, or who are fixing up their house and getting new quartz counters. I think I'll just skip the next rally and take care of myself and start working on my own personal bucket list. Or something that rhymes with that. Yeah!.

And then I think, "Get a GRIP, buster!" Or I try to remember how this kind of despair is sometimes laughed at by our sisters and brothers of color as "white people problems." There is a whole genre of rich humor out there, created mostly I think by young white people and young people of color. One website features photos of obviously affluent white yuppies and preppies, with agony and worry on their

faces, lamenting things like; “I want to put in a swimming pool but my yard is so big I’m not sure where to put it.” Or, “I have so much vacation time this year, I don’t think I can use it all.” Or “The cleaning lady put my shirts in the wrong drawer.” Or, “There’s just no good financial products that return annual double-digit returns anymore.” One could go on.

There’s a more serious problem with this despair and pessimism. In the reading earlier, we introduced the term “naïve cynicism,” from a [recent essay in Harper’s magazine](#) that my wonderfully optimistic daughter Laura sent to me earlier this summer. It’s kept me nourished all summer. The essay is by Rebecca Solnit, a human rights and environmental activist. She opens by noting that in the Easter Uprising of 1916, exactly 100 years ago, the Irish people began to challenge the mighty British Empire, but were brutally suppressed. The progressive cynics then naively dismissed the notion that Anglo-American and European domination and colonization of the world could be seriously challenged. They were very wrong. Within just 50 years, most nations in Africa and Asia had their independence, although a case can still be made that they suffer from western and homegrown economic exploitation. Solnit pivots to describe widespread cynicism around climate change, then documents amazing breakthroughs in alternative energy and peer-reviewed research that is enormously hopeful about our ability to reverse the process. Then she shows how Black Lives Matter and the Occupy Wall Street movements were similarly dismissed by cynics as puny and hopeless. But in fact they are giving rise to new momentum in public policy and wider public embrace of ideas like Medicare for all, erasing student debt, universal basic income, ending mass incarceration and discriminatory policing, beginning a

process of reparation and reconciliation, and on and on and on. Recent polling [by Pew Research](#) shows that the percentage of whites who believe more ought to be done for racial equity is increasing, not decreasing. Here's even more counter-intuitive news: [other polls show that people of color and Millennials are more optimistic](#) about the future and realizing the so-called American Dream than old white people are, despite the former having a whole lot less money and property. It's pretty clear from a lot of evidence that white people see their relative domination and advantage and privilege eroding, not understanding yet the consensus among most economists that we all do better when we all do better.

Solnit's basic point is that cynics are often just plain wrong about the totality of facts and the larger context. She calls naïve cynicism "a technique for turning away from the always imperfect, but often important victories that life on earth provides _ and for lumping all bad things together regardless of scale and ignoring all the progress."

Oprah Winfrey actually has a webpage labeled "[100 things that are getting better](#)" and Harvard University scientist Steven Pinker has done remarkable work showing that global rates of violent death, from both wars and interpersonal violence, is in steep decline since World War II. I highly recommend Pinker's book, [The Better Angels of our Nature](#). Despite all the Trumpiness and grumpiness about America going to hell in a handbasket because of minorities and immigrants and their threat to our safety, [violent crime rates in the U.S. have declined steeply and remain low compared to the 1980s and 1990s](#). How about that: as America has gotten less white, it has gotten safer. [Economists generally agree](#) that worldwide a billion people have lifted themselves

out of abject poverty over the last few decades and prospects for reducing that number further look very good. In today's Star Tribune, there's a story about [obesity finally declining in Minnesota](#), (thanks in part to Mary and Philando and Michelle Obama, healthier school lunches, and aggressive local health efforts by governments and non-profits.)

Imagine that despairing personal pessimistic reverie that I opened with, by a hypothetical Unitarian or Universalist social justice activist in 1916. She or he might have been in hopeless despair over the fact that despite a century of effort for women's suffrage, most women still could not vote. This cynic would not know that a constitutional amendment and a major victory would be achieved just five years later. The despairing cynic of 1916 might have found it hopeless that so many of her sisters were dying in childbirth or from brutal factory toil in unsafe and unsanitary conditions. She would not imagine that the childbirth survival rate for women in 2016 would be close to 100 percent and that life expectancy for men and women would be 25 years longer, and that labor laws and public health measures and progressive reform and scientific advances would transform and improve most lives for most working class people. Think about that tomorrow on Labor Day.

Our 1916 cynic might be in utter despair about the rampant lynchings throughout much of the South, we had our own in Duluth in 1920, and worsening Jim Crow laws in the South and de facto discrimination everywhere else. The 1916 pessimist could not imagine the sweeping civil rights victories exactly 50 years later, or that women would outnumber men in college and that women and people of color would have not only access but assistance to pursue any career they

chose, less than 100 years later. And even the most cockeyed optimists in 1916 did not dream that sisters and brothers with different sexual orientations had a snowball's chance of escaping the closet, much less equality under the law, and freedom to marry. The 1916 cynic could not imagine that a black man and then a woman, in succession, could be president of the United States. If you are about to be born and you don't know what station in life or gender or race you will be, this might be the best time in human history to arrive.

Of course, of course, lots of really horrible things, wars and holocausts (which we alluded to in deeply sad refrain of Schindler's List in the prelude) happened too in the last 100 years. More horrible things will happen tomorrow and the day after that. Discrimination and white privilege and institutional racism stubbornly persist and we need to stay righteously indignant. We Unitarian Universalists try to be clear-eyed about our human condition and some amount of embracing of despair and darkness is part of being human, necessary to understanding and enlightenment. Maybe what I'm saying is that it's not so much a sin or a folly to despair, for awhile, to visit that place, but it is a sin or a folly to live there.

And I want to apologize for the inconsistency in the labeling of this sermon. Some of you may have noticed that online it's "the Folly of Naïve Cynicism" and on your church program it's the "...Sin of Naïve Cynicism." This confusion is all my fault and I chalk it up to the lingering influence of my fundamentalist Jehovah's Witness upbringing and the delicious idea of original sin, and the Jehovah's Witness in me demands that a sermon in a church ought to have something in it about sin and repentance. And I have some secular humanist back-up on this. The very fine author Joyce Carol Oates wrote a memorable essay for

the New York Times Books section some 20 years ago calling despair the one unforgiveable sin, noting its fashionableness in literature and among elites, observing its link to narcissism, separation from humanity and its contempt for God's capacity for forgiveness. So there.

The JW in me often finds it necessary at this point in my annual sermon to dictate specific instructions for how to go door-to-door with the equity gospel and what that always changing and emerging gospel ought to look like.

For the latest and greatest, I strongly encourage you to go to the website of the organization [Demos](#) and absorb the inspirational words from Demos's new leader, Heather McGhee, and an audacious recent report, "[A Vision for Black Lives](#), a Cutting Edge Policy Agenda That Could Heal our Nation." For local content on the nuts and bolts of an equity agenda, political action and policy proposals for the 2017 legislative session and local action too, Google the groups [Voices for Racial Justice](#), the [Minnesota Budget Project](#), [Take Action Minnesota](#), the [Alliance for Sustainability](#), or my organization [Growth & Justice](#). Last Sunday we had a [major op-ed](#) in the Star Tribune that described rural angst and the path to a statewide equity agenda.

Finally, for quick local treatment of despair, you can't go wrong more closely associating and aligning yourself with the people in this community who loved Philando and are busy doing things right now to remember him and improve lives in his name.

Within a week of the killing, our spirits were sent soaring by an absolutely inspirational service for Philando at the St. Paul Cathedral, presided over by an ecumenical team that included a Baptist and a Catholic. My favorite item in the printed order of service was a quote

from Philando's mom, Valerie, saying: quote "Philando, you were a quiet and humble man...But you making some noise now Baby", unquote, followed by six exclamation marks. And this quote from his sister: "My brother, my hero, your heart was so pure and solid as gold...I love you forever and your legacy will continue to live on. You made history, you opened their eyes."

If Philando's mother and sister and his friends and family could find that much hope and spirit and inspiration so shortly after his death, we have no excuse for naively wallowing in cynicism and despair, and no alternative but to persevere for justice in his name and for the benefit of countless others, and to do so with joyful and knowledgeable optimism.