

# Our Workforce Equity Imperative

**Dane Smith, Unity Unitarian Church, St. Paul, Minnesota, Sept. 1, 2013**

Chris Rock, the funny and brilliant, and now very rich, African-American comedian, had something quite serious to say recently when he was asked if he still experiences racism.

Here's what he said: "Every now and then I'm in a situation where someone doesn't recognize me and I experience racism. Things like not being buzzed into a store. Or sitting in first class on a plane and having someone ask to see my ticket, four times. Or having the police pull me over for nothing then seeing it's me and letting me go, meanwhile they never seem to be able to name what I did to get pulled over in the first place. Having a real estate agent refuse to show me a house. I could go on." End of quote.

Indeed, let's go on. Chris Rock doesn't need to worry too much about finding a job, or being paid for what his labor is really worth, but tens of millions of African-Americans, Latino Americans, Native Americans, women of all colors, Asian-Americans, immigrants of all colors and people who speak with accents, people with disabilities, do have to worry about this every day. And on top of it, many live in a constant state of cringing anxiety about where the next slight, the next insult, the next obstacle, the next little or large indignity, is going to come from. And these two problems, discrimination and economic status, are absolutely cause-and-effect and much more related than most Americans realize or perhaps want to admit.

I have personally heard too many white Minnesotans and Americans wonder aloud why "those people" won't catch up. And of course, they are not really wondering at all, they are implying in the most skillful passive-aggressive Minnesota way that something about those people is inherently inferior, or as we say in Minnesota, "differnt." In this state of oblivion about our relative privilege, we never really grasp the zillion ways that discrimination \_ ongoing, pervasive, unrelenting, often subtle but just as often blatant \_ takes place all around us. These zillions of little things \_ none so heinous as whites-only signs and Jim Crow laws, or lynchings, like we had in Duluth less than 100 years ago \_ these zillions of slights and injustices and little cuts will create an inferiority complex, resentment, anger, or depression and dysfunction and dysphoria that most white people can't quite imagine, and will never fully understand.

This summer has been one long awkward, inspirational, aggravating, and often uplifting conversation about racial inequality in our nation and world and state. The main trigger may have been the verdict in the Trayvon Martin homicide and those boneheaded comments by a southern white cooking show celebrity. But there are also the new and outrageous voting rights restrictions in North Carolina and other states, and Oprah Winfrey being told in Switzerland that Oprah probably couldn't afford the handbag she asked to see, clueless clerk not realizing that Oprah could probably buy Switzerland. And then there's all that worrisome data, study after study, including much research right here in Minnesota, documenting separate and unequal

trends and stubborn inequalities on everything from kindergarten discipline, to health and nutrition and housing, to higher ed disparities, to prison populations and of course, underlying everything, a stubborn racial dimension to our overall growing economic inequality and workforce inequalities, which lie underneath that widening canyon between the 1 percent and the rest of us.

Some of the best moments during this summer of discontent were provided by President Obama, most recently and just five days ago on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. And for many in this church, a high point of the summer was the inspirational call to do better by a former top White House adviser for energy policy, CNN commentator Van Jones, who from this pulpit rededicated our new church just before Memorial Day.

I loved the cadence that the president developed about how millions of Americans are still marching in different ways than in 1963, for Jobs and Freedom. As he ticked off those who marching \_ he's marching, she's marching \_ one in particular caught my ear. The president actually singled out for recognition those in the 1 percent, or, quote, "that successful businessman who doesn't have to, but pays his workers a fair wage and then offers a shot to a man, maybe an ex-con, that businessman, he's marching."

This rather wonky term that I chose for a sermon label \_ "the workforce equity imperative" \_ was borrowed from a presentation by a Minnesota business leader at a recent House-Senate hearing convened around the objective of creating for our state the "World's Best Workforce." Business moguls often do not support the agenda of social justice advocates, especially when it comes to actually paying the taxes for investment in human capital. But they increasingly say exactly what we do about the clear and present danger to our economy and to long-term business health, from race gaps in educational readiness and attainment. In the end, and we can't say this enough: racism and injustice and economic inequality are bad for business. Too much human talent is wasted and too many customers don't have enough to buy the stuff.

Van Jones dedicated our new and improved church with an inspirational appeal for new and improved policies and spiritual energy around the two gigantic maladies that threaten our globe and family of humans: climate change and growing inequality, of both opportunity and outcome. But the thing I remember most about his presentation was his personal anecdote about all the rich young white kids he hung out with at Yale University doing drugs and getting in to some trouble with that, and how some or many went safely into treatment, while the same drug troubles a few blocks away, because of get-tough, zero-tolerance policies in those neighborhoods, resulted in long mandatory prison sentences for poor black youth, who were doing and dealing pretty much exactly the same thing as the white kids safely in treatment programs.

That story reminds me of something I witnessed earlier this year when I was privileged to be Principal for a Day at one of St. Paul's most diverse elementary schools. Shadowing the principal, I witnessed a tense situation involving three black boys, about 10 years old, who were

about to be suspended for pushing and shoving during gym class and for using words that implied they were members of gangs, pretending to be tough, like most boys do, best I could tell. I had an extended conversation with the principal, an impressive Asian-American who had himself escaped persecution in southeast Asia, and who acknowledged to me that there was a big problem in unequal discipline from a very early age in our schools, with black kids in particular more likely to be punished and given time outs, based on something as simple and innocent as the fact that black boys and girls tend to speak more loudly and are less deferential to authority, are a little sassier basically, than white kids and other kids of color. We are talking kindergartners here. How hard would it be, to train for that and allow for that, and not over-react to that, maybe even channel that early anger and assertiveness in a positive direction? And thus do all in our power to shut down the kindergarten-to-prison pipeline that gives us the highest incarceration rate among so-called civilized or developed nations?

We need to think every day about how this early and inherited inequality compounds itself. I don't know many times I've heard successful, mostly white male, business types wax eloquent about the glories of compound interest, how assets and savings and investments can multiply, and how we all could be rich if we only used compound interest to our advantage. A growing number of social scientists are producing important work on how *liabilities* compound themselves, how a lack of any wealth whatsoever, constant debt from payday lending and outrageous fees and interest charges, and our myriad ways of punishing failure, combine with the more important psychological persecution, to create a pathology of paranoia, a feeling of exclusion and neglect, animosity and violence, all the more reinforced when everybody around you is in the same leaky boat. I just saw some very recent research suggests that the condition of poverty, apart from race, imposes a mental burden akin to losing 13 IQ points, or comparable to the cognitive difference that's been observed between chronic alcoholics and normal adults.

The work and spirit of Van Jones a prodigious amount of progressive homework across the globe and among all God's children of all colors and genders and identities, give us every reason for intelligent optimism that our better angels will prevail and we will figure this out. No nation of our size and power and wealth is as diverse, and for all our sad history and current distemper over this, no nation with a similar diversity has come so far so fast toward reconciliation and resolution of the injustices that prevent us from becoming that indivisible family, with liberty and justice for all. I am confident that our white majority will transition into minority status, actually a plurality for quite awhile, without another civil war.

We can dedicate ourselves to affirmative actions, including more time and more of our money, moving public policy on this front, knowing that our faith, for almost 200 years, has been at the very front lines of this battle. We and the Quakers and other pioneers in liberal religion have been marching for abolition and equality, with leaders like Frederick Douglass, since the early 1800s. Thousands of Unitarians and Universalists were at that 1963 March for Jobs and Freedom and a Unitarian church in Washington was a major staging area for that march. UU leaders were in the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King's inner circle. This is not some add-on task for

us, some extra thing on our to-do list, but rather, this economic equality and workforce equity battle is a defining distinction of our denomination and our faith. It's the **first** thing we should be about in a faith with no creed except the one we teach our kindergartners, that we are a people with open minds, loving hearts and helping hands.

This is my fifth Labor Sunday preaching to this choir about how economic justice creates economic growth, and those of you who have endured this know that I always come up with some specific tasks in practical progressive political action. Last year, I implored you to get involved in fighting constitutional amendments that would have prevented people of color from voting and other marginalized people from marrying. At the time, I sounded confident but the logical half of my predictable white brain told me we were not going to win either one. But you went out there \_ you and thousands and thousands of like-minded people of color and conscience \_ you went out there and proved the pundits wrong. And not only did we stop bad things from happening, we immediately made big progress in public policy in this state. I could speak for an hour listing remarkable progress in the last legislative session, but suffice it to say that marriage is legal for everyone in this state now. And we not only have one of the most accessible voting systems, we have: legislation and appropriations that provide tens of millions of dollars for early childhood education, we have a Dream Act that will allow thousands of Latino kids to go to our colleges, we have a dramatic expansion of health-care coverage to uninsured and underinsured families, and we have a mandate that school districts must annually report on their racial achievement gaps and produce a plan to rectify them.

Here's this fall's to-do list toward this very practical and achievable goal of workforce equity: ONE: Do whatever you can to raise our minimum wage to a more livable wage. It is un-American and *an affront to conservative values* that people can work all day long and not be paid enough to move out of official poverty status. That's a disincentive to work and it costs taxpayers millions in relief and welfare programs. TWO: Join the Minnesota Unitarian Universalist Social Justice Alliance or other groups working to build workforce equity in hiring and employment. Just a few days ago, our UU leaders, including Ralph Wyman and Avi Viswanthan, helped organize a showing that resulted in a Star Tribune front-page photo of a construction worker standing up to demand that commitments be honored for training and for equity hiring for the new Vikings stadium. THREE, we are beginning to understand the vital importance of personal relationships in helping kids of color succeed in school. Be a tutor, be a mentor, bring kids of color in to your workplace for internships and let them see what's possible, let them get a feel for what it takes to enjoy a life of rewarding labor. Take a look at the Minneapolis Step-Up program for a glimpse of what's possible.

Sometimes as we try to help, white folks can come off as a little pretentious and presumptuous, like trying to dance when you actually got no rhythm, and we run the risk of looking a little foolish and clumsy, even self-righteous. People of color can smell insincerity and condescension and sometimes will call it out. And after all, it was millions of ordinary people of color, led by

Martin Luther King and Cesar Chavez, and Minnesota's own Roy Wilkins and leaders like Dennis Banks and Russell Means, fighting for themselves, who actually deserve most of the credit for the progress that we have so far. And we should not over-emphasize the role of white do-gooders, even though, we were absolutely necessary and further progress will depend on us.

But in case you are wondering whether we are really wanted or needed, I'd like you to listen to the voice of this African-American woman, Joy DeGruy, an author and educator with a vivid personal story and some advice and some loving encouragement to those of us white privilege to assert ourselves. To set the stage for this anecdote, picture five females in line at a grocery-check out register: the first very white, the next is black and accompanied by her 10-year-old daughter, followed in line by two more elderly white women.

### **PARAPHRASED RECORDING of Joy**

**DeGruy...**<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wf9QBnPK6Yg> (inspiring 4-minute monologue telling vivid story of discrimination at the check-out counter, and how all of us can use our white privilege for racial equity)

So, there we go. That's what we can do **every single day**, for workforce equity, to counteract the implicit bias and compounded injustice that also takes place **every single day**. Do what Joy said: assertively leverage our white privilege to educate, to stand up, step up and speak out, to make right, a situation that is as wrong as it can be. Use our white privilege and unfair advantage to undo our advantage, and all our grandchildren will profit from it, as surely as white southerners benefitted from an economic rebirth and became the New South, but only **AFTER** the Civil Rights Act forced the racist majority to surrender some of their immoral and inefficient advantages and privileges. The evidence is abundant and irrefutable. Nations and economies that are more equal are healthier, wealthier and wiser and happier than those in which some of God's children get everything and too many others get nothing. **Equity IS** the superior growth model. And it really is **imperative**.

.