

“Created Identity”
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Unity Church–Unitarian

Worship Leader:
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My fiancé, Juliana, has a two year old niece named Eva. Eva’s favorite thing – is to walk around, pointing at people (and things) and say, “Name? Name?” This is an age old question about identity, “Who/what are you?” And then the flip side, “Who am I?” It’s a question as old as human history.

Remember when Moses meets God on Mt. Sinai? True or not, it’s a good story – and Moses is asking, “Who are you?” Remember, God has just commissioned Moses for the big time job of leading the Israelites out of Egypt. Moses is thinking, “Oh man, I’ve got no recognition in the polls, I stutter, and this desert thing for 40 years.” He’s throwing around a lot of “buts.”

“But God...but...if I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they say, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?”

And God says, “Moses, quit your bellyaching! (That’s in the original Hebrew!) “Here’s what you tell them: Say that ‘I AM who I AM.’ Tell them, ‘I AM has sent you...’”

And Moses scrunches up his face. “But God...”

And you know, here’s Moses, a reluctant leader trying to nail down the details of this divine plan – and he’s like, “Yeah, um... Yahweh, for security purposes, can I get your mother’s maiden name and social, and could I get your name, as well...”

But Yahweh laughs him off, “I AM who I AM.” (Try that the next time you’re talking to a customer service rep and they ask for the last four of your social!)

Maybe God can get away with saying “I AM who I AM” (the ground of being) and gets away with it, but most of us can’t. In fact, when it comes to identity, most of us **want** those closest to us to know our complexity and multiple identities. Saying, “I AM who I AM” doesn’t suffice for mere mortals.

Because we have identities as sons and daughters, mothers, fathers, democrats, republicans, Americans (whatever that identity means!) We have identities as Unitarians, Christians, atheists, agnostics... As divorced, widowed, single, queer, straight, disabled, addicted, adopted...survivor! This is just the surface.

Perhaps it's difficult to publicly claim all our identities, but we do claim many. We often name for ourselves who we are, and what that means, rather than someone else labeling and creating an identity for us.

Except, what strikes me is this: how often do those of us who are "white" publicly claim that identity? And really, what is a "white identity," and how is it created? It is these question that I will focus on today.

In my experience as a white person, exploring "white identity" is a complicated, emotional terrain – so I'll name that up front. There's the temptation, for many of us who are white, to say, "What do you mean, 'white identity?' I'm a human being. I don't see colors." Or you might say, "I've transcended race. I don't even think about it." But I would argue there is such a thing as "white identity."

Recently, the Star-Tribune ran an article about Barack Obama's presidential bid. The title was: "Some Wonder: Is Barack Obama Black Enough?" I saw it, and read the rest of the paper, but then I came back to it and looked at it again.

I suddenly imagined a different headline, about another person running for our highest office: "Some Wonder: Is Hilary Clinton White Enough?" "Is John McCain White Enough?"

If these imaginary headlines strike you as odd, perhaps it's because as author Tim Wise writes, there is a white identity out there and it is the default setting on the computer of American life: Times New Roman font, one inch margins, left hand justified." Whiteness is the default, the benchmark, the comparison point that is often unnamed.

I realize this idea of "white identity" still might feel a bit abstract. And so, if you do not identify as a person of color, I invite you to play the what Unitarian theologian Thandeka calls the "race game." For the next week, every time you refer to a white person, say that. For example, if you're talking about a friend, you would say, "My white friend, Steve."

Or if you're talking about me, you might say, "Our white minister, Justin, gave a fascinating sermon...."

Try it. How does it feel? How do people respond?

As the Race exhibit at the Science Museum makes clear, part of the complexity and confusion around race is that it is an absolute illusion (there is no biological or genetic evidence for a racially superior group) *and yet at the same time*, Race is a very real social construct, with economic, spiritual, and personal implications for us all.

So how did we get to where we are today? The early history of the colonies in this country reveals something remarkable about the construction of race – and white identity – in North America. Granted, these early English colonists had a concept of difference, but it was not race as we know it today.

It had to do primarily with economic status and religion. It was the rich race or class vs. the poor race or class. It was civilized Christians vs. heathens, such as Jews, Pagans, or Muslims (maybe even UUs!) And it was in these early colonies, as Judy Helfand points out in *Constructing White Identity*, "That the 'white race,' and its norms and practices was invented to solve a particular problem in colonial Virginia."¹

The particular problem was this: as author Jim Goad points out, "half and possibly as many as two-thirds... of ALL white colonial immigrants arrived in chains" (131, Thandeka, *Learning to Be White*.) Who were these white immigrants in chains? Prisoners, indentured servants, and the destitute. In the early 1600s, as Lerone Bennett, Jr, points out in his book, *Before the Mayflower, A History of Black America*, "Both black and white servants ran away together, played together, and revolted together.

They mated and married, were the majority of the colonial population – and created a racial wonderland. The basic division was not between blacks and whites, but between servants and free people."² As whites and blacks suffered the same fate under the ruling class, a natural alliance emerged. By the late 1660s, this small elite group of large landowners faced the problem of maintaining social control.

The answer to this problem, as author Edmund Morgan explains, "Was racism...racism that could separate dangerous free whites (who finished their servitude, but had nothing) from dangerous black slaves, by a screen of racial contempt. By a series of acts, the Virginia assembly deliberately fostered the contempt of whites for blacks and Indians."³ A system of racial oppression began to take shape, one that divided laborers into Black and White, with "special privileges" for the whites.

Different terms of servitude existed for blacks and whites. If you were from a Christian nation, and white, you served for 5-10 years. If you were black, and non-Christian, you were a servant for life. If you were white, you could own property and other slaves after you were free. Not so, if you were black. Certain jobs become "white" jobs. Soon, the term "white" began to replace "free" and "Christian" in the laws. For example, in 1691, the term "white" was used for the first time in a legal context, when Virginia declared that, "a free English or other white man or women who shall intermarry with a negro or Indian, shall be banished and removed from the domain forever."⁴ By the middle of the 18th century, the concept of a "white race" was real and many poor European Americans now identified as white. Consequently, their alliance shifted from blacks to the ruling elite.

The emerging coalitions between free whites and African slaves was effectively divided and conquered.⁵

¹ <http://academic.udayton.edu/race/01race/white11.htm>.

² Lenore Bennett, Jr. *Before the Mayflower: A History of Black America*.

³ Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia*.

⁴ The Laws of Virginia, April 1691.

⁵ Thandeka, *White Like Me*, 147.

The notion of white racial superiority had taken hold. In the early 18th century, slavery had become an institution in this country, and in the Naturalization Act of 1790, Congress declared that “only free white persons could become U.S. Citizens.”

In 1856, when Dred Scott sued for his freedom, because of his extended stay in free states, the supreme court ruled that “Blacks were not intended to be included under the word ‘citizen’ in the constitution, and can therefore claim none of the rights and privileges which that constitution protects.”⁶ Through out the following decades, the story remained the same; more wealth and land accumulated in the hands of white people, often because of the labor and at the expense of people of color.

As one of the presenters in a video at the Race exhibit remarked, “If the early colonists had simply said, ‘We need labor, and we have the power to enslave to get that labor,’ it would have been one thing. Because when that power was gone, slavery would have gone with it. But instead, America created this idea that People of Color (not just blacks) were fundamentally different and inferior to “white” people. This prejudice, plus the power to enforce it, created institutional, systemic racism.

And for over 350 years our schools, laws, and culture, have reflected this. Despite gains in the Civil Rights movement, we still lived in a country that is sick with the disease of racism.

This may seem hard to believe, but I’m not here to induce feelings of guilt or shame. I am here as white person, thinking about this history, saying that although Unity Church has an anti-racism team, it’s time for me, for us, to become active anti-racists. And I believe that in doing this work, as imperfectly as we will, we might engage the holy in a way we never have before.

For white people, this work starts with naming an often invisible part of our identity.

I’ll demonstrate: Hi, I’m Justin. I’m white. (It’s not a God given thing – it’s the social identity I have.) This anti-racism work continues when we reclaim our own history and cultural heritage. I’m not just white - I’m a quarter Irish, with Bohemian, German, and Scottish in my blood.

We can explore the complicated dynamics of racism by reading Tim Wise’s book, *White Like Me*, or Thandeka’s book, *Learning to Be White*, or Paul Kivel’s book, *Uprooting Racism*.

For white people, anti-racism work deepens when we talk to other white people these books, or race, or “white identity,” and the way that white privilege operates in the world. Speaking of privilege, author Tim Wise shares this observation, “That Arabs are being treated with suspicion since 9/11, while white men were not treated that way after Timothy McVeigh’s bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City, is entirely about white privilege” (Wise, 48, *White Like Me*). It’s clear – Timothy McVeigh didn’t represent me or any other white man. In doing this work as white people, we must, of course, form alliances with people of color and listen to what they have to say, but much of the work is ours to do – as we seek to undo racism.

⁶ (Justice Roger B. Taney.)

I have no idea if we can change 350 years of racism in our lifetime. But I do know this. Change is possible.

And I offer you the well known story of John Newton. Newton was born in London in 1725. By age 23, he was captain of a slave ship. On one particular voyage a violent storm rose up, and Newton, not a religious man, as the story goes, exclaimed, "Lord, have mercy on us." He survived the storm and had a conversion experienced, reflecting on God's saving grace in his life.

Still, he didn't imagine this grace extending to his human cargo, and he continued his slave trade. But this experience stuck with him, and in 1772, now out of the slave trade, Newton wrote "Amazing Grace." Several years after this, he began to express regret for his involvement in the slave trade and he began to fight against slavery, speaking out against it until his death in 1807.

Now John Newton did not stop racism or slavery (and it was only later in his life that he took up this work), but as Tim Wise says about the struggle to end racism, "I do the work anyway, because as uncertain as the outcome of our resistance may be, the outcome of our silence is anything but. We know exactly what will happen if we don't do the work: *nothing!*"

Given that choice, as we engage in this work, discovering the measure of our resolve and common humanity, I remember these words, "I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see," and I will opt for hope and amazing grace, as we do this work together.

May it be so.