

The Story of Whiteness

I have not, in my life, been prone to protests, but I have felt called to action these past few weeks.

I felt called to action at the women's march, and again at the protest on Tuesday night against a resolution proposed by one of Worcester's city councilors. The proposal read: "Our City Council supports federal law and does not join other communities in declaring themselves sanctuary cities. We will always be welcoming of new immigrants and refugees to our city but only to those that follow our laws."

The mayor was against it, the police chief was against it, and it turns out that makes sense: 40,000 Worcesterites, or 20% of our city's population, are foreign-born. This is not a tiny minority. These are people we see and work with every day. They are our neighbors, they are voters, consumers, workers, and leaders in our city.

Worcester has always been a city of immigrants, and those immigrants have been different people through the years. Here are just a few I know of from our city's history: English, Irish, French, Swedish, Armenian, Albanian, Puerto Rican, Vietnamese, Ghanaian, Iraqi, and Indian. What else—shout it out! African Americans, too, are part of Worcester's past and present. Immigration is part of who we are.

Our immigration law has always struggled with who belongs in America and who doesn't. Part of what is so distasteful about the Executive Order issued by President Trump two weeks ago is the fact that some White House advisors, and the President himself in a tweet, have referred to it as a "Muslim Ban." The order looks neutral on the face of it but we suspect it is being driven by considerations of religion and race.

Immigration has long been a focus of cultural and racial divisions in our country. Many of us think of ourselves as White. I think of myself as White. But “whiteness” is not an ethnic group, a cultural group, or a nationality. Whiteness was created by law in America to let some people in and keep others out. It was created in part as a tool for immigration law.

Whiteness has been used throughout the histories of America and Europe to praise desirable groups of people and exclude undesirable groups. Whiteness does not describe any one skin color or any one culture.

In the United States, the Supreme Court legally defined what it meant to be “white” in a pair of decisions in 1922.

Soon after becoming a nation, the United States passed a law that only free, white immigrants could become citizens. The 14th Amendment to the Constitution expanded citizenship to anyone born in the United States, including African Americans. But immigrants seeking naturalized citizenship still had to prove they were “White,” and the courts soon found themselves in the position of having to decide who was White.

In 1909, the U.S. Court of Appeals in Massachusetts ruled that Armenians, classified as Asiatic Turks, were legally White. This led to the conclusion that other Asiatic races, such as Phillipinos, Japanese, and Syrians, might also be White.

In 1922, a Japanese man named Takao Ozawa petitioned for naturalized citizenship. He had spent his adult life in the U.S., first studying in California, before making his life in Hawaii. In 1920, people who were not citizens could not own land. Ozawa wanted to become a citizen and own property in the U.S.

Ozawa wrote his own brief and made two arguments. The first was that his skin was just as pale as the skin of White people. If pale Armenian

Asiatics could be White, he argued, then he, a Japanese man, should also be White. But second argument was more profound. Ozawa argued that race shouldn't matter for citizenship. He argued that character and a commitment to the United States should be what mattered. The Supreme Court ruled unanimously against Ozawa, finding that Japanese were not White. They said their decision was scientific, because to be White was to be Caucasian, not Asiatic.

Then, in 1923, Bhagat Singh Thind, an Indian immigrant to the U.S., petitioned for citizenship as an Aryan/Caucasian. He made the sound scientific argument (as science was understood then) that the Aryan or Caucasian people had originated in North India, and that he was therefore both Caucasian and White. But the Supreme Court, again ruling unanimously, denied Thind's petition. This time the court said that race is not something defined by science, but is instead something intuited by the "common [White] man." Thindh may be Caucasian, the court ruled, but he was not White.

There are three things that especially stick with me about our nation's legal history of whiteness:

1. A prominent Unitarian, William Howard Taft, was Chief Justice of the US for both the Ozawa and Thind decisions. We cannot rely on our liberal faith to convince us to be anti-racist, and we have to own this history as our history.

2. Racism is bad for business—there is more prosperity and more growth when more people have access to markets and when companies can hire the best people from the largest pool—so whether it's not allowing Asian immigrants to buy land or proposing a 20% tax on goods imported from Mexico, laws which have racism as their foundation work to make all of us a little poorer, both financially and spiritually.

3. A truism I live by is that we can't get other people to do things, only ourselves. If we want to make a change in the world around us, we have to look at what we can do, what commitments we can make, what we can give up in our lives to help us get there. If we think of ourselves as White, how can we escape the bind of race and racial division?

I propose we need to look beyond our legacy of liberal Protestantism to know what to do about this problem of Whiteness. We must turn to one of the other sources of our faith: in this case Buddhism. Buddhism has something to teach us about the value of emptying ourselves of that which is not good for us, in order to make room for love.

Buddhism has the concept of *sunyata*, or "emptying." In Buddhism, this means emptying oneself of the false forms and illusions of this life, to recognize the interconnectedness of all things.

Sunyata is not simply emptying ourselves so that we are nothing or have nothing inside ourselves. It is emptying ourselves of falsehood so we can be filled with truth. It is emptying ourselves of illusions so as to be filled with lovingkindness.

Empty of race, so as to be filled with an appreciation of human culture.

Empty of guilt, so that we acknowledge it may be human to try to categorize people, but not seek to make those categories laws or reasons for exclusion.

Empty of false identities, so we can celebrate who we truly are as individuals and as groups.

Empty of hard-heartedness, so we may be filled with compassion.

Empty of Whiteness, so we may claim the specific cultures and ethnicities from which we come, and which make us who we are.

Empty of power-over, so that we may be filled with power-with.

We are all kin. We do better when we work together. People use resources but they also create abundance and prosperity. We are called to empty ourselves of false categories in order to see one another as we truly are.

What does it take to get there? Buddhists would tell us it takes practice: the practice of meditation, the practice of loving-kindness. What can we do, what practices can we undertake, to work to empty ourselves of Whiteness and other false categories?

First, it takes spiritual practice. A practice is spiritual if it brings us into a deep connection with our truest self, our deepest values, our highest calling. Meditation, prayer, writing, music, community: do the thing that reveals and sustains your true self.

Learn and understand our own ethnic heritage. What were our families before they were White or Black, or Asian or Latino/a? What is the story of our culture and our people? What are our cultural touchstones and strengths?

Say who you are and what you believe. America is once again facing pressure for people to align along racial lines. We do not need to do that. Resist other people's categories for you and be yourself, share your values, in conversation, in protest, in petition, in assembly.

We dream of a world in which diversity prospers but racism is dead. Yet race is so pervasive, we need some specific tools to help us get there. We end today with an acknowledgement that we will need all our spiritual

resources, and not least our love for one another, to help realize that dream. We will need our meditations, and our prayers; our political actions and our dinner-table conversations; our joy in one another's company and the still, small voice within to help us get there. We need all of us, in all our diversity, to build the world we dream of.

Please join me in the spirit of prayer and meditation with the loving-kindness meditation.

May I be filled with lovingkindness.

May I be safe from inner and outer dangers.

May I be well in body and mind.

May I be at ease and happy.

...those I love

...those in other countries

...my enemy

Sources

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