

**"On Being Carefully Taught" by Ellen O'Neill-Waite
Worship Service of August 16, 2015
First Unitarian Church of Worcester, MA**

In 1957, when I was 8 1/2 years old, my family moved from Cheshire, Connecticut, to Brewster, Florida, a small town right in the center of the state. It was an actual "company" town, including all that historically entailed. My father was the new Operations Manager for the company's phosphate plant - the largest and best employer in the area. This lent our family a kind of local "celebrity" status.

Shortly after we arrived, my mother took us to a department store in a nearby town. There she was personally greeted because she was already "known" to the wider community. So, while the grown-ups huddled around her, I set out to explore the store on my own.

Using my much praised ability to read, I wandered around and soon made a discovery that sent me running to get my 5 year old sister and 2 year old brother. There was colored water at the back of the store, and I wanted all of us to drink from that fountain. "Colored" and "White"

Imagine our disappointment, after trying both, to discover that both contained just plain water. Imagine the staff's reaction to this unexpected behavior by loud, jabbering, Yankee-sounding children. Imagine my mother realizing that she had to explain an entire world-view reflected in the single word: "Colored".

Today I am a 67yo, middle class, White Anglo-Saxon Protestant female; AND I claim this story as my *bona fides* to talk about Race and Racism in this country. I know it's a small story: 8 year-old girl gets "social convention" wrong. But, it IS the key to rest of my stories, the ones where I grow up to be one of the Good White People, a Liberal, a Unitarian Universalist, definitely NOT a Racist.

Up to that day, I don't believe I had ever experienced anything related to "Race"; I hadn't even heard that word yet. Though I realized quickly that I was - my family was - "White", I did NOT truly know what "being White" meant. It hadn't been explained to me. What was expected of me? How was I to behave? How was I to be "not Colored" - for it seemed "Colored" was something bad to be. Oscar Hammerstein's lyric from "South Pacific" sums up my quandary perfectly:

You've got to be taught before it's too late
Before you are six or seven or eight
To hate all the people your relatives hate
You've got to be carefully taught
You've got to be carefully taught.

Well! I was well past eight, and way behind in "being taught". My FDR-Democrat of a mother offered no specific lessons on being "White" or "Race". She was vigilant about teaching me to be polite, and making sure that I did not acquire a Southern accent. Gradually I intuited that "White-ness" had something to do with "proper behavior;" and that any impropriety was somehow related to me being a "Yankee", whatever that was. Brand-new to the company town's school, I got called out in front of my class and taken to the principal for being rude to my teacher, - *because* I didn't know to say "Yes Ma'am" and "No Ma'am". So, it fell to my mother to correct me. Still never mentioning Race, she taught all of us kids to use those honorifics - with every adult we encountered. EVERY KIND OF ADULT. EVERY TIME.

Later, that same teacher scolded me for running at recess: "Ladies do not run around like boys. Maybe Damn Yankees do, but I will not allow it." Soooo, my mother told me it would be better if I

kept my clothes clean at recess. Then she went to the school, and insisted on having me tested and promoted out of that teacher's class.

Early on, I did learn one explicit lesson about Race, that made me change the words of the rope skipping rhyme: "Enney, meeney, miney, moe. catch a N---". It quickly became "catch a tiger by the toe". That's definitely what I taught to my siblings. BUT, how this "enlightened" alteration occurred to me has always been a little vague. When I've told the story in the past, I was a naive egalitarian from whom this wisdom had sprung full-blown. Preparing this sermon, something closer to the Truth swam back to my consciousness. **I** must have said the original rhyme - offensive word and all - in the presence of my father's boss' wife, because I have a distinct memory of hearing HER say, "That is a "white trash" word. Proper young ladies never say it. We say Nigrah or Negro, like the Yankees. But it's easier to just say Colored." Another lesson came swiftly on its tail: I must never publically shame my parents. Words mattered and I should use them carefully. And, some words were bad. Yet, I had heard that same woman call Negro men and women "boy" or "girl" to their faces, and surely that was wrong. In private, my mother pointedly agreed that those words were wrong, and I must never use them; BUT, I must never point out the mistake.

Essentially, my mother's teaching on Race was to invite me into a conspiracy that allowed me to feel superior to "Southern bigots". I carefully DID as my parents SAID I should. I earnestly believed that Jesus did indeed love "ALL the children of the world - red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in His sight." I had been given permission to congratulate myself on being a "Good White Person".

So why have I asked you to "handle me with care"? Why am I feeling "Fragile"? Because, in the past few years I've come to question whether this being a "Good White Person" is a solution *to* or an exacerbation *of* the problems of "Racism". Why am I made uncomfortable when John Metta, a Black writer, tells me: "*Racism is the fact that "White" means "normal" and that anything else is different. The system was made for White people, so White people don't have to think about living in it.*"

I know this one. He's stating Friedrich Hegel's "Master/Slave Dialectic" in its simplest form. Hegel asserts, it's not the Master's role to know the Slave except as a tool to meet needs. The Slave, on the other hand, **MUST** know all about the Master to survive. Metta is also pointing out that it is dangerous to think of "racism" as only something individuals are or are not "*doing*". Unequal privilege accrues to ANY group with legally unequal power, whether or not there's a difference in Race - think Protestant Irish over Catholic Irish; or Sunni Muslim Iraqis over Shi'a Muslim Iraqis - think Colonialism - think Sexism. The cornerstone of each of these dynamics - I hesitate to call them relationships - is that the Master doesn't know that he doesn't know anything about the Slave.

It's this "not knowing" that *IS* "White Privilege" in a nutshell. We "white people" were figuratively born on 3rd base, but we all think we hit triples. Admitting that "white privilege" is pervasive in our society seems like tacit approval of this ongoing injustice. Yet if told that the social and economic benefits enjoyed by our own group may be unearned or unmerited, we feel threatened, vulnerable, "fragile". Moreover, if we or our children lose benefits, we fear any other group - whether race, gender, nationality, religion - that might get those benefits instead of us. "White Fragility" is strongest when "I win/You lose," threatens to turn into "You win/I lose." Any shift in the distribution of finite resources or rewards will invite all the "-isms" and "-phobias" to thrive. Loss of power by a dominant group - perceived or real - can result in dangerously displaced anger. Elizabeth Broadbent offers a chilling take on this collision of "White Privilege" with "White Fragility": "*White privilege means you don't worry that cops will shoot your sons.*"

(But) if you don't school your sons about (it), if you don't insist on its reality, and call out oppression (and resist claims of fragility), your sons might become something terrifying. Your sons may become the shooters.

So, again, why am I "fragile"? No one is accusing me, individually, of being a racist. I'm only being asked to recognize that I participate in a racist system when I'm that "Good White Person" who treats People of Color fairly, but never confronts Racists and their mistakes. I'm being asked to stop being a "Good White Person" who wants racial justice as long as it doesn't inconvenience me or mine. I'm being asked to be brave enough to use the power that white privilege gives me to speak against the system that gave it to me.

So if I am made both "privileged" and "fragile" by my "whiteness", how can I become part of the solution and work with People of Color to affect change in this country? How can we as a predominantly "white" Unitarian Universalist congregation actually "affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person"? If our individual members are busy guarding their fragility, can we "affirm and promote justice, equity and compassion in human relations". How do we - at the very least - get to fairness? Well, we begin with the Wiogora School of Wonder and Wisdom. Some of you may have heard me mention this in passing. This is a program that boldly presents our congregation and our UU principles to a waiting Muggle world. I had the great privilege of teaching the History of Magic at Wiogora, in tandem with Alison Barrows Ronn, also from our congregation. Our chronicles and source texts were the seven Harry Potter books. The characters were our historic figures. This year, we focused on the fourth book, "The Goblet of Fire". If you know the series, you know that this book lays bare a Wizarding World rife with systemic inequities. It examines the loaded concepts of having "pure blood" and "half blood" and legal control of "non-human" creatures by wizards. The consequences of disobeying rules and laws vary significantly among characters. These would be challenging concepts for anyone.

Yet, in every age group, the kids - excuse me, the young scholars - demonstrated a breadth of knowledge of the books and films, an eagerness to share with each other, and clear insight into the challenges. Discussion in each group started with the same questions: [1] Were some characters treated differently strictly because of who they were? [2] Were there characters for whom expectations were held over which they had no control? [3] Were "rules" or "laws" applied equally to every character? Even the youngest group had lively discussions and comments about "fairness." We did not push them to relate the characters to our "real" world, yet most groups made the connections naturally.

The next exercise was a "Privilege Walk" by Harry Potter characters. Each scholar was randomly assigned a character and given their Wizarding World biography. Responding as that character to a series of questions, they were able to take steps forward or back based on their answers. Questions covered origins, parents' status and wealth, things over which the character had no real control. One step at a time we all could see who started with benefits versus liabilities. It wasn't designed as a "contest" but in the end, the physical representation sure looked like someone won. In the Privilege Walk wrap-up discussion, the scholars were keenly aware that "privilege" and "worthiness" were not the same. They consistently exceeded our expectations for critical thinking and insightful analysis, repeatedly pointing out that being the most skillful or even the best liked didn't give the most benefit. Moreover, they understood that even favorite characters could be made vulnerable if cherished beliefs were threatened - or worse - proven wrong. Unexpected sympathy for the "villains" came up frequently. One discussion touched on the idea that the "Death Eaters" in Potter's world might be vulnerable

youth starved for support and love, "turned" by stronger elders, just like cults, gangs and militias recruit in our "real world".

Our scholars were able to perfectly describe both "privilege" and "fragility" at work in the Potter world, AND, they transferred that awareness to their own "real world." They longed for fairness, even when they knew that they personally had advantage and privilege. They didn't seem threatened by perceived or real differences among themselves. I came away from every class filled with hope that they can be the change they long for in the world. The America of these scholars will not be some fragile thing. It will be large, in the words of Walt Whitman, containing multitudes. Let us pray

ENDING PRAYER

Oh Power over All,
Let your small voice sound within each us.
Teach us to hear Your many voices,
Not as babbling chaos,
But as brilliantly complex chorus.
Let us sing our way forward, together.

Amen.