

## **The Next Ten Words (in Racial Justice)**

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I teach courses on political rhetoric, so perhaps it's not surprising that one of my favorite television shows of all time was *West Wing*, which focused on a fictional president of the United States, Jeb Bartlett—played by Martin Sheen—and which seemed to capture the idealism of politics at its best, along with the sometimes deeply troubling aspects of pragmatism that politics brings. Of all the episodes I watched, one I particularly liked was where President Bartlett, running for re-election, faces his conservative opponent, Governor Robert Ritchie, in a televised debate. In response to a question about whether his proposed tax cut could hurt the economy, Ritchie glibly answers, “The American people know how to spend their money better than the federal government does.” Bartlett pauses for just a moment and then responds, “There it is. That's the 10-word answer. . . . Ten word answers can kill you in political campaigns. They're the tip of the sword. Here's my question: What are the next words of your answer? Your taxes are too high? So are mine. Give the next 10 words. How are we going to do it? Give me 10 after that, and I'll drop out of the race right now. . . . there aren't very many unnuanced moments in leading a country that is way too big for 10 words.” Ritchie, of course, has no response, and Bartlett's re-election is all but assured.

Ten-word answers. Although they can shut down a discussion before it's even begun, all of us are sometimes guilty of clinging to our 10-word answers. They feel good because they make the world seem simple and easy to navigate, even when issues and possible solutions are quite complex. And perhaps no issue draws more such seemingly definitive soundbite answers as the issue of race, and white, progressive Unitarian Universalists are not immune. In the face

of racial injustice, white UUs often declare, “We are not racist” or point to our principle about the “inherent worth and dignity of every person,” but what are our next 10 words?

Today, I’d like to explore how we might better understand our own positioning with regard to race and what we might do next. Race is always a difficult issue to discuss—and there is so much that could be said—that I want to start by providing a bit of explanation for where I’m going. First, I want to make clear that many minoritized groups—for example, Latinx, Native Americans, and Asian Americans—suffer greatly due to racism and in no way do I intend to diminish their injuries. Given the limited time that I have here today, however, I will primarily be focusing on issues of race with regard to blacks and whites because the black/white divide still remains the most persistent issue of race in our country.

I also want to start with some definitions, as provided by Robyn DiAngelo, author of numerous books on race. First, prejudice is “a learned prejudgment based on stereotypes about a social group that someone belongs to.” Prejudice is what happens at the individual level, and we all have prejudices that may be positive or negative. If I have never experienced women as political leaders and cultural messages are always depicting men as strong and decisive and women as weak and overly emotional, I will come have certain expectations about male and female leaders. Every one of us holds stereotypes—whether about “cat people” vs. “dog people” or what Midwesterners are like—and we make prejudgments based on them because it’s our mind’s way of helping us make sense of the massive amounts of information that we encounter in the world.

In contrast to prejudice, discrimination is “unfair action toward a social group and to its members that is based on prejudice about that group.” Discrimination, like prejudice, occurs on the individual level, and all humans discriminate. I might support a male candidate for president

because of the gender stereotypes I hold, or I might vote against a female candidate for the same reason. In either event, I have acted unfairly because of my prejudices.

Much of the time, our prejudices are what DiAngelo refers to as implicit bias. That is, they are “largely unconscious,” “automatic,” and operate “below conscious awareness and without intentional control.” Even if we develop implicit bias based, not on direct experience, but on cultural messages from our families growing up, from our communities, from the media, and so on, we will discriminate on that basis, even as we remain unaware that we are doing so and even if that implicit bias conflicts with what we consciously believe. I recall a friend at another school sharing how he had observed an instructor in his department who called on male students far more often than female students. When he pointed this out, the instructor was horrified as she considered herself a feminist yet her discriminatory actions indicated an implicit bias in favor of males.

When we move from the individual level to the group level, prejudice—whether conscious or, in the form of implicit bias, unconscious—and the discrimination based on them take on a new character: oppression. DiAngelo explains that the “term ‘oppression’ indicates that one group is in the *position to enforce* their prejudices and discrimination against another group *throughout the society*” which can have long-term and far-reaching impacts.” That is, prejudice + discrimination + power=oppression.

This oppression is rooted in history; it’s institutional—that is, it can be seen in the media, government, science, higher education, criminal justice, medicine, and so on; its ideas are reinforced throughout our society, and it results in what DiAngelo and others describe as “systemic privilege” for the dominant group in a society because the “rights, benefits, and

resources” that everyone supposedly has access to are really only “consistently available” to the dominant group; this makes them privileges or unearned advantages.

And of course, the concepts of oppression and privilege lead us to three terms that make us white people feel very uneasy: *white supremacy*, *racism*, and *white privilege*. White supremacy or racism tends to conjure up images of threatening men dressed in sheets in the Deep South or angry marchers carrying torches in Charlottesville, Virginia. As a result, these terms tend to challenge our self-identities as moral people. We have to remember, though, that white supremacy really just refers to oppression that benefits white people, by giving them privileges or unearned advantages at the cost of people of color, and that this racism often operates unconsciously. When we say that all white people are racist, this does not mean that all white people are bad people. Let me explain.

Blogger Alex Feinman uses the analogy of being left-handed versus being right-handed. When you are a left-handed child, you become highly aware of how everything in your world—what is considered the norm—has been created for people who are right-handed. The desk in your classroom is shaped for a right-handed person to take notes, the pencil sharpener on the wall has its handle on the right-hand side, and the right-handed scissors—the only scissors in the classroom—are next to impossible for you to use. If you don’t realize that it’s a right-hander’s world, you may begin to feel quite dejected about your ability to do well at tasks that your classmates find easy and you may begin to blame yourself for your performance, rather than the system in which you’ve been placed. And if you do realize what the systemic problem is, it takes a lot of fortitude to challenge it, you might get a pair of left-handed scissors but a “quit your griping and make do” response to the request for a left-handed desk, and you might feel

resentful or even angry about the obstacles that you have to work around that your classmates don't.

Right-handed people, however, likely never even notice or think about these systemic discriminations. Does that mean that right-handers are terrible people? No, but it means that they often oblivious to the obstacles that left-handers face on a daily basis, obstacles put in place by a culture that only thinks about the world from a right-handed perspective.

And, indeed, black Americans and white Americans see the world in very different ways. The Pew Research Center conducted a 2019 study that showed 37% of white people said the United States had not gone far enough in giving blacks equal rights with whites, as opposed to 78% of black people who thought this was the case. At the same time, a majority of whites—55%—and two-thirds of blacks—68%—agreed that being black generally hurts a person's ability to get ahead. However, they saw vastly different causes. White Americans said black people had family instability and a lack of good role models, while black Americans pointed to systemic issues: racial discrimination, lower access to high-paying jobs, and less access to good schools. Not unlike right-handers, we white people are often strikingly unaware of the systemic challenges that black people face.

Carol Anderson—a professor of history and African American studies at Emory—carefully traces how institutional racism has reverberated throughout history to the present and how efforts to decrease oppression often result in backlash and new systemic forms of discrimination. All in all, most white and black Americans understand slavery as a racist system, but many whites today assume, once slavery ended, that everyone was on a level playing field. Historian Henry Louis Gates' recent book and PBS documentary on Reconstruction illustrate that federal legislative efforts helped former slaves by giving voting rights to black men, creating

the Freedmen's Bureau that protected the freedmen's legal rights and helped them negotiate labor contracts, and established schools and churches for former slaves. President Ulysses Grant later sent government troops to combat the Ku Klux Klan. Due to Southern white violence and Northern weariness with having troops stationed in the former Confederacy, troops were removed, the Freedmen's Bureau closed, and black citizens' rights were rolled back in favor of Jim Crow laws in the South that made it impossible for blacks to vote and made it easy for white law enforcement to arrest black boys and men on petty or trumped up charges and then lease them to local farms and businesses to work as prisoners, a different form of slavery. Similarly, Anderson shows how *Brown vs. Board of Education*, which outlawed the doctrine of "separate but equal" schools, also gave birth to a concerted new effort on the part of white schools and state governments to slow down implementation, such that black children at the time of *Brown* had to fight the same battle for their own children.

Housing is another area of continuing systemic racism. According to Stanford's Center on Poverty and Inequality, only 41% of black families and 45% of Latinx families owned their own homes in 2014, in comparison to 71% of white families. Why is that? Well, one reason comes from 80 years ago when President Franklin Roosevelt's "New Deal" included home-mortgage expansion but only white families were allowed to participate. If you own a home, you have a form of wealth that you can leave your children and, over time, wealth can accumulate and be used to invest in education or in a business. The practice known as "redlining" began in earnest back in this era, too. Redlining is segregating minorities in particular areas (think inner city neighborhoods), denying them financial services in the form of loans to invest in these neighborhoods or to leave, and/or charging them more for food and other items because of the lack of competition. Have you ever wondered, for instance, why the only black church in

Wooster is south of the downtown or why the vast majority of black people in town live south of Bowman Avenue? My former colleagues, Dr. Ted Williams, a chemistry professor, and Dr. Yvonne Williams, a political science and Africana Studies professor who later would become Dean of the Faculty, could only find a home near the college when one of Ted's retiring white colleagues on College Avenue sold it to him, which made the neighbors furious. Even today, studies have found discrimination against minorities in real estate and auto loans. This means that black families are still denied the ability to obtain their own home and car and/or they have to pay far higher amounts than their white counterparts do.

Compounding this challenge, the Economic Policy Institute reports that wage gaps between white and black workers continue to persist. From 2000-2018, the Institute said wages for white workers grew much faster than for black workers and that this was true from the lowest-paid to the highest-paid employees, with black workers earning 79% of what white workers earned for the same job in 2018.

When you add all these different forms of racism together—and there are many more—you can see their interlocking, systemic nature and how hard they are to escape. This is why Black Lives Matter not only advocates on the issues of police brutality and criminal justice reform, but on the issues of economic justice, LGBTQ rights, the environment, healthcare, education, and voting rights and voter suppression. Black Americans have lower access to nutritious food at reasonable prices, which can have an impact on health, wealth, and how children learn. The legacy of housing discrimination creates rundown neighborhoods with poorer schools and where good jobs are harder to find—all of which can create a climate that puts stress on families and where crime and other forms of social decline are more likely to take root. The poor and minorities are also far more likely to encounter toxic air and water because

manufacturing and toxic dumps are located in or near their neighborhoods due to the devalued worth of land and the likelihood that residents will not be able to muster enough opposition through governmental representation or enough money to engage in litigation. And even if a black person gets a good education and a good job with good wages, it won't be enough economically to overcome years and years of discrimination. The Economic Policy Institute discovered that African Americans with a college degree in 2018 still had less wealth than white families where the head of household had dropped out of high school. When some white people claim that black Americans need to "pull themselves up by the bootstraps," it never occurs to them that many black people simply don't have boots.

So what does this mean for us as Unitarian Universalists? First, perhaps some self-reflection.

Even though UUs have fought for racial justice—whether it was Unitarian minister Theodore Parker aiding fugitive slaves or James Reeb and Viola Luizzo who lost their lives in Selma after heeding Martin Luther King's call or our current work on the border—we often overlook the more uncomfortable parts of our history. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, conflict over issues of race in the UUA and the funding of the Black Affairs Council led to major upheaval that contributed to a decline in African American membership. Just two years ago, the president of the UUA resigned amidst criticism of racist hiring practices. And there is no denying the fact that we remain a very white religious faith. As of 2008, the last data that I could find, Unitarian Universalists were 89% white and only 1% black, in comparison to a U.S. population that was 65.6% white and 12.1% black.

In *White Fragility*, Robyn DiAngelo—who is herself white—notes that white progressives—people who feel that they are not racist or are less racist or "already get it"—often

feel defensive, angry, or sad when faced with their complicity in a racially oppressive system, which keeps us from much-needed ongoing self-examination, education, and relationship building. And this discomfort can be quite real. For example, a number of years ago I went to visit a former student in a black neighborhood in Cleveland. I felt ill at ease as the only white person for what seemed like blocks around and also angry with myself for feeling ill at ease. Yet, it was a good lesson in understanding white privilege and how I normally could choose to move only in spaces where I would be in the majority or where I would feel completely comfortable and no one would question my presence. In contrast, when my former student was in white-owned department stores, someone would always follow him; when he walked across Beall Avenue in Wooster, white drivers would punch the power locks on their doors; when he drove anywhere, he made sure it was in the daytime as much as possible to lessen the chances of a dangerous encounter with police. I may not have created the system of white supremacy in which he and I both live, but I certainly have gained advantages from it. The distress we white people may feel in pondering our complicity in systemic racism can't begin to compare with the discomfort that people of color endure every day that often is hidden from our view.

While thinking and talking about racism is difficult, Ibram Kendi—author of *Stamped from the Beginning*—says, “the only way to undo racism is to consistently identify and describe it and then dismantle it.” We must, in other words, become antiracists: people who support antiracist policies through their actions and words.

How might we here at the UFWC do that?

First, we need to participate in our own ongoing education on racism. The Racial Justice Team has had two reading groups in the last year, and we will be holding some education

activities in the near future on Sundays during the second service when the Humanists are *not* meeting. Stay tuned for more details soon.

Second, the UUA is currently gathering information on best practices that we can, in the future, build on to make our congregation more welcoming to people of color. The UUA's Commission on Institutional Change conducted a survey of UUs at General Assembly and found that nearly 60 percent thought anti-racist, multicultural work was the most important issue for the UUA to tackle and nearly 91% rated its urgency as an 8, 9, or 10 on a 10-point scale. Yes, we live in a community that is overwhelmingly white and yet, years ago, when we worked so hard to become a Welcoming Congregation for people who were LGBTQ, I can remember someone saying to me: "Well, it's the right thing to do, but I don't think we really have that many people who are LGBTQ in our area." Hmm. If you build it, they will come?

Another action we can take is to offer financial and other support for antiracist causes. The Immigrant Worker Project's van fund is calling for your check. Vote for political candidates who care about antiracist policies. Call your representatives and identify yourself as white to express support for policies that will support people of color. As part of our work on the Racial Justice Team, we hope to keep you aware of legislation that could use your support.

As individuals, we also need to examine the contexts in which we exist and find ways to disrupt racism. We can offer mentoring for a person of color trying to navigate a context with which we're familiar. We can interrupt the racist joke or comment that a relative makes. We can ask questions about why more people of color are not in our workplace or our civic groups, and try to find answers. We have advantages being white, and we should use those to be effective allies, but this can be trickier than it seems. For one, not all people of color will agree

on what the appropriate action is. You will also make mistakes, and you will have to be willing to listen to criticism with an open mind and an open heart to reflect on your words and actions.

Nonetheless, with energy, dedication, openness, and perseverance, we can become antiracists. Our principles call on us to do so. To say, in response to racial injustice, that we are not racist is not enough. What will our next 10 words be?