

“Strange Fruit Begins At The Root”

Rev. DC Fortune

UU Congregation of the Susquehanna Valley

Feb. 18, 2024

Prelude – video

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Ks4_CxomIU

Offertory - “Strange Fruit” with Billie Holiday (video)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Web007rzSOI>

Strange Fruit Begins At The Root

To discuss racism in the United States in 2024, we must acknowledge that this nation was founded explicitly on the notion that white people were naturally superior to anyone and everyone who was not white.

White people were superior to the native inhabitants of this continent. White people were superior to the African peoples they enslaved. God said so. Or so the colonizers claimed, to justify brutal genocide.

White supremacy is in the foundational DNA of this nation. It is baked in. Like cast iron seasoned with spicy chorizo, the bitter flavor of white supremacy lingers forever, tainting every food cooked afterwards with its spice.

I speak this morning, like so many ministers in our movement, to a congregation made up overwhelmingly of white people. White people with a certain degree of privilege: Generally educated, even over-educated, generally affluent, mostly able-bodied, at least for now, mostly native born, US citizens, mostly native speakers of English. Yes, there are a few exceptions, but by and large, we are a group that holds those identities, and they afford us a lot of privilege.

What can a well-intentioned white minister say to a group of similarly well-intentioned, mostly white people to drive home an understanding of white supremacist culture in a way that inspires us all to actively work for justice and equity?

Let's start with a very simple truth, then.

I am racist.

And so are you.

I am racist in the same way a fish is wet.

I am racist (and so are you) because we swim in the white supremacist culture that is the very foundation of this nation.

There is a story about a very old salmon, heading upstream to spawn. He is old, jaw hooked, back humped and red. This is his final journey. As he goes, he passed a couple of younger fish, barely a year old.

"How's the water, boys?" he asks as he labors past.

"Fine, just fine," they answer.

After the old fish has swum past, one of the younger ones looks at his companion and asks "what's water?"

This is the world in which we live. We swim in the water of white supremacist culture, largely invisible to us, unless we carry one or more of a number of historically targeted identities.

In the same way the person with the life-threatening allergy to nuts can tell when someone fifteen rows back on the airplane has opened a snickers bar, those who do not fit the ideal model of straight, white, protestant Christian are aware that there is poison in the air and that it can kill them.

About "Strange Fruit"

Abel Meeropol, son of Russian Jewish immigrants in Brooklyn wrote "Strange Fruit" as a poem in 1937 and later set it to music. Billie Holiday heard the song and immediately included it in her

performance repertoire, quickly taking place of prestige as her closing number. Some audiences loved it, some were offended, but it stirred strong emotions, regardless.

She recorded the piece in 1939 with Commodore Records, after Columbia refused to risk the likely backlash of such a record.

Harry Anslinger, the racist commissioner of the Federal Bureau of Narcotics, was so opposed to the song and artist that he set up Holiday in a drug sting and she ended up in prison for over a year, also losing her license to perform in cabarets upon her release in 1948.

Years later, after her release, she succumbed to the ravages of alcohol and drug addiction and was admitted to the hospital in 1959. Anslinger sent his agents into the hospital where they handcuffed Holiday to her gurney and Anslinger ordered the doctors to provide no further treatment of her. She died a few days later, at the age of 44.

While her death did not match the grim and vivid imagery of her most favorite song, it was every bit a lynching.

White privilege is largely invisible to those who carry it. In novels, we don't read about white characters, they're just characters. If they're black, or brown or some other shade, that is remarked upon early and often. White characters just *are.*

It is easy for us to look back at this story and say "well thank goodness that happened nearly a hundred years ago. Certainly we have progressed far beyond that kind of brutality."

And yet, just yesterday, in Sunbury, across the Susquehanna River from where we worship this morning, a group marched, calling themselves a movement for "white lives matter." They waved US flags and neo-nazi flags as they disrupted traffic and then marched through downtown. They drew the attention of residents, who shouted at them and made their own signs in opposition to their message, before they finally jumped into a car with its license plate obscured by a US flag and drove away.

YESTERDAY.

HERE.

It is not over. Not by a long shot.

This is the foundational genetic profile of the US.

We Unitarian Universalists are not immune to the effects of white supremacist culture.

The American Unitarian Association was established more than a hundred years ago as an intentionally exclusive bastion of white men from Harvard. No, really. It's that foundational DNA that caused so many denominational leaders to get a nearly terminal case of the vapors when some suggested that the UUA move its national headquarters out of Boston when the Board of Trustees decided to sell the historic headquarters on Beacon Street next to the state capitol. Vapors! The notion of venturing beyond the safety zone of Boston's I-495 corridor was simply unthinkable.

That kind of change is as unthinkable in this century as it was unthinkable for the American Unitarian Association to entertain the notion of black clergy in the 20th century. Ethelred Brown applied again and again for support to start a congregation in his home nation of Jamaica. Repeatedly, he was rebuffed. At one point, he got some funding, but it was cut off after just a few years.

The Unitarian Universalist Association has dropped the ball when it comes to racial justice many times. In 1963, the delegates at General Assembly declined to pass a measure requiring Association member congregations to have policies prohibiting discrimination or segregation based on race.

Later, during what came to be known as the Black Empowerment Movement, African American UUs formed a coalition and petitioned for funds and other support to help attract and retain people of color to UU congregations. They got rousing support at the General Assembly that took place just months after Dr. King was murdered, but in subsequent years, strings were attached to that multi-year grant, requiring a full vote of GA for the organization to receive its promised money. Every year. And people in

the floor discussion poked and prodded about details of the money management much the way disgruntled voters criticize the annual school budget at a town council meeting.

There were good folks who tried hard and other folks who didn't see why black folks needed support in the first place, and more still who thought that UUism was not the right place for people of color at all. At one point, a huge delegation of people of color walked out of General Assembly. Many never returned.

Systems are designed to sustain and protect themselves. Systems are designed to resist change, and when change comes to one part of a system, the whole organism convulses in an effort to resist that change. If that change is going to stay, the whole system must adjust – and that means every part of the system.

This is familiar territory to anyone who has worked in addiction recovery or family systems theory. When one person gets well, the whole family freaks out and misbehaves. They simply don't know how to operate when someone begins to demand truth and transparency and – forbid! – accountability.

This cultural convulsing is described by Robin DiAngelo in her groundbreaking book as “White Fragility.”

I confess that I was initially resistant to the term, because it seemed like a judgment of moral failing, but what DiAngelo describes is something very different. White people do not have the necessary emotional or spiritual muscles to deal with racial discomfort or challenge. We – and I use that term intentionally, because I am white and I enjoy white privilege – we who enjoy light-skinned privilege – have never had to live in situations where we were the perpetual outsiders, where we were discriminated against systemically because of who we are or who we appear to be.

I want you to put aside right now that one time a person of color was mean to you in school, or that neighborhood where you used to live where you

were one of the few white families, or that you or someone in your family married a person of color and therefore you know what it's like. You don't. I don't. We cannot know what it is to every day wake up in a nation, in a culture founded on the notion that you, your ancestors, and your progeny are not human.

We. Cannot. Know. That. There is no nation on earth where the founding ethos was rooted in the notion that white people are inherently inferior and must be enslaved, terrorized, and subjugated to keep them down. None.

There may be pockets of culture where white folks are unwelcome, but the large difference there is that white folks have historically had the ability to leave when we are uncomfortable. When schools integrated, white folks moved out to the suburbs. When public pools integrated, backyard pools became a thing where people could afford them. Want to guess who could afford them?

White fragility is when bad things happen to white people and there is an understanding that something is *wrong* about it. It's not supposed to happen to them. Although communities of color have been dealing with heroin addiction for decades, it only is an outrage when addiction moves to the suburbs.

In her article, DiAngelo describes a series of indicators – symptoms if you will – that point toward white fragility.

White Fragility is a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. These moves include the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation. These behaviors, in turn, function to reinstate white racial equilibrium. Racial stress results from an interruption to what is racially familiar.

One of the key points she makes is that white people – or people who experience white privilege – is that we are utterly unequipped to deal with any form of racial discomfort.

We *expect* to not have our comfort challenged in any way, and when it is, when someone suggests that we might be wrong, that our point of view is rooted in our own white privilege, when we are forced to acknowledge that there are systems of oppression and imbalances of power that favor people with white privilege, we do those things she described – we get defensive, angry, we are ashamed, we are outraged.

We expect racial comfort

We expect segregation

We expect to be able to talk whenever we like and to be believed.

We expect all the movie heroes to look like us

We expect that our experience is considered the standard, or normal one and that others are wrong or inferior.

We expect to always feel like we fit in wherever we go, and that to not fit is wrong.

We expect to be free of the psychic burden of race. White is the standard, only people of color experience race, thus rendering it *not our problem.*

We are not practiced at listening and following. We like to lead. And white leadership is precisely the thing Black voices do NOT need in this moment.

Let's take a look at a piece of that video that started our service today.

I want you to pay special attention to what the white members of the chorus are doing. Let's play that clip, shall we?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iBUtYnOBrjg>

I had a conversation once with a group of white men who were flat-out INCENSED that they had been asked to be silent during a conversation

about race. They were furious. OF COURSE their opinions were valuable. OF COURSE their words were important.

So important, in fact, that in the face of being asked to be quiet and listen, they left the conversation entirely.

I am willing to bet that those men would claim to not be racist. In fact I have heard each of them say just that.

Fragility is real, friends.

And I am aware enough to know that I am racist. I believe that we all are racist in this room. We have absorbed the messages of our dominant culture. I know that's a challenging thing to hear – what does your body do when you hear me say that? Do you feel tension? Do you feel anger? Shame? Defensiveness? Do you want to say “screw it, this minister's a nut,” and walk out the door?

Those are all the things DiAngelo describes. That is how we can recognize our own white fragility. The more angry this sermon makes you, the more fragile you are. I wonder. Can you say it with me? I am racist.

You know the things I told you today are real. I'm citing academic sources to a group of people who appreciate peer-reviewed academic papers. The evidence points to the reality that we, who grew up in this country, who live and breathe and swim in the water of our culture, must be, by our very nature, racist. (adjective, not noun)

I invite you to say it with me. I am racist.

If you choose not to, that's ok. It's a lot to consider.

Its hard to wrap our heads around. It is a very big awakening.

No, we didn't start this stuff. But it is the world we inherited, and it is our problem to address. If you buy a house and the roof leaks, you fix the roof. You don't allow the leak to stay, because it will cause greater and greater damage to the home.

I need to make a confession of sorts: I've screwed up justice work for most of my life.

I've done it wrong. I've made it about me. I've said the wrong things at exactly the wrong times, and I've made grave errors that make me wince still after a decade or more. And I make grave errors, still.

I grew up in a place where all the isms were largely the norm: racism, sexism, heterosexism, antisemitism, transphobia, etc. All of them. I knew early that they were wrong, but lacked the language, skill, and courage to fight them for a long time.

More than once I have felt particularly smug and superior about my level of enlightenment around justice issues only to abruptly put my foot in my mouth in a very public and embarrassing way.

It feels like each thing I learn about this work shines a light on how poorly I've done it in the past. I get paralyzed by fear of doing it badly again. My desire to not screw up can keep me from acting at all, and that's not good, either.

I have spent too much time apologizing for my ineptitude and shame for not doing it right. Marginalized folks do not need my white guilt or shame. They need me to shut up, listen, learn, and keep trying.

I expect I will still screw things up as I go. What I need to remember is that we all have to start somewhere. I feel I'm late to the party on a lot of fronts, and in other places I get impatient with folks who are just learning about their own privilege. Compassion is good stuff all around. I need to be compassionate with those just catching up, and I need to be compassionate with myself for not being perfect at this stuff already.

May this be our practice and our prayer.