



Sermon

One of the ways I paid my way through 13 years of university education was by painting houses. I loved it because the results were immediate, unlike my 13 years of university education! I loved for other reasons as well. People's homes are so personal, I liked being part of that. But, it also meant I saw the best and worst side of people. I distinctly remember a client who was determined to paint her home inside and out in pure white. And this is the problem with that. There is no pure white in paint. It must have a tint. You can have a bluish white, a yellowish white, a greenish white, a brownish white, etc, etc. Pure white doesn't exist. And we told her this. But she was undeterred and somehow got it into her head that she would get paint without tint and that would be pure white. That was another problem because the tint gives the paint its substance and strength and adhesion. Without it, paint is useless. It will run down your walls while it's drying, you can peel it away in rubbery sheets, and you'll be able to see right through it. We told her all of this, but she was relentless. So we made her sign away her right to a warranty and pay us by the hour. It was awful. We painted backwards, from the bottom up, to keep the paint from sliding down as fast as we put it up. She would examine the results after every coat, and of course, you could see right through it, so she demanded another coat. It's a good thing she paid us by the hour because we did six coats before she was happy. And within one year, it was chipping and peeling just like we said it would.

How many of you are familiar with the news story this past week, of the revelation that Senate Leader Harry Reid said, in a private conversation during the last election campaign, that Obama had a good chance of winning white votes because he was light skinned and spoke with "a Negro dialect." As I watched the media turn it into a drama, I thought about that woman's desire for a pure white paint. I thought about how we assume white is a color without tint. We say "people of color" and that means people who are brown, red, yellow, black, anything but white. As if white people don't have a color. In a way, Harry Reid broke the silence about whiteness as a racialized experience. When you try to separate whiteness from race you can see right through it, it can't stick to anything, and it just keeps chipping and peeling. He may not have used the best language to express this truth, but what he did was like putting the tint in a bucket of paint.

This is the kind of stuff that fascinates Thandeka, one of Unitarian Universalism's most pre-eminent contemporary theologians. Thandeka identifies herself as an African American. Her name, which means "beloved" was bestowed upon her by Bishop Desmond Tutu. Raised by an artist mother and a Baptist minister father, she has written books, published articles, taught in universities around the country, and is working on a systematic theology of personal experience. And, she loves Unitarian Universalism and believes "that we can become one of the largest religious movements in the country."

As an African American minister in a denomination that is primarily white, she has struggled to find her place, but that's actually not her primary focus in her work. Her main focus has been to study what it means to be white. She wants to understand the human beings who she worships with, works with, teaches, and lives beside. The conclusion she has come to is that for most white people, they have no consciousness that their own experience is shaped by their color. To have a racial experience is to be Black or Hispanic or Asian or Native American, but not



to be White. In fact, most whites, especially liberal whites, will resist this because we associate any racialization of our identity with white supremacy. Somehow, when you talk with liberal whites about their whiteness, the predominant emotion is shame and guilt.

Let me give you an example of how Thandeka came to this conclusion. Here's an excerpt from her book "Learning to be White":

"I had recently arrived in Massachusetts ... to teach at a local college. I had lunch with a member of the college staff. My luncheon partner, a fifth generation Smith College graduate with a New England genealogy older than the state and a portfolio perhaps as wealthy, wanted to get to know me, asked me what it felt like to be black. I was not offended by her query. Her face was open, her eyes friendly and engaged. She simply believed that nothing from her own background or experience could help her understand me. I knew better. I had been assigned a race by America's pervasive socialization process, and so had she. ...I believed that if she drew upon her own experience of being "raced" she might then be able to see what we had in common. How could I make her conscious of the racialization process ... ? ... I invented the Race Game and invited her to play it for a week. For the next seven days, she must use the term "white" whenever she mentioned the name of one of her Euro-American cohorts. She must say, for instance ... "my white husband, Phil," or "my white friend Julie" or "my lovely white child Jackie." I guaranteed her that if she did this for a week ... I could answer her using terms she would understand. We never had lunch again."

Thandeka shared this experience with the class she was teaching, and one young woman dared everyone in her class to try it and report back by mail. She was the only person to write back and said she could not do it. And Thandeka wondered, "What had I asked her to endure? What was she afraid of seeing? What didn't she want to feel? "

I ask those of you who are Euro-American, could you do it? What do you think would be the reaction from your friends, your family, the cashier at the QT? Thandeka found that everyone she proposed this game to, felt shame at the prospect. So she decided to push further. She asked every Euro-American would talk to her about when they had first realized they were white. Every one of them shared a story in which they had been shamed. A woman whose parents, when she brought home a black man, they asked her to stop seeing him because they didn't want to worry the neighbors. A man who invited a black friend into a fraternity, and was told by the leaders they would not accept blacks. The man wept in shame as he spoke of going to his friend and telling him he was not welcome, and how he has never forgiven himself. I have heard stories from some of you. You lived through times of white flight, and your family relocated to West County, and how you felt odd leaving your black friends, but never daring to ask your parents why. I've heard some youth talk about the black students bussed into your schools from the inner city, and how the black kids and white kids keep to themselves, and some have mentioned how uncomfortable it is, and how helpless they feel to change it. Something keeps them on their side of the cafeteria. Some of you feel shame that you can't find the courage to break through that line. You're in the same place that some people would like to



put Harry Reid. It seems fascinating that members of a party who intentionally used race to secure white votes and national victories in the last 40 years of elections, are trying to shame Reid into resignation.

Thandeka argues that every incident of racist behavior in this country has its roots in a Euro-American child who was shamed, because no child knows race until they are taught race. White children learn what it means to be white when they are shamed and threatened with alienation from other whites. That child then grows into an adult marked with shame, and may very well use shame to confront other Euro-Americans who step outside the boundaries they were punished for crossing. And the cycle continues. And for many, underneath the shame is guilt. This is especially true for white liberals who know they believe in racial equality but often seem unable to have the courage to stand up for it. I remember once at our annual General Assembly there was a group of us having our picture taken. We were all white except one woman, and the cameraman got so frustrated because he couldn't get the right light setting and he finally blurted out, "You're too dark!" None of us whites said a thing. It's like there was this awkward moment and we just wanted it to end. What kept us silent? What kept me silent? For four years I have been asking myself, why didn't I say anything? It wasn't until I read Thandeka's book that I understood that it was shame, not wanting to take the risk of setting ourselves apart.

Thandeka believes that every Euro-American has stories like this, where they stepped outside the line, and were shamed into whiteness by the threat of exile from other whites. And years later, even in situations where it should be safe to do so, they'll hold back because they've now got this inner trigger that can be powerful enough to paralyze them.

And this is why this is important. Our approach to racist behavior in this country is to shame the person who exhibits racist behavior. Thandeka argues that this dehumanizes them the same way they were dehumanized when they were shamed the first, second, third, fourth time around. How many of us were experienced shame being used as a tool of discipline when we were children? How well did it work? You might do the right thing afterwards, but you didn't do it because you believed in it, but because you were afraid. So how well did the shaming work to make you into a better person? And somehow we think that shame is going to solve the problem of racism? If shame got us into this mess, if it is what has created the racial experience of whiteness, it's not going to get us out of it. Any of us who struggle with shame know that it's an insidious emotion that robs us of our life force. Shame can never heal, never restore, never reconcile what has been broken. There's only one thing that can heal, restore, and reconcile, and I bet you know what that is. - Love. Compassion.

Do you know why Thandeka's theology of the experience of race has rocked Unitarian Universalism? Because she has reconciled an approach to racism within our foundational theology. From the very beginning, Unitarianism and Universalism have been about stepping outside theologies that were based in shame. And you better believe that their critics used shame to try and keep those early UUs from gaining any ground. But it didn't work. The idea that humanity is depraved is based in shame. So we got rid of it. The threat of hell to force people to be good is based in shame. So we got rid of it. But somehow it's been hard to take that lesson and apply it to racism because so many of us still live in an experience of whiteness based on shame. At this time in history, shame is the tint that



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gives those of us who are white in color its substance and form. Can we, through love and compassion, change the tint?

Thandeka is trying to do that by naming it. You can't change something unless you acknowledge it exists, so she's opening the door for Euro-Americans to see with open eyes how they have been shamed into whiteness because what she wants for herself and for everyone else, regardless of race, is to stop the cycle. The beauty of Unitarian Universalism is that it tells us we can do this. We are a people of hope and possibility. We called to affirm and promote the interdependent web of all existence which tells us that we already are one. We just have to start living like we believe it. Our faith calls us every day to walk through fear into trust. We have already learned how to throw off the shackles of all kinds of shame so we can do this.

May it be so. Amen