



Some things bear repeating

Clay Nelson © 12 July 2020

Some things bear repeating. Most of this musing is from a [talk on racism I gave over a year ago](#). Sadly, it has not passed its use by date.

Racism is like the Covid 19 virus, if it can be cured it will be a challenge. Scientists are working on it, but they aren't there yet. But they do know a few prerequisites. Racism is what Rudyard Kipling coined as "the white man's burden" — not just for colonisers, not just for Trump supporters, not just for people who dress up in bedsheets, not just for Americans, but all white people, even for Unitarians in their predominantly white faith movement with their first three principles which are the antidote to racism. Recognising the inherent worth and dignity of every person; seeking justice, equity and compassion in human relations; and accepting one another and encouraging spiritual growth in our congregations.

If you're white it was not your choice, but you are still subject to white consciousness, what [Unitarian Charles Alexander describes as moderate white supremacy](#). "Moderate White Supremacy is systemic, invasive, and self-perpetuating, continually prioritising White cultural values and interests above those of marginalised people of colour. It permeates and corrupts our practices, systems and institutions, even corrupting the reforms we institute to bring about equality." As a black man Alexander points out that it is the white people's burden to cure themselves.

The cure begins with understanding the source and dynamics of racism. Racism is layered. At the bottom is internalised racism. Even "good" white people have race-based beliefs and feelings. These feelings are inculcated in us from birth by the biases in our families, our classmates, and in our white culture including the pervasive effect of the media. It is important to note that no one is born racist. To become racist we have to be carefully taught. The more racist attitudes are normalised in society, the more they blind white people to their own attitudes and their impact on people of colour.

The next layer, interpersonal racism, is more blatant. This is bigotry and biases shown between individuals through word and deed. Those who express hatred to people of colour give moderate white supremacists cover. We can point our finger at them as "bad" white people and deny our own racial beliefs and attitudes which give support to a more insidious form of racism, institutional racism. Institutional racism involves discriminatory policies and practices within organisations and institutions that give preference to one race over another.

Here is one example of institutional racism from our Unitarian history. It is the story of the Reverend W.H.G. Carter, a big man with a big personality. Light-skinned, six-feet-two, a man of charm, energy, imagination, and learning. He trained as a minister in the African Methodist Episcopal church, but never served as a minister in that denomination. He disagreed with many beliefs of the African Methodist Episcopal church, starting with the divinity of Jesus. As an adult, Reverend Carter worked as a photographer, a mural painter, a teacher, a postal worker, a funhouse operator and a real estate speculator. Like his maternal grandfather, William Henry Gray — a free-born African American — Carter was a political activist.

Reverend Carter in 1918 founded a Unitarian Church in Cincinnati. Called the Church of the Unitarian Brotherhood, it was probably the only African American Unitarian church in America at that time. He also founded a fraternal order called the Grand Order of Denizens or GOD. A denizen is someone who lives in a place: a citizen is someone who has certain rights in a place. The Order provided food, money, clothing, and advocacy to poor blacks in Cincinnati.

At the time, other Unitarians knew about the church and its founder, but turned their backs because the church was African American and poor. Twenty years later, a representative of the American Unitarian Association came to investigate, but the conclusion of the official report was, "I do not recommend Unitarian fellowship for Mr. Carter or subsidy for his movement." In other words, there was no ministerial degree for Reverend Carter, and no money for his church. Shortly afterwards, the Church of the Unitarian Brotherhood closed down.

The last layer of racism is systemic racism, the ongoing racial inequalities maintained by society. It puts people of colour at a permanent disadvantage in all aspects of life. They are going to lower decile schools, more likely to be incarcerated, have difficulty getting loans, suffer higher unemployment and when employed they are in lower paid jobs, live in unhealthier homes in more dangerous neighbourhoods, and have higher infant mortality and lower lifespans. This form of racism, supported by the three other layers, is by far the most destructive and prevalent. In New Zealand it falls most heavily on Maori and Pacific Islanders. It is maintained by those of us who are white either by our blindness to it or by the privilege it confers upon us. This includes social justice-oriented Unitarians.

I'm going to share a shameful story that has been buried in the annals of New Zealand history. It is the story of eugenics. Eugenics is a belief that the genetic composition of the human race can be improved by selective breeding. It judges certain genetic groups as inferior while promoting other genetic groups as superior. It is a movement that began in England. Its stated purpose was to protect the purity of the white race. It spread to

Europe, America, Canada, and eventually to New Zealand. Sir Truby King, founder of the Plunket Society and a member of the Dunedin Eugenics Society, was a strong proponent, along with Unitarian Sir Robert Stout, a former Premier and Chief Justice. Eugenics was the founding purpose of the Plunket Society. King wrote, The Plunket Society was founded to improve the calibre of Caucasian New Zealand babies by a strict regime of scheduled feeding, exposure to sunlight, and cleaning. "The destiny of the race is in the hands of its mothers."

In a submission to Parliament prominent New Zealand eugenicists argued, "It has rightly been decided that this should be not only a 'white man's country,' but as completely British as possible. We ought to make every effort to keep the stock sturdy and strong, as well as racially pure. The pioneers were for the most part an ideal stock for a new offshoot of the Mother-country. The Great War revealed that from their loins have sprung some of the finest men the world has ever seen, not only in physical strength, but in character and spirit. It also revealed that an inferior strain had crept in and that New Zealand was already getting its share of weaklings. Surely our aim should be to prevent, as far as possible, the multiplication of the latter type."

Overseas, eugenics principles were adopted to terrible ends. The theories took their most horrifying manifestation under Nazi Germany. But even as the full extent of Nazis' racial cleansing programmes were being discovered, the idea of ridding the race of the mentally ill or "feeble-minded" was still doing the rounds in New Zealand.

The horrors of the holocaust essentially marked the end of the eugenics movement in New Zealand, although vestiges of it remain, especially in some Pākehā attitudes toward Māori and Pacific Islanders as inferior races and social policies that put them at a disadvantage. An example is how racism undermines Maori self-image. Studies have shown that it is not uncommon for Māori to buy into racist stereotypes. In one focus group a Māori man said, "if they going to keep writing bad things about us then we are gonna be bad because we feel like we are meant to be bad... Māori are meant to be in jail anyway."

Statements like this break my heart and motivate me to unburden myself of racial attitudes that cripple a Māori or Pasifika child's chances to have the same chances in life my white race has given me.

If we are to find a cure for racism it is going to have to begin with examining our internalised racism. We need to understand that our internalised racism is a spiritual crime against ourselves that burdens and blinds us. Racism is a choice and empath and honest self-awareness goes a long way towards curing it. The more we put ourselves in the other person's shoes scientific studies show the less racist we become.