



Auckland Unitarian Church

Love beyond belief

Whiteness, the gift that keeps on giving

Clay Nelson © 11 June 2023

You might remember me telling you the story of the 1969 UUA General Assembly in Boston. It was at the height of the Black empowerment movement in America. For that reason, many Black UUs attended instead of the token few who usually came. White UUs were shocked and wondered where they all came from. They had always been there since the 18th century but had been generally ignored or discounted. We were more diverse than we had been aware of or at least acknowledged. But in 1969, systemic racism reared its ugly head, undermining that diversity and many Black UUs walked out the door, never to return. Much has happened within Unitarian Universalism since then. So, it was highly newsworthy when Sofia Betancourt, a woman, a person of colour and openly queer, was overwhelmingly elected as president of the UUA.

New Zealand Unitarians don't have that history but look around you. How many people of colour do you see? What accounts for this? I suggest that the reason is that a white monarch has always ruled us. Our lack of diversity is due to colonialism which gave Whiteness an uneven hand over the first people of the land. The tāngata whenua became subjects of Whiteness.

In his most recent book, "Queen is Dead", *Indigenous Australian journalist and writer Stan Grant uses the white Queen as a metaphor. He writes:*

There will never again be a Queen who reigns in a world where Whiteness is so assured. The empire into which she was born and over which she reigned is a thing of nostalgia. Like a cool autumn evening when the sun dips early, and the branches of stark trees stripped of their leaves hang still in the breathless air, Britain itself is a thing of faded beauty. I want that Britain to lay its burden down.

The White Queen is dead. Let the spell be broken.

This spell has been cast for a thousand years. It is an evil magic, a trick of nature that fixes a hierarchy of humanity with people who imagine they are White at the top and those deemed not White measured below.

We have created a world in the image of Whiteness. White monarchs. White scientists. White artists. White poets. White musicians. White thinkers. White terror and White fear. Yes, and White love and White mercy. But still White. All of it White.
[\[https://e-tangata.co.nz/reflections/the-last-white-queen/\]](https://e-tangata.co.nz/reflections/the-last-white-queen/)

With this in mind, in one minute, name ten famous people. Who comes to mind?

Now, how many were White?

Now take another minute; name ten famous people who are not White. These people have shaped our world, too; their thoughts and faiths and art have fired our imaginations. But I doubt that they came so quickly to mind. Who did you think of?

Stan Grant offers this reason,

Under the spell of Whiteness, it is White people we see first. The Whitest stars that shine brightest. Interestingly, when I ask someone to name those people who are not White, no one says Jesus. In a world where Whiteness is prized, Jesus — a dark-haired, dark-skinned Jewish man from the Middle East — has become bathed in beatific White splendour.

Many years ago, while leading a youth group retreat, I showed a film where Jesus was portrayed as brown and balding, with spindling legs and a pot belly. The young people could not take it in. Whiteness had already blinded them to the possibility of this portrayal.

When I was born, there were five billion fewer people on the planet. Having grown up in the western US, I hadn't known more than three Black people and none my own age. My high school had 3700 students, and not one was Black. It was not until university that I had Black friends. Even then, Black students were few and far between, and their presence was only due to Affirmative Action.

So does anyone care to guess how many White people there are on Earth today?

By some estimates, there are about 700 million people in the world whom we would call Caucasian. You could fit twice that number into China or India. That is fewer than one in 10 people. The United Nations says that by 2025, some 98 per cent of the world's population growth will be in non-White countries, particularly Africa and Asia.

Gravity is tilting. In 1900, Europe had a quarter of the world's population, but by the middle of the present century, that will have fallen to just 7 per cent. By 2050, it is thought that one in four people on Earth will be African.

So fewer than 10 per cent of the people in the world are White: Caucasian. But why does it seem the number is so much greater? Stan Grant's answer is,

Because Whiteness is all around us. It is a swarm. All-seeing, all-knowing Whiteness. When engulfed by Whiteness, all else dims.

Because it is everywhere. It frames everything. We live in a maze of mirrors, and each one distorts our reality. Once trapped in Whiteness, we cannot easily find our way out. And in each warped mirror, Whiteness stares back at us.

Such a tiny number of White people have conquered the world. And I do mean conquered. With force and their law, they have subdued the planet. Whiteness has bent the world to its will.

Are these people who think of themselves White so supernaturally gifted? Are they chosen by the gods? Do they possess some wisdom unknown to the rest of us? No.

The conquest of Whiteness is no divine providence. It is no accident. It was drawn on maps. It was sailed on ships. It was written in books. It was weighed in gold. It was marched in

columns. It was sounded off in cannon fire. It was hoisted by flags. It was named Empire.

Like most of us here, I have benefitted in untold ways simply because I was born White. Because Whiteness also relies on patriarchy to maintain its power, I have benefitted two-fold. It is important to note that every benefit I gained came at the expense of those not born White or male.

While I did not choose to be a White male, I did choose to be a UU. That requires being more concerned for those on the margins of Whiteness than myself. It requires my standing up against injustice that seeks to dim the beauty and contribution of people of colour by depriving them of opportunity.

We do this because, whatever our skin colour, we all have been far too long the subjects of Whiteness. My dream is that future ministers in this pulpit will one day look out and see the glory of humanity's diversity and rejoice.

Discussion question

How have you benefitted from Whiteness or paid a price for not being White?