

WHITE FRAGILITY WORKSHOP NOTES

Bob:

Review key concepts of white fragility, share “racist realism” framework as a continuing thread in our history and present today. Tie in to three main messages.

I’ve been addressing white people’s notions of superiority – both personal and structural since I was 18 years old. And if there is anything that has been evident it is that these ideas of white supremacy – however repugnant we say they are - do not seem to go away. They just MORPH. Why?

Because the BENEFITS to white people/culture/institutions are pernicious.

White people – ME AND PEOPLE LIKE ME – actually think and deep down feel or deeply want to believe that racism is just about inter-personal relationships:

No more than RESPECT AND REGARD.

And so white people are all about outward expressions of NICENESS. We refuse to consider ourselves racist because that would mean we are not nice.

HOW DARE YOU ACCUSE ME OF NOT BEING A NICE PERSON.

We get DEFENSIVE. We get SAD. We get ANGRY. We explain our TRUE MEANING until the accuser cries uncle. We may even CRY.

We exhibit what Robin DiAngelo calls WHITE FRAGILITY.

My experience: Just last Thursday night as co-chair of the Inclusion Commission at my congregation I exhibited my own white fragility. My co-chair called me out. He said my TONE made it sound like a sense of white superiority was a good thing. I wanted to protest – luckily I recognized that he had triggered my white fragility. Later after further discussion with him and after more thought I realized that at least some of my sense of whiteness was a sense that I was in the SUPERIOR PLACE inviting others into MY PLACE. [NOTE: I recognized that, as John Powell pointed out, I was doing inclusion, offering an opportunity to join MY thing, rather than creating a place where all belonged.]

This DEFENSE MECHANISM has to be recognized as DANGEROUS to people of color. It is what keeps white supremacy in place.

White Fragility is not Benign. It serves white people so they do not have to address their complicity with systems that benefit white people.

It is what keeps white people from fully seeing how we white folks are PERSONALLY HABITUATED INTO RACIST THINKING AND ACTIONS.

It is what keeps white people from changing structures like real estate steering; like criminally under-resourced urban schools; like the lack of transportation; like the wealth gap; like the hyper criminalization of black men. And all the other ways white people have GAMED PUBLIC POLICY AND DESIGNED SOCIETAL STRUCTURES THAT CAUSE SELF-FULFILLING/SELF-JUSTIFYING/PREDICTABLE DELETERIOUS OUTCOMES.

RACIST REALISM – That sense of righteous anger. It is that sense that some white people down deep just intransigently refuse to live with and work with black folk and we cannot make them do so. We have to change their hearts and minds first.

But it is not those others whose hearts and minds need to be changed. In the words of Walt Kelly, the cartoonist, “We have met the enemy and it is us.”

It's over 150 YEARS OF HABITUATION. To a greater or lesser degree all or almost all white folks have been conditioned to believe that, in the words of the hugely influential thinker and minister of the 19th century, Augustus Brownson, that white people should not be “Africanized.” The Brownson story: How he justified white supremacy giving rise to the KKK and lynching and terrorism.

It started even earlier when freemen and freewomen were refused entry into the “white man's churches.” The story of Richard Allen and Absalom Jones.

It started in 1701 when Cadillac landed at Detroit and enslaved Native Americans right here; when Andrew Macomb held slaves; when the upstanding white citizens of Detroit found ways to circumvent the Northwest Ordinance so they could keep slaves; when a KKK leader almost got elected Mayor of Detroit; when a wall was built in NW Detroit to maintain the color line; when in the 1950s manufacturing began to move far outside of Detroit; when white Detroiters refused to integrate “their” schools; when steering continues; when Grosse Point built walls; when Affirmative Action was voted down; when metropolitan wide transportation was voted down; when a way to provide affordable

water rates for poor people supposedly cannot be found; when many \$ millions can be found for stadiums but not for the schools; and

It is not about a supposed ancient period of enslaving people. It is about now. It is about how people's opportunities are being thwarted now.

NOW WHEN WHITE STATUS IS BEING DEFENDED. NOW WHEN THE COLOR LINE IS BEING MAINTAINED. IT WAS THE ISSUE OF THE 20TH CENTURY AS DR. W.E.B. DUBOISE SAID AND IT REMAINS THE ISSUE OF THE 21ST.

How else do we explain insurance redlining. Housing segregation? Mass incarceration of black men? The 16:1 wealth gap.

SINCE WHITE PEOPLE THINK/FEEL...BLACK CULTURE IS DANGEROUS; Black men and black boys are dangerous; Black people living in your neighborhood are dangerous to property values; black kids in schools will lower the educational standards.

THIS IS THE REALITY OF WHITE RACISM. THESE ARE THE VALUES THAT ARE HABITUATED INTO WHITE CULTURE; WHITE FEELING AND WHEN I AM PAINFULLY HONEST, MY OWN WHITE THINKING. IT IS INSIDIOUS AND UNAVOIDABLE.

DESPITE OUR WHITE FRAGILITY WE MUST ADMIT HOW MUCH IT FORMS WHITE SOCIETY AND WHITE PEOPLE MUST ALLOW OURSELVES TO BE CONFRONTED BY THE TRUTH OF IT. RECOGNIZE IT. CONFRONT IT IN OURSELVES. AND MOST IMPORTANTLY, CONFRONT IT IN INSTITUTIONS AND STRUCTURES THAT ENABLE IT AND PERPETUATE IT.

This is the reality to one degree or another for white people.

White people must come to terms with it and not give into to the white defense mechanism of white fragility. We are heirs to the white supremacy that have been habituated by our forebears. Not 150 years ago. But now, this year and last year.

Admit it. Catch it and deal with it. That act will free us to see what perpetuates it and see the urgency of addressing it at its root, at its STRUCTURED AND INTENTIONAL root.

Bob Bruttell

rabruttell@gmail.com