

## **Waking Up White**

Unitarian Universalist Community Church, Augusta, ME, Rev Carie Johnsen, March 2016

**Opening/Chalice Lighting**     *We have only begun to know  
the power that is in us if we would join  
our solitudes in the communion of the struggle.*  
~ Denise Levertov

### **Check-in/Sharing**

**Reading**     Waking Up White, and Finding Myself in the Race Story by Debbie Irving

NOT SO LONG AGO, if someone had called me a racist, I would have kicked and screamed in protest. “But I’m a good person!” I would have insisted. “I don’t see color! I don’t have a racist bone in my body!” I would have felt insulted and misunderstood and stomped off to lick my wounds. That’s because I thought being a racist meant not liking people of color or being a name-calling bigot.

For years I struggled silently to understand race and racism. I had no way to make sense of debates in the media about whether the white guy was “being racist” or the black guy was “playing the race card.” I wanted close friends of color but kept ending up with white people as my closest friends. When I was with a person of color, I felt an inexplicable tension and a fear that I might say or do something offensive or embarrassing. When white people made blatantly racist jokes or remarks, I felt upset but had no idea what to do or say. I didn’t understand why, if laws supporting slavery, segregation, and discrimination had been abolished, lifestyles still looked so different across the color lines. Most confusing were unwanted racist thoughts that made me feel like a jerk. I felt too embarrassed to admit any of this which prevented me from going in search of answers.

It turns out, stumbling block number 1 was that I didn’t think I had a race, so I never thought to look within myself for answers. The way I understood it, race was for other people, brown- and black-skinned people. Don’t get me wrong— if you put a census form in my hand, I would know to check “white” or “Caucasian.” It’s more that I thought all those other categories, like Asian, African American, American Indian, and Latino, were the real races. I thought white was the raceless race— just plain, normal, the one against which all others were measured.

This widespread phenomenon of white people wanting to guard themselves against appearing stupid, racist, or radical has resulted in an epidemic of silence from people who care deeply about justice and love for their fellow human beings. I believe most white people would take a stand against racism if only they knew how, or even imagined they had a role.<sup>1</sup>

Irving, Debby (2014-01-16). *Waking Up White: and Finding Myself in the Story of Race* (Kindle Locations 89-92). Elephant Room Press. Kindle Edition.

**Questions:**

1. When we make a wrong turn using a GPS the device promptly recalibrates and offers new directions. How do you recognize you have encountered a racist thought? How do you recalibrate?
2. How have you understood your race? What is your racial story? How have you measured your race against other races?
3. How have you guarded yourself from appearing stupid, racist or radical? When and how have you been silence?

Check-out/Likes and Wishes: How was the session for you?

**Closing Words**          “Distant Return” by Stephen Shick

Someday, out there, on a day like this  
in a place I will never see,  
where the clearing winds always come  
after the storm,  
I will arrive nameless  
on a distant memory  
carrying with me all the best  
I gave back to this earth.

All the hope I found  
scattered by others  
along the roads  
I traveled

All the courage that came  
unexpectedly when you took my hand  
and we cried  
for those we could not save

All the love that exposed  
the lies I told myself  
about who I was  
and what I was meant to do

All the faith that came to me  
when I saw others  
carry these things  
into the future.