



Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry Network Website
Session Plan
**Faith Connections: An Invitation to Explore White
Privilege**
St. Peter United Church of Christ, Lake Zurich, IL,
Rev. Emily Mitchell, January 2016

Preliminaries

Opening Reading and Prayer/Candle Lighting

The Peace of Wild Things, by Wendell Berry
When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

Let us be in prayer.

Holy One,
You who call us into uncomfortable conversations, you who ask us to stretch ourselves, you who implore us to reach out, in love, toward those who know our deepest selves, and those we hardly understand at all, help us to be an open-hearted vessel. May we experience growing pangs with joy, for we trust you are guiding us closer to you. Amen.

Check-in

(Remember to keep check-in shorter than in the past to allow more time to tackle the more difficult discussions.)

Meditation

For your prework, you were asked to watch a video. The narrator told a story about a trip to the grocery store with her daughter and sister in law. I'm going to play the audio of that piece now. And I'm going to ask you to listen, while imagining you are standing in the shoes of the narrator. You are the black person telling the story.

OK. Here we go. Please place yourself in a relaxed position. Feet on the floor, eyes closed. Hands in your lap. Breathe normally...As you listen, enter more and more deeply into the

experience being described. If you get distracted, that's ok. Just pull your attention back to the narrator. Try to feel what she feels.

<http://world-trust.org/films/all/ctc-deepens-conversation-joy/#prettyPhoto>

Focused Sharing/Focused Listening

“Faith in Action” Discussion/Activity

1. *Spend some real time discussing reactions to the meditation. How did you feel? (Focus on feelings, not nouns, as in “humiliated” vs. “discrimination.” Try to lead people to speak from the narrator’s perspective.*
-- To what extent could you put yourself in the shoes of the narrator? What would you have done in that situation if the sister-in-law had not been there? What would have been the consequences? Does the presence of her daughter make a difference? Dig in. During Barack Obama’s first campaign for President, Michelle Obama was widely depicted as the “angry black woman” the narrator speaks of. Did this prove to be true? Are they aware that, as a U.S. Senator from Illinois, Barack Obama was subjected to security scrutiny when he went into an upscale store in D. C. dressed casually? Or that he was pulled over—in D. C. and Illinois—several times in racial profiling incidents? What does that say about an “autopilot” way of thinking, or establishment policies as cited in the video?
2. *Tell about a time when you first realized your race. What happened? What did that experience feel like? How did it affect you?*
3. *Define “white privilege.” What do you have/do/be/are that you never have to think about? Use the knapsack imagery from the prework, then push beyond it. Ideas might be educational opportunities, healthcare, wearing a hoodie without attracting attention, going into any store and not being followed. Again, dig into this discussion so that some of the institutional differences can be brought to light.*
4. *Discuss responses to 1 and 2 of the “10 Ways to be an Ally”. Was it hard to do this activity? If so, why was it difficult? If not, what was easy about it? What ideas/understandings did you identify that had the most impact on you? Why?*
5. *Discuss interview with Ta-Nehisi Coates. What about his interview impacted you the most? What is your understanding of governmental authority? How has your view on authority changed or remained unchanged based on the interview.*
6. *When has privilege (expected or unexpected) opened a door for you that may not have opened otherwise? Getting a job, etc.*
7. *Discuss where each person went for his/her visit to a location in which s/he was a racial minority. What did that experience feel like? Why do you think that is? What might it feel like to be in the minority all/most of the time?*

Additional Questions to Consider

8. *What about this topic do you struggle with the most? Why?*
9. *What kinds of feelings come up for you when you discuss this topic? How might you address those feelings moving forward?*

Check-out

Closing Prayer/Interactive Ritual

“Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world’s grief. Love justly, now. Love mercy, now. Walk humbly, now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it.” – From The Talmud

Closing Blessing

And so may it be.

Now go in peace. May you leave this place knowing you are good and knowing you are loved. Take your light and your love from this place. Use them to bless the world. And stay safe until we meet again. We ask this in Jesus’ name. Amen.



Faith Connections: An Invitation to Explore White Privilege

Participant Preparation

Participant Preparation

As Americans, when we take a look at our current culture, when we look at the history of the United States and learn about slavery, Jim Crow laws, the Civil Rights movement, and when we remember our own experiences of American life, we see that racism has been and continues to be a problem in our country. We see the ways it impacts Americans in the past and today. And many of us work to improve the lives of people of color in America. Yet, for many white folks, there is another side of the coin to racism, one that individuals often do not see, but is becoming increasingly important to discuss: white privilege.

White privilege may be a hard idea to pin down, especially for those for whom it's a new concept. I've found this image to be most helpful to me, one coined in an article by Wellesley professor Peggy McIntosh. In the article, she says, "White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools and blank checks."¹ But the truth is, if the backpack is invisible, it's hard to imagine what those special provisions actually look like.

Here are some of the assets she listed. See if any of these apply to you:

- I can choose makeup or Band-Aids in "flesh" color in any store and have them more or less match my skin.
- I can swear, or dress in second hand clothes, without having people attribute these choices to the bad morals, poverty, or the illiteracy of my race or cultural heritage.
- When my kids learn about their national heritage they will mostly learn that it's people of our color who made this country what it is.
- I can criticize our government and talk about how much I fear its policies without being seen as a cultural outsider or being told to "go home."
- I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty well assured that I will not be followed or harassed.
- I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race.
- I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial or cultural group.

If we believe we are good people, it's tempting to say to ourselves, "No, I don't have any privileges. I try to do good in the world. I give to others. Besides, I worked hard for what I have!" And many of us have worked hard to achieve the success we have received.

Acknowledging white privilege is not about dismissing a person's achievements, or even

¹ <http://ted.coe.wayne.edu/ele3600/mcintosh.html>

about individuals who act negatively toward others. It's about finding ways of seeing an entire system of racial bias in our society—a system that is bigger than any one of us. When we work to see how that system plays out in our lives, it is *then* that we can begin to empower ourselves to bring about positive changes toward equality.

If you're reading this and feeling defensive—that's great! It means you care about others and your impact on the world. Take that feeling and get curious; what, specifically, do you feel defensive about? Why? What is at stake for you? Do you feel afraid? Sad? Guilty? Angry? Try to reflect as specifically as possible on what feelings you're experiencing and why. If you're feeling ready to begin, but don't know where to start—that's great! This session is the beginning of a lifelong discovery, and an opportunity to deepen your relationship and empathy towards others. If you're feeling afraid of saying or doing the wrong thing—that's great! It means you care about how you behave toward other people. Know that everyone who works toward equality makes mistakes. Embrace it, knowing that God loves you, and is with you on this journey—even in the errors.

No matter where you are, hold onto the possibility that God is calling you into the struggle. It is in the struggle, after all, where we are most likely to grow.

Faith in Action Preparation/Questions to Consider

1. Watch the video on this page: <http://world-trust.org/films/all/ctc-deepens-conversation-joy/#prettyPhoto>
2. Read "10 Ways to Be an Ally" (attached). To the best of your ability, write down your responses to ways 1 and 2. Keep in mind the other tips during the large group discussion. (And be glad, by participating, you're practicing #10!)
3. Listen to the interview with Ta-Nehisi Coates on racial profiling. Consider your relationship to authority and the police, and how it might be informed by your race. What is your view of governmental authority?
<http://www.npr.org/2013/11/03/242735957/sunday-convo-racial-profiling>
4. If you can, visit a place in which you are in the racial or cultural minority. Be aware of how you feel in that atmosphere. Write down a few thoughts in preparation. If time doesn't allow for this right now, think about an experience you had in the past and reflect on the same questions.
5. Think about a time when you first realized your race. What happened? What did that experience feel like? How did it affect you?

Readings for Reflection

“Without community, there is no liberation.” — Audre Lorde

Revelation 21: “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ²And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; ⁴he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.” ⁵And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.” ⁶Then he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.”

“Being self-aware is not the absence of mistakes, but the ability to learn and correct them.” – Daniel Chidiac

“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial "outside agitator" idea. Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider.” – MLK, *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*

“He who knows others is wise. He who knows himself is enlightened.” - Lao Tzu

Isaiah 58:11-12: “The Lord will guide you continually,
and satisfy your needs in parched places,
and make your bones strong;
and you shall be like a watered garden,
like a spring of water,
whose waters never fail.

¹²Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,
the restorer of streets to live in.”

“Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world’s grief. Love justly, now. Love mercy, now. Walk humbly, now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it.” – From The Talmud

10 Ways to be an Ally

As I have gotten deeper into anti-oppression work I find that I discover more and more subtleties and complexities than I ever considered. Learning to be a good ally is not a linear education with some sort of graduation or certification at the end. It is a process full of experimentation, humility, confusion, challenge, and clarity. This list is by no means complete. It's really just a few suggestions on how to turn your mind towards solidarity.

1. Consider your position and how it benefits you to be in that position. As a white person, a heterosexual person, a person with money, a man, etc. one has certain privileges that are not afforded to others. Many of these privileges are unearned, meaning they are afforded to the person, simply because they are white, a man, a heterosexual. The idea of privilege is also bigger than just making a list of these unearned benefits. It is important to understand how these benefits affect your daily life, your career, your education, and your relationships with authority (landlords, police, bosses, teachers, etc.) among other things. The idea is not necessarily to make a hierarchy of oppression but rather consider how all our identities intersect. For example, if someone is poor but is also white they may not have class privilege, but as a white person, it is likely that they'll have an easier time being poor than a person of color with the same income level. For more on white privilege specifically check out Peggy McIntosh's article "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack" (<http://www.nymbp.org/reference/WhitePrivilege.pdf>)

2. Do a personal inventory. It is helpful to understand how particular issues like racism, sexism, etc. have played out in your own life. One way to do this is to write about all the times that you can remember when some form of oppression affected your life. This could mean that you were the recipient or the perpetrator of oppressive behaviors. It could also be things that you observed or events with which you were personally involved. It could be painful memories from school, work, family, etc. A personal inventory may also include a very honest evaluation of your feelings, thoughts, experiences with, and beliefs about people who are different than you. As a heterosexual, you may discover feelings of discomfort about gay or as a cisgender person (a person whose gender identity matches the gender they were assigned at birth) you may feel some discomfort around people who identify as transgender. This doesn't mean you're a bad person. It does mean that you have thoughts or feelings that could lead to perpetuating oppression.

3. Do your homework. Sometimes people from a dominant culture have a very sincere interest in understanding people from other cultures, races, genders, or sexual orientations. One way to do so is to be in conversation with those other cultures. However, there is a big difference between a natural or intentional conversation about oppression and simply asking someone who has experienced oppression to teach you about it. Asking one person of another culture to be your teacher is disrespectful for a couple of reasons. First, experiences of oppression are utterly personal and often painful. When a white person asks a person of color to share their experiences it could trigger some painful memories.

Second, this creates a false understanding of entire cultures and people. When we ask one person to speak for an entire people, this is what is known as tokenism. Humans are so wonderfully diverse, even within subcultures. Latinos are not just Mexicans and what one African-American person thinks about an issue may be different than what another thinks. When we tokenize someone, we run the risk of reductionist essentialism, reducing a whole group of people into one fixed idea about who they are. Curiously, white people are rarely, if ever asked to represent the ideas and beliefs of their entire race.

Third, there are so many other ways to get a multicultural perspective. Many, many books, articles, and videos are out there to give someone an understanding of other cultures. In seeking these things out one should consider looking into the history of a culture and understanding what role your own culture played in their history. For example, how did policy decisions by able-bodied people affect alter-abled people? Consider the books you read and the movies you watch. Are the others, actors, producers usually from a dominant culture? When one is in conversation with someone who is talking about their experiences in oppression, the best, most supportive thing they can do is to just listen and learn. While some things may sound difficult to believe it is important to remember that this person knows their experience better than we do and that our privilege may have made such experiences unthinkable in our own lives. Receptive listening also ensures that the experiences of people who have been oppressed, as well as the people themselves do not become invisible. Listening can be an act of solidarity.

4. Consider the difference between guilt and action

Discovering that one has benefits that others do not simply because of circumstance can sometimes lead to feelings of guilt or shame. While it is certainly useful to have a sense of regret for conscious or unconscious ways that we have personally or communally perpetuated oppression, it doesn't necessarily serve us to dwell in that regret. Oppressed people may not care if people in a dominant culture feel bad or guilty. However, they might very well care about how you act upon that guilt. If you want to make a difference, don't be guilty, be active. Being active means interrupting oppressive comments or conversations but it also means active participation in the struggle.

5. Be clear on why you are involved in the struggle (against racism, sexism, heterosexism, etc.)

If you do take action it is important to consider why. Sometimes people from the dominant culture get involved in a struggle in order to "help" or to take up a cause for other people, or to assuage their own feelings of guilt. Part of privilege is that one can choose to engage in the struggle or not. However, for oppressed peoples the choice is not as simple as being a part of a cause or not, it can be a matter of survival. Do we believe that oppression is a problem for the society as a whole or just a problem for its victims? While racism affects people of color in very detrimental ways, racism is a problem for white people because it is white people who need to act to change it. As well, it is good to consider how oppression benefits you and what you may get out of ending oppression, and what you may lose. If you're involved simply to help, get a good internship, or take up a cause, you might be doing yourself and your community a disservice.

6. Consider the difference between charity and solidarity As you do get involved in ending oppression consider not only your intent, but also the effectiveness of your action. Charity is a form of help. Examples of charity include volunteerism (short-term, limited participation in a cause) and philanthropy (donating money to a cause). Consider Martin Luther King Jr.'s admonishment: "Philanthropy is commendable, but it must not cause the philanthropist to overlook the circumstances of economic injustice which make philanthropy necessary." Solidarity is a different sense of involvement. It is a long-term participation in the struggle, understanding the part you play and how the issues affect you personally. As well, solidarity may very well mean not being the center of the solution, but just a small part. It may mean deferring your sense of authority and leadership. It can also mean dropping your own agenda for how change should be achieved. It can be very problematic when the leadership in an organization is people from the dominant culture. When people from the dominant culture define the issues or strategies for oppressed people it can be condescending and ineffective. So, an example of

solidarity is being part of community organizing efforts led by people of color, womyn, etc in an active, but non-leadership role. Being in solidarity means seeing how you will benefit from the liberation of others.

7. Don't be afraid to mess up or be to be uncomfortable

This is difficult work and it requires a lot of humility and vulnerability. It is important to realize that we are asking ourselves to challenge things we've believed since we were children. We were brought up with a frame of reference that has inevitable blind spots. We are trying to change behaviors that are well ingrained. We will mess up. Sometimes people will be kind in their response to our follies and sometimes they won't. However, we can be kind to ourselves by getting support from other people and by attending kindly to whatever emotions arise. We can be kind to others by not letting these mess ups lead to give ups. Anyone who has been involved in anti-oppression work probably has one or many stories of being called out on some unskillful behavior. It is part of the process and something we can ultimately be grateful for, even if it is painful as hell in the moment.

8. Make Amends

If you do mess up, or if you recall some instance in which you feel you acted unskillfully, try to make amends. Apologize to your community or to the person/people directly. Realize that in doing so you may or may not get a positive response from the persons you hurt. Apologizing is not in and of itself the end of the situation. Either way, the best way to make amends might be to continue to be internally introspective and externally active.

9. Don't expect a pat on the back

It is exciting to engage in social justice work. As we begin to change our internal landscape we may feel our self-esteem rise with our integrity. Sometimes our head may get a little big. Some people have experienced a feeling of being one of "the good white people", for example. Don't let this hinder your own self-evaluation and openness to being challenged on your stuff. And don't expect oppressed peoples to acknowledge your internal or external achievements. If you do find yourself wondering why you aren't getting more positive feedback for the work you are doing, it may be a good time to check your intentions. Are you doing the work for yourself and your community or because you are trying to be a good helper, feel less guilty, and/or get the respect of others?

10. Do the work within yourself, your own cultures and your own communities

For people who are in the dominant group it may be very difficult to experience the anger or frustration of oppressed people. The level of emotion may trigger very deep wounds of our own and it can get really uncomfortable, really fast. It is important for us to do our own emotional processing work. It is helpful to be clear about our own relationship to anger and other strong emotions so that we are not defensive or shut down when we experience these emotions with people who have been oppressed.

Part of solidarity is creating active change within the privileged communities. This also creates allies for allies, meaning as an ally, it is important to have support from others who are trying to do the same. This helps keep you in check and gives you a place to explore some of the pain and challenges of this work. For example, as you do a personal inventory it can be good to have another person from your same culture to talk with about these memories. It can be transformative when men get together and talk about ways they have mistreated womyn or when white people get together and talk about ways that they could have handled racially insensitive remarks differently. Work within your own culture or community may manifest as a monthly

support group or discussion group, a caucus or sub-committee within an organization, or a blog devoted to discussing such matters.

For more on being an ally: www.paulkivel.com/articles/guidelinesforbeingstrongwhiteallies.pdf

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