

White in the South: Can I Get a Witness?

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(Sing) “Have you seen but a white lily grow – before rude hands have touched it?”

That’s the first line of a song that my voice instructor assigned to me. This song was written in the 1600’s for an English theater group. So the words were written a long time ago and it’s known as a classic solo. The song starts off praising the whiteness of the lily and the new fallen snow – that’s not really a problem. But it ends with praise for the whiteness of the woman he loves – and that just didn’t sit right with me. SO – when my voice teacher encouraged me to work on this song, I told him that I was uncomfortable singing it. He said, “Well I know it has some challenging parts – but I think you can do it and it provides good exercise in variations for voice.” We were obviously not talking about the same kinds of challenges.

I had to do a little talking to myself. “It’s just a song Jane. And he’s the teacher – you are the student. Sing the damn song.”

(Sing) “Oh so white, oh so soft, oh so sweet is she – so sweet is she.”

Maybe I’ve gotten too sensitive! – Or maybe not. Sometimes I feel like I’m balancing on a tight rope when considering and discussing issues of race and privilege – but even that is a form of privilege; because I have the choice to get up here on this tight rope or not.

As a white person, I don’t have to think about being white. In fact, when this topic comes up some white folks say, “You know, I don’t see why we need to focus on race – I personally don’t think about it. We should move on.” Or those of us submerged in academia may say something like, “Ultimately we humans made up the concept of race as we attempted to increase both our understanding and manipulation of our world.

In other words, race is socially constructed. It has no natural, biological reality. We are all a part of the human race with lots of variability within it.” Blah Blah Blah.

All that may be true, but as Cornel West states, “Race Matters.”

This group is well read – you know that race still matters greatly today. You probably know that even today, job applicants with white sounding names are 50% more likely to get called back. (And not have to produce their long form birth certificate!) I could go on and on regarding how race still matters in housing opportunities, education, health and wellness, income security, etc. etc. And most of you know this. But it’s not something white folks really have to think about. Those of us who are white are like fish swimming in the water. We are in the middle of a white dominated society, swimming in white privilege and so unless we make a conscious effort, we don’t really know the water is even there.

Here’s a homework assignment for you white folks that are here today. This week – just this week – every time you look at your watch to note the time, also note that you are white. Then think about what your current situation is at that time and place, and consider the implications of your whiteness.

I’ll model this for you. (Look at watch). It’s now _____ o’clock. I’m white. And I’m speaking to you as a Unitarian Universalist minister called to serve in South Georgia. Now believe me, I could spend days considering the implications of my whiteness for that situation.

My sermon topic today is “White in the South: Can I Get a Witness?” I’ve read loads of books and articles on racial identity and privilege. Also, I’ve been studying and exploring this from a personal

perspective and the perspective of my southern community for most of my life. So, while I could share data with you, I'm not sure that would be all that meaningful. Instead, I'm going to tell you two stories in the short time I have left.

The first story takes place in fall of 2008. Richard came over to look at my husband's fender bender and give an estimate. Richard used to work in an auto body shop my family had owned back in the 90's and now has a small shop in his backyard. Back when Richard worked at my family's auto body shop, we used to have some heated conversations around race and sexuality issues –with him quoting scripture and sharing what he thought was just the natural and right way of living. Well, on this fall day of 2008, Richard happened to see a presidential campaign sign that I had by my driveway and commented that he saw it. And I thought, “Oh, here we go again.”

Then he said, “I'm with you all the way on that one. We can't afford the other one.”

And I probably looked shocked and said –“Well, Richard – I'm glad to hear you say that because – you know –they say that a lot of hard working white folks like yourself are just going to vote against their pocketbooks for some reason.”

And he said, “Well, Miss Jane – (he's from the old school) – he said –“Miss Jane, Ida been right there with'em too. But I've changed. You know some of my nieces got into mixed marriages –and I told them that was their decision – but that I didn't want them comin' round to my house. You see, I didn't want my children exposed to that kind of thing 'cause I didn't believe it was right. But one of them called me this summer – one of Mike's daughters – and said, ‘Uncle Richard, you know I've always loved you, and I think you loved me when we were growin' up. You were like a father to us when daddy died. And I know you didn't approve of me dating and marrying Joe. But I know you loved me. And I'm callin' now because I need you. I need you because our little baby just died and I wanted you to come to the funeral home tonight if you could.’”

Richard said he went to that funeral home and went up to that casket and saw that beautiful baby lying there and just wept. And he said, “God – you got my attention! I had a month and a half that I could have known and loved this precious little girl. But because I held on to those stupid racist attitudes, that had been ingrained in me from birth, I missed that opportunity. But I'll never do that again.” Richard said that the next weekend he invited the whole family – with all the children of various marriages that he had not gotten to know – to come to his home – and they shared food and love.

He said, “Miss Jane – I sometimes slip up and something will come out of my mouth like it used to – but I'm really trying.”

And I said, “Richard – you're recovering – just like me. I'm a recovering racist – and I mess up too – but I keep trying. And if you keep working on it, you will get better – but it takes work. And like any good work – it's worth it.”

Story # 2 is more personal. It's a bit of my own story.

I was born in Statesboro, Georgia in 1950. (Go ahead – do the math. I grew up in the days of Jim Crow laws. But these laws did not affect me in ways that were obvious to me. My white privilege allowed me access to every store, restaurant, and entertainment spot in town. And for the most part, I was pretty naïve about the evils of racism.

Oh, I did notice things – as all children do. I remember when I was 5 or 6, standing in the “Whites Only” line at the Dairy Queen with my dad, waiting to get a cone. I asked my dad why all of the white

people were in our line and all of the colored people were in the other line. My father shared this explanation with me. He told me that we were white – and that we stood in our line to get vanilla ice cream, while the colored people stood in the other line to get chocolate ice cream. Well, of course, I immediately told him that I wanted chocolate. And he said, “No, you are white, so you get vanilla. That’s just the way it is and you have to accept it.” Well, I didn’t realize that vanilla was the only flavor served at Dairy Queen. (That was even in the days before dipped cones.) But his unusual answer stuck with me. And it has served as a metaphor for what happened in my life. Indeed, I just accepted the differences and did not question them much.

Yet, I still took notice –like when boxes were being filled at my elementary school with our old worn-out textbooks. I asked what was going to happen to them and was told that they were being taken to the “colored school” for the children to use there. “Separate but equal” was never the case in Statesboro, Georgia.

To be fair to my parents, they never overtly taught me to be a racist. They didn’t have to. Everything in my society, from the Dairy Queen windows on, taught me that white folks and black folks should function in separate social environments. And my society not only taught me that “separate” was right, it also taught me that I was in the superior group. All I had to do was look at the water fountains. The “whites only” fountains were clean with cool, refrigerated water. Not so for the “colored” fountains. And of course, my Southern Baptist church reinforced these standards.

When I entered Statesboro High School in the fall of 1965, there were 12 new faces, darker faces than I was accustomed to seeing in my schools. And I was afraid of these new folks and I could not understand why they would want to leave “their” school to come to “our” school. But I made it through those years with very little interaction – except with one special girl that I connected with. She and I were both kind of cut-ups, and we’d have a few laughs in the hallway together between classes. And I began to realize that in many ways she was more like me than my white friends –so that put a little crack in my racist armor that was the beginning of a long journey and transformation.

Fast forward to the year 2008! That year I was on the planning committee for my 40th high school class reunion. We had not had one in 30 years. I had volunteered to try to find the addresses of the African American students who were in our class. And as I found some of these folks on the internet and read about the great things they were doing, I thought --- I could KNOWN them. What an opportunity I had missed because of my racism!

So I wrote them a letter, sharing with them some of the background I’ve mentioned to you, thanking the one girl anonymously who helped me to begin my journey, and offering an apology to all of them. I closed the letter with this list of sorrows.

- *I’m sorry that I did not make an effort to understand why you were coming to Statesboro High School.*
- *I’m sorry that I did not meet you outside of the school to welcome you.*
- *I’m sorry that I was afraid of you and avoided being in places where several of you were gathered together.*
- *I’m sorry that I avoided sitting by you in class.*
- *I’m sorry that I was involved with negative conversations about you and did not speak up when you were put down.*
- *I’m sorry that I didn’t encourage you to join the clubs that I was in or join the flagette team.*
- *I’m sorry that I didn’t invite you to my 16th birthday party. It would have been a lot more fun with you there.*

- *I'm sorry that I didn't find ways to get to know you – really know you and understand you individually, rather than seeing you as “one of those black students.”*
- *I'm sorry that I didn't recognize the remarkable opportunity that I had in that place and time in history to be a part of something special with you.*
- *And I'm sorry – oh SO sorry, that it's taken me 40 years to say, “I'm sorry.” I hope you can forgive me.*

On March 17, 2008, I mailed that letter to those classmates, and I also sent it as an “open letter” which was published in our local paper. I have since met with five of them – who have generously forgiven me, and a couple of them have become email buddies. But you know the one that I thought was my “sort of” friend – the one that I singled out and thanked anonymously in the letter – I didn't hear from her. Now at first I thought, “Maybe she didn't get the letter.” And that was a little bit of white privilege too –thinking that surely if she got the letter she would forgive me. That's what we white people do when we mess up – we just say –“Oh, I didn't mean to offend you. I didn't mean to hurt anyone. I didn't realize it would be a problem.” And folks that we've really hurt, who we've cut to the core with our comments or actions or non-actions – are just supposed to say, “That's okay.”

I think she probably got that letter – because I sent it right where her Mama told me to. But perhaps the pain I caused was too great. The other students said they remembered me as someone who was nice to them. I appreciated that memory – and realized that basically I had been polite as my Mama taught me to be with all folks – but I had not really reached out in any positive way to them.

But with this girl –my “sort of” friend, I was just friendly enough with her for her to perhaps think that I was her real friend. But then of course – that was just when it was convenient –when I wanted to have a good laugh with her and break the tension –and perhaps relieve a little of the guilt that I was already beginning to feel. I realize now I should not expect her forgiveness. I can't go back and change my actions, but I can actively work to change what I do in the future. And my intention is to be an active antiracist and white ally, and to be a WITNESS to racism and white privilege when I see it.

The subtitle of this sermon is “Can I get a witness?” Because I'm asking you to explore your own privileges – be they the result of race, gender, sexuality, physical abilities, ethnicity, nationality, religion, or class –and I know you may have some oppression as the result of some of these things – but most of us have great privileges too. As my friend Jesus told us – we need to get the logs out of our own eyes. Then we can see more clearly and be a witness!

Of course, a witness doesn't just SEE something. A witness attests to it. They call it out. And there ARE ways to do this that can live up to our principles of respect and dignity for all. We don't have to lay a lot of guilt on folks or belittle their backgrounds. We can witness with love.

But I won't lie to you. When you witness, when you work as many of us have – actively in anti-oppression work, you will sometimes hurt someone and you will sometimes get hurt. Many of you may be able to attest to that as well.

This is not an easy journey. But you know – if your heart is in the right place, if your heart is in a holy place, you will be blessed with knowing that you are trying to do the right thing.

(Sing) “When our heart is in a holy place, when our heart is in a holy place,
We are blessed with love and amazing grace, when our heart is in a holy place.”

Amen and Blessed Be.