

**“Unpacking the Backpack of Whiteness”©**  
**Shoreline Unitarian Universalist Society, Madison, CT**

**The Rev. Jeanne Lloyd**

**Linda Brill**

**Dan Brill**

**Cathy Ramin**

**September 24, 2017**

**Gathering Music** *Allegro ma non troppo, Opus 49, no. 2, Beethoven* Carol Wright

**Sounding of the Gong**

**#Welcome**

Eric Munro, Treasurer  
Board of Trustees

**Prelude** *Andante, from Suite in G major, Joseph-Hector Fiocco*

**Chalice Lighting & Bell**

*(The flaming chalice is the symbol of our free faith)*

**Opening Words** *by Maya Angelou*

*History, despite its wrenching pain cannot be unlived,*

*But if face with courage, need not be lived again.*

*Life up your eyes upon the day breaking for you.*

*Give birth again to the dream.*

**#\*Opening Hymn #150**

*All Whose Boast It is, verses 1-2*

**A Story for All**

Nate Pawelek, Director of Religious Education

**Our Covenant with Our Teachers and Children**

**#Sing the Young People Out**

*Till We Meet Again (2x)*  
*May Peace Go With You (2x)*

### **Honoring Our Joys and Sorrows**

And, now, if you woke this morning with a sorrow so heavy that you need the help of this community to carry it; or if, in the spirit of thankfulness, you woke with gratitude in your heart that simply must be shared, now is the time for you to speak.

Please come forward to the lectern as you are able. Or, we will bring a mic to you, as needed.

PAUSE

Let us reflect with reverence in our hearts for the joys and sorrows spoken and unspoken today.

**Sung Meditation: Hymn #95, verses. 1-3**

*There is More Love Somewhere*

### **Offertory Words**

Let us offer with generosity what treasure we have to the service and stewardship of this congregation and to those whose lives suffer in these moments. Fifty percent of this month's cash collection will go to the victims of Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Maria. Puerto Rico is home of 3 ½ million unrepresented U.S. citizens and home to some of our members. Let us give from the heart, knowing any one of us could face these same challenges. No one of us is immune. In those moments when we seek refuge, peace, and freedom from fear, we rely on others. Our generosity and stewardship of this world does indeed make a difference.

**Offering & Offertory Music** *Bouree in F Major*, Telemann

### **Reflections**

#### ***Unpacking the Backpack of Whiteness***

Rev. Lloyd, Dan Brill, Linda Brill, and Cathy Ramin

#### ***Rev. Jeanne Lloyd***

Last week I shared with you that each of us is a prisoner to our own way of thinking. Or, said another way, our capacity to know and be known is limited by our cultural assumptions.

When controversy erupted at our denominational headquarters this past spring regarding the degree to which people of color are regularly hired in our highest and best paid professional positions, the Board of Trustees of the UUA labeled this inequitable practice “white supremacy”. These words are not easy to hear and harder to identify with. // America was built on principles of freedom, fairness and equity, and it was also built on the provision of different rights for men, property-owners, and slaves. All these

principles shaped this country, in much the same way that a young sapling is shaped into a tree. The outcome of creating an inequitable system that does not match our ideals is hard to acknowledge. Yes, equity for all. Yes, discrimination against those who were not men, not property-owners, not free of slavery.

Given the juxtaposition of these discrepant world views that have been passed down from generation to generation in a predominantly white culture, is it any wonder that it's tough to acknowledge the effect of white supremacy on this country? Any wonder that it's tough to talk about? Any wonder that it's tough to even name? It's as though there was a trauma in our young life that happened, but it is so difficult to accept that we keep it buried, deep down, hidden, because it's just too painful to acknowledge. And, yet, since denial rarely works over the long term, it keeps bubbling up to the surface, in countless ways, in big ways, every hundred years or so, because . . . denial rarely brings healing to a wound improperly named or treated.

Peggy McIntosh<sup>1</sup> talks about racism being invisible to people who have white skin, in much the way that for a long time, and even still, society grants men advantages that women didn't and still don't have. So too, she says that those of us with white skin each carry an invisible backpack full of privileges that we get to take out and use every day (like coupons). Privileges that advantage people who are white.

Things like:

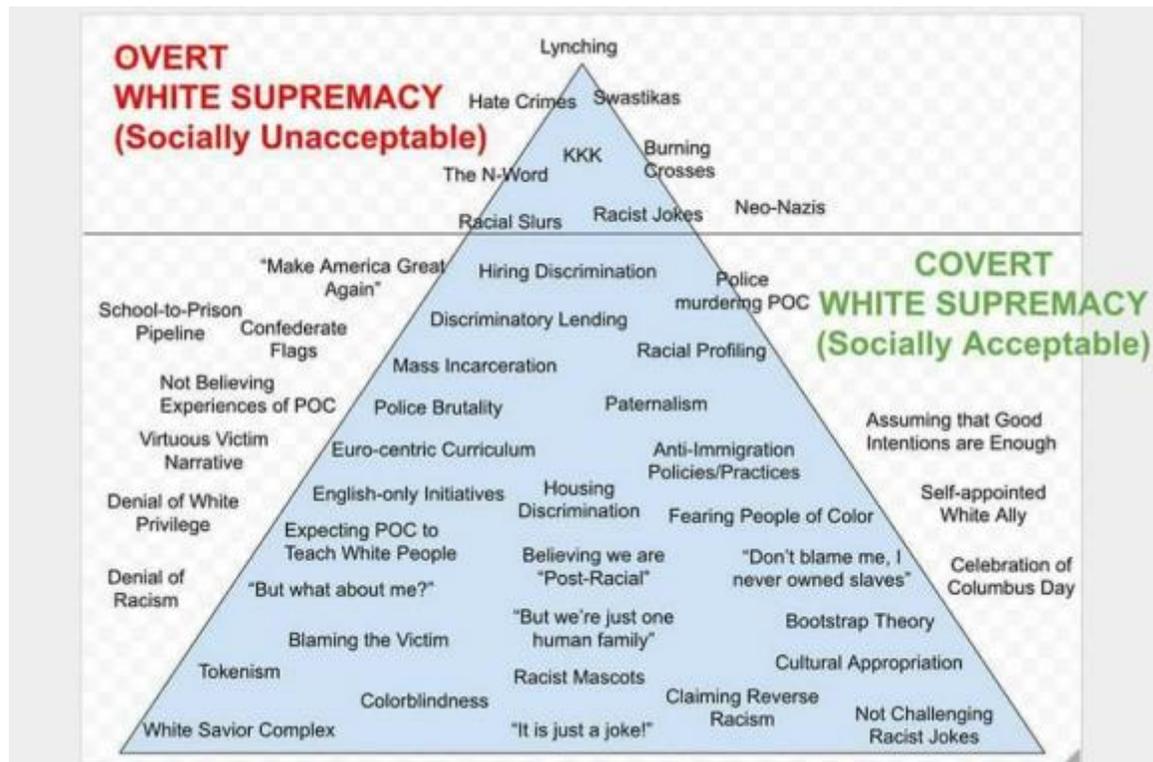
- I can take a job with an affirmative action employer without having coworkers on the job suspect that I got it because of the color of my skin.
- I can remain oblivious of the language and customs of people of color, who constitute the world's majority, without feeling in my culture any penalty for such [cluelessness].
- I am never asked to speak for all the people who have the same skin color as me.
- I can swear, or dress in second-hand clothes, or arrive late without having people attribute those choices to the bad morals, the poverty, or the illiteracy of my race.
- Whether I use checks, credit cards, or cash, I can count on my skin color not to work against the appearance of financial reliability.
- I can be sure that my children will be given [school] materials that [reinforce] ... the existence of [our] race.
- By and large, I can [better] protect my [child].
- I can criticize our government and talk about how much I fear its policies and practices without being seen as an outsider.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.csusm.edu/sjs/documents/UnpackingTheKnapsack.pdf> September 23, 2017

These and many many other attributes are privileges afforded to a currently dominant culture that is mostly white skinned. And, these and many more advantages are invisible to many of us. It is an invisibility that promotes denial. // Denial prevents healing and reconciliation, within our own psyches, our own families, and with those fellow citizens that we once promised freedom.

So what about this phrase “white supremacy”? Please take a look at the chart in your Order of Service.



Source: UUA

Think of it as one person’s attempt to describe the issue of racism in this country. Think of it as an iceberg, that, by and large remains hidden from view. It is easy to name those at the top of the iceberg as white supremacists. I want to believe that it is fair to say that we are not them, but, look at the rest of the iceberg. Any one of us may find ourselves falling in a region of the iceberg, fully and completely unaware that we who have white skin are part of a white supremacist society that started long before we were born, and regrettably, as long as it is denied, will continue. So, the next time you hear somebody rightfully denouncing the extreme behavior of those at the very top of this

invisible system, ask yourself: “How is it that this system continues to thrive?” (It is not kept afloat by individuals alone.)

In a moment, you will hear other’s reflections on this topic. And, you will hear them speak of Bryan Stevenson<sup>2</sup>, author of the book, “Just Mercy”, and speaker at the Ware Lecture at our UUA General Assembly last June. He said that if we want to acknowledge the trauma of racism and oppression and work toward healing this country, we need address these 4 issues: proximity, narrative, discomfort and hope:

1. **Proximity:** Solutions can only come when we are in proximity to those who have been pushed to the margins. We need to get in proximity.
2. **The Narrative:** We need to change the assumptions we make about each other. Fear and anger are the essential ingredients for maintaining injustice. He says, “The great evil of slavery was the narrative that justified racial inequality. We don't talk about slavery, the lynching, the terror, and until we do we can't be free. Slavery didn't end - it just evolved. We’ve been too celebratory about the civil rights movement. We need to change the narrative. We need to liberate America, not punish it.
3. **Discomfort:** It is a well-known saying that a minister’s job is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. Stevenson broadens this notion saying, we all have to be willing to do uncomfortable things and make uncomfortable decisions.
4. **Hope:** Hopelessness is the enemy of justice. We must resist that kind of hopelessness. We have to stay hopeful.

***Linda Brill, Chair, Safe Congregations Committee, SUUS***

Good morning. For those of you who don’t know, my name is Linda Brill, and I am one of the four delegates from SUUS who went to the UU General Assembly in New Orleans this past June. I am a relatively new UU and this was my first General Assembly. None of the great things I had heard about attending GA prepared me for the power of sitting in a room with four thousand other UUs and listening to our collective voices sing or our individual voices speak. It was a long four days of listening, learning, sharing, and connecting that ultimately led to some personal transformation.

Much of the General Assembly this year was influenced by a controversy that took place many years ago about which I knew nothing. Reverend Jeanne explained that years ago there was much greater racial diversity among UU members, but that a schism occurred along racial lines after the civil rights movement caused by a lack of financial support for

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.uua.org/liberty/criminaljustice/ware-stevenson> September 23, 2017

people of color. In addition, newer feelings of disenfranchisement have been caused by a lack of people of color being elected to positions of high leadership within the UU. When I looked at the schedule of events for the four days, I noticed a number of programs and spaces open only to people of color, and I repeatedly heard the term “white supremacy” being used. My initial reaction was to feel offended and to wonder out loud to my husband what the reaction would be if I organized a white only program or created a white only space. I felt that conversations around race should be held openly among racially diverse participants, and that, furthermore, this whole safe space thing was getting out of control. Luckily, I was able to shut my mouth long enough to open my ears and experience a transformation in my thinking as a result of the General Assembly.

My initial reaction to the term “white supremacist” was that it named others who are filled with hatred and who actively and intentionally oppress and diminish people of color. That certainly doesn’t apply to me. In fact, one of the major tenets of Unitarian Universalists is the belief in the inherent worth and dignity of every person. UUs are rightfully proud of how many of our leaders and members marched in the civil rights movement. We are rightfully proud of our desire to stand on the side of justice and our liberal religion that seeks to include all people. SUUS’ mission statement even says we “promote justice”. How then can “white supremacy” apply? One of the criticisms of UUs is that we secretly or overtly believe in our own exceptionalism. As Reverend Jeanne mentioned last week, sometimes our framing of the world prevents us from seeing clearly, or the framing is the bars that keep us imprisoned in our way of seeing the world. I needed to put aside my own self-congratulatory belief in my open mindedness and listen to what others had to say.

Once I suspended feeling insulted and defensive and began to listen, my understanding of “white supremacy” began to grow. I began to understand that the term speaks to the white privilege that exists in our society and that this white privilege allows me to walk through the world differently and more easily than can people of color. I began to understand that these privileges, none of which I asked for or deserve, keep white people in a dominant position and that this is white supremacy.

Bryan Stevenson, the founder and Executive Director of the Equal Justice Initiative, gave the Ware Lecture at GA. He was riveting. I was literally on the edge of my seat reminding myself to breathe the whole time he spoke. He made four suggestions about what we can do to make the world better. One of his suggestions is to change the narrative. My narrative was that I was doing a fairly good job of listening and seeing the injustice in the world, that I was a part of the solution not a part of the problem. My initial reaction to the term “white supremacy” disabused me of that notion. Stevenson also urged us to “Be willing to do uncomfortable things”. It was uncomfortable to

recognize my own privilege and uncomfortable to acknowledge that my privilege has come at the expense of others. But as Reverend Jeanne said last week, we can change and move towards a world where everyone has the same privilege if we view the world as a place of abundance where there is enough for everyone, not view the world as a place of scarcity where there is only so much to go around. It is only through an understanding of a world of abundance that white supremacy can be destroyed. I have come to understand that I do not need to feel ashamed of my privilege but rather I need to work to ensure that every individual has the same privileges. Only then can we rid ourselves of white supremacy.

***Dan Brill, President, Shoreline UU Society***

I too attended my first UU General Assembly earlier this year, and I had the same initial reaction as Linda did to the use of the term white supremacy. In retrospect, I think the term white supremacy was used so that those attending would be shocked into much needed change and carry the message back to others.

While I attended a number of lectures on white supremacy, the one that struck me the most was the Ware Lecture given by Bryan Stevenson. As Rev. Jeanne mentioned, he made four suggestions to help reduce injustice. Two of Stevenson’s suggestions particularly resonated with my own experiences.

Stevenson’s first suggestion was to get proximate to those poor or minority communities on the margin, and the second was to help change the narratives that sustain the policies of injustice.

As I listened to these messages, I thought about some of the experiences Linda and I had when we moved three miles from Rye, New York to Port Chester, New York.

With this very short move, we instantly became proximate to a less affluent and much more racially mixed community.

The \$57,000 Household Income in Port Chester was three times less than the household income in Rye.

Moreover, Port Chester’s population was 64% Hispanic and 5% black while Rye’s population was 83% white.

This morning, I’d like to share with you a few examples of the narratives we heard from others after the move:

1. When we first arrived, our 8<sup>th</sup> grade daughter Emily invited five of her friends to come trick or treating in Port Chester. Every single girl responded that she could not come to trick or treating in Port Chester. When Linda called to ask why, one of the mothers said she wouldn't let her daughter come, “because of those people.” Linda told her she was setting a terrible example for her daughter. The narrative these girls may have heard was that poor people, Hispanic people, and Black people are dangerous and scary.
2. A neighbor told us a story about a time he attended a fancy party on a yacht. When he answered Port Chester to a man's question, “Where do you live?” the man responded, how did you get on this boat?
3. One of our friends said he felt sorry for us.
4. Another said he'd never live in Port Chester.
5. Many of the white people who lived in Port Chester complained about signs in Spanish, and that “all the illegals are ruining the schools”.

We were flabbergasted by these reactions. Some of our friends didn't want to listen to what we loved about living in our more diverse community. None of these people seemed even remotely aware of their privilege or their prejudice.

I can only assume all of them had listened over and over again to the narratives they heard from their parents, their friends, and their neighbors which caused them to be afraid of those who were poorer, spoke languages other than English and didn't look like they do.

None of them realized they were missing a golden opportunity to learn first hand about the rich cultures of Brazil, Peru, El Salvador, Mexico, Panama, Argentina and others from members of a community right in their own back yard.

They, like so many of us, had no idea they were caught in a narrative that separates us from our fellows. Attending GA last June really underscored that we still have much work to do in order to move toward a more just and equitable world but that having these sometimes difficult conversations and being willing to examine our own narratives is an important step forward.

***Cathy Ramin, Chair, Social Justice Coordinating Team***

I am Cathy Ramin and like Dan, Linda and Rev. Jeanne, I had the privilege of attending General Assembly in New Orleans this year. When reflecting on and describing my experience at GA, I feel I must go back a bit to explain my mindset upon arrival.

I spent much of the last year in a state of deep unease. Many things were going quite well in my personal and professional life. I turned 40, I found SUUS and in many ways I had the sense that all roads had led me to this place I was supposed to be. But in other ways I was feeling quite unsettled. My family started renting in Branford 3 ½ years ago with the idea that we would scope out the Shoreline area before buying a house. Almost immediately after moving, I had a friend say we should move to Guilford because the schools are so much better. Probing deeper to understand what made them so much better, my friend answered that there are “communities in the Branford schools that just don’t share our values”. Thinking New Haven might be a good fit for us, we took the kids to explore the parks and playgrounds there. But everyone I talked to suggested that New Haven Public Schools are terrible and New Haven itself is unsafe. Most people just seemed confused as to why I would even contemplate moving to New Haven. And then came the presidential campaigns and the ramping up of “Us vs. Them” rhetoric. I couldn’t help but feel disappointed at the lack of growth demonstrated by our country.

You see, before I lived in Connecticut, I lived in Northern California, a place as diverse and accepting of “the other” as any place I’ve ever been. And before that, I lived in Alabama, a place that makes our history of suppressing “the other” *visible* for all to see. I guess I’ve always held this sensitivity to the divides within our country. So when we moved to Connecticut, one of my biggest disappointments was the extreme segregation that exists here. The geographical segregation is so pronounced, that my 4 year old daughter even called it out at a playground in Stamford one day. I will never forget her asking, *“Mommy, why do all the kids at that school have brown skin and all the kids in mine have pink or yellow skin?”* I struggled to come up with an answer.

As I muddled through 2016, I continued to struggle for answers as to how much of these perceptions about the schools in Guilford vs. Branford vs. New Haven were real and how much was imagined. I struggled to understand how New Haven’s schools could be ranked among the lowest in the state when surrounded by so much wealth from Yale and its neighboring communities. I struggled to understand how people could not see the direct link between policemen sicking dogs on African American children just 50 years ago in Birmingham, Alabama and the current state of inequity between New Haven and Guilford schools today. But mostly I struggled with the idea that with all of these problems in our society, I was doing nothing to change them. My photography profession suddenly felt very selfish and I found myself seeking a way to spend more of my time working towards addressing these systemic problems.

So when I went to GA, I went seeking answers. In the face of so many problems, I wanted to know what, as the Social Justice chair of our little congregation, I could grab onto in the larger UUA to work towards unravelling these societal ills that hold us back. Through study and reflection, I knew that this issue of segregation within Connecticut was the issue that I felt most called to address but I felt inadequate to address on my own and I was hoping for answers.

Over the course of GA, I heard the issue of white supremacy raised over and over and realized I was in the company of other seekers. I felt the companionship of others who were aware of the legacy of slavery within our country and how this legacy has reared its ugly head even within such a liberal institution as our UU faith. I listened to presentations on putting our principles into action by the #LoveResists campaign, by the Long Haul Volunteers and by the founders of Inequality.org. But in all of these presentations, I did not hear a plan for what I could do personally to work towards addressing this issue of inequality within the state of Connecticut.

And then I attended the WARE lecture given by Bryan Stevenson. In my short time with you today, I cannot give adequate life to the power he infused in his words that night, but I have to say that those words have changed my life. In the weeks that followed, I heard his words over and over in my head and I knew that within them I had found the answer I had gone in search of when attending GA.

This summer, about a month after returning from GA I was offered a position teaching high school in the New Haven Public School district. Accepting this position would mean making many major changes to the life that I had become accustomed to since moving to Connecticut and so I struggled mightily with whether or not to take the job. During this struggle, Mr. Stevenson's words echoed in my head: get proximate, change the narrative, stay hopeful, be willing to get uncomfortable. This position offered the opportunity to fulfill all of these requests. I came to understand that the answers I was seeking when I went to GA were not held by any particular organization. There is no group that holds the key to addressing all of the overlapping ways white supremacy has led to our current state of segregation and racial inequity in Connecticut. Mr. Stevenson's words brought home the idea that WE are the ones we've been waiting for.

The power to change these systems of oppression lie entirely within us. We each must find our own way to get proximate, change the narratives, stay hopeful and get uncomfortable. I am now 3 weeks into my new job, I am learning as much as I am teaching and I am once again feeling that all roads have led me to this place where I belong.

**\*Closing Hymn #151, verses 1-3** *I Wish I Knew How*

*(A Civil Rights Song . . . written by Billy Taylor for his daughter . . .)*

**\*Closing Words & Extinguishing the Chalice**

We extinguish this flame, but not the light of truth, the warmth of community, or the fire of commitment. These we carry in our hearts until we are together again.

**Sung Benediction #402** *From you I receive, to you I give  
Together we share, and from this we live.*