

Shoreline Unitarian Universalist Society
Online Service
October 25, 2020

Passages That Provoke Change

Rev. Jeanne Lloyd & the SUUS Racial Justice Team

Rev. Jeanne

Today, I've asked our Racial Justice Team to reflect on passages on racism from books or readings or other forms of media, that have stopped them in their tracks, given them a new point of view, provoked them to work together as part of this congregation for change and fairness in our world. This Racial Justice Team formed after the death of George Floyd. It is following an "action-reflection" justice model that promotes change, learning, and the transformation of our lives and our world. This type of social justice model asks us to reflect deeply on our place and complicity in oppression, and to act in ways that promote fairness for all people. After acting, (in whatever way that may be) comes the time to reflect. What worked? What did we learn? How have we changed? In what ways were we humbled? How shall we persist? What shall we do next?

And, so it goes, act and reflect, act again, reflect again, keep moving forward, keep learning, keep acting, and little by little inequitable systems *can* change and we along with them. The most important strength we can bring to this work is persistence and support for each other in this very hard and very joyful ministry.

The members of our Racial Justice Team speaking today are: David Merrill, Soule Golden, Linda Dalterio, and Laura Martino. Let us listen deeply to those passages that have provoked them to invite us to work together for racial justice.

Dave Merrill

After George Floyd's death, I found I needed to do more when it came to racism. When the opportunity came to join a group at SUUS, I jumped at it. Shortly after I joined I read, SO YOU WANT TO TALK ABOUT RACISM by Ijeoma Oluo. I was struck by her chapter "Why Am I Always Being Told To "Check My Privilege?" Her definition: "Privilege in the social justice context, is an advantage or a set of advantages that you have that others don't." p. 59

In Oluo's words, ". . . we all need to be checking our privilege. And not just when we are told to in the middle of an argument. I recommend practicing looking for your privilege at first when you are in a neutral situation. Sit down and think about the advantages you've had in life. Have you always had good mental health? Did you grow up middle class? Are you white? Are you male? Are you nondisabled? . . . Are you a documented citizen of the country you live in? Did you grow up in a stable environment? Do you have stable housing? Do you have reliable transportation? Are you cisgender? Are you straight? Are

you thin, tall, or conventionally attractive? Take some time to dig deep through all of the advantages that you have that others may not. Write them down.” p. 65

She goes on to say not to look at disadvantages at this point, but for me, the question “Have you always had good mental health,” was loaded. A lot of you already know just before I came to SUUS I was diagnosed with PTSD and anxiety, had to leave my job of 27 years and couldn’t drive initially. That’s a pretty big disadvantage, but what struck me, as I thought about it, was how many advantages I had within my disadvantage. I had choices a lot of people wouldn’t. I think that describes privilege even more.

At first I wasn’t able to do much of anything. My first move was to find a therapist. I still had my insurance. Initially I was on short-term disability. Not everyone with PTSD has that. I got lucky and found the right therapist on the first try based on recommendations from my insurance company.

There were a few options I looked at right away. I started filling out the on line application for Disability. I had a computer and an Internet connection at home to do this. Not everyone does.

As I got into filling out the forms my therapist suggested I talk to a disability lawyer. She recommended one and I got a free consultation.

I found out I would need to be on approved medication for my diagnosis- psych meds. I had to look at that. My Masters thesis compared Prozac to St. John’s Wort, so I have a good background in the advantages and disadvantages in being on psych meds. A lot of people don’t have that and wouldn’t have had the opportunity to pursue a masters degree while working full time. But I did.

I didn’t want to take the meds, given what I know. I went on 5-HTP, the precursor to Serotonin, which I got from my Naturopathic doctor. It minimized my anxiety while driving, allowing me to use exposure therapy to get back to driving. Most people probably don’t know about this option, but it was part of my education.

Going on Disability was a decision to stay sick, maybe even get sicker to get on disability. It usually takes 3-5 years to get it approved, over which I would likely lose my home and most of my possessions while I waited for the money. The fact was, I didn’t want to do that. I wanted to get better. Most people don’t have that option, but I did. I had a family who were willing to support that decision with money and moral support. I could borrow what I needed.

I ended up needing a lawyer. I didn’t have the money for the \$4,000 retainer, but my sister did and fronted me the money. Not everyone has that.

So, even in a situation where I had what I might call an anti-privilege, because of all my other privileges- a good education, growing up middle class, white and male in a family who largely did very well for themselves, my privilege gave me a lot to navigate a really bad situation. I had very different choices and outcomes than most people would, even others of similar privilege. It really puts a spotlight on the plight of those without those privileges.

Linda Dalterio

The words that forever changed how I view the race issue came from 2 unrelated sources that I heard several months after Michael Brown was shot and killed by Ferguson police in 2014. You might recall that a video of Michael Brown committing a strong-armed robbery shortly before the shooting circulated widely after the shooting and negatively influenced public opinion of him.

In an episode of “This American Life” on NPR, I heard this story from reporter Nikole Hannah Jones...

She said...

“I was watching the coverage of Michael Brown...There was one moment that I could not get out of my head. It's news footage of his mother, ...right after he was killed... and this is what she says.

“You took my son away from me. You know how hard it was for me to get him to stay in school and graduate? You know how many black men graduate? Not many!”

Nikole continued...

“I watched this over and over. A police officer has just killed her oldest child. It has to be the worst moment of her life, but of all the ways she could have expressed her grief and outrage, this is what was on her mind-- school, getting her son through school... Most black kids will not be shot by the police, but many of them will go to a school like Michael Brown's... almost completely black, almost completely poor, and failing badly. The district is called Normandy... Each year, the Missouri Department of Education puts out a report on how its 520 school districts are doing. It's a numeric snapshot of the type of education students are receiving... In 2014, here's how the Normandy District was performing: Points for academic achievement in English-- 0

math-- 0

social studies-- 0

science-- 0

college placement-- 0.

...10 out of 140 points, that was its score. Normandy is the worst district in the state of Missouri.”

That NPR story went on to describe and defend how school integration has been the most successful way in history to close the achievement gap and improve lives. But yet, we are still so segregated. Why? And at that moment, I remembered these words spoken by Dr MLK Jr, 50 years earlier..

He said...

"... people who argue against integration often say, "Well, if you integrate public schools... you will pull the white race back a generation." And they like to talk about the cultural lag in the Negro community. And they say, "Now you know, the Negro is a criminal, and he has the highest crime rate in any city that you can find in the United States." And the arguments go on ad infinitum why integration shouldn't come into being.

And King continued...

"But I think there's an answer to that, and that is that if there is cultural lag in the Negro community—and there certainly is—this lag is there because of segregation and discrimination. It's there because of long years of slavery and segregation. Criminal responses are not racial, but environmental. Poverty, economic deprivation, social isolation and all of these things breed crime, whatever the racial group may be. And it is a torturous logic to use the tragic results of racial segregation as an argument for the continuation of it... And so it is necessary to see this and to go all out to make economic justice a reality all over our nation."

MLK, London, 1964

Soule Golden

One of the first books I read after George Floyd's murder was one I happened to have at home and on my reading list, *Born a Crime*, by Trevor Noah. Noah is South African born to a black Xosa mother and a Swiss father. As the title would suggest, simply being born of these two parents was a crime at the time of his birth. While his story touches on the atrocities of life in apartheid South Africa it's also a harrowing and deeply comedic coming-of-age story. He writes of the injustices lived by him and his black community, but also of his being mistaken for white on black and white film and of his grandparents sparing him from punishment because he was lighter-skinned than his cousins.

The book reads in memory somewhat chronologically and between chapters there are short, more philosophical reflections. One, which offers perspective and direction is as follows:

In Germany, no child finishes high school without learning about the Holocaust. Not just the facts of it but the how and the why and the gravity of it—what it means. As a result, Germans grow up appropriately aware and apologetic. British schools treat colonialism the same way, to an extent. Their children are taught the history of the Empire with a

kind of disclaimer hanging over the whole thing, “well, *that* was shameful, now wasn’t it?”

In South Africa, the atrocities of apartheid, have never been taught that way. We weren’t taught judgement or shame. We were taught history the way it’s taught in America. In America the history of racism is taught like this: “There was slavery and then there was Jim Crow and then there was Martin Luther King Jr. and now it’s done.” It was the same for us. “Apartheid was bad. Nelson Mandela was freed. Let’s move on.” Facts, but not many and never the emotional or moral dimension. It was as if the teachers, many of whom were white had been given a mandate “what ever you do, don’t make the kids angry.”

The book also defines Apartheid. I grew up thinking Apartheid was scary and only happened in a faraway place, but it is literally defined as “apartness” and in South Africa, it was the “apartness” of white people and black people and those of mixed-race, referred to as colored. Other ethnic identities like Japanese, Chinese & Indian people who lived in or visited South Africa were divided into those groups based on the whims of the Colonial government. And further reflection through this text on our society reveals our own apartness based on race in America. In schools and churches and neighborhoods and grocery stores and banks and on and on. Though this American Apartheid may not be explicitly written into our current laws, it’s been carried on through our socialization, education, and institutions.

The book offers us a different kind of separation—we can separate ourselves from our own state and look on a land across the ocean and come to conclusions about what is fair and unjust. And we can bring those conclusions back to our own environments and acknowledge (and hopefully act on) similar injustices here.

Laura Martino

Passages that Provoke Change: See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o9nfTWKrR4&feature=youtu.be&ab_channel=LauraMartino

Rev. Jeanne

The hard part about changing the world, is that we can’t do that without changing ourselves. And, changing ourselves requires shared insight, infinite patience and relentless persistence. More than that, it requires that we each start where each person is at, without judgment, and then that we share common experiences and learnings that allow us to develop a new language of common understanding ... one that never existed before! It is only with this new language of

understanding that we can then begin to: speak coherently with each other; effectively share our aspirations; and most importantly . . . galvanize our actions toward a common outcome.

Change does not happen solely through action, nor does it happen solely through reflection. It only happens by learning from each other, reflecting together and acting together to form a new way, a joyful way, of our being in and with the world.

May the Spirit of Life that draws us toward the best that life has to offer, be with this congregation's commitment to and the practice of racial justice.

May it be so.