

The Ghosts of Racism

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Last August tenth there was a bull-riding rodeo at the Missouri State Fair. A rodeo clown named Tuffy Gessling strode into the arena wearing a face mask of a smiling President Barak Obama. The announcer said to the crowd, “Here’s our Obama dummy, President Obama. I know a lot of clowns. He just runs around acting like one, doesn’t know he is one. This bull’s gonna get you, Obama. He’s gonna get you!” Tuffy called out, “We’re gonna stomp Obama. Anybody want to see Obama run down by a bull?” The crowd roared with approval.

The news media jumped all over this with cries of “racism!” The Missouri State Fair first demanded that Gessling submit to racial sensitivity training but then banned him from the fair for life. The outcry was almost equally strong from both sides, those condemning the act and those speaking out in support of Gessling.

Now, this is actually an old act, one that never drew much comment before. Rodeo clowns have done this with President Reagan, both Bushes and Clinton, but the spectacle of a white man in a mask depicting our black president set off all the alarms, rippling through the history of racism in America.

When he was interviewed afterwards, Tuffy Gessling said that, “I never did anything because of anybody’s race. I don’t care what color people are. If they’re blue, white, green, polka dotted, striped . . . it doesn’t bother me one bit. . . If President Obama turns out, I would be honored to shake his hand.”

I believe Gessling when he said he was just doing today’s version of an old rodeo clown act and that thoughts of racism hadn’t crossed his mind, but it’s clear that those thoughts did occur to many Americans. One response that stopped me in my tracks was one supporter who said, “If you keep whining about racism it will never go away.”

“If you keep whining about racism it will never go away.” The idea that the best way to deal with racism is to ignore it is an oddly popular view, both on the

left and the right. Gessling's comment about "blue, white, green, polka dotted, striped" points toward the longing of many that if we could only be color-blind to racial differences, all would be well. This, unfortunately, is not the case. Despite fantasies to the contrary, whether in the media, congress, or the Supreme Court, racism is quite alive and kicking in America.

The American Journal of Sociology published the results of a study examining the effects of a criminal record in employment. They found that white men without a criminal record were more than twice as likely to be called back after an employment interview than a black man with identical credentials. even more amazing is the study also found that, when both applicants included a non-criminal drug offense on their records, the white applicant was called back more than three times as often as the black man.

Unemployment rates for blacks are consistently nearly twice those for whites, even when they have the same level of education. Poverty rates are three times as high for blacks as for whites. Although blacks make up barely twelve percent of the US population and are no more likely than whites to use drugs, more than half of those in state prisons for drug offenses are black.

I could go on and on, but the facts are clear. Racism is alive and kicking in America despite our aspirations toward color-blindness, everyone saying, "I'm not a racist." As the Polish poet, Stanislaw Lec, said, "Each snowflake in an avalanche pleads not guilty." The question I want to consider this morning is, "How did it come to pass that racism is so thoroughly embedded in the fabric of our culture that it can persist even when everyone insists that they're not racist?"

For this we have to go back to the very beginnings of our country, and I do this with the help of the Unitarian Universalist minister and theologian, Thandeka, from whose book, *Learning to Be White*, I will quote freely.

It began in Jamestown, Virginia, the first permanent English settlement in America. Although the first Africans were brought there in 1619, white indentured workers did the lion's share of labor, working side-by-side with blacks, they were all housed in separate quarters, supervised by overseers, and often whipped. The only difference was that the whites would eventually complete their period of indenture and blacks, being property, did not. The

institution of slavery didn't really take root for another fifty years following Bacon's Rebellion, when a large group of white and black workers rose up against the ruling elite, burning Jamestown to the ground.

Thandeka describes the aftermath of this rebellion, "With a swelling slave population, the masters faced the prospect of white freemen with disappointed hopes joining forces with slaves of desperate hope to mount ever more virulent rebellions. The elites' race strategy decreased the probability of such intraclass rebellions. The problem of how to redirect the class interests of the rabble so that they would not bond with slave was resolved through the sinister design of racism. . . The answer to the problem, obvious if unspoken and only gradually recognized, was racism, to separate dangerous free whites from dangerous slave blacks by a screen of racial contempt."

This was accomplished through a series of race laws passed in the wake of the rebellion. The first forbade free Negroes and Indians from owning white servants. Then it became legal to enslave Indians. The same year, all property – horses, cattle, and hogs – was confiscated from slaves and sold by church wardens for the benefit of poor whites. By means of such acts . . . the tobacco planters and ruling elite of Virginia raised the legal status of lower-class whites relative to that of Negroes and Indians, whether free, servant, or slave.

"The legislators also raised the status of white servants, white workers, and the white poor in relation to their masters and other white superiors. In 1705, the assembly required masters to provide white servants at the end of their indentureship with corn, money, a gun, clothing, and . . . fifty acres of land. . . As a result of such legal changes in the status of the white small man's economic position, he gained legal, political, emotional, social, and financial status that was directly related to the concomitant degradation of Indians and Negroes."

"Racial contempt would function as a wall between poor whites and blacks protecting masters and their slave-produced wealth from both lower-class whites and slaves. At the same time the new laws led the poor whites to identify with the ruling elite, . . . The Virginia assembly gave the white servant a number of class privileges associated with the elite: the right, for example, to whip a black servant or slave. These laws also gave legal protection to the poor white against the white

elite by forbidding the elite to strip their white Christian servants and beat them naked” as they were free to do with blacks.

“A new multiclass white race would emerge from the Virginia laws as one not biologically engineered but socially constructed. Its creation was determined not by genes but by gentry motivated by class interests and wanting social control. The laws and the racial contempt they generated would sever ties of previous mutual interest and goodwill between European and African servants and workers, providing the ruling elite with a buffer of poor whites between themselves and the slaves to keep blacks down, and prevent either group from separately challenging the class interests of the elite. The very definition of the white would now be legally bound to the inferior social status of the black.”

These differences were so completely embraced that when the US Constitution was written a century later, the gulf between white and black was unbridgeable. Blacks were inferior, little more than beasts, and whites were noble creatures entitled to the unalienable rights with which nature’s God had endowed them.

But not all were equal. As James Madison said, “The nation ought to be constituted to protect the minority of the opulent against the majority,” which was made up of poor whites and blacks. Both within and beneath the constitution, this protection was produced by a carefully cultivated antipathy of whites against blacks.

And it wasn’t easy being a poor white. Your status was secure in that it depended on the contrast between your life and that of the supposedly inferior, bestial black slaves. But white identity offered little in the way of ease or comfort. These were offset by the sense of pride at being – at least – better than blacks.

And, as Thandeka writes, being white came to mean not being black. Whites projected everything they disapproved of onto the black canvass of the invented category of race. They were supposed to work hard, so blacks were lazy. They were supposed to regulate their appetites according to an acceptable moral code, so blacks were imagined to be immoral and licentious. The very fact that blacks were the losers in the system made poor whites winners, no matter what other privations they might suffer at the hands of the wealthy.

“By the time of the Civil War, poor whites were indeed white supremacists who extolled their own merit in racial rather than class terms,” Thandeka writes.

This class division set the stage for American social history and it’s so embedded in our culture as to be largely invisible, so hard to see that people can claim that it would go away if we all could just stop whining about it and be blind to differences in color.

As it’s been said, “I don’t know who discovered water, but it sure wasn’t a fish.” Racism is part of the air and water of our culture, so thoroughly woven into its fabric that it’s hard to imagine what it would be without it. The elements of class antipathy are so well established that they have functioned in the same way whenever America has confronted difference, whether of race, nationality or culture. Irish, Polish, Italians, Jews and others have all had their turn at being demonized for not being acceptably white. Immigrants have been variously vilified despite the fact that the actual threat they posed was economic: they took over jobs that previously had been held by properly “white” Americans.

The pressures upon these immigrant groups that they learn to be acceptably white were so severe that they usually achieved a degree of success within several generations. First generation immigrants, of course, couldn’t succeed because they still remembered the lives and cultures from which they needed to separate themselves. The demands were large and severe, and the pressures to be properly white in standards and behavior were acute and children were taught to be ashamed of the culture and behavior of their ancestors and parents.

In this way, whiteness policed itself by social forces that are so completely internalized that we don’t see them for what they are. It’s like the water in the fish tank. We don’t notice it. We think of it as completely natural and normal. We call it politeness. We call it duty. We call it patriotism. We call it morality. We build walls around ourselves out of necessary repressions and reinforce them with feelings of shame and guilt lest we stray beyond the pale. These walls separate us from those who are different from us and they also separate us from parts of ourselves that we split off as unacceptable, projecting them upon others as inferior, like America learned so well to do with blacks.

I'll give you an example. White identity is inextricably bound up with the concept of agency, of accomplishing something, of doing something. We see our actions as significant, leading to goals or outcomes which we choose. We congratulate ourselves when we succeed and criticize ourselves when we fail. But the overall assumption is that a meaningful action is one that produces the desired outcome. We develop a fascination with the idea of progress as a long series of successful, meaningful choices and actions.

What about an oppressed underclass, though? The history of African-Americans is one of not having meaningful choices in life other than acquiescence. There is no possibility of choosing a desirable outcome, either to succeed or to fail. There is no idea that accomplishment is a possibility. Deprived of the ability to worship progress, many turned to relational values instead, opening their hearts to one another in shared suffering, a choice that could lead – ironically – to a greater depth of humanity and wholeness, more fulfilling than the “progress” of the white culture.

Being white is costly, first of all because there is no white without a different, inferior, “other” black race. But it is also costly because it requires that we see ourselves as agents of effective action whose actions need to make a difference. This gives our white identity a compulsiveness that offers us little peace. Even when we're not doing anything, we tend to be compulsively attached to our thinking, believing that what happens in our minds is a form of effective action.

Being white is costly in many ways. Historically white identity is a laundry list of things we shouldn't do, so many things that white identity is almost a list of absences rather than presences, like white bread made with over-refined flour. And these absences create voids in our hearts that crave to be filled. And our obsession with effective action tells us that we should be able to do something that would fill those voids. And this makes us uniquely exploitable by commercial interests that advertise their wares as the solution to all that is missing in our lives.

Just as the invention of the racial divide separated poor whites from their black brothers and made them compliant accomplices in their own exploitation

by the wealthy elite, our white identity today serves to separate us from the hidden wholeness that is our true birthright, setting us up to be compliant accomplices in our own exploitation.

Being white is also costly because of the hole in our soul we suffer when we exclude so many from the circle of our charity and compassion. Our very tendency to view the poor and underclass as morally inferior allows us to turn a blind eye to the cruelty we inflict on so many lives through indifference and imprisonment. It has led us to accept as normal an incarceration rate 750% greater than any other developed society.

Race is so woven into the fabric of our society that we can hardly see it in action, whether in our legal or economic systems, and not in our own hearts and lives. I know we all want to live in a post-racial world where this isn't a problem, but I don't think we're on the threshold of that. Instead, I invite you to explore the subtleties of your own white racial identities. See what they cost you, how they separate you from yourselves as certainly as they separate you from others who appear different.

I think the way forward is the opposite of being color-blind. We need to learn to see what has been hidden, taste what's in the water, smell what's in the air. Maybe the answer is best expressed in the words of a song from the musical, *Avenue Q*:

“Everyone's a little bit racist sometimes. . . Look around and you will find no one's really color blind. Maybe it's a fact we all should face. Everyone makes judgments based on race. If we all could just admit that we are racist a little bit, even though we all know that it's wrong, maybe it would help us get along. Everyone's a little bit racist it's true. But everyone is just about as racist as you! If we all could just admit that we are racist a little bit, and everyone stopped being so PC, maybe we could live in harmony.”

May it be so.