

## **Interdependence Day: Understanding and Working against White Supremacy**

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Everyone loves a good story, especially a rags-to-riches story about succeeding in the US and showing that the unalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness guaranteed by the government are really available to us. So here we go, with not one story but two.

This story starts, not on July 4, 1776, but on December 13, 1965. A girl was born to a family of working-class Jews. She grew up in a poor urban neighborhood and at one time lived on a crack corner. But she was creative and loved learning, and through an enormous amount of work along with need-based scholarships went to college, where she flourished. She found professors at college who served as mentors, who told her she could succeed at graduate school and, so encouraged, she eventually went to graduate school, got a doctorate, and now is part of the US upper middle class.

This woman's spouse, in the meantime, grew up poor in a rural part of the Midwest and was the first in her immediate family to go to college. She similarly received financial support and good mentorship and through hard work and the support of others is now a college professor.

On Independence Day weekend, it's important to remember success stories like these, stories that show the good in this country. These two women, who many of you will recognize as me and Phoebe, were able to succeed, to have good lives and to pursue happiness, precisely because of the freedom we had. America, independent from Britain, could grow to become the country it is, and its people, free from authoritarianism and oppression, could grow to have rich, joyous, fulfilled lives.

But even on Independence Day, and perhaps especially on Independence Day, we owe it to the country and to those who are not fully free to thrive here to engage in a different kind of patriotic reflection. Patriotism is not just a swelling in the heart or the tears that come unbidden during America the Beautiful. At its best, patriotism is a deep, abiding commitment to the well-being of every single American. This commitment requires seeing both the greatness of this nation and the ways it has fallen short historically and continues to fall short today. An important aspect of this falling short is that not everyone has the same opportunities, the same access to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness that we two have had. If I am grateful for the life I have been able to develop, I ought to wish such a good life for everyone in this land. And if that means saying, "my country, right her wrongs" instead of "my country, right or wrong", so be it.

Black Americans are one group of people whose access to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness has long been stymied in the US and often still is today. The UUA, recognizing this, is encouraging its member congregations to understand and work against the white supremacy that keeps Black Americans from having good lives. According to the UUA webpage, "White supremacy" is a provocative phrase, as it conjures up images of mobs in white hoods. Yet in 2017, actual 'white supremacists' are not required in order to uphold white supremacist culture — that is, the set of institutional assumptions and practices, often operating unconsciously, that

tend to benefit white people and exclude people of color. Building a faith full of people who understand that key distinction is essential as we work toward a more just society in difficult political times.”

Before we think together about racism, or, to use the more controversial term, white supremacy, it’s important to pay close attention to the point made in this website quote. White supremacy, or racism, or the assumption of Black inferiority, does not require white supremacists. Racism keeps going just fine even in a society where most white people have the best intentions and do not wish harm to Black people. Acknowledging the existence of racial inequality does not require us to feel attacked or defensive or guilty, though we may feel those feelings anyway, as I will consider on August 6<sup>th</sup>. Acknowledging the existence of racial inequality simply requires us to think systematically about the interdependent web of racism. So that is our topic today. Our monthly theme is understanding, and there’s a lot to understand about how this impediment to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness works.

To think about white supremacy systematically, it may help to borrow an image originally used by feminist theorist Marilyn Frye back in the 1970s when trying to explain the complexity of sexism. In an essay entitled “Oppression”, Frye invited her readers to think about a birdcage. A birdcage literally keeps a bird from flying away freely and it does so by systematically containing the bird. If we look only at any one bar of the birdcage, or, say, its floor, it is not at all clear why the bird does not just fly away. We can encourage the bird to fly away and if it doesn’t do so, we might think something is wrong with the bird. Only when we see that the cage is made of a number of connecting sections that, taken as a whole, keep the bird captured, do we understand that the bird cannot fly away no matter how much we want it to or how much it wants to. It’s not about good intentions. It’s not about the bird pulling itself up by its bootstraps. It’s about an actual cage.

Now, we need to be careful with the birdcage analogy in considering white supremacy because it is, in some ways, just an analogy, and in other ways, it hits awfully close to home. If we were to look carefully at either the history of slavery or the current practices of mass incarceration, we would be looking at actual cages with actual people in them. Even racial segregation, though not involving actual bars, sets people apart spatially and makes it very difficult to escape. But today we consider the birdcage as an analogy, simply to have a sense of how many bars there are, what they have to do with each other, and how they send messages of white superiority and Black inferiority, of white lives mattering more, of white well-being mattering more. I’ll mention several social institutions, some cultural messages, and two examples of face-to-face violence.

While white supremacy is about large-scale social patterns that negatively impact a group of people, it’s often easier to see the impact of inequality on individuals. So let’s engage in an exercise that we might call “building the birdcage.” I’m a success story in part because I was free to become one. What about a young Black man? Is he equally free? Let’s follow the lifespan of such a man, and in order to avoid common stereotypes let’s say he comes from a middle-class family.

In such a family our young man may avoid the worst troubles of living in a segregated neighborhood, such as the violence that often goes with poverty. But his parents, having faced

white supremacy their whole lives, may still be more prone to physical and mental health difficulties that interfere with their well-being. And while our young man may have fewer relatives in prison than a poor young Black man would, he learns early that racial profiling by the police is no respecter of social class. His father may have had run-ins simply because he “fits the description” by virtue of being Black. Certainly, the parents of our young man have had to teach him that the police are not necessarily on his side and have instructed him about how to behave if he is ever stopped by police, even if he is not doing anything wrong. He sees their fury and broken hearts.

Our Black young man may have high hopes when he goes to school. Education is often held up as the route from poverty to wealth and from a difficult life to a good life. But if our young man is in a racially integrated school, he notices that when Black schoolmates get in trouble, they are likely to get suspended or expelled and to get in trouble with the police. In contrast, white students tend to face lesser punishments for the same misbehaviors. School thus becomes a place where, far from giving everyone the opportunity to succeed equally, students face different penalties based on race.

Now, it is possible that our young man is growing up in a segregated neighborhood even if his family is not poor. In that case, his schools are likely to have poor teachers, to be lacking good teaching and learning materials, to be housed in failing buildings, and to be too financially strapped to provide decent instruments for band or decent grounds for after-school sports. Why is his school so poor? Because schools are funded by property taxes, and segregated BIPOC neighborhoods tend to be poor even if specific families in them are not. In this scenario our young man knows that society can’t care very much about him and kids like him. The evidence is all around him.

As he grows up, he knows that he may be targeted by anti-Black vigilantes and police officers for any reason or no reason at all. He observes that police officers can shoot a 12-year-old with a toy gun two seconds after emerging on the scene and be given the benefit of the doubt but that somehow police officers can capture white mass murderers alive and take them for fast food before booking them. He recognizes that police officers must find Black men frightening but wonders why people who are servants of the state don’t seem to serve families like his very well. Liberty and the pursuit of happiness are difficult when life itself is so often at risk.

Then there’s the media. Our young Black man notices that Black men shot to death by police officers for any reason or no reason at all will be described more negatively in the media than they would be if they were white mass murderers. Somehow, the articles find a way to talk about the promising futures of the white mass murderers while suggesting that a Black man shot to death purely by accident by a nervous young officer was a thug and a career criminal. The officer, of course, serves no time for the shooting, our young man notices. This is not surprising. The media takes the officer’s side. And our young man cannot count the shootings, the failures to indict police, or the media representations of the victims as villains. They pile up and make it hard for him to breathe.

Our young man is terrified to go anywhere that might involve a police stop, and he knows that he will receive more attention and more suspicion from police because of the color of his skin, that

he will be presumed guilty in a country that is supposed to presume people innocent. He knows he will be lucky to get away with being disrespected rather than anything more severe, even as he knows that it is morally wrong for him to be disrespected simply because he is Black. He observes that white people get away with all sorts of illegal behavior without being targeted by the police. He knows that if the police arrest him, whether legitimately or not, the likelihood of him getting a decent job or decent housing later goes way down.

At age 18, our young man is excited to vote. He wants to participate in our democracy and have a legitimate voice in the political system. He sees this as an element of the pursuit of happiness. But if he lives in an area that is culturally racist, he may be illegally barred from voting and have no recourse. He knows that the Supreme Court has struck down parts of the Voting Rights Act that protect his ability to vote. And he knows that plenty of white people are taking advantage of this outcome to limit who can vote. Once again, he is angry and sad. Why do so many white people not accord him the respect they would want for themselves?

He tries to get a job but, presumed incompetent or simply considered not a good “fit” for the company, faces hiring discrimination. If he does happen to live in a poor area, he may not have a good network to help him to find the kind of job that might pay enough to give him better living options. He tries to get a decent mortgage but the financing is impossible. He tries to buy a car and is given a price higher than the white man ahead of him received.

The culture around him sends regular messages about his lack of importance and value. He hears about Black-on-Black crime but never about white-on-white crime though almost all crime is intra-racial because of segregation. He hears that America is never to forget 9/11 but that he is playing the race card or acting like a victim if he brings up slavery, lynching, Jim Crow, police violence or mass incarceration. He sees religion used to justify white supremacy. He sees Confederate flags. When he walks down the street, even while wearing a suit, white parents pull their children closer and women pull their handbags closer. He recognizes that he scares people, that he is monstrous. This bewilders him and breaks his heart. And he knows that for all of their fear he is at far more risk of being hurt in a hate crime than he is of hurting anyone else.

White people call him the n-word, or refer to him as a thug. White people make racist jokes in front of him and then chide him for not having a sense of humor. Well-meaning white people say they don’t see color and then immediately blame Black people for not pulling themselves up by their bootstraps, though they may tell him he’s different from the rest of his people because he speaks well or has a middle-class job. Or they tell him how racism works.

When our young Black man internalizes the stress of living in an institutional and cultural and interpersonal birdcage, he turns to the healthcare system for physical and emotional support. Unfortunately, he will likely receive worse medical care and less pain management than a white person with his symptoms. If he lives in a majority-Black area there are not likely to be many doctors.

So what must this be like? If I were that young Black man, what message would I get? Would I be confident that America wished me life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness?

Of course not. And thus, Langston Hughes could say America never was America to him and that there has never been freedom for him in the homeland of the free.

The birdcage is not a windowless, darkened room. Black people can see life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness in the experiences of white people even as they recognize that they themselves don't have equal access to it. Black people are on their way to the freedom land but they can't get there yet; the road is blocked. Black people may be able to see the interdependent web of all existence but the interdependent web of white supremacy is all they get to experience.

What, then, shall we do?

Hopefully, I've made my case that white supremacy, the set of ideas and institutions that treat white people as better and more important than Black people, is an interdependent matter. Different elements of society, from face to face interactions all the way up to what happens in the White House, play an interlocking role in the privileging of white people and, too often, the suffering of black people.

But fortunately, our part in the solution is also interdependent. We can't merely stew in private or post endlessly on Facebook, though I admit to having done both things too often. We can't just have diverse sets of friends and treat them respectfully. Here are some things we can do.

First, we can support each other emotionally and spiritually in the process of doing this work. It's really hard stuff. Most of those of us who are white have not been trained to learn about these issues and go through the personal pain and resistance and come out at a point of commitment that we can sustain over the long haul. We need each other as witnesses and healers.

Second, we can learn together. We can train ourselves about these matters and share what we have learned. We need each other as teachers and learners.

Third, we can work together in passing along what we know to other white people. White people swim in white supremacy like a fish in water, and we need each other to help white people see the water.

Fourth, we can take action together, whether that means writing postcards at parties or protesting or organizing fundraisers that benefit organizations of color or joining organizations that work against racism. We need each other to join in prophetic justice work.

Fifth, we can strategize collectively about how to challenge both the culture and the institutions of white supremacy. Culture sounds like a giant, amorphous blob but it is really just the sum of values, beliefs and messages that we receive and pass along. And institutions may exist at scales ranging from local to global but ultimately institutions are simply people carrying out tasks with particular goals and resources. The more precisely we can identify where our culture and institutions support white supremacy, the more effectively we can work against these elements. We need each other as co-conspirators of equality.

There are many concrete things we might do, far too many to list here. But if we can summon our courage and dare to think about our country as a place worthy of pride and desperately in need of change, we can do the work that will enable America to be the America that Langston Hughes sought and never found. We can create a land that is truly made for you and me. We can be the ones to make a difference. We can build a land where the captives go free. And when we, and the many others committed to a free America, have all contributed our piece, we will live in a land where life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are available for everyone. Absolutely everyone. So let us make America again. Amen, and blessed be.