

## Love and Justice: How Beloved Community Helps Us Work against White Supremacy

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In 1977, a progressive therapist named Sara Winter wrote a piece called “Rooting Out Racism” for the journal *Issues in Radical Therapy*. Reflecting on her own experiences, Sara wrote:

“When someone pushes racism into my awareness, I feel guilty (that I could be doing so much more), angry (I don’t like to feel like I’m wrong), defensive (I already have two Black friends...I worry more about racism than most whites do – isn’t that enough?); turned off (I have other priorities in my life than guilt about that thought); helpless (the problem is so big – what can I do?). I HATE TO FEEL THIS WAY. That is why I minimize race issues and let them fade from my awareness whenever possible.”

I don’t know how you feel hearing those words but when I first read them, I felt a great sense of relief, coupled with sadness. Relief because someone was saying what I felt (though I really don’t use the phrase “turned off” very often, it being 2017 now). Sadness that this should be Sara Winter’s reality, and quite possibly the reality of so many of us who are white and want to be on the right side of working to end white supremacy. And yet without naming the reality and wrestling with it, we are not likely to be doing our best in the struggle for a truly just and loving society.

After all, we who are white are not merely going to magically rise up and join in solidarity with our friends and neighbors of color to overturn centuries of structural, cultural, and interpersonal racism from which we benefit. Before we can do that, we have to go through all those emotions and responses to the reality both of white supremacy and of our location within it. In my experience it takes a lot of time and a lot of work. It’s taken me more than 20 years of reading, listening, writing, talking, and engaging with all sorts of people on this topic to get to a point where I can say calmly, non-defensively, and sadly but realistically that:

- a) I am a racist simply because I benefit from being white in a racist society,
- b) I still occasionally have thoughts I wish I didn’t have and I am still working to root them out and get rid of them,
- c) I am committed to being uncomfortable in the service of ending white supremacy because my discomfort is nothing compared to what people of color go through every single day, and
- d) Being part of a Beloved Community that is working to end white supremacy is probably the most important thing I will ever do, though I’m glad to also have music to make, sermons to preach, and ideas to write down.

In service to those points, I would like today to reflect on the internal struggle that white people may undergo as they come to recognize, accept the reality of, and commit to working against, white supremacy. These responses and emotions can halt us in our tracks or we can recognize them and work with them to enable ourselves to move forward and to support each other in this process. And in a month when we are considering the importance of the Six Sources, this reflection is a way to honor the words and deeds of prophetic people which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love – and also to invite us to become prophetic people ourselves.

I find it helpful to view this process as a set of stages. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross suggested that there were five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. My own experience and that of people I've spoken with suggests that there might be up to eleven stages of emotional struggle around accepting white supremacy as a white person. The stages don't always happen in order, they can overlap, and we may move back and forth between them. They are denial, resistance, distress, defensiveness, guilt, fear, paralysis, anger, sadness, resignation, and commitment. Even those of us who are further along than denial may not be living in commitment full-time but we may be committed part of the time and we can work toward being there more of the time. So, I will start with those responses, then go on after the Prayer of Community to consider briefly how we might help each other during this work.

Kubler-Ross's first stage of grief, denial, work wells in describing how white people first engage with white supremacy: we don't. We reject the idea that racism is still present and harming people. We say, we've had a black president. How bad could it be? We say that Oprah seems to be doing pretty well and ignore the fact that upscale jewelry stores have refused to let her in since black people surely don't have enough money for expensive jewelry. We say proudly that we are color-blind and that we don't care whether people are white, black, yellow, red, or purple, signaling by our mention of purple people that we are not taking the whole matter terribly seriously.

The stage of denial may not involve deep-seated, unconscious inability to see what's right in front of us. We may simply be insanely busy and focused on our day-to-day lives. We may be struggling with our own challenges. We may well be ignorant of the depth of continuing white supremacy today; certainly, neither our primary schooling nor our mainstream media are very adept at helping us see and understand it. I'm 51 years old now and I was out of college before I had the faintest inkling about how severe and extensive white supremacy was. And I was an activist in college and had a number of friends of color. My parents both worked with black people. I have no excuse except the same excuse most of us white people have: society didn't make it easy for us to see it so we didn't see it. Is that morally wrong? Sure, but that's not the point. The point, I think, is to acknowledge the reality of racism and move forward.

Once we confront the reality and enormity of racism we may move to resistance. We don't want this to be true. We are being forced to see what's going on and we hate and resent it, thank you very much. My period of resistance looked a lot like an adult temper tantrum minus the actual kicking and screaming.

After we've spent some time resisting the reality of white supremacy, we may become uncomfortable and distressed. We start figuring out the implications of racism for our own lives. This may go something like, "Wait. I always thought I was a good person. Am I a bad person?" We may suddenly wonder what our friends of color think of us and become concerned to reassure ourselves that we are good friends to them. We might wonder whether our successes have always been due to our hard work and talent or whether we might have been the beneficiaries of some background affirmative action. All in all, this is a very difficult stage.

Perhaps it's not surprising, then, that distress may lead to defensiveness. My family didn't own slaves, we might say. I have black friends, we might say. I would never use a racial slur, we might say. The list goes on and on but it's all in service to our attempts to rescue our wounded feelings and say that at some level this is all not about us. Unfortunately, at the end of the day, it is about us, because who else could it be about? Remember the point on the UUA website that I mentioned in July: white supremacy does not require white supremacists. It just requires structures and cultures of injustice, and our daily lives tend to support these even though we don't want to do so.

Once we cannot avoid that fact, we may find that we struggle with guilt. Guilt because we benefit from white supremacy. Guilt because, truth be told, we like not being stopped by the police when we're doing 50 in a 45-mile-an-hour zone because we are late for church. Guilt because we could be resisting racism more actively than we are, pretty much all the time. Guilt that we resent having to deal with the topic at all.

Somewhere in the mix with guilt, but present enough to merit its own discussion is fear. While I've felt various kinds of fear related to racism, two in particular seem to be biggies. First, we may simply be afraid of appearing racist. We don't want to say the wrong thing in a social justice context and embarrass ourselves, and most of us have, I suspect, done exactly that at some point or other. Second, and in some ways much bigger, we may fear what will happen if we start taking personal responsibility for working against racism. We think we might become *that person* – the one who awkwardly interrupts racist comments and jokes. The one who calls people out, making them uncomfortable and becoming uncomfortable ourselves. The one who might risk friendships, family relationships, even jobs to point out racist words and actions in front of us, promulgated by people we love, people we respect, and people who pay us. This one's a tough nut. I can get up here and say all this but there are still people I won't call out when they say something because of exactly this fear.

At about this point we might find ourselves emotionally immobilized, paralyzed by a combination of helplessness and hopelessness. We know that having good intentions about being part of the solution means very little on its own. We want to do the right thing and sometimes we succeed, but not often enough, it seems. The enormity of racism, the horrific power of its impacts on people of color, and the relatively little that we can do come together. Certainly, the current political balance of power in this country does not look good for people of color, on a wide range of fronts.

But we may eventually break through the paralysis and get to some pretty deep anger. Anger at the systems that hurt people, anger at the individual people who hurt other people, anger at the people who don't see the harm or perhaps do see it but do not seem to care about it. Anger that this commitment to work for racial justice is so hard, even if it is definitely the right commitment to make. Anger that every time the country makes two steps forward on racial equality it makes at least one step back and angry that some people are so pleased with that.

And, unsurprisingly, underneath everything else we've yet encountered is deep, abiding sadness, grief for light-years. Sadness that white supremacy ever came to pass at all, grief at the suffering of people whose only crime is what they look like and where their families came from at some

point. Sadness that some people feel so disrespected that they have to find someone else to look down on. Sadness that the many and profound gifts that people of color have to offer the world are, in many cases, not available because the individuals in question are not able to get a good education or they experience violence or they encounter the criminal justice system and are treated unfairly by it. Give me an ocean to hold my tears. Holly Near writes in her song I Am Willing, and that feels about on target. Or maybe not. Maybe the sorrow is too big even for an ocean. But there it is.

And eventually, just as Kubler-Ross got to acceptance, so too do we get to resignation. We can deny it. we can resist it. we can rage or cry but there it is: white supremacy. How we feel about it is beside the point. Our intentions are beside the point. Our black friends are beside the point. We trust good evidence and the evidence is compelling, both historically and in the present. White supremacy is real. So now what are we going to do? We can't unlearn what we have learned. We can't skip over articles about racial inequality posted on Facebook. We can't unread the books and blogs. We know that we have now agreed to be uncomfortable for the rest of our lives and we are as fine with that as we can be.

And finally, we begin to reach what seems to me the closest thing to a final stage: commitment. The willingness to stay on it, to keep learning, to keep listening, to keep contributing where that seems possible and appropriate. It can be hard to stay in this zone. But once we have had a taste of commitment, we know for sure how important this work is and we keep returning to it.

Denial. Resistance. Distress. Defensiveness. Guilt. Fear. Paralysis. Anger. Sadness. Resignation. Commitment. This is how I and some people I know have made our way from cluelessness about racism to a degree of understanding and a pledge to be part of the solution, however imperfectly we keep the pledge for the sake of love and for the sake of justice.

Moving through the stages of confronting both the racial structures of society and our place in them is profoundly difficult, but fortunately we don't have to do it alone. In fact, we can't do it alone. If we work together, we can support each other in our difficult growth processes, in our understanding of white supremacy, and in our willingness to be in solidarity with communities of color.

We the Beloved Community can respond to those among us who are in denial about white supremacy by gently and non-judgmentally being witnesses to its reality. We can bring up the topic. We can talk about our own experiences of understanding ourselves as color-blind and describing what changed. We can comment on racism as it appears in the news. We can ask questions that reveal the double-standards hidden in some kinds of talk about race, such as inquiring, when someone mentions "black-on-black" crime, why they are not also talking about "white-on-white crime", since almost all crime is intra-racial due to racial segregation. These actions are difficult to take and we are likely to be uncomfortable taking them but I believe that if our actions make one life easier, freer, or richer, our discomfort is worth it.

We the Beloved Community can respond to those among us who resist the reality of white supremacy simply by being good listeners. I know that if people had tried to argue with me or judge me when I was in my resistance phase, I would have gotten angry and left. Denial is a

great way to avoid discomfort; resistance is uncomfortable. We can be there for people who are uncomfortable, providing an open and non-anxious presence for their anxiety. And this can continue into the phases of distress and defensiveness.

We the Beloved Community can respond to those among us struggling with the guilt related to being white in a white supremacist society both by being supportive and by pointing out some realities that can be helpful; they certainly have been to me and people I know. We did not cause white supremacy and unless we are literally involved in racist actions and organizations, we have nothing about which to feel guilty. It is only human to be grateful for inequality when it benefits us. It is only natural to resent having to spend our precious time, money and energy trying to end something that we did not ask to exist in the first place. It is only reasonable to react with stress when we can't hold back the ocean with a toy bucket and feel that we should try harder even if we know it's not sustainable. All of these things are true. If we can jettison our guilt, we will be freer to take up responsibility for being part of the solution.

We the Beloved Community can respond to those among us struggling with fear by telling our stories and showing how we got through difficult situations, whether those situations involved falling on our face in front of activists of color or having a painful conversation with a friend or relative. For many of us, when it comes to fear, the only way out is through. We might make fewer mistakes over time. And as for those difficult conversations and experiences of calling people out, the second time we might be less afraid, and the third time we may be less afraid still.

We the Beloved Community can respond to those among us struggling with paralysis, immobilization, helplessness, and hopelessness, by pointing to the historical successes of the civil rights movement and the multitudes who fight on today. We can say with Holly Near, I am open and I am willing for to be hopeless would seem so strange. It dishonors those who go before us so lift me up to the light of change. And we ourselves can be models for action, however modest and preliminary. Doing anything is better than doing nothing. We know this and we can demonstrate it.

We the Beloved Community can respond to those among us struggling with anger and sadness and resignation in the same way as we respond to some of the earlier stages: with good listening, gentle support, and great compassion. We love each other through the difficulty and into acceptance of and engagement with white supremacy in the many ways we might work against it.

And so, finally, we the Beloved Community welcome those who have reached the stage of commitment even as we struggle to stay committed ourselves. We care for one another and encourage one another, and we celebrate progress and mourn the continued losses and keep at it, day after day, year after year.

When we, as the Beloved Community, make these promises and act on them, we join the prophetic people who make up the history of Unitarianism and Universalism, and those who are hard at work in today's Unitarian Universalism. And with these promises and actions, we proclaim that we're on our way and we won't turn back. We proclaim that we would be one in our commitment to a world bursting with joy for all people, a world where people of color do not

need to be afraid of racial slurs, discrimination, or violence, a world where no one needs to specify that black lives matter because it's so patently obvious that they do. We don't live in that world yet but we are working our way toward it, one person at a time, one action at a time, one stage at a time, and we are taking care of each other on the way.

By refusing to minimize so-called race issues, as Sara Winter did, by confronting the reality of white supremacy head-on, we build a world where such race issues are a bad memory of the past. So may we challenge each cause of fear and sorrow even as we more closely follow, following love everyday into the gray. Amen and blessed be.