

Two New Definitions of PC: Continuing Dr. King's Work

Amanda Udis-Kessler, January 20, 2019, High Plains Church UU; slight updates June 12, 2022

Recently, I had to fire my GI doctor and get a new one. He was about to scope my stomach to find out why I had been having GI problems for months. I was gowned, had an IV in, and had various monitors in place when he picked a political fight with me having to do with the firing of a teacher in New York for making a mock “Heil Hitler” salute. I asked whether we could change the topic. In response, he snorted and said, the firing was “just a load of PC nonsense.” (Hopefully, you have figured out that he did not actually say “nonsense.”) Then he put me under.

I’ve thought about this moment many times since it happened, not least because of the doctor’s use of the term PC, or “politically correct.” This phrase, coined by progressives decades ago, has been taken over by conservatives and according to Wikipedia now describes “language, policies, or measures that are intended to avoid...behavior that [excludes, marginalizes, or insults] groups of people considered disadvantaged or discriminated against, especially groups defined by sex or race.” In plain English, values and actions that treat all people well by refusing to devalue some of them are politically correct. To make a rhyme of it, politically correct is all about respect. Which makes PC a good thing in my book.

In this positive spirit of political correctness, I would like to introduce two new definitions of PC that supplement the one we have now. I believe that all three definitions of PC help us think about the life and work of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., which we celebrate today, and I believe further that all three definitions provide us with guidance about how to continue his work in our time.

The first definition of PC, mentioned above, involves treating people with respect, something Dr. King did and encouraged others to do. While we know the Civil Rights movement was about ending racial discrimination in all its forms, it is helpful to remember that discrimination can only exist when people do not respect one another, either as individuals or as members of social groups. You may remember that protestors carried signs reading, “I am a man” during the Memphis sanitation strike in 1968. I cannot imagine a clearer call for respect.

There are two other kinds of PC that we see in the life and work of Dr. King. First, people count. People are worthy and people matter – all people. Second, passionate compassion: a strong, urgent experience of the suffering of others that fuels a commitment to work to end that suffering.

The idea that all people count, that they matter and deserve our respect is our First Principle, condensed to its bare bones. It is thus one of our central articles of faith. It is the good news that Unitarian Universalism has to offer to the world, this idea that everyone is worthy in the sight of love. If we are to help bring Dr. King’s vision of a world of respect and mattering to fruition, it will be because we have accepted this radical claim about people and their value so deeply that it goads us to make our city and our society and the whole world a place in which people – all people - count.

Many groups of people in the US have not been treated as though they have inherent worth and dignity and we have reason to be concerned about all of these groups, but today I'd like to focus on Black Americans in particular. There is a great deal of evidence that Black people don't count in America. The evidence includes housing discrimination, employment discrimination, the killing of unarmed young Black people by police, racist language and jokes, and disparate medical treatment including a systematic unwillingness to give Black people the same amount of pain control as white people. Then, of course, there is the history and present reality of racial segregation and the ways that it limits access to good schools, good jobs, good healthcare, the development of wealth, and other social goods. But today I would like to say just a bit about three other examples of the undignified treatment of Black people in our country. These examples concern the experience of shopping while Black, the many situations in which white people call police on Black people for living their daily lives, and some ways in which the criminal justice system treats Black people differently from white people. I find these examples important because they demonstrate that Black Americans do not count as consumers in particular, as Americans in general, or as innocent until proven guilty.

Many of us have heard the term "driving while Black", which describes the racial profiling of Black Americans by police. Fewer of us have probably heard the term "shopping while Black", which describes situations in which store personnel call police on Black people who are simply trying to shop, or in which Black shoppers are otherwise mistreated. In 2018, three young men were arrested while shopping for prom wear at a Nordstrom Rack outside of St. Louis, while a San Jose woman was searched in a Macy's for no obvious reason other than the color of her skin. A Georgia employee called police on a family eating dinner at a sub shop, while a pizza place accepted a discount coupon from a white man but not the same coupon from his Black friend. In 2016, a Victoria's Secret expelled all Black shoppers, but no white shoppers, after a Black woman was accused of shoplifting. A few years earlier, a Black teenager was arrested outside of a Barney's in New York City, accused of using a fake debit card since he could not possibly have been able to afford a \$350 belt. Black shoppers are regularly followed by security guards, assumed to be too poor to buy anything, kept waiting by clerks longer than white people, and otherwise made to feel out of place. And why does any of this matter? Because the Black people in question received the clear message that they don't count, their wishes and plans don't matter, and they will be punished for doing that most American of things: shopping.

But shopping while Black is just the tip of a much larger iceberg. Here are some other activities for which Black people had police called on them in 2018:

- Waiting for a friend in a Starbucks
- Calling a parent from the lobby of a hotel at which they were staying
- Golfing too slowly
- Falling asleep in their college dorm's common room
- Babysitting white children
- Eating breakfast in the college classroom in which they were about to teach
- Visiting a patient to provide nursing home healthcare
- Working out at a fitness club
- Watching their son play soccer
- Cashing their own paycheck at a bank
- Moving into their own apartment

- Moving out of an AirBnB without waving at white neighbors
- Buying food at a convenience store
- Listening to music on their own front porch
- Operating a lemonade stand
- Selling bottled water on a sidewalk
- Barbequing at a park
- Campaigning door to door as a candidate for office
- Asking for directions
- Working as a home inspector
- Working as a firefighter
- Swimming in a public pool

Those of us here today who are white have probably done many of these things without facing suspicion, being harassed or arrested, or otherwise receiving the message that we don't belong or are dangerous. I have done about half of the things on this list over the course of my life, always without incident. I have even shopped at the same Barney's as the Black teenager mentioned above, successfully buying my mother birthday gifts there more than once. Even if the Jim Crow laws against which Dr. King protested are no longer on the books, the above examples of racial mistreatment are not as far removed from Jim Crow treatment as we might wish. Were Dr. King with us today, he would be protesting the challenges faced by Black people as they simply went about their lives in the public sphere. Since Dr. King is not here, it is our work to be concerned about these injustices and to struggle against them.

Then there is the US criminal justice system, in which Black men represent almost 40 percent of prisoners but only around 14 percent of US Americans, a criminal justice system overrepresentation of about 300 percent. Unfortunately, this overrepresentation should not surprise us given how the criminal justice system more broadly targets BIPOC people.

For example, Black people and white people use illegal drugs at about the same rate but police are much more likely to arrest Black people for drug possession. Why? Because police are much more likely to go into BIPOC neighborhoods and stop and frisk people to search for drugs, or to pull drivers of color over to search for drugs, than they are to go looking for drugs where I guarantee drugs can be found: among the white students at the college where I work. Or, really, anywhere enough white people gather. Because, again, white people and Black people use drugs at about the same rate. But if you assume that BIPOC people are the drug users and you only look for drugs in BIPOC communities, guess what? You will find BIPOC drug users and you won't find white drug users. Why won't you find white drug users? Because you don't go looking for them. Sociologists call this the self-fulfilling prophecy. And it leads to punishing drug users – but only some of them.

We should not be surprised then to learn that even beyond issues of drugs, Black people are more likely than white people to be profiled, to be stopped and frisked or pulled over, to be arrested, to be convicted if arrested, and to be sentenced more harshly if convicted. Black people are far more likely to receive the death penalty for killing white people than white people are for killing Black people. That fact alone should be sufficient evidence about who does and who does not count in our society.

Ironically, Dr. King did not get to protest the systematic discrimination of today's criminal justice system because it did not exist in his time, at least not to anything like the extent it does today. Scholars of racism have argued that the War on Drugs and mass incarceration were a racist response to the passing of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Whether this is technically true or not, both the War on Drugs and mass incarceration have had the effect of maintaining systematic racism, albeit in a somewhat different form than Jim Crow. Critical race lawyers, in fact, refer to mass incarceration as the new Jim Crow. And just as this system of criminalizing race and racializing criminality would be abhorrent to Dr. King, it should be abhorrent to all of us.

Which leads me, finally, to the third definition of PC that drove Dr. King and that is waiting for us today: passionate compassion. I mean by this phrase the deep sense of connectedness to the suffering of others that drives us to work to end their suffering. Thinking about racism and the harm it does literally pains me. It hurts my stomach and breaks my heart. And that's a good thing, since if I didn't care about racism, I would not care about working to end it. We have Dr. King to thank today because he was full of passionate compassion, a care for others that was emotionally powerful and urgent. Compassion is a moral demand. Passionate compassion is a moral demand that we can't refuse.

Some of us may know that the word "compassion" comes from the Latin word meaning, "to bear or feel the suffering of another person." Interestingly, the Hebrew and Aramaic root of compassion, *racham*, is the plural form of the singular noun "womb." Compassion, we might say, is "wombishness." Does that sound strange, or suggest that only mothers can feel compassion? Here's a different kind of translation, available to every single one of us: Compassion is gutsy. It takes guts to be compassionate –literally.

To honor its womblike etymology, compassion is also generative in the way that giving birth is generative. And, of course, in the way that making art is generative. Compassion allows us to create something new: a world where people count, and where it is a simply of matter of respect to be PC in our words and actions.

Compassion is thus a form of creativity. When we consider the idea of being a people of possibility, as this month's theme invites, we might include the creative possibility of compassion. For ourselves, of course. And for those we love, without a doubt. But also, for those we don't know and never will, those whose suffering, it turns out, may benefit us despite our best intentions.

If I had been a young Black man, I might still be in jail today for the indiscretions of my youth, indiscretions I can't talk about here. But because I was allowed to get away with those indiscretions, I went on to have the life I have had for the past 30-plus years. My freedom is, therefore, linked inextricably with the targeting of all those young BIPOC people. For that reason, if for no other, I owe BIPOC communities my compassion, my commitment, my creativity, and my openness to the possibility of a world free of racism. One way I can offer my best self to those who may not get to be their best selves is by raising these uncomfortable topics here and inviting us to be people of compassion, of creativity, of possibility – and of commitment to a society where every last person counts.

I'd like to close with a meditation. Please get comfortable in your seats and, if you are willing, close your eyes. Let's contemplate, for a moment, a society in which every last person counts, in which we have collectively brought Dr. King's dream to fruition.

Imagine how your life would be different if we lived in a society, a world, with no social inequality of any kind. No racism. No sexism. No homophobia. No class inequality. No religious discrimination. No xenophobia. No ableism. No inequality, period. What would it be like if we treated everyone with respect and everyone responded in kind? What would it be like to live in a world where no one was devalued, where no one was dehumanized, where it was unthinkable to cause someone pain because of some attribute they had? What would it be like to live in a society without poverty? Where no one went hungry or lacked healthcare? What would it be like to live in a society that had renounced violence and war? How would you feel in that society? What would you be able to do that you can't do now? Would you connect better with other people? Would you feel freer to be vulnerable? Would you feel safer? More joyous? Would you create more art, better art? Would other people treat you better? Would you have opportunities you can't begin to imagine today?

Do you want to live in this society? And if you do, what are you personally willing to do, alone and with others, to get us there together? What passionate compassion can you offer? What creativity? What possibilities do you hold in your heart that you could use to bless the world?

Whenever you are ready, you can open your eyes.

In memory of Dr. King, and in honor of his life and work, may we be the ones who make the difference. May we be the ones who bind up the broken, who fight the good fight. May we love with abundance and care with compassion. May our hands and our hearts and our minds and our souls all work together to make the world new. Amen and blessed be.

Benediction: Let us be PC people. Let us offer all others the respect that is theirs by rights of their inherent worth and dignity. Let us treat all people as though they count. And let us cultivate passionate compassion and bless the world with it. May it be so.