

## Choosing the Red Pill

Rev Pam Rumancik ~ Delivered September 20, 2015

Today, we're going to be talking about a very hard subject – Racism. First I want to say, take a deep breath, put your feet on the floor, breathe in, breathe out. I have come to love this congregation and I am not here to shame you, to make you feel like you are bad, or to make you feel guilty. A lot of the Anti-racism work in the past has used these tactics but I don't think they are helpful. Shaming someone never helps – even if they've done something horrendous – which I'm pretty sure you haven't. Well, maybe Dave Lloyd... no just joshing Dave – we're all good.

Good. We come to church to know and to feel good. To figure out how to live into the deepest most fully alive versions of ourselves. We come to talk about connection and community, about living into the best of life. We come to know – and to be known. To love – and to be loved. Beautiful and worthwhile things to be sure. But we also come to figure out what is true. Truth, with a capital T – and truth with all the many small t's in our lives. And unfortunately, truth isn't always pretty, or easy, or comfortable.

In the movie *The Matrix*, that this clip came from, Neo was invited to step into the truth. It was something he always suspected was there, but had no proof. Morpheus tells him that if he chooses the red pill, life will never be the same. And that's exactly what happens. Neo finds himself, waking up for the first time in a type of liquid-filled pod, where he has literally been acting as a living battery cell for his entire life. His energy has been used to fuel a virtual digital reality. Nothing he experienced his entire life was real. It's disorienting and hard to believe but he moves forward because he wants to find out what is real.

Back in the 90's, my kids loved this film. Every single day for a very long period, when I got home from work, they were all sprawled around the family room watching *The Matrix*. And every single time, I'd plop down, and finish watching it with them to the very end. It fascinated me. That there could be two parallel realities without anyone knowing about it. Some part of me profoundly related to Neo – to his confusion, to his naiveté, to his determination to find the truth no matter what the cost.

Today, we find ourselves in a similar moment. I do not have a dispenser of red pills to pass out, but I do have an invitation to a reality that some of us have avoided seeing for a very long time. Something we've seen out of the corner of our eyes, suspected was out there, but always found a way to distract ourselves from.

We are living at a particular moment in history; one of those moments that we look back upon in retrospect and realize everything changed. Events of the past year, in Ferguson, in New York, in Cleveland, in Texas, in Baltimore, have been a wakeup call for Unitarian Universalists and for the entire country. Much like Selma, or the fall of the Berlin Wall, or 9-11. This is a moment when something has changed how we see ourselves and the world around us. The reality we thought was true has been proven a fiction – and we are faced with a decision.

Do we take the red pill and investigate, read, learn the truth of the world around us – or do we take the blue pill, and drop back into the dream of equality- even if that dream is false?

As Unitarian Universalists, we are called to wake up to the reality of racism - as a structure of oppression - that surrounds us like the air we breathe. A structure that has remained virtually invisible to most white Americans. It is a matrix – a way that society maintains a better quality of life for white people at the expense of black people & people of color. It is real and true, and once you see it, it's impossible to not see.

Today, we're going to settle in, bring our whole selves to the table, and figure out what we don't know we don't know.

We are very proud of our Unitarian Universalist history. We love to tell the stories of our folks leading the cutting edge of social reform in the past including the abolitionist & women's suffrage movements, our civil rights martyrs, and early feminism. We have a long list of UU's who have ended up on the right side of history in social causes.

But, you know, we don't tell the stories of our congregations who were on the wrong side of history. The congregations who looked historic moments in the eye – but failed the test. Sad to say there are many of those as well. Our reading today tells the story of First Church Philly and how a large contingent tried to force an end to the majority's abolitionist work and left when they did not succeed.

There's a line from Ernest Cassara's book "Universalism in America" citing Garrison's paper "The Liberator." In protest against an escaped slave being returned south because of the Fugitive Slave Act "the Methodist and Universalist bells sang out a song of freedom. The Unitarian bells were silent, their steeples being clogged with cotton." Self-interest blinded their ability to advocate for real freedom.

And closer to home, George Pullman, refused to negotiate with unions and called the US military into break a strike he caused by decreasing pay while keeping rents high in his Pullman housing - with his Universalist congregation's support. This list could go on and on; churches that fired their ministers after returning from Selma; discrimination against women, discrimination against queer folk, discrimination against ministers of color. There have been a whole lot of times that history has called, and we have failed to answer the call.

It's understandable. Change is hard. It takes real courage to wake up to a new reality. Every step forward means giving something up: Illusions, misconceptions, relationships, comfort. We want to feel comfortable. Life is hard enough as it is without taking on someone else's troubles.

But it is not acceptable when that comfort comes at someone else's expense.

Unitarian Universalism is a living faith. This means "that any one of us can change what we believe, if we experience a deeper truth that contradicts our previous beliefs. But in order to

change, we have to be open to new thoughts, new ideas, and new experiences. We have to have our ears open to hear the experiences of the people with whom we are in community.”

Which brings us back to our topic today. Taking the red pill. As Thoreau wrote “If it [life] proves to be mean, then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world;” Yes. Racism is real and yes, it is mean. If we are to be fully alive then we must acknowledge the whole of it, its pain and destructiveness.

We have to look, listen, and learn. We need to become aware of that which hides in plain sight. Racism is not simple racial discrimination. Any one of any race can be prejudiced, or discriminate against another human because of their perceived race. But Racism is much more than that. Racism is what happens when racial discrimination is aligned with power. It’s what happens when laws, policies and social mores maintain distinctly better experiences for white people - at the expense of blacks and people of color.

We see it in the ways black schools receive less funding, the way black motorists are routinely pulled over for driving exactly like white people do. Sandra Bland, the black woman who died in police custody in Texas, was pulled over for changing lanes without signaling. The Dash Cam on the police car showed many white people doing the very same thing.

It’s in the way black people are often portrayed on TV – usually as a side kick to a smarter white person – or as comic relief in a situation involving whites who are doing the real work.

It’s in our justice system – the Tribune just had an article on how the Chicago police continue to set up sobriety tests in neighborhoods of color, even after they’ve been warned to stop. Even after it is statistically proven that white neighborhoods have higher rates of DUIs.

For those of you who took the time and energy – and it takes a lot of energy to look at such hard facts – to read “The New Jim Crow” this summer, this is no longer surprising. At the book discussion on Thursday night, people said that they knew there was injustice in the system, but the depth and width and heartlessness, the entirety of how our society treats black people differently than white people had been previously unimaginable to them. There are a few signs in comfortable white America, but when you peel back the veneer there is a reality that boggles the mind. How is it possible that we treat human beings this way?

Erikka Knuti, a political strategist is quoted as saying: "Part of white privilege has been the ability to not know that your privilege exists. If you benefit from racism, do you really want to know that?"<sup>1</sup> It’s much more comfortable to live within a cocoon of ignorance. Ta Nahisi Coates calls white people dreamers in his book “Between the World and Me”. Everything is designed to keep white people following that American Dream of the clapboard houses with the white picket fences, to keep people believing that “having” is more important than living in right relationship with one another.

In an article titled “White People Explain Why They Feel Oppressed” the author Toure writes:

“I can see where it would be uncomfortable for people to admit that their lives are shaped by unearned advantages, especially in an environment where those advantages may be beginning to slip away, but the blindness itself is a part of the problem”<sup>iii</sup>

Until recently. Until body cameras & dash cams & cell phone cameras have made it impossible to ignore.

But denial is more than a river in Egypt. Toure writes:

“I’m not sure if white people are like sleepwalkers, or more like ostriches, consciously burying their heads in the sand, hiding from reality. And that’s exactly what vexes me the most about white people: their reluctance, or unwillingness, to recognize the vast impact their race has on their lives and on the lives of all those around them.”

The power of systemic racism is that white people can be personally unprejudiced and still benefit materially from the ongoing and unobserved process around us.

Now I said I wasn’t going to shame you today and I’m not. Being born into a system does not make any of us a bad person. This system was developed at the very beginning of our country and is deeply engrained in our consciousness. We are enculturated to **not** see it if we are white – although it is completely obvious to people of color.

Yes, whites benefit at the expense of blacks, just by being part of the system, but there is not individual guilt when you don’t know it is happening. The culpability only occurs when you know about it and still do nothing.

With the events of the past year, it’s really hard to honestly not know that something is wrong. I have been reading, books and articles and watching interviews and movies on the subject pretty intensely all this past summer. I’ve created a race resources page on our website with pages of things that you can use to inform your own search for truth

My understanding has changed drastically. And I have to tell you that I’ve been overwhelmed by the amount of damage and pain white America has inflicted on our African American brothers and sisters. The overt discrimination in our laws and policies, the total lack of justice in our courts, the unequal distribution of resources and of law enforcement. It is heartbreaking.

There is no way I can know what I now know, and remain silent. My faith demands that I continue to learn more, that I strengthen and deepen relationships with people of color, that I use the privilege my white skin gives me to work for justice for everyone.

The mission statement that was adopted at the annual meeting last spring says that we work for a just world with “Courageous, compassionate action.” This is what the church is here to do.

Taking this statement to heart, at their annual retreat the social justice committee voted to install a “Black Lives Matter” banner on our property this year. They took it to the board, who agreed it was in their purview, and plans were set in motion.

I’ll talk about this more at the town hall meeting, but “Black Lives Matter” does not mean they matter more. It means, that in our country, it is demonstrably true that black lives matter less. Saying “Black Lives Matter” is simply a statement of affirmation and support. When society’s actions show glaringly that they don’t matter, we must use our white privilege to affirm that yes - they do.

Right after this decisions was made, around the country, the poop hit the fan. Black Lives Matters activists interrupted a number of campaign stops for both democrats and republicans and got their message into the public sphere. Conservative news outlets started aligning the Black Lives Matters movement with terrorists and cop-killings.

Some of you already know this story but my wife is a Unitarian Universalist Minister who serves our church down on the south side of Chicago in Beverly. They have been embroiled in a great deal of ugliness over the posting of their sign. Ask me about it later or check out their FB page to learn more. It is a hot mess – and it’s not quite over yet.

Courageous action often has a very high price, which is why we have stories of our churches who were unwilling to pay it. But we are still inspired today by those who stepped into the fray and bent the arc of the universe toward justice.

On the front cover of your UU World magazine the headline reads “General Assembly Affirms Black Lives Matters” and all across the country our sister congregations have been putting up signs to affirm this truth. To stand with our black members and friends, to begin to dismantle racism by making its ugliness, complexity and overarching grip on society visible. Because this isn’t one of those times when it’s okay to sit back. Whites are benefiting from a racist system, even if we don’t want to. In this instance, if we are not part of the solution, we are definitely part of the problem.

What are **we** going to do now? That’s what we’re going to talk about at the Town Hall meeting at noon.

But the one thing I want to urge, is that whatever we do, we do with love. Our affirmation of courageous, compassionate action means that, no matter what happens, we remain in relationship and conversation. Courage means stepping outside of our comfort zone, but compassion means understanding that everyone within the system is stuck in some way.

And getting unstuck can hurt, causing anxiety and fear. Fear can manifest as anger. It causes the same rush of adrenaline, the same fight or flight reaction, which makes these discussions emotionally charged and really, really hard to have together. Our whole bodies are screaming

“Danger, Danger Will Robinson! Run away, you’re going to feel bad about yourself!” which is why we have to stand on the side of love, with everyone, including ourselves.

Which brings us back to the beginning of this sermon. We must remember that we are love in this world and we need to rest in that love in our discussions with one another.

If your life is too hard, too challenging, to take this one now, then do what you need to do. Everyone can’t be on the front lines, if you need nurture and support, then ask for it. But everyone can learn more about the reality of the situation. If you can’t march, at least do not stay asleep.

I truly believe that this congregation is ground zero; it is solidly middle class, solidly dominant culture, and it is filled with people who believe in justice. And if we can do this really hard, really challenging work here, we can take it out into our mostly white, mostly dominant culture communities around us and lead the change there. We must do the work here, because we have the power and privilege necessary to make the needed systemic change.

At the book club discussion of “The New Jim Crow” on Thursday a member brought her young adult son, Chad, who is African American. He sat there listening to the older white folks talk until we started talking about putting up the Black Lives Matter sign. Then he sat forward and his eyes lit up. He told the group that he grew up in the suburbs where the racism, that has been invisible to so many of us, was just part of his life. He feels the support of the more liberal folks in many parts of the city of Chicago where he now lives, but if he came out here and saw a Black Lives Matters sign here, in front of the church, it would mean so much more; to know that we see and hear and support this work – out here, in the suburbs - would affirm that his life matters – and that we are willing to say that to the world. It was a powerful moment.

You are needed now. Your wisdom, your experience, your compassion and your courage. Waking up is hard, but if we hold onto one another in love and compassion, we can change the world. Amen & blessed be.

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<sup>i</sup> <http://www.vice.com/read/white-people-told-me-why-they-feel-they-oppressed-456>

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.vice.com/read/white-people-told-me-why-they-feel-they-oppressed-456>