

From Fragility to Accountability

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It's been 70 days since George Floyd was murdered in Minneapolis. I think about his death pretty much every day. And I think about the Black people who live in the Tenderloin and the poverty that dominates their lives. I know that poverty and racism are killing them just as surely as that white police officer killed George Floyd. Maybe more slowly, but just as certainly.

When Carmen and I agreed to join you today, I knew that I wanted to talk about racism. But it has been very difficult to figure out how to say what I long to say out loud. I have struggled with how to avoid saying that I have answers or some kind of expertise, because I have neither.

All I have is my lived experience as a white person born and raised in segregated communities with advantages that never had to be named. I am profoundly aware that it is not easy for white people to talk about racism. Especially in a culture that teaches white people like me that to even notice race is to be racist or that whenever I start to talk about race, I will surely say something wrong or hurtful or ignorant or embarrassing.

If you are like me, white and progressive, and you feel this kind of anxiety around racism, you are also probably motivated to address racism. Like me maybe you are trying to understand what anti-racism needs to look like today, as opposed to ten years ago or twenty or thirty. And maybe like me, you are finding yourself at a loss for words, or worse, unable to find a course of action.

Robin Diangelo's book "White Fragility" is much on my mind. It feels like her work should be helpful in coming to grips with what is happening, specifically with understanding what I should be doing or at least why this is so incredibly hard for me. The message of "White Fragility" is that white people—white progressive liberals—have certain, near invisible or unconscious defenses to racism. I will admit, here and now, that in the last few years, I have employed almost every single one of them—from touting the social justice work of my parents to virtue signaling by explaining how racism works when there are people of color in the room, as if my realizations about racism are new discoveries and not the everyday, lived experiences of the people around me.

I am embarrassed by so many of those moments. I know I have said those things because I am looking for validation, because I don't want to be one of those people who act out of implicit bias and racism. I don't want to be seen as bad person.

These highly emotional defenses service a purpose. They create a smoke screen and obscure what's really important. If we are busy addressing anxiety or hurt pride or seeking attention, then the one thing we don't have to do is be accountable for the harm that has been and continues to be done.

When I think about how I have expressed my whiteness as anxiety and what that anxiety does to me, I feel real despair: How can we ever make systemic changes, if I cannot even change myself and get past my own defenses?

A year ago or so, I came across a book called "Until We Reckon: Violence, Mass Incarceration, and A Road to Repair" by Danielle Sered. It's a book about restorative justice and focuses on Sered's experiences doing restorative justice in Boston. She describes how restorative justice can work, how it is different from punitive justice, and how it can be a response to the systematic impacts of racism on communities of color.

Sered's description of why prisons sentences fail to address the damage done by violence resonated deeply with me and my struggles with racism. Punishment doesn't necessarily address the needs of the person who has been harmed. It might fulfill a desire for revenge, but it doesn't heal. For twenty years, Sered has been listening to the survivors of crime, especially

violent crime, talk about what they need, and she has heard some common themes emerge. Of course, she explains, not all survivors want the same thing or have the same experiences. But the themes that do emerge are important and insightful. There are two significant themes. First, people who have been hurt want to have the hurt and pain they have experienced acknowledged, not dismissed or excused away. And second, they want to know that they and the people they love will be safe in the future. The chapter “In Praise of Accountability,” describes how holding an offender accountable humanizes both the offender and the survivor by telling the truth about what happened as well as laying the ground work for changing an offender’s behavior in a meaningful way.

When I read that, it struck me deeply. The history of the US is laced with threads of racial violence. Anti-black racial violence began in slavery and became the racial terrorism of lynching and mass incarceration. There is not a decade of our history without notable and horrific acts of racial violence and terror. As a whole, Americans are marked by these experiences—some as the targets of this violence and others as the perpetrators and beneficiaries of it. This violence haunts all of us. After reading that chapter on accountability, a question arose for me: What if we apply process of accountability to our experiences of racism? Would the experience of whiteness in America change?

I had to go back and really study what accountability requires. In Sered’s framework, it requires first an acknowledgement of what one has done and the impact of those actions. Such an acknowledgement hits at the core of white fragility. Rather than defending ourselves or making excuses, we have to acknowledge racism, in all its forms, and the deep, on-going harm it does. This means that instead of focusing on our own experiences of privilege, it is time to focus on the violence, implicit and explicit, that has been in the service of racial domination.

To do so would change, for example, how we look at school segregation which is as intense today as it was in 1968. We would not look at the privileges and advantages of private school system, which is the primary means by which school segregation is maintained, but we would instead look at the damage done by segregation. Not in the abstract, but in the lives of students of color. We would look at the high rates of detention for African-American boys in school and how such detention sets too many of them on the road to prison.

School segregation inscribes on young boys of color white fears of violence, white assumptions that Black men are dangerous in ways that no one else is, and that they are destined for prison because we experience Blackness as inherently dangerous. At that point, we would have to acknowledge how all-encompassing the criminal system is for people of color: men of color, for women of color, for transgender people of color. It begins when they are small children and continues through school, through stop & frisk, through traffic stops, through prison, and yes, to death at the hands of police officers on the street.

Imagine if we were right now listening to the mother or grandmother of an 8-year old Black boy describe her fears for him, the conditions he is facing in a segregated school, and what he suffers every time he is disciplined at school for being too high-strung. Imagine we are not talking about white people, but listening to the experiences of Black families. For me in that moment, this is what happens: who I am, what I have done is no longer the center of attention. In that moment, what matters is that little boy and the people who love him.

If we can collectively have moments like that, turning our attention away from whiteness and onto those who are being deeply hurt day-in and day-out, then it becomes possible for us to take responsibility, to become accountable for our whiteness. It becomes possible to offer genuine remorse and express genuine horror at what is happening rather than avoid or excuse it.

In that moment, we would begin to see the individual lives that are shattered by racism. This is the magnitude of that image of George Floyd dying. We saw a unique human being, a man with a family and a life, be killed casually, easily by a police officer. We came to see that the system that defines all Black men as dangerous killed a helpless human being and we want

to say, “This is so wrong. It should not have happened to George Floyd, a unique and precious human being.”

But there is a problem here. You are hearing all this from me, a white person, not the mother or grandmother of an African-American 8-year old. For this conversation to become a form of accountability, we have to have it with those who are harmed by racial domination. We have to find a way out of the structures of segregation that keep us talking only among ourselves. This is perhaps one of the hardest things to do—break down the barriers that keep us so insulated and give us the choice to turn away when it gets hard.

I have been living in the Tenderloin for nine years and still I struggle to overcome the structures of separation that keep Black and white segregated. As an individual, I can only do so much. I can show up, I can advocate, I can step back, but I cannot stop the arrests, I cannot provide housing, I cannot undo the trauma of generational poverty and racism that keeps the people I care about from being free. And if those things don’t change, we cannot have relationships based in human dignity and equality—I will always be a white person with power to be feared or manipulated or used and the Black people around me will be subject to white domination.

The most important part of accountability is doing what needs to be done in order to prevent harm from being done again. For an individual who has committed an assault, the process of accountability may include anger management and other behavioral treatments. But for a society that has more than 400 years of violent history to account for, it is going to take so much more. As a white person, I have to step out of individual regret and turn to collective accountability. If we are to tell Black and Brown people that they are safe from future violation, we have to move beyond our individual fragility and into communities of relationship so we can engage in meaningful accountability.

That must happen structurally, through institutional action. It could, for example, happen through churches—imagine a predominantly white church seeking relationship with a predominantly Black church for the purpose of accountability. That would require a certain courage as well as a certain humility. It would require risking rejection and embarrassment. Oh, what a forthright conversation that would have to be: “We want to listen to and understand your experience. We know there is so much we need to know before we can be truly accountable for what has happened, before we will be capable of assuring you that the systems of racist violence are undone.” As white people, this is how we can know what to do to end racism. We would know it then because in that relationship, we would be committed to the wellbeing of those who have lived for generations with violent racism, our lives would be bound up together. We would not cease to be white, but our whiteness would be less and less the center of attention.

Around the Fools, we often ask, “How is my liberation and wellbeing bound up with yours?” Through a process of truth and reconciliation, which is just another name for accountability, we would learn to be honest and we could find a path, one step at a time, out of the separation and segregation of white fragility and into accountability and community.

Through such a process, we will say and mean, that Black lives matter. Will be able to say we have made real progress towards realizing the aspirations of the 1948 United Nations proclamation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights:

***Every human being has
the right to live, liberty, and security of person.***

A reflection on whiteness and racism on July 26, 2020 at the Unitarian-Universalist Society of San Francisco.