

Unlearning

Rev. Dr. Michael Tino

[Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Northern Westchester](#) – October 26, 2008

© 2008 MICHAEL JAMES TINO

*You've got to be taught
To hate and fear,
You've got to be taught
From year to year,
It's got to be drummed
In your dear little ear
You've got to be carefully taught. (Hammerstein)*

From the very beginning of our lives, each of us is subjected to a constant stream of information. Words, pictures, movements—they start out fuzzy as our brains adjust to this world of sensory input, but little by little we begin to make sense of them. We sense shapes and colors and patterns.

Not too much later, our brains begin to make connections between the things we are learning. We begin to understand why people act and react in certain ways, like Professor Peggy McIntosh, who recalls in Shakti Butler's documentary film "Making Whiteness Visible" a time at six or seven years of age when a good-bye kiss on the cheek of her grandmother's African-American cook sent her grandmother into a racist rage. (McIntosh in Butler)

Even as children, we learn from everything that is around us—from the race and gender roles of the heroes and princesses in animated fairytale movies to the way people are depicted on our favorite television shows, from the messages being volleyed back and forth in presidential elections to the way people are treated in the playground.

We begin to understand cause and effect; we pick up on subtle messages; we are faced—even as children—with hard choices. Peggy McIntosh learned that in order to get her grandmother's love, she needed to treat someone else badly because of their race.

We are carefully taught.

*You've got to be taught to be afraid
Of people whose eyes are oddly made,
And people whose skin is a diff'rent shade,
You've got to be carefully taught. (Hammerstein)*

We are carefully taught that the differences we notice by nature—differences that hundreds of thousands of years of human evolution might have even wired us to be a little wary of—mean that some people are inferior and some are superior. We knew we were different—we have to be taught to discriminate on the basis of that difference.

White people in the United States are carefully taught that we deserve everything we have. We (and here I say we because I am in this group, and not to imply that all of you are) are taught to ignore a long history in which white people amassed wealth and power through enslavement, subjugation, theft and exploitation. We are taught to think nothing of the ease with which we access social services and the access and advantages we get based merely on the color of our skin.

We are taught, further, that people who don't get these things—people of color—don't deserve them. We are taught that people with different shades of skin from ours are threatening and suspect. We are taught that our experience of the world is normal—and so the experiences of people of color are somehow abnormal, less than, or worthy of dismissal.

Quite simply, white people in this country are carefully taught from the moment we enter this world that we are superior to people of color. And we internalize these messages of superiority.

People of color in the United States—African-Americans, Latino/Latina and Hispanic people, Asian-Americans, Arab-Americans, and Native-Americans—are taught that they deserve to have a harder time getting the same things their white peers get. They are taught that they do not deserve consideration or services from social programs, and that the institutions and systems in our society are not set up to meet their needs.

People of color are taught that their experiences are not normal, that their struggles are not worthy, and that their dreams are not attainable. They are taught that they will have to work twice as hard to get half as much as their white peers—that they have to become the President of the Harvard Law Review in order to be seen as the equal of someone who graduated with a grade-point average that put him 894th in a class of 899.

People of color in this country are carefully taught from the moment they enter this world that they are inferior to white people. And they internalize those messages of inferiority.

We are all very carefully taught, often despite the best efforts of parents and religious communities, who insist upon teaching fairness, equity and love.

And none of us forget these lessons, though we might try our hardest to ignore them.

People of color don't have the luxury of even being able to try to ignore the lessons of our society—they are forced every day to live them.

One of the hardest privileges for white people to accept is the privilege we have to forget that our attitudes and actions are informed by the careful teaching of our society.

And when we forget, racism shows its ugly head.

Even those of us who basically understand how carefully-taught racism is in our society are not immune from falling back on the lessons that were ingrained in us as children.

Richard Rodgers, the composer of the music behind “You’ve Got to Be Carefully Taught,” was widely-known in the theater world of the 1950s and 60s for being a risk-taking, progressive, fair-minded person. He wrote parts in musical theater for people of all racial backgrounds, and promoted the careers of many people of color.

One of the many people who worked with Rodgers was the famous actress and singer Diahann Carroll. In her memoir entitled *The Legs are the Last to Go*, Carroll tells a chilling story about events following the Detroit premiere of “No Strings,” a groundbreaking 1963 musical about interracial romance written by Rodgers, who specifically envisioned Carroll as the female lead.

Carroll vividly recalls being uninvited by Rodgers from the cast party for the musical because the hosts were uncomfortable with an African-American woman in their house.

While far from the only incident of racism that Carroll has encountered in her many years in the theater, this one stung particularly hard because of who was perpetuating the racism. In an interview with WNYC’s Leonard Lopate, Carroll expressed her disappointment in someone she thought knew better, someone she trusted to be on her side.

Diahann Carroll’s story also illustrates to me why this issue is a religious issue: the racism that we are so carefully taught harms our souls, hurts our spirits, interrupts our relationships with others, and befouls our lives.

Racism has the power, if we let it run unchecked, of harming us all—people of color and white people too.

Racism gets in the way of trust, it forms a callous around our hearts, and it builds walls that separate us from one another. Racism hurts. A lot.

And this is why it takes careful teaching to get it in our heads: racism is not something that most of us would choose if we could. I dare say that all of the people here today would gladly choose—were we given that power—to end racism completely, to banish it from our lives, from our communities and from our institutions.

While it is not a simple task, that is, in fact, something we can work towards.

*You've got to be taught before it's too late,
Before you are six or seven or eight,
To hate all the people your relatives hate,
You've got to be carefully taught! (Hammerstein)*

The only response to having been so carefully taught the ways of race and racism in our society is to actively participate in unlearning all of those things.

Unlearning the lessons of internalized superiority and inferiority. Unlearning the ways in which we subconsciously react to people who are different from us—and the ways in which we consciously translate those reactions into attitudes and actions.

Unlearning that those of us who are white deserve to be privileged in our society, and those of us who are people of color deserve to have less.

Unlearning is a life-long process for white people. As I said earlier, it is one of the fundamental parts of white privilege in our society that we get to forget about race and racism if we want to. After all, we were so carefully taught that our experiences were normal—why should we think about anything different?

This process is ongoing. It requires commitment and strength. It requires us to show up to the task, and not assume that other people will do it for us. It requires making hard choices sometimes.

The process of unlearning racism takes a lot of work. It is deeply-religious work—the work of healing our broken world, the work of making true relationships of equality possible, the work of compassion and justice. This is work that I am committed to, and it is work that I am asking you to be my companions in—no matter your skin color or your racial or ethnic background.

We have been carefully taught, dear friends. It is up to us to unlearn those lessons. This is a task at which failure is not an option.

With dedication, hard work, and determination, we can defeat racism. We can change the messages in our society, so that the lessons carefully taught to the next generation are different from the lessons taught to us.

It won't be easy. Won't you join me?

Works Cited/Consulted

Butler, Shakti. "Mirrors of Privilege: Making Whiteness Visible," film.

Hammerstein, Oscar, lyricist. "You've Got to Be Carefully Taught," from the musical *South Pacific*.

Lopate, Leonard, interview with Diahann Carroll, "The Leonard Lopate Show," WNYC FM, October 2 2008 (available on-line at <http://www.podcastdirectory.com/podshows/3418025>)