

We've grown accustomed to things in our world taking on a life of their own. Take etiquette for example. I don't know why it's so important to put the fork on the left and the knife on the right.

Put the fork on the left, Why? Most of us are right handed! When I sit to eat, I want to simply pick up my fork and dig in. but instead, I've got to do a dance with my left hand before I can eat my mashed potatoes. Often, our customs and practices are odd or strange, and we do them anyway, they persist for generations.

I've learned to manage myself when sitting at my brother's dinner table and he serves what he calls my mother's potato salad. It's wholly unrecognizable to me as such. I know how to make mom's potato salad, and so do my other brothers and sisters, who all make it a bit differently. Mom's potato salad has taken on a life of it's own, and lives on, years after her death.

Our society has grown accustomed to and accepting of, customs, practices and beliefs that have taken on a life of their own. Since this is Black History month, it feels incumbent upon me to address some of the practices, customs and embedded beliefs that have a negative impact on people of color, especially black people (African Americans, if you prefer).

Lets start with Black History month. It's a double edge sword in my view. On one hand, it's an attempt to redress an historic practice in our society that has excluded black people from the main of American life. It holds up the fact that black people have indeed made significant contributions to American life and it's prosperity. On the other hand, it simultaneously reinforces and further entrenches what it ostensibly endeavors to do, redress black people's exclusion from "*American history*." The very fact that we have a Black History Month says that black history is separate from American history and that black people have yet to be included as "real" Americans.

I'm absolutely convinced, *that* exact notion, that black people are not yet fully accepted as "real" Americans, is why President Obama has faced a level of opposition, I expect, history will document as unprecedented. There continues to be an identifiable segment of the population that comes right out and says, his election to the Presidency is illegitimate. Despite facts to the contrary, one polls shows 39% of the population believes he is foreign born. Another poll shows 17% believe he is Muslim and 33% believes he has no religion at all. I believe the last congress's strategy of wholesale opposition was only possible within the context of that underlying national questioning of the President's legitimacy.

What I'm talking about here can legitimately be named racism. Racism comes in many forms, although we as a society, tend to only acknowledge individual racism. Even in acknowledging that form of racism, we diminish the significance of it by labeling those who are racist as backward, ignorant and uneducated. Thereby, quickly separating "them" from the so-called mainstream, us.

We also diminish the reality and ramifications of racism by immediately changing the subject from a conversation about racism to a conversation about time and progress. The argument goes, 'yeah but, we've made such progress.' And indeed we have, no question, full stop. Yet, it is also true that a cup of water for someone dying of thirst is progress, a life saver in fact. Yet a cup of water is not sufficient for health and life.

Many studies have been done on issues of race, racism and ramifications of racial disparity; sociological studies, psychological, biology and physiology, financial studies, studies in healthcare and our legal system or so-called system of justice. Virtually every study documents the negative consequences of being black, in America. This dynamic is not accidental, it does not exist due to happenstance. These studies document that racism in our society has taken on a life of its own.

Scholars have identified various forms of racism. There is personal racism (the kind we're most familiar with), institutional, cultural and structural racism that operate in similar ways with fundamentally the same net negative impact.

I want to tell you a story that illustrates how pervasive racism can be, how blind we can be to its existence, how self-perpetuating it can be and how it is often carried out by well-meaning, well-educated individuals.

I was brought in as a consultant to help a major corporation address issues of race that were stirring in its ranks. In addition to a lot of other work- we worked with them for 3 years- we asked the design engineering department to evaluate its hiring, promotion and retention of minorities, especially its black employees.

Here's what they found. Blacks were hired from many of the same colleges and universities as their white male employees. Both were hired at relatively the same pay. Blacks were promoted, on average, 1-2 yrs slower than their white male counterparts, with a concomitant lag in salary increases. Here's where I need to tell you that this was a department that had an energetic affirmative action program. It's a department that was run by people I personally met and deemed to be committed to the program and by all accounts were perfectly decent people.

Here's the ringer. White men were promoted the same way they were hired. Based on potential, not demonstrated performance. They assessed their work and determined they would likely be successful at the next pay grade. The black employees, however, were told: "you do good work, we're giving you a good review. So, we're going to start giving you more difficult assignments and as soon as you demonstrate your ability to work at that next higher level, we'll promote you."

Both are legitimate criteria on which to make a decision for promotion. You've got good potential, so we're going to promote you. OR demonstrate you can do the work, you get the job title. Perfectly reasonable but inconsistent and horribly disadvantageous if you are black. These performance reviews took place in one-on-one conversations and unconscious institutional and cultural racism crept in. Managers look good if the people they back are successful. They damage their careers when their people fail. If a white guy fails, he's just a guy that failed, it happens. If a black guy fails, it reinforces the idea that blacks are inferior to begin with and the boss should have noticed the shortcomings. It reflects badly on the manager.

A similar dynamic occurs at a cultural, governmental and societal level. An unemployment rate of 8% was seen as sufficiently burdensome that the pundits presumed a President couldn't get re-elected with such numbers. The black unemployment rate was 20 and 30%, yet it was a non-issue in the pundit's analysis.

That reality can only exist in an environment where black people fundamentally don't matter; in a cultural environment that thinks of black people as being on welfare, shiftless and lazy. (Just last year, some politician actually said, President Obama was lazy); and in a structural environment that is very used to excluding black people from meaningful employment. Unemployed blacks? No news there!

Currently, I'm working my way through a very compelling book, the San Francisco Chronicle calls it "the bible of a social movement." The book is called *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. Written by Michelle Alexander. Her basic thesis is that a racial caste system, which subjugates those of African descent, has taken on a life of its own. This caste system, which was intentionally designed to create a privileged white hierarchy, she argues, can be traced through an arc of control mechanisms, from our country's founding to today; slavery is replaced by Jim Crow laws which have now been replaced by mass prison incarceration.

After slavery came Reconstruction, which was beaten back by the restrictive Jim Crow laws. When those laws were found unconstitutional, the Civil Rights era emerged, only to be beaten back by a systematic effort of disproportional, mass incarceration of people of color.

Alexander says, “it may be impossible to overstate the significance of race in defining the basic structure of American society...the constitution was based largely on the effort to preserve a racial caste system—slavery—while affording political and economic rights to whites, especially propertied whites.” “The method for determining proportional representation and the electoral college were specifically developed with the interest of slaveholders in mind (slaves counted as 3/5s a man).” This racist fiction, she says, is embedded in our founding document and creates the structure of American democracy.

Since Africans were not really people, there was no contradiction when the Declaration of Independence declared all men are created equal. She states that after slavery—achieved only after internecine war- terrified whites came to view blacks as menacing and dangerous, creating the current stereotype of blacks as aggressive, unruly predators. Alexander quotes an Alabama planter, “we have the power to pass stringent police laws to govern the Negroes—this is a blessing—for they must be controlled in some way or white people cannot live among them.” The Jim Crow laws followed the demise of slavery.

The Jim Crow era highlighted “stunningly comprehensive and repressive” legal segregation, combined with the re-emergence of the Ku Klux Klan, and the withdrawal of Federal troops to enforce civil rights legislation. Many believe Jim Crow ended with *Brown v Board of Education*, 1954. Scholars however see the beginning of its demise in WWII. The US could not ignore the contradiction of its opposition to the Nazi treatment of Jews and it’s own treatment of American blacks. It feared losing status as the leader of the so-called “free world”.

For either or both reasons, Jim crow eventually fell at the hands of mass street level demonstrations, hoses and police brutality. The civil rights era emerged spawning the Black Power movement. And in its midst, a quiet, counter insurgency was formed.

Under the rubric of a “war on drugs” and a crackdown on criminality, Alexander, I have to tell you, argues persuasively, mass incarceration took root, as an intentionally designed mechanism to reinstate a racial caste system of white hierarchy. The process has been shockingly successful. Not only do convicted felons often lose the basic right to vote, they are ineligible for many federal benefits and employers generally won’t hire them. Felons, even after they’ve served their time, are left adrift, separate from any meaningful connection to America.

And the housing of convicts has proved a profitable enterprise with the privatization of jails. Always seeking new inmates, sometimes transferred all the way across country, newer and bigger buildings are built.

Alexander tells us, mass incarceration is the major social justice issue of our times. It lies languishing in the shadows because most folks are not inclined to stick their necks out on behalf of convicted criminals—even if unfairly convicted as many DNA tests now confirm.

I usually like to end my sermons on a positive note, proclaiming the good news as a teacher once said. The truth is, however, there is very little good news in this story. The single light I can find is that Unitarian Universalists have begun to have serious conversations about this material and its analysis. Perhaps and maybe, we can assume a rightful leadership role in combating the scourge of mass incarceration.

God knows, someone needs to.

Amen