



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“American Creed,”
a sermon given by Julie Lombard
on March 8, 2015

Not long ago, my thirteen year old child and I were watching TV together. We were flipping channels when we discovered the primetime showing of the 40th Anniversary of Saturday Night Live. I assured her, “This will be good.” It was good to see the many cast members reunited again. They highlighted old clips from the show throughout the years. Not all of Saturday Night Live is live. They are known for their pre-recorded skits. They played a few favorite skits before showing one with comedian, Eddie Murphy, called “White Like Me.” In the skit, Murphy trades in his trademark t-shirt and hoodie sweatshirt for a three-piece suit and white face paint. He enters NYC dressed this way to comically expose white privilege in 1984.

I remember seeing this skit 30 years ago. I was just about my daughter’s age. Back then, I thought the skit was hilarious. So, I told her, “This is funny.” Murphy enters a convenient store in costume to buy an item. He is surprised by when he goes to pay the clerk that he is waved on. The clerk says, “Take it.” Murphy’s face is full of shock as he finds out that the joke is on him, white privilege is real- white people do get a free ride.

This once funny joke wasn’t funny anymore. It struck me as insane that we live in a world that hasn’t changed much in the past 30 years. You’d think with the ways that things like our electronics have changed that the issue of white privilege might have changed more, too. I sit beside my child in a broken world. I stopped laughing. I was disturbed. This is not what I hoped for her. I had dreamed that civil rights would have advanced more.

I recently read an article about white privilege in *The New York Times*. They wrote about an Australian Study about free rides for whites on buses in Brisbane. More bus drivers allow whites folks to ride free without paying than any other group. Even blacks bus drivers showed a bias towards whites. Discrimination is still alive around world. I think this is the truest example of brokenness I can think of and it breaks my heart.

What does white privilege look like to you? Does it exist here in Haverhill?

There’s another story of a store clerk, but this is a real story of a store in Miami Gardens, FL. The store is owned by a man named Alex. Miami Gardens is a newly incorporated city with a new police force. Alex was approached by the police to join a Zero Tolerance on crime program. He had owned the store for years never experiencing a break in, but he wanted to support the cause

because crime had been on the rise. He joined the program and the police put up a sign in the store. Life went on as usual, right? No, it did not.

Things took a strange twist when Alex sent an employee named Earl to clean up the parking lot. When Earl didn't return, Alex went to check on him. All Alex found was the dust pan and broom on the ground. The next day when Earl returned to work, Alex asked him what had happened. Earl shared a story that was hard to hear. Earl had been arrested for trespassing at work. Have you heard of Alex and Earl's story?

In the past four years while working for Alex, Earl has been stopped and questioned by police 258 times, searched 100 times, arrested and jailed 56 times. Earl's been taken out of the cooler as he stocks shelves while Alex repeatedly tell the police that Earl is an employee and not trespassing. Did I even have to tell you that Earl is African-American?

Alex put up surveillance cameras, not to catch criminals, but police brutality. It's hard for Alex to run his business when his employees and customers keep getting harassed by the police. Alex has complained to the city, to the police, and he even reached out to the NAACP for help. Now he's suing for justice.

One evening while driving home, Alex was pulled over for a broken tail light. Before he knew it, there were six police cars on the scene; he asked the officer, "All this for a broken tail light?" I will not repeat what the officer said, but intimidation was the aim of the comment. The next day at work, Alex checked the surveillance tapes from the night before and he saw his truck departing his lot without a broken tail light. Alex was born in Venezuela and is of Palestinian decent- was he also being discriminated against or punished for fighting the system? Why is this happening in Miami Gardens? Why does this happen anywhere?

In an article from the Miami Herald, Chuck Drago, a former police officer and consultant on police policy said, "There is no justifying this kind of behavior. Nobody can justify overstepping the constitution to fight crime." He continued to say what is happening in FL and in many other places is that the police departments are not building good relationships within a community. Building relationships builds trust. If you need surveillance cameras for the people who are there to serve and protect, you know something is seriously wrong.

We have a UU expert we can turn to: Rev. Mark Morrison-Reed investigated race in his book titled *Black Pioneers in a White Denomination*. First he asks- who are the black people who join our UU tradition? He is an African-American who knows firsthand what it's like to be one of the few blacks in a UU church. In his book, he explores the unfortunate truth about our history that may surprise you. It surprised me. Our tradition was slow to make multi-racial advancements with attracting folks to the pews or our pulpits.

There were communities that were able to break that mold; most of these were in the larger urban areas like Washington, D.C, New York, and Chicago. In the smaller cities and towns across America, it was different. Morrison-Reed believes we have to consider class as an issue as much as race. He claims UUs are mostly well educated middle class. In smaller communities, there are few middle class blacks. When there are some, they often prefer to stick together. So, in smaller cities, like Haverhill, it may always be difficult to integrate the pews and pulpits. We can sing, "Come, Come Whoever You Are" as much as we want, but still the same class will come.

Remember Chuck Drago, the officer in the Miami Herald article that said the key to success is by building good relationships within a community. We can be like one of the churches from this book- like the Church of the Restoration in Philadelphia. Since 1965 when their UU minister marched in Selma, they have been intentional and creative about being good neighbors. The church helped to form a Philadelphia to Philadelphia exchange to start dialogue among blacks and whites in the namesake town in Mississippi where three civil rights workers had been killed. That church knew that it was important for both the minister and the congregants to be visibly and vocally concerned with African-American issues. They joined watchdog agencies tracking police brutality. They made these issues their own issues. They dreamed of building a Beloved Community. Mark Morrison-Reed recently speaking from Selma on the 50th anniversary said, "We assume the overwhelming response to Selma was about a response to oppression, but in reality it was a consequence of relationship. We overemphasize moral courage but really it's all about relationship."

The Philadelphia church reminds me of another church I know, this one. This church has had a long standing relationship with an African-American Church across the street. We've gathered for close to thirty years together for an annual MLK Breakfast. This takes commitment and intention on both sides. It also takes leaders willing to dream, leaders like Ann Doughty. During the February Board meeting, Ann shared out loud her dream for the choirs from these two churches to coming together to sing. I hope her dream comes true. What a creative way to build stronger relationships.

This church is a good example to other churches how to love our neighbors. We need to share what we've learned and continue to learn as we move forward on this journey. In January, there was great attendance at the Race Conversation here. I hope that there will also be as good attendance at the UU Class Conversation Workshop that's being held here at the end of March. If you want to know more about this workshop- let me know.

Mark Morrison-Reed ends his book by saying to move forward as a denomination, UU's need first to ask ourselves why- Why bother doing this work? He continues by saying he thinks there is only one authentic answer - for yourself. For yourself because you will feel more comfortable in a multicultural, multi-racial congregation because being part of an inclusive movement is consistent with your self-image you hold for yourself as a religious liberal. For yourself so that any guilt or anger you carry about this, like the guilt and anger I felt as I sat beside my daughter when we were watching Eddie Murphy's "White Like Me" skit, I can stop feeling that guilty and angry and let it go. I can do this for myself because I yearn to be different not merely for myself, but for my kids. I dream that they will be the hope our broken world desperately needs. With our help, our intention, and our commitment- we can heal a broken American Creed and love our neighbor.

May it be so. Amen.