

Why Anti-Racism Will Fail: A Response

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When I was asked to respond to this presentation, I had two immediate reactions. The first was to feel honored to have been asked. The second took the form of a question: Why would anyone of my complexion want to get involved in a public discussion of this topic? As you can see, the first reaction won out. However, I trust you will respect the second one sufficiently to forgive me if I spend a little time outlining my bona fides.

I grew up in a community rigidly segregated by race. The schools, the library, all public facilities, employment opportunities, housing, even shopping were separate and unequal. It was also a community rigidly stratified along social and economic lines. We belonged to a part of the community that has been referred to by some recent writers as "not quite white." We were the sons and daughters of the working poor-often less graciously referred to as "poor white trash."

I grew up with a constant reminder of our situation, as my parents reminded me over and over again that "it's no disgrace to be poor; it's just damned inconvenient." And behind those words I heard the real message: "It is a disgrace to be this poor." Often they would attempt to reassure me by telling me that it could be worse-"at least, we're not black." Unspoken was the rest of the sentence, "we're just not quite white."

Issues of race dominated my coming of age. The year I graduated from high school, the Supreme Court issued its ruling in *Brown vs. the Board of Education*, declaring segregation in the schools unconstitutional. My years in college increased my awareness of civil rights issues, as I encountered African Americans for the very first time, and as I realized that the poor whites with whom I worked nights in the factory seemed strangely blocked from embracing their true interests in alliance with other despised segments of culture. In seminary, serving a small church in Ohio, I sought ways to bring the worlds of rural Ohio and inner-city Chicago into dialogue.

The early years of my ministry after seminary saw me deeply engaged in the Civil Rights Movement, serving a suburban church profoundly committed to the ultimately successful effort to integrate its community. I marched, protested, chaired the Unitarian Universalists for the Chicago Freedom Movement and worked with the Poor People's Campaign, Martin Luther King's final project--an effort to address the economic and class roots of racism.

As my involvement deepened, my relation to my community of origin grew more and more strained. My decision to abandon the true faith and become a Universalist was hard for the family to accept. But my involvement with race issues was more than my "not quite white" family could tolerate. They were more than uneasy; they were ashamed of my involvement. When we adopted an

African American child, the strained bond with my community of origin broke. We entered upon years of struggle with schools, churches, police, community structures in behalf of our third son.

My life as a Unitarian Universalist minister was equally absorbed by issues of race. I was present at the General Assembly to witness the bitter debate over whether, in light of our tradition of congregational polity, the Unitarian Universalist Association could require our congregations to adopt racially non-discriminatory membership policies. I was at the General Assembly in Cleveland in 1968, and voted for full funding of the Black Affairs Council. I was among those who walked out of the Boston Assembly in 1969 when it seemed the Unitarian Universalist Association was about to renege on its commitment to the Black Affairs Council.

Given this history, it has seemed passing strange to me that try as I will, I have been unable to gin up any enthusiasm for the Association's "anti-racism agenda." I have read, attended conferences and workshops, watched videos, engaged in conversations and I have been unmoved and unimpressed. It seems to me that the program is more focused on saving souls than on challenging corporate power. Even as a child in the "hot and holy churches," I had learned that soul-saving is poor theology and cheap justice. It is doomed to fail, if only because souls are inevitably born faster than they can be redeemed. What is more, the anti-racism program subtly personalizes what is a corporate problem. In its essence and perhaps in its consequences, it is not unlike the process we went through as a nation a century or more ago as we brought to an end the era of reconstruction and abandoned the dream of a society of true equality.

Reading Thandeka's book, *Learning To Be White*, and the address she has just delivered this afternoon, I suddenly heard in my inner ear a small voice saying: "Look. Look! LOOK! The Emperor has no clothes!"

I want to thank Thandeka for voicing my unformed sense of some elemental violation- that something central to our tradition was being savaged. I would only add another perspective on that violation. The program of "anti-racism" rejects not only our Unitarian tradition, but also our Universalist tradition. Universalism proudly proclaimed that all would be saved-even great Satan himself, that no sin is infinite and no class of sinner is forever damned. The Universalist knew and insisted upon a greater gospel. In the 1840's they argued that ending slavery would not be enough---that we would need "to conquer our miserable prejudices." But they never doubted we could do it. What was needed was to recognize that we are already saved and need only accept our true nature and embrace our true destiny.

I thank Thandeka for helping me understand the way issues of race have been used to distract us from questions of power-who has it, who uses it, who is served by it. If you want a close-to-home example, look at the history of the General Assembly. Before the conflict over the Black Affairs Council, the General

Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association was a powerful body. It had the power and it used the power to approve and amend the Association's budget and to instruct the Board to implement not just general policies but specific programs and projects. That was precisely what it did in relation to the Black Affairs Council. After the conflict over the Black Affairs Council, the Assembly was stripped of its effective power. First, a rule was adopted requiring that any spending proposal coming from the General Assembly be paired with sources of revenue to fund it. Then a ruling from counsel declared that actions by the Assembly were to be understood as advisory, not mandatory. And the General Assembly became a pep-rally rather than a governing body. Distracted by race, we quietly surrendered power. And as it is in our tiny little association, so it is in the larger world.

Beyond this, Thandeka helps me to understand that at the heart of what is called racism is white guilt and shame. Having betrayed our own best selves, our ideals so that we be not driven from our primary communities, we cannot confront our own brokenness and shame. And so, we racialize our pain and wreak vengeance on that other community which was the occasion of our act of betrayal. Compounding the guilt and shame, as anti-racism programs invariably do, can only reinforce the very attitudes they seek to overcome and so, ultimately are self-defeating.

Finally, Thandeka has helped me put into sharper focus the essentially narcissistic nature of the "anti-racism agenda." Because it helps us avoid the topic we are most uncomfortable addressing, the question of class, it relieves us of responsibility for a world going to hell in a hand-basket. We delude ourselves into believing that if we can become "anti-racist" and create an "anti-racist UUA"-though no one has explained to me what such an eventuality might look like-that somehow the world be a better place. All the while, power continues to concentrate in the hands of fewer and fewer people, the massive transfer of wealth from the poor to the rich goes on unabated, beneath a façade of prosperity the social safety net is shredded and in tatters, and the spoliation of the earth continues apace. It is unclear to me how an "anti-racist" Unitarian Universalist Association, even if we could achieve it, would make the larger world significantly or measurably better, fairer, more just or more merciful. I fear that our inward-directed "anti-racist agenda" is but an indication that, to misquote the prophet, we "have sold the poor for an eased conscience and the needy for an empty slogan."