

Lives Matter

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Hi guys. This isn't an easy one for me, because it's so close to home. I'm not gonna lie to you. Lives Matter: specifically, White lives matter. That's the sad truth in our society. Now, in our UU minds, we firmly believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every individual; to you and to me, ALL lives matter, but then, what does that look like to the rest of the world? We live in a world of "either/or", so when some people hear "black lives matter", they think we're saying other lives don't. Now *we* know that this doesn't mean that white lives or police lives or LGBTQ+ lives *don't* matter; it's just that we have to be very deliberate about ensuring equality and respect for black and brown people. Pretending that black lives really do matter in our society now doesn't make it so. We have to distinguish between a conviction and the empirical data.

How many of you have seen the signs outside of churches saying, "All are welcome"??? We have one ourselves, but what does it mean? Does that mean that Atheists, Agnostics, Muslims, Buddhists, homeless, transients, gays and transgender folks are welcome? Ours does, but the rest; I'm thinkin' maybe not so much. Maybe "all" really doesn't mean anything. We have to be specific; generalizations such as "all" just don't cut it.

Racism is like a cancer from which this country must recover, and the first step to recovery is admission that we have an illness. Denial doesn't cure. Here are a few examples I found on the UUA website:

Seth Carrier-Ladd, settled minister in Muncie, Indiana wrote: "Joseph Houseman, a 63-year old white man stood on the street in Kalamazoo, MI with a rifle in his hands. When the police arrived, he refused to identify himself, he gave them the middle finger, and he

cursed them out. Did they feel threatened and shoot him down on the spot? No... they spent 40 minutes talking him down, eventually convincing him to hand over the rifle peacefully. In fact, not only was Joseph Houseman not shot, he wasn't even arrested. Not only was he not shot or arrested, he was given back his gun the very next day.”

“In contrast, Tamir Rice, a twelve-year-old black boy holding a toy gun in a park is shot to death by police within two seconds of their arrival.”

The police didn't even take two minutes to find out what Tamir was doing, or that the gun was a toy. When's the last time police got called about a white kid playing with a toy gun? Black kids can't just play with toy guns. White kids can.

We've all heard the litany of black men being killed by police: Eric Garner, Michael Brown, and Philando Castile, among others. According to CNN: “black and Hispanic men were 2.8 and 1.7 times more likely to be killed by police use of force than white men.”

The practice has its own term: “legal intervention”. Because it's “legal”, police are rarely held accountable for the deaths. In The Reporter-Herald on July 4th.

“**Tulsa, OK:** A former Oklahoma police officer who said he was trying to protect his daughter when he fatally shot her black boyfriend in 2014 is on trial for the third time in seven months, after jurors in previous trials couldn't decide whether he was guilty of murder. Experts say Shannon Kepler's case illustrates a broad unwillingness to convict police officers, particularly in cases of fatal shootings . . . ‘Police officers are viewed in America as they can do no wrong, black or white,’ said Tulsa civil rights activist Marq Lewis, who described what he called a ‘cultural marketing’ of the infallible, crime-busting police officer. They sacrifice their lives every day; when you keep hearing that over and

over, at is always going to be at the back of your mind . . . this is an American perception problem”.

My ex-husband was a Federal Law Enforcement Agent with the Coast Guard, and because of that, when I heard about the killing of Michael Brown, my first thought was, and I told my husband, “somebody was gonna die out there, and that officer could have been you”. He completely turned my head around when he pointed out something that I hadn’t picked up on. Officer Wilson was driving a large SUV. So? So the gun rests in the center console. Wilson was between Brown and the gun. He had to have already drawn the gun before Brown leaned in and took it. You don’t draw your gun unless you’re prepared to shoot somebody. Michael Brown was gonna die out there.

We hear about the disproportionate number of young black and brown men incarcerated or killed by police, and many people think, “Well, that’s because they commit a disproportionate number of crimes”. I’d really like to see the true numbers on that; how many black or brown people are talked down or let go with a warning as opposed to white people.

Now, *I* know that if I get stopped by the police, most of the time they’ll just tell me not to do that again and let me go, unless I’ve blown past them at 15 miles over the speed limit . . . still, I get a ticket and a scolding. I’m never in fear for my life. That’s because – well, look at me! That is, by the way, one of those “white privilege” instances that we take for granted.

My ex and I lived in a houseboat in Shoreline Marina in Long Beach, California for 10 years. Many of you know we worked with the police and with at-risk youth and gangs. We had a core group of teens to whom we taught leadership skills, and they were very

responsible. One year, we went on vacation and asked two of the youth – Absalon & Sal - to go check on our boat a few times. Michael told the shore patrol, who had jurisdiction there, that these kids might be on our boat, so not to worry. Nevertheless, while we were gone, he received a phone call from the Long Beach Police Department. Someone had called 911 because they saw these two brown kids in our boat. Michael told them the deal and hung up. The phone rang again, and it was Sal. He was crying hysterically, scared to death. “MIKE!!!! He pulled me off the boat and threw me face down on the dock and put his foot on my back! I couldn’t move, and he wouldn’t listen to me! He pulled out a gun! I thought he was gonna shoot me!” Michael talked him down, and assured Sal that he’d take care of it when we got home. The situation got resolved, but the terror Sal suffered at the hands of the police will never go away.

Sometime later, Michael and I went away again, and didn’t ask the kids to come to the boat. We returned to find a half-dozen people sitting on the bow of our boat with tiki torches, voting each other off the island. Did anyone call 911? NO! It was a bunch of WHITE people! Michael was *furious!* He started yelling at them, “Who told you you could use our boat??? Get off!!!” (Or words to that effect). They had no idea why he was so upset.

Now, I’m aware that human nature is to identify differences between people, places, and things, so as to determine superiority. We love competition. (Well, *I* don’t, but collectively, humans do): My car is better than yours, my school is better than yours, my team, my town, country, leader, is better than yours. It’s pettiness that perseveres. An acquaintance told me, “There’s always been prejudice, and there always will be”. Yes, that may well be true, but when taken to extremes by people in power, it goes beyond prejudice to abuse. Let’s just say it: white people have the power. When white people

decide that other, “inferior” races don’t deserve the same treatment, they’re getting into dangerous territory. Can you say “Hitler”?

In another article, on page 8A of that same newspaper - boy, was it a gold mine! – “Black babies 2.5 times more likely to die than white babies”. The article states that “If black infants born in the United States had all of the health and medical benefits enjoyed by white infants, nearly 4,000 fewer of them would die each year, new research suggests. That would amount to a nearly 60% decrease in the number of black infants that die each year. Instead, black babies are nearly 2.5 times more likely than white babies during their first year of life.”

Carrier-Ladd says in his sermon: “Black people in Los Angeles may know that South Central LA has one primary care physician for every 13,000 residents; the nearby white town Bel Air has one for every 214 residents. Similarly, southeast Washington, DC has one pediatrician for every 3700 children while nearby white Bethesda has one for every 400. A black person may well be given less pain treatment at the doctor than a white person would be, and a black person experiencing a heart attack is less likely than a white person to receive best-practice care.”

And there are those in power who want to cut Medicaid, which is the only source of health insurance for a substantial number of people. They think this will be an incentive for people to find work. Do we really think people aren’t working because they have Medicaid? Are you kidding me? They have Medicaid because they can’t find a job! If any of you have had to try and find work, you know what I’m talking about. I’m a highly educated, skilled, dependable worker, WHITE even - yet I’ve taken part-time jobs for \$5 an hour because that’s all I could get! Try supporting a family with that income!!!

Oh yeah, and when I took that menial job, I was a 40-year-old newlywed, just moved with my husband to Washington, DC. Now, I need to preface this with a side note about my ex. If you've seen Michael, you'll know that he's 6'4" and brown. Puerto Rican; Afro-Caribbean. He has African features, and he's often mistaken for African-American. Well, we found a cute little apartment complex in Oxon Hill, Maryland, just outside the beltway, not far from his job at Headquarters. The manager seemed quite friendly and took one look at us and said, "I've got just the place for you. It's all I have right now, but I think you'll like it". She took us to a downstairs apartment with linoleum floors, no air conditioning, and what sounded like a family of elephant trainers or gymnasts in the apartment above us. It was right next to the beltway; trucks kept us awake rumbling by, and I was afraid to go to sleep alone at night when Michael was on that shift. Months later, the manager left and a new one took over. He was like, "You're in *THAT* apartment?" Well yeah, that's all she had. He then told us that the woman who rented to us was a racist, and he moved us to a beautiful 3rd floor apartment with wood floors and air conditioning for the same price.

This isn't an isolated incident either. Carrier-Ladd points out that: "Black people are less likely to be shown apartments and homes in certain neighborhoods than white people". I might add, in apartment complexes as well.

Now, I'm not trying to be Debbie Downer here. Just because things aren't the way they should be, that doesn't mean we just shrug our shoulders or despair at the way things are. We aren't waiting on the world to change. We're the people who go out and affect change. That requires that first of all, we expect to be uncomfortable as we find our way. We're willing to experience discomfort, because we know that without discomfort, there can be no change.

In our quest to radiate love, peace and justice, we must include commitment to this particular flavor of justice. We're not afraid of commitment. We're committed to becoming officially designated a Welcoming Congregation by the Unitarian Universalist Association, we've organized Martin Luther King celebrations, Peace in the Park, and Mother's Day demonstrations. We're committed to supporting local nonprofits who share our values. We're what's called a "force multiplier". We partner with others in order to expand the impact we and they make in our community.

We've admitted that in the present reality, black and brown lives don't matter as much as white lives; now we MUST put energy into changing that. We need to become part of the solution. Just as we heterosexuals need to educate ourselves and others about the LGBTQ+ community, we white folks need to educate ourselves and others about black history and current events in the non-white community.

Here's a touch of education for you: The reason I say "black" and not African-American is that African-American is not a color; it's a culture. I grew up in Federal Housing that was built after WWII for the returning soldiers. It's what you probably know as "the projects". I was often the only white girl in my elementary school, and most everyone else was African-American or Mexican (California is, after all, Mexico del Norte). I grew up listening to African-American music, learning to dance watching "Soul Train", and playing double-dutch jump rope with my dark-skinned homies. At talent shows, I was usually one of The Supremes. My dark-skinned ex-husband, on the other hand, was raised in a Catholic/Hispanic culture, spoke Spanish fluently, and couldn't name three of Smokey Robinson's hit songs if his life depended on it. Now you can't say you didn't learn anything in church. It's a start. Now what else can we do?

We as individuals and as a congregation need to support organizations that fight for equality, such as Fuerza Latina, the Southern Christian Law Center, the NAACP, and any others that we can identify as standing on the side of love.

We can write letters to the editor and vote for politicians who acknowledge racial inequality and are willing to commit to work for change. We can donate to and join organizations that work for equality. If you're already doing these things, you are blessed and a blessing.

Martin Luther King dreamed of a Beloved Community, and that's what we're trying to create here. Racial equality and the bold statement that Black and Brown Lives Matter are a part of that Beloved Community. We have yet to achieve it, but the achievement of those goals is worth doing the hard work to make it happen. This is our challenge. May it be so.