

# WHEEL OF POWER/PRIVILEGE



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**A Plea to extend our Honoring of Black History through the entire year,  
one White Woman's Journey into increased Awareness,  
and what's a Community Meditation Circle got to do with it?\***

an offering by Chris Chance, PhD

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(completed April 2024, with the help of a diverse team of contributing readers,  
to share with UU friends who are travelers on the journey of social justice, love, and unity)

Sunday morning MLK weekend (January, 2024), I experienced a different world just miles from my home. I was singing with a group called Rock My Soul ([ProjectMusicWorks.org](https://ProjectMusicWorks.org)) at the New Hope Baptist Church in Portsmouth, NH. My mostly White choir was invited to participate by the Black woman minister at this majority Black congregation.

I have attended many MLK weekend services over the years, but this was my first time experiencing one in a Black Baptist church. The service was not merely an intellectual exercise in understanding the contribution of one great spiritual leader in the righteous fight for justice. There was a visceral sense in the room that we were honoring the memory of a murdered brother. The song, poetry, reminders of the Reverend Dr. King's effort to speak and write the truth even when incarcerated, even when under threat, were poignant. Images from historic film footage included MLK preaching and leading marches, and throngs of people attending his burial, after he was assassinated for speaking truth to power and calling for needed change. In a country where people were kidnapped from their homeland, enslaved to support a colonial economy, subjected to lynchings and massacres and forced segregation after emancipation from slavery, and continued suffering from hate crime, prejudice and public policy blocking socioeconomic advancement, Dr. King had peacefully spoken the truth. In King's honor, we sang our hearts out to roots gospel songs like "Heaven Help us All!" And "Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me 'Round!" It was impossible not to cry through the lyrics "Heaven help the Black man if he struggles one more day; heaven help the White man if he turns his back away! Heaven help the man who kicks the man who has to crawl; Heaven help us all!" Our voices were raised together to sing these songs that I had recently learned, and most in the congregation had probably known since childhood. The joy of hope felt deeply shared, in all our bones, together.

One speaker shared about the long battle to convince NH state leaders to recognize Martin Luther King Day as a holiday. Many congregants present knew

the history well and had been part of this ongoing advocacy effort, started in the 1970s and not accepted into legislation until 1999. (Being a White Massachusetts native transplanted to NH in adulthood, this was news to me). I noticed when I needed a bathroom break that the doors were carefully locked when anyone exited, and also monitored for re-entry. Protection was needed. Vigilance was exercised and precautions were taken.

My singing group was welcomed with open arms and invited to the pancake breakfast that followed the service. I left feeling uplifted by the togetherness, and yet filled with sorrow as well. Hate crimes continue. These Black neighbors have reason to hold fear, and a deep right to feel angry, but continue to hope and pray for peace. Black theologians teach us Christian faith has been a bridge for many African Americans to reject fear and anger. A Black woman present at the service explained to me their shared belief that if one chooses faith in the path of Jesus, His Love is the guiding light. In Unitarian Universalist circles, we also value love and deep kindness; we just come at it differently. I felt connected, yet aware of my difference in privilege in this sacred space, where I arrived as a guest, guided by the universal language of music sung from the soul.

I have much more to learn, and plan to continue approaching experiences that break my habit of social segregation. I was deeply struck by the fact that a palpably different experience of daily life was happening just a few miles from where I live, in a majority White neighborhood where few people even bother to lock their front doors at night...

That same evening of MLK Sunday, I served as a song-leader at another service organized by the Dover Area Religious Leaders Association (DARLA), and shared some history I had just learned. I was leading the song "We Shall Overcome," which I personally associated with Joan Baez during the 1960s Civil Rights marches. Digging into history, I learned the melody originated as the spiritual "I'll Be Alright" from the time of enslavement when Black people sent messages through music for survival, connection, and courage. The songs were a reclaiming of humanity and the basic human right to joy. Sorrow songs, such as "This Little Light of Mine" and "Gonna Sit at the Welcome Table" were centered on imagining a brighter future where they would finally be allowed to shine their light or have a place at the table. Folks wrote the songs out of faith and hope. "I'll Be Alright" had evolved over the years, with words changed and verses added to meet historic moments. In 1947, the song was published in "The People's Song Bulletin" of The Highlander Folk School in Tennessee, where union organizers

were receiving training. Pete Seeger joined with Guy Carawan and Frank Hamilton to more broadly publish the song as “We Shall Overcome” in 1960. Soon after, a group of college students at a Highlander conference on “Singing In the Movement” were taught the song. One of these students was Jamilla Jones, who had walked to school as a child during the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1956, and later had sung in the Montgomery Trio and was associated with the Freedom Singers. In a 2011 oral history interview for the Smithsonian Museum of African American History and Culture (available to the public now online), Ms. Jones recalls adding the verse “We are unafraid... today!” while sitting in the dark during a police raid of the Highlander school.

At a *peaceful* gathering for training in *nonviolent* protest, Jamilla Jones found herself *trapped in the dark* during a police raid. She felt the power of her voice in a new way when she was asked to quiet down. She did not quiet down. Jamilla Jones just kept singing louder, encouraging herself and her friends through the fear. In the Smithsonian video of her oral history, 51 years later, we can see the twinkle in her eye and hear the power of her voice as she recalls that moment in her youth, and sings out: “We are unafraid!”

The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. quoted lyrics from “We shall Overcome” during what was to be his final sermon, four days before his assassination in April, 1968, praying for truth and justice to prevail.

*We have not yet overcome* as a people in this country, and I am learning more about the change that is still needed every day. I am learning to step back to see myself in the context of my personal White privilege, which has contributed to blindspots and times of lapses in active compassion for my neighbors. I am one who was *not* actively denied access to formal education, one who has *not* had to struggle on an unfair playing field to access basic necessities like healthy food, decent healthcare, or consistent shelter. The shade of my skin has afforded me some protection many people do not have.

I listen in awe of the patience and joyful persistence of those still seeking healing from “spiritual, moral, and material harm.” That’s how Drs. Ragland and Salazar of the grassroots Truth-Telling Project put it, as they help neighbors all over the country find ways to heal intergenerational wounds, together, creating cultures of reparation: the necessary midpoint between truth and reconciliation ([truthtellingproject.org](http://truthtellingproject.org)). A making amends and repairing wounds together is needed, and is underway in many neighborhoods. Other countries (e.g., Germany, South Africa) have done better with recovery from genocide, apartheid, and related social atrocities than we have in the USA. Systemic healing efforts

are needed because collective trauma is *ongoing*, and can clearly be seen and heard when we choose to look and listen. Recognizing the stories of mistreatment is considered by those who have been mistreated the first step in any reconciliation: to see our wrongs. Grassroots efforts are needed because the federal government is too slow to take a moral stand on the issue of ongoing racism that could disrupt the comfort of those at the top of the socio-economic hierarchy who are holding onto material wealth by keeping poor people poor (Mathew Desmond, Poverty, by America, 2023).

Some back story: one White woman in NH trying to break silence and understand where my voice might fit:

In 2016, I was disturbed by activation of racist and sexist voices in federal leadership, when the Trump administration took office. Looking back, I was lulled into a false optimism by the hopefulness of the Obama administration, and surprised by the backlash of activated racism around me. I was realizing I needed significant re-education.

My personal racial identity includes being a direct descendent of Mayflower Pilgrims on my mother's side. It was also my mother who recommended I read the book Mayflower by Nathaniel Philbrook (2006), to learn more about the whole story of my family line, including the cruel behavior of my Pilgrim ancestors toward the indigenous tribes such as the Wampanoag peoples. She thought I should be aware of the whole picture. As a child I had simply been told my ancestors were brave pioneers seeking religious freedom. In reality, my ancestors were also seeking freedom from British laws against subjugation and enslavement of other people. I recall visiting the Plymouth Plantation history museum as a child in the 1970s, and walking through the reconstructed colonial village full of exhibits about Pilgrim ingenuity, use of tools, and farming techniques. Returning to the same living history museum with my daughter in 2009, exhibits had changed to include celebration of indigenous life and descriptions of violent attacks on indigenous tribes and disease spread instigated by the White colonists. As scholars sought out a greater variety of voices to describe people's lives after the 1620 colonial settlement in Plymouth, Massachusetts, educational exhibits were updated. My daughter enjoyed the museum, and her reaction to learning some of the darker stories was one of curiosity, not shame or fear. I understand this educational resource is now called Plimoth Patuxet Museums, further honoring the whole of history by including the

original Algonquian language word for a band of the Wampanoag tribal confederation decimated by colonization.

Like many of us, my identity is multifaceted. Looking at the wheel of power graphic by Sylvia Duckworth (inspired by Columbia Law School Professor Kimberle Crenshaw's ideas on intersectional identity and systems of inequity), some aspects of my identity like my White racial/ethnic status fall in the center, suggesting a high level of privilege; while others, such as my gender as a woman, are relatively more marginalized. A guide to approaching the concept of racial identity is to recognize that if you have never thought about it, probably you were born into a position of racial privilege in the social hierarchy, where some of your behaviors and practices are culturally centered and accepted as the majority "norm." You might enjoy the privilege of not having to think about your race every time you walk into a new space at your school or place of work. If you find yourself experiencing no fear of engaging a stranger in a "lively debate" in a public forum, you are probably living near the center of the wheel of privilege.

Now in middle age, I can look back at my personal life course in terms of teachable moments about power and privilege. My childhood experience included some times of stress and challenge, such as variable socioeconomic status due to the divorce of my parents. I lived in a low income neighborhood and experienced physical violence briefly, but my college-educated White mother was able to shift back into the white-collar workforce full-time and buy a house, so my situation improved. Some diversity was present in my extended family including a Japanese aunt and biracial cousins. I was born in 1967, a young child in the early 1970s in the suburbs of Boston, when busing from the city for desegregation was the policy in Massachusetts. I've spoken to UU friends in the past about watching my mother extend kindness to my Black school friend, who was once stuck at my house during a snowstorm, unable to get home to her family in inner-city Boston. I noticed, as a first grade child, the terror she seemed to be feeling, triggered especially by my mother's inability to help her properly braid her hair in the morning after our impromptu sleepover. A scholarship student at Brown University in the 1980s, I was curious to understand more when a student newspaper featured an article stating "Brown University is predominantly white and therefore racist." Given an active African-American Studies department and consciousness of the importance of diversity in the study of oral history, campus leadership was responsive, and set up town meeting style forums for students to discuss personal stories, reactions, responses, feelings and ideas on the topic of

race relations on campus. I was given the opportunity to sit with the discomfort of social conflict, and learn from people's spoken sense of truth.

When I was age 23, my 21-year-old sister was killed suddenly in an accident. Her bicycle was hit by a car. A distracted, overtired driver did not see the stop sign and my sister Jenny was brain dead just hours later. Like anyone who has lost a young family member, I carry this sorrow deep within me as I move through my life. The pain reminds me of the preciousness of time, and the vulnerability of human bodies. The pain of losing Jenny was almost too much for my mother to bear. So, I can almost begin to imagine how the families of a young person murdered, killed by hate, must suffer. I realize I am privileged to not have to live with that level of pain myself.

My call to more racial identity consciousness, humility, and trying to help break silence has also been motivated by listening to the experiences of Black friends when I attended graduate school in a relatively racially diverse location. I witnessed my grad school friends who were Black or biracial follow careful codes of conduct to try to avoid police harassment in everyday situations. Now having resided and worked many years in NH, I have fewer daily interactions with people of color, but when clients of color do arrive in my psychotherapy practice, their experiences of fear, situations of feeling othered, pressures of representation, and the sting of daily discrimination and microaggressions are clear. I have certainly also been impacted by the experiences of my daughter, a child with an olive skin tone given Ashkenazi Jewish heritage on her father's side. She experiences being assigned various racial identities by others, including as a teen here in NH, due to her racially ambiguous appearance. She has been privy to unfiltered conversations about race that most young women who have experienced White privilege do not tend to hear, given pressure on people of color to code-switch/verbally and behaviorally assimilate to avoid prejudice in the presence of the White gaze.

Like many of us during the surreal early Covid-19 pandemic time, starting 2020, I found myself unusually confined. In my non-traditional blended family life now feeling overcrowded in our shared home, I was seeing patients through my computer on TeleHealth for the first time and trying to be helpful to the four very frustrated adolescent girls/young women who had been removed from their regular school activities. In May of 2020, along with any American who owns a television set or a computer, I saw the horrifying video of George Floyd's agonizing death under the knee of a White police officer. I think the mama bear



part of my identity got poked that day at some new level. My inner voice seemed to be yelling at me: "This will not be the world for our children!"

So, I marched with the UNH students under the Black Lives Matter banner in my orthopedic shoes, down the main street of Durham, New Hampshire. We chanted names of just a few representatives of the many victims of racial violence: Trayvon Martin, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd. Speeches from youth were inspiring. A passer-by yelled something hateful out of a car window. I told the students around me: "don't respond- that's how we stay non-violent!" I felt my mind enter that liminal space of confusion.... I knew I had wandered into the tip of an iceberg I did not fully understand...

### Wisdom and Resources from a Racial Justice Think Tank:

Seeking company in my confusion, I joined in with a group gathered and facilitated by a respected colleague in psychology, Anita Remig, PhD. Anita practices the Baha'i faith, and has academic experience in the area of justice studies and was far better informed than I about how to skillfully enter the conversation about race. Several of us had a lot of experience working with trauma survivors and had some understanding of the magnitude of harm we were witnessing in real time in daily media. Monthly Zoom meetings with a group organized by Anita became a critical source of learning for me. The meetings started as a loose discussion about participants' concerns and observations and included and amplified voices of people of color from academics to artists who participated and also arrived at times as invited expert guests. The group felt in some ways like a lifeline to social sanity for me and evolved into a specialized book club which Anita termed "The racial justice think tank." I continued meeting for about three years.

During that time I felt empowered to take on a new advocacy role within my state professional organization (The New Hampshire Psychological Association, NHPA). While researching negative mental health impacts of past restrictions on access to reproductive health services, tracking legal assaults on what we used to call pro-choice (and is now more aptly termed "reproductive justice"), I was becoming acutely aware of repercussions of Supreme Court precedent now shifting important areas of societal discord to the state government level. I also became aware that the issue of reproductive choice and health access, close to the hearts of White women, was historically championed most strongly by Black women, who were most intimately aware of repercussions of atrocities like rape, forced sterilization and medical experimentation without consent on those most



marginalized. When we turn to understanding our country's history in its full reality, it becomes impossible not to see the wounds and social echoes of enslavement all around us. And indeed, there is current writing on the lack of reproductive choice as a type of slavery. Individuals' bodily autonomy or body sovereignty is not being respected.

The more I delved into reading history from more diverse perspectives, the more I became aware of social policies keeping the playing field uneven. Anti-Black systems history is wide-ranging, from Black veterans being denied benefits White veterans enjoyed, to red-lining practices effectively banning buyers of color from competing and gaining wealth through real-estate, to food deserts impacting the health of inner city families, to unfair testing and admission policies to higher education, to clear racial injustice in policing and incarceration practices, to unequal healthcare access and treatment (mental and physical), to denial of federal loans to Black farmers. Studies within psychology are consistent with concerns about ongoing trauma in communities of color. The Center for Disease Control has published updated research on adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), which suggests mechanisms by which race-related trauma impacts lifespan development. Picture a pyramid with layers of trauma contributing to early death of non-White people, layered on starting from birth. Generational embodiment/historic trauma is the bottom layer; social conditions/local context is the next; adverse childhood experiences are layered on next; then disrupted neurodevelopment; social and emotional challenges; adoption of health risk behavior; disease, disability, and social challenges. In other words, when we see an early death in the Black community, much of the contributing trauma *could have been prevented* through more responsive social policy and more inclusive, equitable societal norms. Another way of looking at shorter life spans and poorer health for our Black neighbors is the "weathering" effect on the body related to the constant, ongoing, inescapable stress of racism (per Arline Geronimus, book cited in recommended reading list).

When we learn a polluted river is causing people cancer, we should try to clean it up. It seems racism is like a toxin poisoning our national groundwater. Will we respond? Like a poison, isn't this having a negative impact on us all? While Black people are killed by racism, White people are corrupted and limited by it in subtler ways. Racism gets in the way of authentic, fully loving human relationships (See Vermont's Peace and Justice Center online, [picvt.org](http://picvt.org)).

Embedded psychological forces maintain a caste-like hierarchy that many of us would not consciously choose for our country. We each internalize societal

messages deeply and at a young age. If we could ask a fish how the water feels, a fish might say, "What is water?" We do not have the perspective to clearly perceive what we are in, when we are encompassed within it (concept attributed to the late novelist and essayist David Foster Wallace). It takes the inclusion of diverse voices and perspectives to help us see from more of a bird's eye view. Journalist Ta Nehesi-Coates' heart-wrenching book Between the World and Me, at its core a love letter to his son on the occasion of having to educate him about dangers in our country specific to young Black men, is a must read for all (and thank you Town of Exeter for promoting it as a community read several years ago). While genocide and other forms of active violence may be seen as the tip of the pyramid of white supremacy, the silence of white neighbors provides a foundation that allows racist social structures to persist, and oppressive legislation to continue (concept by Ellen Tuzzolo and SafeHouse Progressive Alliance).

Here is a list of resources I found deeply educational, that I was introduced to, or reminded of, during our Racial Justice Think Tank meetings, and in discussion with concerned colleagues since:

- Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings that Formed the Movement, by Kimberle Crenshaw, Neil Gotanda, Gary Peller, and Kendall Thomas, 1996
- Harvard's "implicit association test," available online to test unconscious bias ([implicit.harvard.edu](http://implicit.harvard.edu), started 1998 with continuing updates)
- Why Are All The Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria, by Beverly Daniel Tatum, PhD, 1997
- The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness, by Michelle Alexander, 2010
- Waking up White: And Finding Myself in the Story of Race, by Debbie Irving, 2014
- Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption, by Bryan Stevenson, 2014
- Between the World and Me, by Ta-Nehisi Coates, 2015
- White Rage: the Unspoken Truth of our Racial Divide, by Carol Anderson, 2016
- My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending of our Hearts and Bodies, by Resmaa Menakem, 2017
- White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White people to Talk About Racism, by Robin DiAngelo, 2018
- Mindful of Race: Transforming Racism from the Inside Out, by Ruth King, 2018
- How to be an Anti-Racist, by Ibram X. Kendi, 2019
- Me and White Supremacy, by Layla Saad, 2020 (with suggested questions and thought exercises for discussion and/or individual journaling)

- Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents, by Isabel Wilkerson, 2020
- From Here to Equality: Reparations for Black Americans in the Twenty-first Century, by Kirsten Mullen and William Darity, Jr., 2020
- The 1619 Project, by Nikole Hannah-Jones, 2021 (Previewed in 2019 by The New York Times Magazine on the 400 year anniversary of the beginning of American Slavery)
- The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together, by Heather McGhee, 2021
- All The White Friends I Couldn't Keep, by Andre Henry, 2022
- A Fever in the Heartland: The Ku Klux Klan's Plot to Take Over America, and the Woman Who Stopped Them, by Timothy Egan, 2023
- Weathering: The Extraordinary Stress of Ordinary Life in an Unjust Society, by Arline Geronimus, 2023
- Youtube: "Developing Your Praxis for Building Diverse Youth Communities," with Dr. Brian Ragsdale, Feb, 2024 (of Yale Youth Ministries: <https://yaleyouthministryinstitute.org>)

### One Black Woman's Experience, in her own words:

As I started to write this essay, trusted advisors suggested it was very important that I get feedback from people of varied cultural and racial backgrounds to contribute and assist in my thinking and editing process, given my inevitable continued blindspots as a White writer. So, I gathered input from several people who generously volunteered time to be involved in the writing process. These readers varied in terms of gender, cultural background, and race. They included women who identify as people of color, and two Black women specifically. The personal truth shared by one of my Black woman readers was so poignant, clear, and heartfelt, I want to present her words with specific accuracy.

This friend from back in my school years did not wish to be identified, for her personal safety and peace of mind. She is understanding, joyful and fun, and has whole-heartedly accepted and greeted me into her life whenever our paths have crossed. She is also quite brilliant, very well-educated, and holds a high-level position within a large company in another state.

My old friend paid attention decades ago when I mentioned to her that some woven slippers I wore had belonged to my sister who died young. I had cleaned them out of Jenny's last apartment in Burlington, VT, and kept them to wear. Years later, my old friend told her son the story of

my sister, bought him some similar wooly woven slippers, and they both playfully called them their Jenny slippers. She honored the memory of my lost sister naturally, joyfully, and without being asked. I did not have to cry, or scream for her to hear me. I had simply quietly shared my story one day long ago, and she has held it gently in her heart forever.

She wanted to make sure I was being clear about healthcare inequities shortening the lives even of financially successful Black people. She was not familiar with the “Wheel Power/Privilege” about intersectional identities presented at the start of the essay. She was aware of a sense of rage in response to that graphic. She reflected that, while it may have some educational value for my White audience: “When I walk out my front door, the only identity that matters to anyone is that I am a Black Woman.” She expects to be treated unjustly. She reflected that it is her experience that, when a White woman cries, everyone seems to respond with concern. Her world is different from that. She feels it would be naïve for her to expect appropriate empathy for her tears. “A White woman’s tears are real.”

She shared about reaction in her workplace after the death of George Floyd. They seemed to want to check on her, the only Black woman in the building. She politely suggested the HR representative provide some education to White men in the building instead. She shared about her White colleagues’ naive dismay when she did not want to publish her picture on the new website. She explained to them her work is much easier when she can pass as White in emails and on the phone, and bypass the constant burden of racist reactivity at least sometimes. They fell silent, and did not request her photo again.

She talked about her son’s experience. Despite living in an upper middle-class neighborhood and enjoying access to excellent formal education, he is very careful. Around police, he takes his hands out of his pockets to show a posture of non-threatening surrender, just in case. He expects his White friends’ families to be afraid of him. He is a gentle-hearted 20-something, just finding his way. “As he is still trying to figure out his world, he is aware the adult world is afraid of him!” As a mom, she feels terrified he will be killed *every time he leaves the house*. “There is danger just in his Blackness.” She knows he has suffered emotionally from race-related stress for his whole life.

How does she deal with all this?

“I have so many reasons to choose joy every day!”

As we caught up about how our lives are going, and I realized she has a whole lot on her plate lately, I apologized if reading this essay stressed her out. She laughed heartily, and then we laughed together at the obvious absurdity of my question. The daily reality of U.S. racism is causing her and her family stress; my essay just points out what is already quite obvious to her. We were connecting on the phone, but I could easily picture her wide, easy smile as we sat with the absurdity together.

Modern Society meets the Brain OR the Blessings and Challenges of Technology:

A positive of today's high-tech world is that a person who does not happen to have the time or ability to read 10+ scholarly books this year or lacks immediate access to a think tank group or specialized book club might be able to find a five minute YouTube interview by authors of interest that will be informative and immediately further social dialogue. (I recommend closer reading before engaging in any debate, as reductionist approaches to complex ideas can easily become part of the problem of unskillful/disrespectful public discourse). The very informative “1619 Project: A New Origin Story” has now been made into a documentary series on Hulu for those who might have missed it in the New York Times Magazine or in book form. It offers a long overdue reframe of U.S. History, centering voices of people kidnapped from their African homeland and enslaved here to help build the colonial economy, and the previously too often silenced voices of their descendants. Enslavement was part of White colonists’ idea of their freedom to build a new nation (as English law at the time had disallowed the holding of slaves). My ancestral people could not have built what we now call the U.S.A at the rate and in the way it happened without free labor of enslaved African-Americans. The whole story can be hard to hear and read, but is the whole truth.

Online groups like “Coming to the TABLE” (Taking America Beyond the Legacy of Enslavement) have emerged to help people engage in thoughtful truth-telling and sharing of knowledge to help dismantle inequitable systems and structures. Organizations like the Truth-Telling Project ([truthtellingproject.org](http://truthtellingproject.org)) are also supporting community outreach and education including collecting and sharing oral history accounts and sponsoring events on special holidays such as Juneteenth (the June 19th celebration of the news of emancipation finally reaching the enslaved people of Texas in 1865, long after President Lincoln had

issued the “Emancipation Proclamation” in January, 1863). All of these organizations have an online presence, offering broad access to empathy-building facts and ideas.

Psychologists work every day with the reality that we humans are constantly affected by the survival reactivity of our brain structure. The limbic system is designed to create an automatic fight, flight, or freeze response to help us survive as mammals in actual survival situations. Cortisol pumps through our brains if we look at the horizon and perceive that a tiger is running toward us. But in today's world, the survival brain is easily confused. Does that email from my boss that sounds somewhat terse indicate a danger to my livelihood? Does that headline I saw about someone wanting to build a border wall mean my life is under some immediate threat?

Given brain bias toward survival reactivity, it is relatively easy to gather a group of people, activate their survival brain around fear, and direct them toward an angry or hateful outlet for that fear. It is far more complicated to teach calm, compassionate awareness, which requires constant overriding of the natural survival response. As humans we have to consciously work to not fall into patterns of over-dichotomizing the world into categories of *friend versus foe*. When a stimulus meets our senses, the mind-body system has an immediate emotional response, we then interpret that response, and finally develop a thought or belief related to that initial automatic reaction. In a way, *all of our power of free will lies in the tiny pause between reaction and interpretation*. If we learn techniques to lengthen this pause, reserve judgment, and observe our reaction contemplatively before deciding on an opinion, a whole new world of thinking is possible. It is hard to develop habits of conscious contemplation, noticing and tracking reactions in our mind-body system and choosing to mentally perspective-take (imagine ourselves in another's shoes). It is even harder if we are hungry, tired, overworked, already struggling to meet our family's basic needs, or feeling targeted and unsafe. Our survival brains can hijack our behavior. Cycles of violence can erupt easily among us humans.

This brain tendency toward "*friend vs. foe*" or us/them dichotomizing informs training of soldiers for war. Mental de-humanizing of the enemy overrides the competing natural tendency to be compassionate and emotionally attach to other humans. Social conditioning creating negative associations with darker skin tones has caused extensive bias and harm. Sarah Tishkoff, professor of genetics and biology at UPenn, explains that race is “both a biological myth and social reality” (according to Alan Yu's WHYY@PBS interview July 30, 2019: “What is

race? It isn't skin color, as some young people are learning"). This is consistent with the 2003 Human Genome Project results confirming there is no genetic basis for race labels, as 99.9% of our DNA is the same. Categorizing human beings based on skin color alone clearly does not make any scientific sense, and certainly does not represent any individual's whole sense of personhood or unique and complex identity. Reductionist labels easily become weapons which groups higher in a hierarchy use to target less powerful groups as "other" or "less than."

A continuing challenge in modern US society concerns the deluge of misinformation and hateful rhetoric that is propagated by algorithms in our high-tech world that funnel agitating news headlines that function as good "clickbait" toward vulnerable consumers, creating discrete silos of reality. The constant cyber shouting match of reactive rhetoric keeps the economic wheels turning, feeding profit for media outlets dependent on the energy of public fear and hatred. This spinning, self-perpetuating tornado of aggressive, command and control style communication online is inherently harmful. The stress Americans are experiencing trying to sort through all the incoming overstimulation appears to be associated with significant increase in reports of anxiety. Internet-exacerbated differences in perception and understanding of what current social reality actually is perpetuates a seemingly endless stream of back-and-forth extremist hate speech. What was once considered a death threat, is now a routine anonymous "troll" post. For too many, the felt sense of terror is constant. For others, exhaustion turns to self-protective indifference.

#### Echoes of Past Mistakes, important not to forget lest we repeat...:

US immigration history is filled with stories of shifting patterns of othering as new people arrive. In the early 1900s, the US eugenics movement was popular and psychologists were involved with assessing immigrants' level of "deficiency" relative to standards of "superiority" in an effort to enhance the genetic quality of the human population. Not a shining moment in the history of Psychology ethics. Cultural bias, influenced by fears about competition for resources, set the direction of scientific inquiry, creating some very harmful pseudo-scientific trends. Eugenics perpetuated false narratives about how surface qualities like skin pigmentation or nose shape imply some truth about internal qualities like intelligence or "goodness." Realities of mammalian adaptation to external environmental factors like climate (e.g., closer to equator



leads to darker skin pigment adaptation) were not considered. The distinctly unloving approach of excising or “exterminating” the genetically “weak” ran rampant.

Even after emancipation from enslavement, “Black Codes” held back freed Blacks from property ownership and fair wages in the South, and designed punishments only for that group, including oppressive vagrancy laws restricting free public movement and measures to punish employers who might offer a fair wage. Similarly, “Jim Crow” laws, lasting from the 1800s until 1965, enforced legal segregation. The Supreme Court decision in *Plessy vs. Ferguson* establishing “separate but equal” laws occurred in 1896. Laws were enacted forcing sterilization of individuals labeled defective, and “anti-miscegenation” laws criminalized sexual relationships and marriage between people of different races. The label “White” was something Jewish American immigrants fought to preserve as a census label to avoid deportation during this frightening era. Given the Holocaust that was soon to happen in World War II Europe, “White” labeling may have saved Jewish lives, but Jewish Americans continued to suffer along with African-Americans and other immigrant groups by being barred from advancement by blatantly antisemitic policies affecting education, employment, housing, and social mobility. Black folks, indigenous people, women, anyone suffering with a mental illness or visible difference in ability was at risk of being ostracized. In the case of the mentally ill, inhumane warehousing practices were carried out and invasive surgeries performed without informed patient consent. \*\* (Eugenics ideas directly influenced WWII era German Naziism and genocide against Jewish people in service of creating a pure “Aryan” race, as described in James Whitman’s 2017 book [Hitler’s American Model: The United States and the Making of Nazi Race Law](#)).

The “Tuskegee experiment” in the 1960s involved a group of scientists recruiting and inhumanely using Black men’s bodies to study the course of syphilis. These men were misinformed about risks, and set up to slowly die despite treatment being available. Modern research suggests knowledge of this atrocity continues to cause Black people to fear and avoid professional medical care. Recent research suggests reports of pain by Black patients are indeed still minimized (PubMed Central at [ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](http://ncbi.nlm.nih.gov)), and anecdotal evidence such as Serena Williams’ distressing experience trying to get help after complications with delivery of her baby persist. Despite her fame as an athlete and wealth, she described to the press being treated as less than in a medical setting, being

unheard when describing her pain and knowledge of her condition, and nearly dying as a result.

Modern genetic studies about human origins (e.g., Mitochondrial Eve) have included misleading charts showing stooped dark-skinned homo sapiens morphing into upright light-skinned Europeans. The implied association of skin color with more primitive levels of evolution is insulting to people of color generally and particularly devaluing of people of color living in less industrialized locations.

My national professional organization, The American Psychological Association (APA), has published a formal “Apology to People of Color for APAs Role in Promoting, Perpetuating, and Failing to Challenge Racism, Racial Discrimination, and Human Hierarchy in the U.S.” This apology was published in October of 2021, and includes specific wording, “APA reaffirms that race is a social construct with no underlying genetic or biological basis and debunks the notion that different groups can be ranked hierarchically on the basis of physical characteristics.” Efforts to “decolonize psychology” recognize White eurocentric biases associated with Psychologists’ historic role in discriminatory practices from biased college admissions test construction to overpathologizing Black psychotherapy patients to incarcerating black people in asylums (as we did women). Our first Black woman APA president, Dr. Thema Bryant, shares clearly about her hope for continued progress in an instagram post: “Liberation psychology encourages us to go beyond coping strategies to resisting the lies of inferiority and dehumanization.”

The observable increase in Anti-Black Legislation (paralleling anti-LGBTQIA+ laws popping up in multiple states, and restrictions on reproductive healthcare access legislation):

There is power in education, and activated extremist factions have become well-organized and are strategically working to undermine social evolution toward more equity, consistent with the pattern of backlash we see over our history following times of signs of minority progress toward empowerment. Here in New Hampshire, the 2021 law HB 544 bans teaching materials in public school that claim “an individual, by virtue of his, or her race or sex, is inherently racist, sexist, or oppressive, whether consciously or unconsciously.” The law was attached to other legislation, and termed “Right To Freedom From Discrimination within Public Workplaces and Education.” Actually, legislation like this attempts to place a gag order on teachers trying to include Black voices in history. Between

January of 2021 and June of 2023, 44 states had introduced bills to restrict the teaching of Critical Race Theory, 18 states had formally imposed bans or restrictions, and New Hampshire is the only state in New England that has passed this type of law (according to Education Week: Edweek.org, June 2023 article by Sarah Schwartz).

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a term coined by law professor Kimberle Crenshaw, JD to describe a body of literature informed academics have deemed important to racial literacy. Professor Crenshaw wrote an OpEd called "King was a critical race theorist before there was a name for it" in the January 17, 2022 Los Angeles Times. She expresses grave concern about children now being pushed "not merely to defer [Rev. Dr Martin Luther] King's dream of racial equality, but to decommission it all together." CRT has been politicized and demonized as a weapon intended to shame White people, when it is merely an academic body of writing focusing on the study of relationships among social conceptions of race and ethnicity, politics and law relative to race, and racial themes in media. CRT provides an analytic tool to enable us to see how much racism and white supremacy show up in our systems (e.g., legal, educational, healthcare, incarceration, law-enforcement). CRT suggests racism is a systemic problem, and not merely a problem of individual prejudice.

Our country has a long history of banning books, starting in the 1600s when Thomas Morton's New English Canaan (1637) was banned by the New England Puritans, for criticizing the colonists' treatment of the indigenous people. Young adult books mentioning the word "menstruation" have been banned, as have books with "dangerous" ideas embodied in assertive female characters. Now attempts to restrict what young students can read is on the rise nationally, such as the Florida law essentially banning the use of words such as "gay" in public education. (See "A Brief History of Banned Books in America" by Chris Klimek, October 5, 2023, at [smithsonianmag.com](https://www.smithsonianmag.com) for more detail). Similarly, Galileo got pushback for his radical new ideas (published in 1632) about the planets revolving around the sun.

In a democratic country, will we continue to bury the bodies in unmarked graves and then ban the books written by observers to silence marginalized voices? Bans on thoughtful exchange of ideas attempt to erase people from history and keep those who are benefiting most from the status quo comfortable. We need access to a diversity of scholarly observation and thought to broaden our thinking and progress, collectively, in positive ways. Banning books about

struggles around social justice paves a road more likely to doom us to repeat the mistakes of the past.

In New Hampshire, the approximately 90% White census illustrates a relative lack of diversity and representation of people of color. This might be partly attributable to patterns of migration after emancipation, and the relative scarcity of jobs in New Hampshire compared to locations like Chicago; however, we in the North need to be aware that our history is not purely about being on the side of abolition. Racist legislation can be found dating back to 1714 in the state of New Hampshire, including curfews to prevent “Indian, Negro and Molatto servants and slaves [from causing] the disquiet and hurt of her Majesty’s good subjects.” In Durham, NH there is an ongoing effort to correct and update artwork and historic marker text which has focused on violence of indigenous people toward colonial settlers, versus the violence of colonizers toward the Abenaki, Pennacook, and Wabanaki people. *Seacoast Online* published an article June, 2020 entitled “Seacoast [NH] has a long history with the Ku Klux Klan,” including a photograph from the mid-1920s of a klan parade through the middle of Portsmouth.

Concerning federal level Supreme Court rulings have continued into 2023, with SCOTUS upending established equal protection law with its decisions in SFFA versus Harvard, and SFFA versus UNC, effectively eliminating the use of affirmative action in college admissions. The American Civil Liberties Union, (ACLU) reminds us “Many schools, as well as the courts, recognize that diversity exposes students to new ideas, and ways of thinking, prepares them to live and work with one another in a diverse society, and increases understanding and respect across differences. Those findings have not changed, although schools will need to rely more on other means of cultivating a campus, where students of all backgrounds can learn together.” ([aclu.org](https://www.aclu.org))

#### Positive Reparative Responses and Local venues for Education:

After the 2003 discovery of human remains under the city of Portsmouth, that turned out to be a paved-over African-American burial ground, a monument to remember free and enslaved Black people here in the NH seacoast region was erected. It is a beautiful and haunting memorial. [BlackHeritageTrailNH.org](https://www.blackheritagetrailnh.org) continues gathering stories and providing education to promote “awareness and appreciation of African-American History and life in order to build more inclusive communities today.” Black Heritage Trail leaders have promoted a documentary

film called "Shadows Fall North." Both free and enslaved Black people have resided in NH as far back as the 1600s.

Portsmouth also offers the Seacoast African American Culture Center (SAACC), housed in a section of the Discover Portsmouth Center. It started in 2000 as a small room in city hall. Their first exhibit was called "Quilts: The Underground Railroad Connection." Sandi Clark Kaddy, President of SAACC was quoted in *NH Magazine*, Feb 1, 2023 as saying, "Much of the legislation in our state that's come out in recent years around what and what not to teach about race has left educators like me in a bind and many of our Black and other community members of color feeling effectively silenced. Racist actions and talk happen today in New Hampshire, and we must be willing to hear, see, and talk about it if we are going to make this a state where everyone can be free."

The Racial Unity Team has been focusing on joining educators in building awareness among youth on what fairness and equity look like. They invite BIPOC artists to speak to students about how the arts have saved them and their communities from despair. The youth are invited to engage in creative expression of what a future without oppression, hate and bias would look like. Students have produced speeches, songs, poetry, petitions, cooking classes and fundraisers for the less fortunate. The work is slated to become a statewide initiative. Currently it serves Dover, Durham, Stratham, and Exeter ([www.racialunityteam.com](http://www.racialunityteam.com)).

### So, what is a White NH UU to do, and what do Community Circles have to do with it?

As we go along in our lives, the challenge of deciding where to direct precious psychological and spiritual energy resources can be daunting. In Unitarian Universalist congregations, we embrace the concept of interconnectedness. We feel the pull of stewardship to work toward preservation versus destruction of the Earth, our natural ecosystem, and our animal kin. We now have significant representation in UU congregations of LGBTQIA+ people and allies to guide us in language and practice to support compassionate social evolution for people of all gender identities and orientation. There is an active dialogue about how to amplify the voices of Black, Indigenous and people of color within Unitarian Universalist circles at the UUA level. My experience here in New Hampshire has been we continue to have very little representation of people of color in our congregations and fellowships.

Perhaps White UUs of northern New England are not tuning in to hear and amplify the voices of people of color as much as is necessary to serve justice and be deeply welcoming. It is unrealistic and unkind to expect marginalized neighbors to show up and magically feel safe if we have not done the personal work to greet them with active respect for their lived reality. Perhaps we have heard about "white saviorism" or "microaggressions," but do not quite understand how to avoid these mistakes in practice. And perhaps our New England roots in stoicism are not helping us meet the moment whole-heartedly. Those of us who were young in the 1970s may also carry the conditioning of "color-blind" concepts of that time, which have now been proven inadequate to meet people feeling actively othered, marginalized, and physically threatened on a daily basis. It is said that the first step in reconciliation lies in recognizing our history.

Our neighbors are still suffering. After over 400 years since the time of active enslavement, more repair is needed. The trauma is ongoing. An active anti-racist person who chooses to speak up about observed persisting racism and inequity may feel some discomfort. But we need to step into the effort. This is the definition of the difference between mere alliance of feeling versus true solidarity. Our personal anxiety is a tiny obstacle compared to the torture of systemic blockades, stings of daily microaggressions, a legacy of unresolved injustice, and the active silencing of our neighbors of color.

Sanctuary spaces where we gather to meditate, notice deeply, and sit with the whole of our inner experience, can help us build the inner resources needed to expand social awareness and be more deeply, and actively welcoming of all. The Buddhist loving-kindness meditation reminds us to picture people in different circumstances, all over the world, and hold all in active compassion. In our UU sanctuaries, we can strive to create equal space and time for each voice in the room, shifting away from the default of hierarchical process, where those with less marginalized identities may unintentionally fill the verbal space. Expanded awareness requires us each to explore non-habitual ways of being. Practice is important. Once awareness expands, it cannot be easily re-contained. Sitting in deliberately inclusive spaces together we can notice more, and grow into a shared awareness that is more deeply understanding, inclusive and caring of all people, all year round.

So when we say as Unitarian Universalists that we are centering love, with its ethical offshoots of justice, interdependence, equity, transformation, pluralism, and generosity, the biggest question remains: *how...*? Do we call out "haters" and loudly debate, or is that more about hate than love? Recognizing the common

humanity of our instincts toward fear, can we find a deeply non-violent way forward? Whether leadership at the UUA adopts a formal change in our mission to include “liberation theology” or not, can we find daily ways to raise our own awareness and the awareness of our White friends and colleagues? Can we do better at self-monitoring our own White-centered conditioning, or blind spots about privilege? Can we push ourselves out of our comfort zones and join in Black-centered celebrations? Can we be active anti-racists all year long during a moment in history that feels like a critical juncture? Can we push out of our comfort zones and enter Black spaces to more often meet our Black neighbors in their comfort zones and continue to learn and grow?

Recent psychological research generally suggests that most White people fall in the middle in terms of white supremacist thinking, meaning they have not adopted actively racist beliefs, but they also are not actively helping to break *patterns of silence that allow oppressive patterns to persist*. So let’s keep talking, learning, noticing, and feeling into the interconnected reality that our neighbors continue to feel unsafe, unheard, and unseen.

One month of the year is not enough. I believe we can *all* work toward the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King’s dream of our country’s founding promise of freedom, equality, and justice for *all*. One of the UU hymns says: “We are a gentle, angry people.” It seems a crucial time to channel anger into active compassion. Let’s read books, listen to ideas, visit a quilt exhibit, see a BIPOC-centered film, listen to music composed by Black musicians, and feel into the whole reality of this moment.

#### The Voice of Jill Scott: Truth Sung from the Heart:

After reading and taking in some of the ideas and images of this article, I suggest an additional practice of experiencing a song. It can be found on YouTube (search: “Jill Scott FULL National Anthem at Essence Festival 2023”). Ms. Scott sings of how this country was built on the backs, blood, and tears of her enslaved ancestors. She questions, “Does this truth hold no weight?” Her courageous performance is both evocative and provocative, and the listener may find it difficult to take in its stark, passionate honesty. It seems urgently important for more White folks to witness the bravery of Black women’s voices *deeply*, with embodied awareness, to meet the challenges of this critical moment in our shared history. Thank you to Dr. Nathalie Edmond for bringing Jill Scott’s performance to my attention during her recent conference for professional psychologists entitled “Race Talk: Privilege, Power, and Oppression.” Dr.



Edmond points out that Jill Scott's performance was designed for a majority Black audience, and it is this self-expression in safe space that all of us need to hear more of to expand our capacity of understanding.

Thank you all for reading and holding the words, images, and sounds I have offered with an attitude of compassionate contemplation as we collectively consider working to consciously let go of our initial mammalian survival brain reactions and move through the human urge to turn away from what is painful. In the words of James Baldwin, “not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.” If we collectively open our eyes, ears, minds and *hearts* to *all* of our neighbors, all year long, there is hope.

\* Borrowed language in the title of this piece was intended, to remember Tina Turner and ‘What’s Love Got To Do With It?’ Tina Turner lived to age 83 and died in 2023. She had resided for many years in Switzerland, where, according to recent interviews, she felt safer and more appreciated than she did here, in her country of birth.

\*\* Readers of diverse heritage will feel the absence of description of the mistreatment of various specific groups in the section on history. Historic realities include early colonial massacres of indigenous tribal peoples, the use and abuse of Chinese immigrants to build railroads, indentured servitude of Irish immigrants, the concentration camp incarceration of Japanese civilians, silencing of women through voting rights delay, the dehumanizing of poverty-stricken Hispanic migrant workers, Muslim travel bans post 9/11 in 2001, and recently separation and the caging of young children of families seeking asylum from mortal danger in Central and South American at our southern border. A comprehensive look at all of these atrocities is beyond the scope of this paper, but that does not mean all of these historic realities should not also be studied, acknowledged, and compassionate repair considered and carried out. I recommend Isabel Wilkerson's excellent 2010 book [The Warmth of Other Suns: the Epic story of America's Great Migration](#), as one source for further study.

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given my personal experience of White privilege. I hope you feel well-represented in the final document. As with any learning process, I have become more aware of all that I don't know, and will try to live into my intention of continuing to grow my awareness and understanding. You are all truly inspirational.

Most contributors preferred to remain anonymous, for personal safety, peace of mind, and/or time management concerns. One contributor did want to be recognized in an effort to support the local organization she represents. Sylvia Foster, you are an exquisite writer, brave truth teller, and have been a clear and loving voice for equity and compassion during your career at UNH and in your personal and volunteer life as well. Thank you for continuing to write, speak, and contribute wherever voices for justice are breaking the silence and amplifying those voices that need to be heard! The Racial Unity Team represents our best hope for a future guided by love and collaborative creation, not hate and violence. See [www.racialunityteam.com](http://www.racialunityteam.com) for more on how to be “a place where everyone belongs.”

I realize respectful language is context-bound, so I apologize in advance for any sting or hurt from my word choices readers may feel in response to this document, especially if you are reading it at some future time, or in some other geographical region. My intention is to promote loving connection and empathic awareness, and to recognize each and every person as precious and whole.

Many of us share the dream...