

Go, Fish, Go

Theodore Parker Unitarian Universalist Church

April 30, 2017

Story for All Ages **The Coat of the Very Familiar**

(adapted from the retelling of a traditional story,
“One Hundred Wisdom Stories,” Margaret Silf)

There was once a woman who used to walk through the streets of the town, and everywhere she went she was noticed. Everyone in town wanted to talk to her, listen to her, ask her questions and spend time with her because she wore the Coat of the Very Familiar – familiar, that is, to almost everyone who lived there.

In the same town, there was a girl, who dressed differently. She would gaze at the woman in the Coat of the Very Familiar and see how much attention everyone paid to her. And she wished so much that people would pay attention to her. She had so much in her heart that she wanted to share, but no one seemed to listen.

So one day, the girl plucked up courage to speak to the lady who wore the Coat of the Very Familiar. “Please,” she said timidly, “excuse me, but may I ask you a favor?” The lady, who was a very kind person, turned around at once and smiled at the girl.

“Of course,” she replied. “What can I do for you?”

“Well,” ventured the girl, “it’s like this: You are dressed in the familiar, and everyone takes notice of you, but I am not. I have no Familiar Coat, and no one ever even notices me. It would make me so happy if, just for one day, I might hide myself inside your cloak and walk around with you through the town. Then, whenever people stopped to notice you, they would also be paying attention to me, and I think I have something important to tell them that they would value, if only they knew.”

The lady who wore the Coat of the Very Familiar readily agreed to the girl’s request, so the very next morning, she wrapped her fine coat around the girl, and they walked together through the town. Everywhere, as usual, people stopped to greet the lady, and when they did, they also paid attention to the girl wrapped in the now Familiar cloak. As they walked, the lady talked with the girl. She asked all about her, and was very interested in everything she had to say. She discovered just how wise the unfamiliar girl actually was, and they quickly became the best of friends – so much so that, to this day, they still walk through the world together – inviting the familiar, and the not-so-familiar, to join their journey.

Reading **Are We Living in a Post-Racial World Yet?**

the Rev. Xolani Kacela from *Voice from the Margins*

We get good at what we practice. Research now tells us very clearly what distinguishes amateurs from experts – it’s the amount of time they spend practicing their craft.

To become exceptional, you must do two things. First, you must practice with intention – you have to aim to become very good. If you set out just to know how to do something or do it “good enough” then that is how good you will become. To become expert, you have to envision yourself as a master of your craft.

Second, you must practice a lot and consistently. Studies show that amateurs practice about three times a week for about an hour per sitting. Those who develop into experts put in three hours a day almost seven days a week. They become consumed with their craft.

In addition, there is a magic number. Becoming an expert demands about ten thousand hours of practice! That’s twenty hours a week for about ten years.

The notion of intentional practice also applies to how we become the beloved community. It’s not enough to just say that we are post-racial, we have to practice being post-racial.

It is said that if you’re not on the court, you’re not in the game. We have to put in the time on and off the court.

SERMON

Go, Fish, Go

the Rev. Anne Bancroft

Let’s start with today’s sermon title: *Go, Fish, Go*, a takeoff on the classic children’s book *Go, Dog, Go* by P.D. Eastman. Eastman worked with Theodor Geisel, better known as Dr. Seuss, and published numerous books under the Random House Beginner Books label. The purpose of the book *Go, Dog, Go* is to teach new vocabulary to early readers. There are a total of 75 words in the book, set in a context that would inform their meaning: big, little, in, out, up, down, house, boat . . . hat . . . “Do you like my hat? I do not. Goodbye. Goodbye.”

It has also been suggested that the book is about relationships. In the end, for no apparent reason, the two dogs who have been passing each other to no avail FINALLY find common ground: “Do you like my hat? I do. What a hat! I like it! I like that party hat!”

For our purposes this morning, the relevance of the book has more to do with vocabulary, words that get learned and given context from an early age, that impact our abilities to be in relationship.

And . . . what's with the fish, then? Well, that's about context, environment, and how we wake up to it.

There's a great joke about two fish in conversation. One says, "How's the water?" and the other says, "What the heck is water?"¹

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So . . . on the very last day of April, the month when our theme is "joy," and spring is bursting on the scene, we're being asked by people of color within our tradition to confront some very difficult vocabulary this week, words that likely have been situated in a context that spans back over a great many years. We are being asked to recognize the relevance of the term "white supremacy" in what are possibly new ways for many of us, so I titled this sermon "Go, Fish, Go" because it's about vocabulary and relationships and waking up to what we are swimming in.

This congregation has been focusing on racial justice work for quite a while now. So, let me first be clear. I am a white, cisgender, straight, raised-Protestant woman. At the risk of over-generalizing, the only people who have likely swum more obliviously to their water than I have been raised to are white, cisgender, straight and raised-Protestant men.

It is likely that there are some among us here who identify as people of color, who are undoubtedly more aware of how white the water we swim in looks now and always has. And I want to say that I appreciate your willingness – if indeed you are willing – to struggle along with those of us who are white as we come to terms with new understandings. In many ways this is a journey of discomfort for all of us.

If you are new here, or visiting today, you may wonder why we are being asked to host – on this particular Sunday or the next one as one of two options - a white supremacy teach-in that more than 500 of our sibling UU congregations are participating. We all might ask, "Why not?" Isn't it about time? Wouldn't we always want to be awake to the water we're in, whatever it looks like? In fact, aren't we overdue?

Yes, AND the invitation, the encouragement, is a function of recent events within the Unitarian Universalist Association that have drawn attention to the presence of a system that undoubtedly continues to privilege the normative power identities among us: white, straight, cisgender, ordained, and male. I could add able-bodied and young to that list. Please note that I did not reference

¹ <http://lifehacker.com/5821126/fish-dont-know-theyre-in-water>

INDIVIDUALS, but systems . . . which, like water, ARE the environments we exist in. And we are being asked to take a careful look all around us.

A week or so ago, a post by blogger Alex Kapitan who writes at “radicalcopyeditor.com”² offered some helpful edification. White supremacy, he suggests, is “a system of social order that keeps power and resources consolidated among white elites, using an ideology that upholds whiteness as being best or most ‘normal.’”

What it’s not (his post continues): “It’s not necessarily active hatred of people who are not white or active belief that white people should rule over everyone else. [White supremacy] is not limited to the most overtly racist fringe elements of society. It’s not a slur or an insult. It’s not an historical artifact.”

What it is: “It’s the water most white people swim through without realizing they are wet.” (“How’s the water?” one fish says. “What the heck is water?” the other replies.)

White supremacy, according to Kapitan, “is a basic fact of U.S. culture and everyday life and a foundational truth of this country.”

Imagine the Coat of the Very Familiar. It’s so “known,” even in its assumptions, so reliable, an almost invisible familiar

Remember: White supremacy is about a system, a pervasive and familiar-feeling system.

In the book *Learning to Be White*, Unitarian Universalist minister the Rev. Thandeka offers us a fairly accessible way to appreciate what white supremacy might look like, or feel like. In response to a question by a student about what it felt like to be black, she invented what she calls the Race Game.

“The Race Game, as my luncheon partner very quickly discovered, had only one rule. For the next seven days, she must use the ascriptive term *white* whenever she mentioned the name of one of her Euro-American cohorts. She must say, for instance, ‘my white husband, Phil,’ or ‘my white friend Julie,’ or ‘my lovely white child Jackie.’ . . . [Thandeka] guaranteed that if [the student] did this for a week and then met me for lunch,” she says, “I could answer her question using terms she would understand. . . . African Americans have learned to use a racial language to describe themselves and others. Euro-Americans also have learned a pervasive racial language. But in their lexicon, their own racial group becomes the great unsaid.”³

The Coat of the Very Familiar.

² (<https://radicalcopyeditor.com/2017/04/21/white-supremacy/>)

³ Thandeka, *Learning to Be White*. New York, The Continuum Publishing Group Inc., p.3

Thandeka describes hearing back from the Euro-American woman originally challenged. “She could not do it, she wrote apologetically, though she hoped someday to have the courage to do so. Courage? Why courage? What had I asked her to endure? What was she afraid of seeing? What didn’t she want to feel? To glimpse? To know?”

We can imagine the woman didn’t want to feel the water she was swimming in.

The story Thandeka references happened in 1991, more than 15 years ago. I think many of us have gotten better at being willing to identify our whiteness. That change, in and of itself, is useful in helping us racialize ourselves – those of us who identify as white – among the plethora of what we often hear described as “others,” as though our mainstream whiteness sets the standard, which – hello – is what white supremacy is designed to do.

That movement hasn’t happened without intention, of course, without a willingness to see the water, which takes practice!

“To become exceptional [at one’s craft],” Xolani Kacela reminds us, “you must do two things. First, you must practice with intention – you have to aim to become very good. . . . Second, you must practice a lot and consistently.”

We have so much to learn, and much to practice. Some days it makes me very weary. I wish you could see the pile of books that, despite my efforts, grows taller around me all the time. And don’t even mention the online resources. I can’t set up systems of organizing fast enough to keep track of them!

But this is soul work, friends. Soul-stretching, spiritual practice to wake up to the world around us, to notice the water.

White supremacy is not just about race, although it IS about race because of who it advantages. But white supremacy, as a system that pervades our culture, also has characteristics that effectively perpetuate an environment that disservices all of us, that separates us based on power and authority, and who has the resources to make what happen. And the reason it’s about race is because it is a function of an historically “white” way of doing things.

White supremacist culture is hierarchical, perfectionist, paternalistic and defensive. It values bigger and more, individualism over community, results over process, either/or thinking, and quantity over quality.⁴

⁴White Supremacy Culture, http://www.cswsworkshop.org/PARC_site_B/dr-culture.html

Have any of you seen the picture of our current president – a white, male, cisgender, straight, billionaire, by the way – signing the executive order impacting international funding for family planning? The president is seated in the middle of a table, facing the camera, surrounded by an entire group of white men in suits. It's kind of stunning, actually – hierarchical, paternalistic, either/or thinking. He's not the only president to find himself in a picture like this. He's just the most recent.

White supremacy dictates who's in the room, and who's at the table, even where the table is. Have any of you seen the beautiful arched stone bridges going out to Long Island from New York City? They're on what used to be the only road out from the city, and they're too low for buses. Well, who needs a bus if you can afford your own car? And if you need a bus, well . . . it's likely there's not much out here you'd enjoy anyway.

I wonder who's in charge of setting the bus routes to West Roxbury?

When I was a little girl, I often heard, "Anne, if it's nice, it's right." OK – so this was probably about who got invited to my birthday party, or who I had to write a thank you note to, but two things: fear of open conflict is a white culture thing – it's rude to raise difficult issues, or it's at least out of line. It makes people uncomfortable. Let's not do that. So on the off chance that it was about something more substantive, let's just say "nice" was the default mode. And in my house, there was ALWAYS a RIGHT way, an either/or, hierarchical, paternalistic right way.

Now, if this were simply the culture in my house that I grew up in and you got to have your culture in your house, and we all kind of figured out how to bring our respective cultures together in our common environment, great! But that's not actually how it works. The common environment that we live in is white supremacy. That's the one that we are all swimming in . . . and unless I'm awake to that fact, I'll never know if there's a different way to do things, a different way to make decisions, to be inclusive, or to prioritize other decision-making patterns that might invite other voices into the room. Not everyone in positions of authority is as nice as the woman wearing the Coat of the Very Familiar. In fact, we know that most people in positions of authority hang on to the access that got them there in the first place. And make no mistake, this culture that we're swimming in is about money – and very few people give that up easily.

I mentioned earlier we have so much to learn, and so much to un-learn about our assumptions and patterns. It takes a lot of energy and a lot of care – and all the while we have things in our lives that consume our attention, people to care for and good work to do, and – oh, by the way – joy! Remember joy!

But if we ever want to be the welcoming, open, and curious people we speak of wanting to become, we can't afford to turn away from this particular growing edge. We need to learn to see the water in all its nuanced and seemingly invisible forms. Once you start noticing, you realize it's everywhere and it dictates so much of our common lives in ways that we simply weren't awake to before.

While our Association is considering its own systems, and the influence of white supremacy on its functioning, we are being asked to do the same. How do we, right here at Theodore Parker Church, participate in a system that constrains our choices, our creativity, our inclusivity? How does our governance serve or constrain us? How do our default modes determine who feels welcome here and who doesn't?

We claim to be people who believe that revelation is not sealed. Typically, we reference scripture when we think of that, but what it really (wholistically) means is that we are willing to pick up the familiar and consider it again – what rings true within it? And what doesn't?

White supremacy is the system that has dictated who gets to wear the Coat of the Very Familiar for too long. When we become aware of that, aware of the water, as though born into a new world . . . the question becomes what we are willing to do about it.

Go, Fish, Go!

Closing Hymn 1020 Woyaya

Written by Ghanaian drummer Sol Amarifio, with lyrics written by Annie Masembe from Uganda. It was frequently heard in work camps throughout central West Africa in the 1970s and 1980s. The arrangement in *Singing the Journey* comes from the version by Ysaye Barnwell (of Sweet Honey in the Rock). "Woyaya" doesn't have a real meaning, it's just like saying "oh, yeah" as an affirmation without literal translation.⁵

⁵ https://www.last.fm/music/Osibisa/_/Woyaya