

October 23, 2016

Homily “Talking the Talk”

Rev. Dr. Len De Roche

We all know Truman integrated the military services right after the war. What didn't happen was equality. Many of you know I had a career in the Air Force. And when I was in the Air Force I flew a year or so with a black pilot.

Before he even showed up at the base, my operations officer said to me, “You're from the Northeast. Do you mind being crewed with this black pilot who is coming?” Now this is more than just flying with a person; it's living with a person when you land somewhere else and sharing a room for a couple of days a week when you live on base by the airplanes in support of NATO. I obviously didn't mind.

But it got me thinking. Why did my operations officer think he had to ask? Then I started to notice the complement of the people I was flying with on the base. We were all basically WASPs. Obviously there was some selection process going on here, some self-selection, and some discriminatory. We were integrated ☐ there were black men on my base ☐ but they were enlisted.

In my travels in the Air Force, I sometimes ended up in places where I was the only white English speaker in the room. It felt odd; it felt intimidating. Yet this is how my black crew member, Claude, must have always felt. Black officer recruitment improved over the time I was in service, but the numbers and the promotions were never proportional.

Real education into white male privilege came when I lived for two years in Chicago. Now I lived in a place called Hyde Park, which is this academic oasis in South Chicago. It was surrounded by some of the worst areas in South Chicago. I had been to East Berlin in the 70s, but this location looked worse; burned up cars and inexpensive three-story apartment houses that had deteriorated 20 years before. In South Chicago there were no shopping centers or large grocery stores. So many people who couldn't drive survived on what they could get in 7-Elevens. Chicago police didn't patrol very frequently. Hyde Park, in contrast, had the largest private police force in the

nation ☐ basically, University of Chicago police force were retired Chicago cops. They were by and large Irish, and I don't remember seeing a black cop the entire time I was there.

I got drawn to Chicago because the seminary professor of mine moved from Pennsylvania to Chicago to take a position there. Doctor Lee Butler was an American Baptist minister who went to Bucknell University, seminary and then graduate school, and Lee was raised in the black section of Harrisburg. He knew that I was interested in Jungian psychology, and needed a year of clinical pastoral education. He told me they had a famous Jungian analyst on staff, and I still had some G.I. Bill educational benefit money left, so I went. Professor Butler lived in Hyde Park during much of the time I was there. He was always in a suit and tie. He told me it kept the police harassment to a minimum, though he had been stopped many times going into his apartment house.

As a staff chaplain at the University of Chicago hospital, I was the minority. I was the resident white guy, and the other guy the Kenyan Presbyterian. The rest of the staff were women: two Koreans, one lady from Burma, and two women who were raised in South Chicago. In a small unit like ours, there is a certain camaraderie and kidding. For the two black women from Chicago, this consisted of teaching me about my white privilege, and how different their experience was.

While I've always lived close to cities, this was the first city I lived in. It was a bit of a wake-up. Who'd have thought I needed to lock my car between carrying bags of groceries into my apartment, or that I would leave my car on the street so long the battery would go dead rather than lose a parking spot.

But the real lessons I learned in the hospital were as a chaplain to the patients especially in the emergency room. Here I met powerful black women who managed communities and families. It was almost a matrilineal society. One day I noticed that one of my Chicago colleagues was distressed. She was divorced and had a 17-year-old son whose education was in the University of Chicago lab schools. He was out with his friends when the police pulled up and he ran. She feared for his life, and was preparing to give him "the talk" about black youth and the police.

My experience with the police growing up in small town in New Jersey was quite different. Most of the cops we knew were small-town police officers

who were raised in the community they were serving. I knew, for example, if I ever got pulled over I was more worried about the talk my father would give me than what the police would do about it. And on Halloween we knew where the local officer had his outhouse, which was upended every year. In other words in my youth there was no distrust of police in my growing up. I would never hesitate to ask for help if it was needed. My Chicago colleagues' experience wouldn't permit that.

Skip ahead to last June, while I was at General Assembly, and former UUA President Bill Sinkford gave a sermon at the Service of the Living Tradition. In the sermon, he talked about his 50 years associated with Unitarian Universalism and his view as a black man of what we have done and we haven't done. He recalled coming to the General Assembly in Cleveland in 1966 as a youth representative of his Cincinnati congregation and meeting Martin Luther King Jr. in an elevator. King was the Ware lecturer that year. Sinkford discussed how far we have come in these past 50 years; he also expressed how far we have not come.

The Black Lives Matter movement addresses many shortfalls. It isn't only about police interaction with the Black community. It addresses the whole social, educational, systemic societal issues that have not kept pace with the legal rights that were addressed in the voting rights bills of the 60s and associated with the civil rights movement. Many of these rights are being clawed back by what has been named the New Jim Crow legislation of the states that enact voter suppression via ID cards, voter name list removals and suppression for criminal convictions.

I believe our first step in reversing the evil we see addressed in the black lives movement, is to recognize our own privilege. In my case my white male privilege. This is not to say that I haven't worked hard, against some obstacles. I've always been work-a-holic, and my college was thanks to scholarships and work-study. But my successes in life, however limited, have had the advantage of the color of my skin. May you all reflect on your advantages. In an ever evolving and never-ending world, Amen.

Rev. Dr. Leonard De Roche