



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“Escalating Inequality”

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Centering Thoughts

The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much; it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little. Franklin D. Roosevelt

I am opposing a social order in which it is possible for one man who does absolutely nothing that is useful to amass a fortune of hundreds of millions of dollars, while millions of men and women who work all the days of their lives secure barely enough for a wretched existence.

Eugene V. Debs

Equality is the soul of liberty; there is, in fact, no liberty without it. Frances Wright

Three Reflections

Julie Sapp

“I am a self-made woman!” This could be the opening statement of a rags-to-riches tale extolling the infinite possibilities of upward mobility in our society. Given enough ambition, determination, talent, and hard work, so the tale goes, anyone can reach the pinnacle of success and financial reward. While the children of the wealthy have always had a head start in this race to the top, the opportunities for upward mobility have been seriously limited lately; a state of affairs that has been acknowledged by politicians as diverse as Bernie Sanders and Paul Ryan.

Issues of class and classism figure into the limits on upward mobility and the increasing gap between the wealthy and the rest of us. In addition to economic level, the determination of social class includes factors of educational level, neighborhood, job type (such as professional and working classes), schools, and dialect. Classism, as defined by classism.com, is #1)“differential treatment based on social class or perceived social class.” #2)“... the systematic oppression of subordinated class groups to advantage and strengthen the dominant class groups”...[and]...#3) “the systematic assignment of characteristics of worth and ability based on social class.” In short, our potential and our value is perceived differently depending on where we live, how we speak, and who we know, and the opportunities we receive follow from that.

So, who among us is self-made? Mitt Romney once famously referred to himself as a self-made

man, having earned his millions through hard work, rather than inheriting them. Politics aside and acknowledging his work ethic, this version of a riches to riches tale overlooks the incredible advantages that provided him with opportunities available to few. The son of a wealthy and influential father, he attended the best schools, and had built-in access to important business contacts when he began his career. A young person today from a low-income family has limited access to the best schools. For example, Forbes Magazine recently reported that at Harvard University a full 45.6% of undergraduates come from families with incomes over \$200,000 per year. That's the highest 4% of income. Among high-achieving high school students, of those who come from poor families, only 34% end up attending one of the 238 most selective colleges in the country. Clear advantage for the children of the wealthy.

How about me? As a teenager, my family survived on welfare and food stamps. I live a comfortable middle class life now, after working my way through college. This version of my story ignores that I grew up in a well-educated family, in a middle class neighborhood, with a standard mid-western American dialect, and I attended good schools. Yes, I worked through college and earned scholarships, but I also received social security survivor benefits, a program axed by congress in 1981 as a budget-saving measure. The cost of college has increased 1000% since I was in school, with fewer programs to assist needy students. Low and middle income students are increasingly reliant on student loans that saddle them with enormous debt. I have to ask myself, what would my prospects be if I were young and poor in today's environment?

And how about you? Wherever you now fall on the economic spectrum, consider what personal characteristics contributed to your current position. Consider, also, how the social status you started out with in life assisted or limited your opportunities. And, most importantly, let's all consider how compassion fits in. How can we all show more compassion to others regardless of social class?

Caryl Sundland

The realities are that the top 20 percent of households in the United States own more than 84 percent of the wealth and the bottom 40 percent combine for a paltry .3%. The Walton family, for example, has more wealth than 42 percent of American families combined. In an ideal distribution, the top 1/3 would own 33 percent of the wealth, and the bottom 2/3 would own 50 percent.

The gap between CEO and unskilled workers is 354 to 1. We may not believe it, but the U.S. is now the most unequal of all western nations. To make matters worse, America has considerably less social mobility than Canada and Europe.

Over the last 25 years the racial wealth gap has increased by \$152,000. So what are the factors contributing to this increased gap? There are several causes among them, years of home ownership accounts for 27% of the difference in relative wealth growth. The difficulty in getting mortgage

loans, in amassing money for down payments and ability to build assets for repairs have contributed to limited homeownership for people of color.

The second largest share of the increase, 20%, is average family income. The dramatic difference in wealth has its roots in long-standing patterns of discrimination in hiring, training, promoting, and access to benefits that have made it much harder for people of color to save and build assets. They are often in lower paying jobs due to lack of a college education, accounting for 5% of the increase in inequality. Also inheritance and financial support from families combine for another 5% of the increase.

There is little evidence to support common perceptions about what underlies the ability to build wealth, including the notion that personal attributes, such as laziness, and behavioral choices are key pieces of the equation. Instead the evidence points to the policies and configuration of opportunities and barriers in workplace, schools, and communities that reinforce deeply entrenched racial dynamics in how wealth is accumulated and continue to permeate the most important spheres of everyday life. The challenge is to change the major evidence based factors affecting the growing racial wealth gap. What can you do to change these? What can we do to change these?

Nancy MacNair

First, I want to show you this book. I think the picture on the front cover looks amazingly like me, as a three year-old child, sitting at a dinner table, with candles, silver, and flowers, wearing a fancy, smocked, carefully ironed dress, with fluffy white window curtains in the background. This author, Debby Irving, is 30 years younger than I am, but describes the same white and upper middle class values my family imparted to me, as the ones she got from her parents. The book is Waking Up White, by Debby Irving, and describes her journey from white oblivion to white awareness.

But I discovered that not only did it describe waking up to white privilege, but also, waking up to class privilege. So I tried coming to terms with my family background. In my family, what was never talked about? Race, sex, conflict, and privilege. Instead, what was valued was avoiding conflict, a sense of time urgency, competitiveness, emotional restraint (NO crying), being judgmental or critical, defensiveness, status, and “What would the neighbors think!” or “If you can’t say anything nice, don’t say anything at all.”

If a relative were alcoholic, or gay, or had a mental illness, it was never revealed or talked about. In the late 1980’s, when I worked a lot with LGBT people, my elderly mother finally said to me, “You know, of course, that we have a gay cousin. Your father and I visited her once in California.” (Of course, I did not know that.)

I realized that I have had unfair advantages since before I was born, a combination of my race and class. My ancestors had degrees from prestigious universities, and my husband’s ancestors, too,

had made large amounts of money on the China trade from Gloucester, MA, long ago. My father, a chemical engineer, was able to buy a lovely stone house with a large yard and lovely trees, in an upscale suburb of Philadelphia, a college town.

My family had musical instruments, recordings of opera, and paid for violin and viola lessons for me from a retired member of the Philadelphia Orchestra.

Black people only lived in one small corner of that community, which was far from my home, and they mainly worked in white people's houses. Realtors kept them in that area. My elementary school was totally white. In Junior High and High School, there were just a few Black students, but not in my "advanced" classes.

A Black maid did clean our house and iron, two days a week, which always made me feel slightly uncomfortable. There was a dancing class and a community swimming pool where Black people were not allowed.

My father easily got me summer jobs with his company or his friends. He was also able to pay totally for all five children's college educations, at private, liberal arts colleges, not cheap. I remember being actually shocked to find out that some of my college friends had to work on campus to help their families pay (!) (My father had worked his way up the managerial ladder and had made a lot of investments.)

So, after reading and some personal soul searching about white and class privilege, I felt the need to look at solutions available. The author I referenced earlier—Debby Irving-- states that "making visible the privilege of white skin is the key to racism's undoing." She writes, "Saying I don't see race," is as racist as it gets. Talking about race is traditionally seen as not nice, not good. Irving's former "color blind" approach was actually allowing her to ignore her own part in the system of racism. "Color blindness" actually maintains the cycle of silence, ignorance, and denial that needs to be broken for racism to be dismantled.

She points out that many white people don't even think of themselves as having a race. (They don't have to, as Blacks always do.) Whites don't usually have to leave their "white comfort zones." They have been given the ultimate choice---whether or not to deal with racism. She also writes that the role for whites is to be allies, not to swoop in and "fix" everything or "help" everyone. The white ally role is a supporting one, not a leading one. Whites do have the opportunity to be in solidarity with Blacks. Recently, though, Black author Ta-Nehisi Coates has suggested not even using the word "ally". "You are not helping someone else in a particular struggle. The fight is yours." It is your own fight.

Some ways of relating are suggested by this author: communicating with honesty and respect, making connections, listening, keeping important conversations going, exploring feelings, showing compassion, and admitting your own vulnerabilities, insecurities, and mistakes. All of these suggestions are not easy for me, I know, since I am often a painfully shy person (!)

But equally important is to continue and increase the work UUFA is doing on social justice issues. In 1975, when I joined UUFA, I don't remember there even being a social action committee. Then, much later on, we were mainly holding meetings with only 4 or 5 attending, and wringing our hands about what we should or could be doing. Ministers never attended those meetings. Now, we often have 10 or more members at meetings, with Reverend Alison attending as her schedule permits, and many more folks are on our Social Action email list.

In your Order of Service is a handout about our Social Action Committee in general and what UUFA and our Social Action Committee have done recently and will be doing in the future. (We hope we haven't left anything out!)

And recently, UUFA has donated over \$34,000 dollars in the last two years to mainly local, small, very needy social justice organizations through our—UUFA's-- "Share the Plate" program. (And "Share the Plate" is actually one of the suggestions for action in the UUA (national) Study Guide on Escalating Inequality.)

I would like to add my suggestion that individuals, workshops, or small groups, such as Small Group Ministry groups could do some sharing or personal soul searching on class and white privilege, coming to terms with the influence of class and race on our own lives.

In conclusion, I'd like to share one last excerpt from *Waking Up White*:

Self-examination and the courage to admit bias and unhelpful inherited behaviors may be our greatest tool for change. Allowing ourselves to be vulnerable enough to expose our ignorance and insecurities takes courage, and love. . . . Please join in opening your heart and mind to the possibility that you----yes, even well-intentioned you----have room to change and grow, so that you can work with people of all colors and ethnicities to co-create communities that can unite, strengthen, and prosper.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. What was the story you were told as a child about your family's class?
2. How has your life been affected by escalating economic inequality?
3. What does your spirituality or theology teach about class and inequality and how we are 'called' as people of faith?
4. What might be your contribution to our congregation or community's efforts against classism and economic injustice? What do you have to offer?