

“Let’s Get Uncomfortable”

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8/10/25

“Take your evil deeds out of my sight; stop doing wrong. Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed”.

Will you pray with me? Lord, help us to trust in the fullness of your grace.

When the world seems to be empty of caring, when needs seem to outweigh resources, awaken us again to your abundance. Help us to do right, and seek justice. May my words, and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight O Lord, our rock and redeemer. Amen.

I am a cisgender, straight, white American woman. In my lived experience, I have been privileged. I have lived my life mostly right here in this community in Vermont. This has led me to the false belief that our little Vermont bubble is different, safer, perhaps more just than the rest of the world. But, just because I haven’t experienced injustice doesn’t mean it’s not here.

Racism is alive and well right here in our liberal, feisty, brave little state.

Does that make you uncomfortable? Me too. And that's actually a good thing. It's ok to admit that I need to learn more, do more, be more, even if it feels embarrassing. Let's be uncomfortable together, because that's the only way we are going to be inspired to make positive change.

Just about two weeks ago, Joey and I went to a meeting to support a good friend who is and has been struggling with racism. I know I am naive about many things. I intentionally keep away from the news these days, I intentionally seek joy in the smallest things and actively take time for self care. Conflict makes me anxious, so I try to avoid it as much as possible. I was absolutely not expecting a situation in which a person of color needed to educate a room full of white people on what daily life is like as a person of color. The constant fear - of being the next black man shot by police, of being imprisoned or deported, of being targeted simply for not being white is something I knew was real, but was ignorant enough to believe wasn't happening right here. Being a person of color in America today is scary. Unfortunately, the response to his impassioned plea to be treated fairly was a chorus of "I didn't intend that" and "I didn't do that". That in itself, was

racism. No one apologized for the way their words and actions made our friend feel, and it didn't appear that some of them were willing to open their minds to understand how words and actions can be interpreted differently by a person of color.

In the book "So You Want to Talk About Race" by Ijeoma Oluo. Oluo lists some basic rules to help determine if a situation is about race. The first rule is "It is about race if a person of color thinks it is about race." Oluo goes on to write that "race impacts almost every aspect of our lives."

That statement is true for everyone - our lived experiences shape us, and those experiences are valid. Regardless of the experiences we have had, race and racial identity contributes to every aspect of life. I brought my own race to the table with me, because being white is part of my identity. I can't leave that behind. The crucial thing is understanding and honoring the fact that not everyone shares that identity and has similar lived experiences to you. I am sure that many of you have read books on anti-racism, and worked to educate yourselves. I am also confident that no one in this room is an overt racist. We all excel at kindness and compassion and caring. But it is not

enough to be kind and compassionate if we leave out any understanding of lived experience and circumstance.

How do our actions interact with systemic racism? How can we change our view of the world, and widen our scope to understand more than just our own point of view? We need to seriously consider these questions to help fight a system of oppression that is literally killing people of color.

I'm assuming most of us have been to the eye doctor, yes? You know the part of the visit where you have the different lenses in front of your face and the doctor says is 1 better? Or 2? 3? Or 4? While asking which is better, she keeps cycling through different lenses in front of your face. Imagine now that each of those different lenses represent a different group of oppressed individuals. White? Or Black? Woman? Or Man? Straight? Or Gay? Cisgender? Or Transgender? Able bodied? Or disabled? Neurotypical? Or neurodivergent? Mentally healthy? Or struggling with mental health? The thing about us human beings, though, is that you can't actually pull apart gender, race, sexual identity, social class, ability, and other forms of difference that shape you as a person. So then, maybe instead of the

different lenses one at a time, we need to imagine a kaleidoscope with all the pieces that make up a person intersecting in front of your eyes. We must learn to see situations with a kaleidoscope overlay and not make assumptions based on our own most comfortable lens prescription.

It is crucial to be open to viewing the world through the lenses of people with different lived experiences in order to more fully and accurately understand our world.

But actually, our world, our country, is pretty hard to understand right now. So while my main message here is echoing just those few lines from Isaiah we heard earlier - "learn to do right, seek justice, defend the oppressed", listen to a few verses prior: Isaiah Chapter 1 verse 4: " Woe to the sinful nation, the people whose guilt is great, a brood of evildoers, children given to corruption! They have forsaken the Lord, they have spurned the Holy One of Israel and turned their backs on him" and verse 7: Your country is desolate, your cities burned with fire". This hits a little close to home as we struggle to breathe the smoky air each day, and to comprehend what

America has become as each day more evil and hatred is revealed and more toxic change is announced.

This reminds me of a moment - a year ago? Two? - when I was sitting in my office at work and my co-worker, a man 10 years or so older than me, a little grumpy, very set in his ways, came in to tell me that his wife had just called to say there was an active shooter at Montpelier High School. {For those who don't remember or didn't know about this - there was no shooter, it was a hoax, but for SWAT teams to swarm a school on lockdown was terrifying nonetheless}. With panic and tears in my eyes I looked up at him and said "What is wrong with our world?" He looked right back and said "A lack of faith".

Diana Butler Bass's The Cottage is one of the few things I look forward to seeing in my email inbox. It is a helpful blend of faith and current events, and always ends with poetry that is labeled "inspiration".

One of her more recent emails was titled "Serenity...are you kidding me?" In this she encouraged a friend to deal with all of the troubling current events

by using the serenity prayer - the one used in AA. 'God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.'" Bass writes:

"The [serenity] prayer is attributed to Reinhold Niebuhr, the great twentieth century American theologian. Niebuhr's theology, richly imbued with irony and humility, emphasized the tensions and contradictions of human sinfulness and the necessity of social justice, communal ethics, and the practice of love. You sense that in this prayer — the recognition of our limits and the summons to genuine courage. But the paradox of serenity and courage must work tandem with wisdom, the ability to both accept and act in difficult and emotionally trying circumstances." I am going to go on and read a long excerpt, because I believe she says it best, and it is worth hearing: "**Give us grace to accept with serenity the things that *cannot be changed*.** Like there's no real going back. We can't live in some nostalgic America. We're going to have technology and AI. We're going to be living with the consequences of climate change. We can't change the past mistakes and sins of our ancestors. We need an honest assessment of reality. We will shed many more tears over what cannot be changed.

What must we learn to accept?

**Give us courage to change the things that *should be changed*.** Not what we can change. But what should be changed. We might feel we can't do big things. But there is so much that should be changed — for future generations to thrive, for the planet to flourish, for humanity to live justly and in peace.

What should be changed? Do we even have the courage to ask the question?

What should be changed?

**Give us *wisdom to distinguish* what cannot be changed from what should be changed.** Only in that tension, the deep irony of the human condition, between the realism of what is and the dream of what should be, will our nightmares cease and our love increase. Wisdom, oh wisdom, we need you.

How would knowing the difference shift our lives and communities? If enough of us embrace serenity, courage, and wisdom, things will change. But not because some Golden Age is dawning or a political savior will save us.

There's only the long, hard work of being human — of striving toward love and justice, accompanied by the tender compassion of grace.”

The inspirational poem for this email was also by Reinhold Niebuhr. It is called “The Irony Of American History”

*Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime;  
therefore we must be saved by hope.*

*Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate  
context of history;  
therefore we must be saved by faith.*

*Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone;  
therefore we must be saved by love.*

*No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as it is  
from our standpoint.*

*Therefore we must be saved by the final form of love which is forgiveness.*

So here we are, a room full of humans, with some long, hard, uncomfortable work ahead of us. Work for change that needs to happen. Fortunately, in this room, we can feel the holy spirit buoying us. We can feel the love and kindness of Jesus as we exchange greetings and hugs and smiles and muffins, and the grace of God pouring down as we open ourselves to prayer and music. Let's work together to acknowledge our ignorance and privilege and take steps forward to fight for humanity – remembering and honoring that we all see the world through a slightly different twist of the kaleidoscope. Amen.