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CARYN D. RISWOLD

The Vocation of White People in a Racist Society

If you have a weakness, it is important to recognize it and strengthen it. This applies to our physical bodies. For example, I have a weaker right knee joint so I need to strengthen the muscles and tendons supporting it so I can safely ride a dozen miles on my bike. This can apply to our intellectual lives as well. I have a weak knowledge of modern German *history* so I need to read and learn so that I can more effectively teach students during my travel course in Germany.

This weakness analogy applies to white people talking about race and racism. Robin DiAngelo points out on the first page of her book, *White Fragility*, that white people “are insulated from racial stress.” She goes on to note that we are “socialized into a deeply internalized sense of superiority” and that “we become highly fragile in conversations about race” (1-2). Fragility results from weakness, and so I propose that we begin thinking of whiteness as a weakness borne of apathy, atrophy, and ignorance.

The Weaknesses of Whiteness

This is not weakness in the sense of lack of power, strength, and ability in the public world and its interlocking systems and structures. Exactly the opposite is true: The entire body of literature on white privilege explains how whiteness confers advantage and benefits upon those who possess it,

whether they know it or not, and definitely without their having earned them.

This is a particular kind of weakness akin to an atrophied muscle or a weak joint. It is the result of not working it out. It is a weakness resulting from social structures designed to our advantage. Think of the morbidly obese human characters in the animated movie *WALL-E*, who never have to walk or move their bodies because everything is designed to support them, move them, feed them, entertain them. They end up unable to stand on their own legs because they never had to develop the muscles to do just that.



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Whiteness is a weakness borne of apathy about race, racism, equity, and inclusion. White people can continue to choose not to exercise the muscle of race-consciousness. It’s easier, more comfortable, and less tiring to pretend we

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don't have that muscle and we don't need it. This weakness manifests itself in many forms, ranging from the kind of defensive denial that educators for diversity and inclusion regularly encounter, to the kind of aggressive violence seen in white supremacist rallies.

It also manifests itself as a form of bullying. DiAngelo describes an unspoken assertion this way: "I am going to make it so miserable for you to confront me [about racism] that you will simply back off, give up, and never raise the issue again" (112). This is one among many reasons that white people are too-seldom called on their racist assumptions, actions, and words. Have you ever attempted to tell another person that something they said was racist? How did that go? Often, most of us end up preserving what DiAngelo calls "white solidarity" which is "the unspoken agreement among whites to protect white advantage and not cause another white person to feel racial discomfort by confronting them when they say or do something racially problematic" (57). This happens daily at the family table, at the department meeting, in the hallway, at the grocery store, in the parking lot, and in every other place that we are together.

Like physical weaknesses, whiteness is a weakness that ends up making us a certain kind of vulnerable. If socialization is doing its job, white privilege becomes buried deep within the subconscious, and so aggressions often stem from a deeply internalized knowledge of this weakness. Think about how some bullies aggress against others often because they are deeply wounded and unable to acknowledge or name that pain. Or they know that they are weak, and therefore are deeply afraid of others knowing it. Some weaknesses are thereby expressed through violence against others in word and/or deed. The thing a bully says or does to another is sometimes best seen and understood as revealing something about himself. This is known as projection.

DiAngelo gives many examples of the ways that "white fragility distorts reality." She points out "how fragile and ill-equipped most white people are to confront racial tensions, and their subsequent projection of this tension onto people of color" (110). Consider three of the more harmful racist stereotypes as projections of white weakness onto nonwhite persons:

- Nonwhite people are lazy. (Actually, to not have to exercise the muscle of race-consciousness reveals white people to be extraordinarily lazy.)
- Nonwhite people are violent and/or criminals. (Actually, white people perpetrate extensive violence, interpersonal and structural, and regularly get away with criminal activity shielded by their whiteness.)
- Nonwhite people don't belong "here" and should be sent back to where they came from. (Actually, white people in this country are the ones who don't belong, the ones whose ancestors colonized by stealing land and life from indigenous peoples.)

For these and so many other reasons, I'd like to suggest that the vocation of white people is to acknowledge the atrophied muscle of race-consciousness and begin exercising it immediately.

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DiAngelo's final piece of advice for those who see their weakness and hear the call to strengthen that muscle is "Take the initiative and find out on your own" (144).

Developing Race-Consciousness

How do we do this? What classes and machines exist at the Gym of Justice-work? Will anyone else be there or are we always working out on our own?

First, read. As an educator, I admit that my own first response to uncovering a weakness related in part to ignorance is to find (or assign!) a book. Happily, there are generations of people of color who have shared their stories, their experience, their angers, and their joys in texts that are autobiographical, poetic, descriptive, educational, and complex in all the necessary ways. Read Jarena Lee, Audre Lorde, W.E.B. DuBois, Malcolm X, Brittney Cooper, and Lenny Duncan. There is simply no excuse for

any white person not to read the reams of books, blogs, essays, poetry, research, and other words written by people of color. Zora Neale Hurston didn't write in order to be forgotten, and Colson Whitehead's insights into history emerge in this moment ready for you to learn from them. Michelle Alexander has defined the contemporary discussion about mass incarceration in *The New Jim Crow* and you do yourself a service to work through it.

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Second, adjust your gaze. Travel to places and through neighborhoods that don't look like your own. Assess your social media connections: Who looks like you and who doesn't? Send your kid to a school or buy a house in a place or attend worship in a space that encourages and facilitates relationships across lines of racial difference. Sit next to someone who doesn't look like you in the next meeting or conference session. Make small talk, because no big-talk comes before small talk. Look people in the eye. Notice your internal bias when it pops up in those spaces and places—because it will. Slow down and assess what your (real?) concern is.

Third, consume info-tainment differently. The entire structure of a capitalist media culture embedded in white supremacy, including its programming and publishing, is designed to enable our white weakness. Seek out movies and entertainment and news sources that center persons and communities that are not white. Ava Duvernay is doing amazing work today on television, streaming, and in theaters. How much of it have you seen? *TheRoot.com* has been publishing online for years. Have you read it lately? And if you haven't engaged *The 1619 Project* yet, I implore you to begin now. There are journalists and activists and writers and speakers using many forms of media to their and our advantage, readily willing and able to be viewed, read, and heard by more people every day.

Finally, look to your own discipline, tradition, institution, or religious heritage for work that has been done already, and keep doing it. We know from working out and physical activity that once we stop strengthening our

race-consciousness muscles they resume their atrophied state. Even as I was sitting in one place for a short time writing this piece, I got up for a glass of water and my leg muscles had stiffened just that little bit that comes with the middle decades of embodied existence. Movement is life, and stillness perpetuates weakness.

Resources in the Lutheran Tradition

Here are some concrete examples that I pulled together after the Vocation of a Lutheran College conference in 2019, thinking particularly about Lutheran colleges and universities looking to address their weaknesses in the work of equity and inclusion.¹ What resources do these institutions have to call upon?

I could point to some theological concepts that root Lutheran identity like paradox (we are all saint and sinner, Christians are freed to serve the neighbor), or to the recent statement about the common calling of our institutions (NECU), but more to the point of this year's conference topic, I want to call on some specific practical resources available through the denomination itself.

First, as companion note to Dr. Guy Nave's plenary-opening "land acknowledgement" statement, we can refer to the "Repudiation of the Doctrine of Discovery" affirmed by the ELCA in 2016. This document is "a statement of repentance and reconciliation to native nations in this country for damage done in the name of Christianity." It

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"repudiate[s] explicitly and clearly the European-derived doctrine of discovery as an example of the 'improper mixing of the power of the church and the power of the sword.'" It goes on to direct various ministries of the Church to develop resources and strategies to live anew and alongside of the indigenous peoples who were the first inhabitants of this land. Though colleges and universities are not named, what strategies might your campus employ to repent its participation in such colonial activity?

Second, as theological and ecclesial guidance for a foregrounding of racial justice in these particular conversations, we can refer to the social statement, "Freed in Christ: Race, Ethnicity, and Culture." This statement was approved by the ELCA at its Churchwide Assembly in 1993, and begins with an effective definition as well as its theological implications:

Racism—a mix of power, privilege, and prejudice—is sin, a violation of God's intention for humanity. The resulting racial, ethnic, or cultural barriers deny the truth that all people are God's creatures and, therefore, persons of dignity. Racism fractures and fragments both church and society. When we speak of racism as though it were a matter of personal attitudes only, we underestimate it.

Dr. Nave, Dr. Monica Smith, and nearly every other speaker and writer on racial justice reiterates this last point because too many people still fail to understand it. Racism is structural, systemic, and institutionalized. Being allegedly "good people" is not enough; in fact, such assertions are part of the problem. In what ways can and must our colleges and universities adjust policies, procedures, and practices in order to move toward inclusive excellence and racial justice?

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Third, as companion resource to Dr. Smith's discussion of the various intersectional social classifications that comprise each of our identities, we can look to the newly adopted social statement, "Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Lutheran Call to Action," which was approved by the ELCA's Churchwide Assembly in August, 2019. In this piece there is a call toward new commitments that address the problem as stated in some detail: "Patriarchy and sexism reflect a lack of trust in God and result in harm and broken relationships. Just as this church has

identified racism as sin, this church identifies patriarchy and sexism as sin." Again when it comes to our campus communities, where is gender justice seen and not seen in our patterns and practices?

Finally, when it comes to religious diversity which intersects with racial justice in some very particular ways, the ELCA's "Declaration of Inter-Religious Commitment" relates directly to the robust initiatives around interfaith engagement on our campuses. This policy statement was also approved at the 2019 Churchwide Assembly. In this resource, the church commits to engaging with our neighbors who are not Lutheran and not Christian. They engage *not* for the sake of evangelizing them but for the sake of serving and defending them. Anti-semitism and Islamophobia are outgrowths of white supremacy, and each is near the surface of the following statement:

Being a neighbor can be risky. When power is abused, and fear grips a community or a nation, standing up for those who are being targeted or excluded takes courage. We are called to exhibit this courage and take this risk.

Our colleges and universities share in this call to take a risk. On campuses where interfaith engagement is beginning to flourish, where must we still attend to the well-being and even safety of our racially and religiously minoritized students and community members?

I offer up these examples as a model for how tending to an institutional vocation includes drawing upon resources from its denominational and formational bodies. They are things that Lutheran colleges and universities already have to help us tone the weak muscle that whiteness is in a racist and white supremacist culture.

Now, stand up, wake up those muscles (gently at first), read something other than these words, and get to work.

Endnotes

1. A version of what follows was originally published at *VocationMatters.org*, the blog of the Scholarly Resources Project of the Network for Vocation in Undergraduate Education. See: vocationmatters.org/2019/07/23/equity-mindedness-and-the-vocation-of-lutheran-colleges/

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