

# *Seeing Our Blind Spots*

A Sermon Delivered on January 19, 2020  
by  
The Reverend Axel H. Gehrmann

*“Fundamentally racism—its heartbeat—  
has always been denial. And the sound of that heartbeat  
has always been “I’m not racist.”*

*-- Ibram X. Kendi*

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**Meditation:** by Angela Herrera. It's entitled "Prayer for Travelers."

This is a prayer for all the travelers.  
For the ones who start out in beauty,  
who fall from grace,  
who step gingerly,  
looking for the way back.  
And for those who are born into the margins,  
who travel from one liminal space to another,  
crossing boundaries in search of center.

This is a prayer for the ones whose births  
are a passing from darkness to darkness,  
who all their lives are drawn toward the light,  
and keep moving,  
and for those whose journeys  
are a winding road that begins  
and ends in the same place,  
though only when the journey is completed  
do they finally know where they are.

For all the travelers, young and old,  
aching and joyful,  
weary and full of life;  
the ones who are here, and the ones who are not here;  
the ones who are like you (and they're all like you)  
and the ones who are different (for in some ways, we each travel alone).

This is a prayer for traveling mercies,  
And sure-footedness,  
for clear vision,  
for bread  
for your body and spirit,  
for water,  
for your safe arrival  
and for everyone you see along the way.

**First Reading:** by the American writer and speaker Ijeoma Oluo, from her book *So You Want to Talk About Race* (p.19)

Often, being a person of color in white-dominated society is like being in an abusive relationship with the world. Every day is a new little hurt, a new little dehumanization. We walk around flinching, still in pain from the last hurt and dreading the next. But when we say "this is hurting us," a spotlight is shown on the freshest hurt, the bruise just forming: "Look how small it is, and I'm sure there is a good reason for it. Why are you

making such a big deal about it? Everyone gets hurt from time to time” - while the world ignores that the rest of our bodies are covered with scars. But racial oppression is even harder to see than the abuse of a loved one, because the abuser is not one person, the abuser is the world around you, and the person inflicting pain in an individual instance may themselves have the best of intentions.

Another analogy: imagine if you were walking down the street and every few minutes someone would punch you in the arm. You don't know who will be punching you, and you don't know why. You are hurt and wary and weary. You are trying to protect yourself, but you can't get off this street. Then imagine somebody walks by, maybe gesticulating wildly in interesting conversation, and they punch you in the arm on accident. Now imagine that this is the last straw, that this is where you scream. That person may not have meant to punch you in the arm, but the issue for you is still the fact that people keep punching you in the arm.

Regardless of why that last person punched you, there's a pattern that needs to be addressed, and your sore arm is testimony to that.

**Second Reading:** by the Unitarian Universalist white, male activist and author, Chris Crass from a piece entitled “To All Get Free Together”

To become an anti-racist faith community, the key question for a white/white majority community is not “How do we get people of color to join our faith community?” It is, instead, “How can we make a prolonged, spiritually-rooted, engaged commitment to uprooting white supremacy within our community and take ongoing collective action to challenge it in society?”

Our goal is not to have white people sit alongside a person of color so as to affirm that those white people aren't racist. Our goal is to build and be part of beloved community, united to end structural oppression and unleash collective liberation in our faith communities, schools, neighborhoods, workplaces, and throughout society. Our goal is to join hands across the divisions of racism in our faith and in our communities, and affirm the humanity in each other. . . .

Our goal is for our faith communities to be spiritually alive, learning from and contributing to liberation cultures and legacies. For our faith communities to be welcoming homes for people of all colors, sexualities, classes, ages, abilities, genders and citizenship statuses. For our faith communities to regularly invite us into and prepare us for courageous action for collective liberation, held in loving community for the long haul.

May our faith communities be active agents in the world, to help us all get free together.

## Seeing Our Blind Spots

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When I was in middle school, my best buddy had a funny habit of punching me in the arm. It was a kind of joke – when we were standing around in the hall, or sitting in class, usually in the very back row, sometimes, out of the blue, he would jab me in the arm. It was the kind of surprise practical joke middle school boys played on each other, when I was a kid growing up in Germany. And I remember, my friend took pride in his speed and good aim, using his middle finger knuckle and hitting me right on the bone. Ouch.

I'd almost forgotten about those days. But Ijeoma Oluo's analogy from our first reading today brought it back to mind.

My buddy's name was Dragisa Stepanovic. He was bigger than me, more athletic, and more studious. He was good-looking, had good hair. He reminded me of a young Dean Martin. I felt fortunate to be his friend. I don't remember why we drifted apart. I didn't give it much thought.

We were both outsiders. I was a new kid, who recently moved back to Germany from America. His family had immigrated from Yugoslavia. "Gastarbeiter," guest worker, is the disparaging term used for the foreigners who were invited to Germany after the war, to help rebuild the country.

I thought the challenges we faced were the same. But, in hindsight, I'm not so sure.

I remember our English teacher, Herr Funk, poked fun at both of us. He called me an "Ami," the term for the many American soldiers stationed in Germany at the time. He called Dragisa a "Macedonian sheep herder." Americans in Germany were powerful and prosperous, and if not admired, at least respected. People from Yugoslavia were looked down upon.

I don't know why, but by the time I was in high school all my best friends were German-born.

In hindsight, I have a hunch that even though I thought our challenges were the same, and - more often than not – I was the innocent victim of his painful punches, there was more going on than met my eyes.

In hindsight, I can imagine Dragisa was the victim of countless subtle punches, day in, day out, from class mates, teachers, and strangers on the street, designed to put him in his place – heck, I probably inadvertently punched him myself, with my own thoughtless assumptions and oversights.

I would like to believe, that if I met Dragisa today, I would have a clearer sense of his experience, a more enlightened understanding of the realities of race and class and social location.

I would like to believe, that – as John Newton wrote in his well-known hymn long ago – “I once was blind, but now I see...” But if I am honest, I have to admit, I am not sure what I would see today.

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We all have our blind spots. As any ophthalmologist will explain – the blind spot is that place in our eye where the optic nerve connects to the retina. In that particular spot, there are no photoreceptors to detect light, and send visual information to the brain.

Have you ever taken a test to see your blind spot? You cover one eye, and hold a piece of paper like this about an arm’s length from your face. If you focus on the x, and slowly move the paper closer, at some point the dot disappears.



What I find most remarkable about the blind spot is that our brain automatically fills in visual information for that part of our retina – basically making an educated guess as to what our blind spot is missing. So unless we take this silly test – the blind spot itself is invisible to us.

Because of this quirk of our neuro-physiology, there are always certain things we simply can’t see. And we can’t see that we don’t see!

We have eyes to see, but even so, in some ways we are all invariably blind. And it is hard to tell the difference.

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The professor of multicultural education, Robin DiAngelo, wrote a book entitled “White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism.” In it, she describes what she calls “the Good/Bad Binary.” She explains it like this: before the civil rights movement, “it was socially acceptable for white people to openly proclaim their belief in their racial superiority. But when white Northerners saw the violence black people [...] endured during the civil rights protests, they were appalled. These images became the

archetypes of racists. After the civil rights movement, to be a good, moral person and to be complicit with racism became mutually exclusive.”

Racism was understood as intentional, malicious acts of racist individuals. And it was understood in very simple moral terms: being a racist is Bad. Racists are ignorant, bigoted, prejudiced, mean-spirited. Good people are just the opposite: progressive, educated, open-minded, well-intentioned.

This simplistic understanding of racism misses the profound effects of systemic racism at work throughout society, in class rooms and court rooms, in police conduct and medical care, in banks and businesses.

DiAngelo writes, the good/bad binary obscures the structural nature of racism and makes it difficult for us to see or understand it. And it affects our actions. “If, as a white person, I conceptualize racism as a binary and I place myself on the “not racist” side, what further action is required of me? No action is required, because I am not a racist. Therefore, racism is not my problem; it doesn’t concern me and there is nothing further I need to do,” she says.

Then there is another counter-productive binary. It’s when we imagine ourselves as either colorblind, or not. If we’re color-blind, we aren’t racist, because we think: “I was taught to treat everyone the same.” “I don’t see color.” “I don’t care if you are pink, purple, or polka-dotted.” “It’s focusing on race is what divides us.” “I’m not racist; I’m from Canada (or Germany).”

If we are color-seeing, celebrating color, we aren’t racist, because we think: “I celebrate diversity.” “I have people of color in my family.” “I marched in the sixties.”

Regardless whether we think of ourselves as color-blind or color-seeing – both are ways to distance ourselves from the realities of racism, and to convince ourselves that we’re not part of the problem. As DiAngelo puts it, “They take race off the table, and they close (rather than open) any further exploration. In so doing, they protect the racial status quo.”

We need to be mindful of these false binaries. DiAngelo says,

“I have found it much more useful to think of myself as on a continuum. Racism is so deeply woven into the fabric of our society that I do not see myself escaping from that continuum in my lifetime. But I can continually seek to move further along it... [Seeing] myself on an active continuum changes the question from whether I am or am not racist to a much more constructive question: Am I actively seeking to interrupt racism...?”

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Now, Chris Crass, the author of our second reading, is a longtime organizer who works to build a powerful multi-racial, working-class and feminist movement. He confronts not

only racism, but also classism and the patriarchy at the root of today's toxic masculinity. They are all connected.

In his classes and workshops, Crass encourages white people to challenge these injustices, both in our society and within our own lives: our daily relationships and interactions, our own self-image and self-understanding. This is deeply personal and spiritual work. And it isn't easy.

We all want to think of ourselves as good people. It is hard to accept that – in these troubling times – our own actions or inactions may be part of the problem. It's hard to accept that our own blind spots make us unwitting accomplices in maintaining a racist social order.

In the last few years, I have participated in some of Chris Crass's classes and conversations, and I appreciated them – especially those designed explicitly for white men. His approach is in some ways similar to the work of the Men's Breakthrough Community, this month's Shared Offering recipient. Breakthrough helps men free themselves from painful or abusive aspects of their lives, working to eliminate negative self-images, and overcome feelings of fear, anger, shame and hopelessness.

Crass tries to minister to the hearts and lives white men and boys, who are struggling to find healing and wholeness, and who desperately want to be good people. He tries to support white men and boys and help them become social justice leaders, rather than fall prey to the messages of the radical right, that blame people of color and women for their pain.

He encourages white men to sit down and engage in honest, soul-searching conversations with other white men, in a safe setting, to think and talk about times in which being a white guy committed to anti-racism and feminism has been difficult.

He asks: What was difficult about it? ... What helped you continue to move forward, despite the difficulty?... And why is this work vital for you, on a heart and soul level? Because we need to understand ourselves better, even as we try to understand others.

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Ijeoma Oluo says being a person of color in a white-dominated society is like being in an abusive relationship with the world. Every day is a new little hurt, a new little dehumanization. And I believe her. As a white man, I will never be able to see the world through the eyes of a woman of color. I can only imagine. I can try to imagine. And I do try to imagine.

I remember those few times someone punched me in the arm, and I try to imagine the countless times I was caught up in interesting conversations, and maybe unthinkingly punched others in the arm on accident. And I realize that my actions are part of a bigger pattern that needs to be addressed.

I don't want to be a racist. I don't want to be a bad person. I want to be a good person. I don't want to be blind. I want to see.

But the truth is: these binaries are not helpful. Better to think of ourselves on a continuum. Better to think of ourselves continually trying to move further along it.

I like what Chris Crass once said, leading into one of our conversations, grappling with these difficult questions. He encouraged us to be gentle with ourselves and each other. He said:

“For some of us, these will be questions that we have already given lots of thought to and this is an opportunity to delve deeper and keep growing. For some of us, these are newer questions, and they are intended to spark our creative thinking, to learn, grow - so if you are struggling with any of them, good, that's what they're here to help us do. If you have partial thoughts, try to be loving and kind towards yourselves, as this is a journey that requires each movement forward - from the first to the two hundredth.”

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We are on a journey. We are on a journey to a place where all people will feel at home – people of all colors, sexualities, classes, ages, abilities and citizenship statuses. A place where we affirm the full humanity of every person. We are on a journey to a place where we will end every oppression, and unleash collective liberation.

We are all travelers, young and old, aching and joyful, weary and full of life.

Mindful of our blind spots, may we envision a better world.  
And may we take steps in that direction,  
Bending a little further toward justice  
Every day.

So be it. Amen