

The Human Race

A Sermon for the Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst

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My Dad told me this weekend about a story he had read in a recent issue of Analog that caught his interest. It caught mine, too, especially since it related to the sermon I was about to write. Analog is a science fiction periodical that has been around since the early 1940s – although it was called Amazing Stories back then. I think my Dad has not only read every issue, he still has them all.

The story that piqued his interest is about the first contact from another life form outside our solar system, and how people react not only to the idea that we are not alone in the Universe, but also to the alien creatures themselves when they are created using the DNA sequences sent in the message. The reactions are as varied as you might imagine. It's a serial piece, so it has just begun and we don't know all of what is to happen yet. But the premise is interesting – and asks pertinent questions of our human natures, our human race.

For my Dad, the question this story asks us all is “Are you ready for SETI?” What will happen when we actually get a response to our search for extra terrestrial intelligence? Are *you* ready for SETI?

I'd wager most of the folks in this room would think their reaction to an alien life form would be receptive, if perhaps cautious. It would be pretty unrealistic to expect, knowing what we do about the size and existent possibilities within our universe, that we are alone. There are Others.

As with many aspects of life, we might be able to speculate about human responses to alien life forms by how well we get along with each other here on Earth. What do you think? Is there reason to be anything but discouraged? The fact is that I am alarmed and sad, very sad, at the degree to which we do not get along. Our dislike and mistrust of those we somehow think of as “other” leaves me feeling very discouraged that we will ever find global peace, much less that we could ever “be ready for SETI.” Any life form able to traverse the Universe and arrive on Earth to check us out will likely be disappointed in the stage of our species' maturity. What do our religious conflicts, racial mistrust, and disdain of the so-called lower classes (to give just three examples) say about capability to get along and treat each other with dignity and compassion?

So much of these disagreements we have is, at least underneath, all about who is a better human being. We are in some kind of race to be the best, the most intelligent, the most highly evolved. We are a competitive species. It seems to be the essential human race, and we will all lose if we keep playing it. As Paul Ehrlich says in his book Human Natures, “Neither global nor regional and local.problems are likely to be solved if different groups are battling one another on the basis of imagined differences in human *quality*.” (p. 290)

What's one quality that seems to have stood out for humans about each other through the ages? What's the characteristic by which we have compared ourselves perhaps most frequently, much to the detriment of everyone? Skin pigmentation, skin color, what we have named "race." We human beings are highly attuned to our visual sensory input, and think that what we "know" with our eyes becomes more important than knowledge we might acquire in other ways. Remember Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart's famous definition of pornography? It's similar to some people's definition of race: "We know it when we see it."

Paul Ehrlich believes, as I do, that knowing how these differences in skin coloration happened in the evolutionary story of the human species may help some people get past their prejudices – at least in an intellectual way. Here is some of the science, or lack of science, behind what we have misunderstood as "races" of human beings.

Skin pigmentation is a sensitive evolutionary trait, "responding [well] to geographically varying selection pressures, primarily the amount of ultraviolet radiation to which a group is exposed." (Ehrlich, p. 291) The currently accepted theory of human dispersion over the planet is called the Out of Africa 2 model. It assumes that Africa was the source of a relatively recent migration of Homo sapiens (estimates vary but certainly this happened within the last 100,000 years) that spread around the world replacing humans from an earlier migration of Homo erectus, and Homo neanderthalensis, also out of Africa. There is much speculation about whether there may have been interbreeding between the two species – according to Ehrlich the jury is still out. If you've ever read Jean Auel's series of historical fiction that began with *Clan of the Cave Bear* you know at least one person's speculation about the interbreeding of the newer with the older human species.

As these originally dark skinned humans dispersed they found themselves in new and varying geographical conditions. Over time the genes in each separate location evolved slightly differently. Skin color evolved as the amount of melanin in the skin necessary to protect against ultraviolet light changed. The further from the equator a population lived, the less melanin they needed for radiation protection, and in fact less melanin was selected for in these geographic regions, in terms of survival, because having lighter skin also allowed for more absorption of Vitamin D. At the equator, survival of the fittest favored dark skin. Further north, survival of the fittest favored lighter skin.

Genetically, there are only six genes, among the various estimates of the total human gene count that have to do with skin color. Six little genes that everyone has – people with white skin have the gene for dark skin and have the potential to produce skin as dark as an African Native. We experience this gene's function when we spend a day at the beach. This is because we are all descended from Africa. (http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/kron/archive/1998/02/23/race_part1.dtl&ty) When a transplant organ donor is being sought, the color of one's skin has absolutely nothing to do with blood or tissue compatibility of a heart or a kidney that may save your life.

Six genes for skin color on which so much history and so many laws and so much institutionally based racial injustice have been based. A person's height is affected by dozens of genes. Other characteristics, like artistic ability, by even more. But your skill

with watercolors is not the basis upon which getting a mortgage has ever been based. Skin color has been. The truth is that “the human species is so evolutionarily young, and its migratory patterns so wide, restless and rococo, that it has simply not had a chance to divide itself into separate biological groups in any but the most superficial ways.” (<http://www.trinicenter.com/sciencenews/raceandgenetics.htm>)

There is more genetic variation *within* each of the so-called races of human being, than there is variation *between* the people of different skin color. This is a fact. There is no such thing as scientifically based racial difference between any human beings. Between the Out of Africa 2 model of human dispersion and current results of the human genome project, we must conclude that racism can find no support in science.

Racism finds support only in our human natures. And perhaps in misinformed people such as the authors of The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life that attempted to resurrect the idea that, based on test scores, white skinned people are more innately intelligent than dark skinned people. Paul Ehrlich points out that “intelligence is considered to be the ability to understand the world, solve problems, and adjust to environmental changes. [It follows that] no single measure of intelligence is considered adequate to capture all its dimensions, and what constitutes intelligence is a function of the attributes not only of individuals but also of the societies in which they are embedded.” (Human Natures, p. 295)

Think about what happened with the Japanese living in the United States following the attack on Pearl Harbor. We in the twentieth century were “just as willing to define opponents as being outside the realm of humanity as had been [our] nineteenth-century counterparts in the U.S. Cavalry during the Indian Wars,” for example. (Ehrlich, p. 263)

Will this way of thinking, this obstacle standing in the way of not only world peace, but neighborhood peace, ever go away? You would think it would, considering the scientific evidence that racial distinctions just do not exist beyond the level of our eyes. But it doesn't. “Racism has if anything,” writes Matt Ridley in Nature via Nurture, “moved up the political agenda even as racial prejudice and scientific justification for it have faded.

By the end of the century, sociologists were even “gingerly hinting at a new and disturbing idea – that however unjustified the science of race might be, racism itself might be in the genes. There might be an inevitable human tendency to be prejudiced against people of a different ethnic origin. Racism might be an instinct.” (Ridley, p. 264-265) It does make sense to think that it would have been beneficial to survival to know at a glance if an outsider was one or your own group, or not. Perhaps “people pay so much attention to race because they instinctively identify people of other races as being members of other tribes or coalitions.” (p. 265)

“Prejudice has been around since the dawn of humanity, when we survived by forming groups – circles of belonging – where we felt safe, comfortable, and superior to people outside the group. It's what psychologists call ‘ethnocentricity,’ or ‘in-group/out-group behavior.’” (http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=kron/archive/1998/02/23/race_part1.dtl&ty) Some of these are more innocent, like family, job, school; some more substantial, like Republican, Democrat,

Patriots or Mets fans. “Prejudice begins with the belief that “my group is better than your group.” (sfgate.com) It’s a problem of identity and otherness. Who am I and who is the other?

Race is a not really an “other.” In reality, scientifically, it does not exist. People of different heights are genetically more different than two six foot people with different skin color. It is we who have created the meaning of what we call race.

“But we can’t deny the fact that, even though a social construct, it has become a part of our lives, our everyday lives. And it stands in the way of our being able to achieve all that we need to individually, collectively, or as a nation.” (sfgate.com)

There are many approaches to the problem of racism. There are many approaches to the solutions of anti-racism. The UUA would, for the most part, have us burdened with the guilt of the oppressor – the need to make reparations to those who have been oppressed. And this is one way, probably one part of what might be helpful, but I don’t think it should be the only approach.

Here are some other things we can do about problems of racism and “the other.”

* We should think about what kind of people we need to be in order to live in harmony with others. Upon what principles should we base our lives and our moral and ethical choices? We do this every Sunday, here, at this same time.

* We should try to remember that more important than being one race or ethnicity is being authentically “you,” and that this applies to everyone else as well.

* “Truth is usually the best corrective.” Barack Obama said this in his book Dreams from My Father. (p. 434) Learn the scientific truth. Learn the truth about the past. Learn the truth about injustices heaped upon one people by another people. Learn about your own ancestors and their complicity in racism. Talk with your family about your parents and their views on race (and other religions) and how you decided not to follow in their footsteps. We were doing this just yesterday around our dinner table, and it was amazing to hear about the racist attitudes of my grandmother and grandfather, with whom I spent so much time and never realized we were so different.

* One article I read, called “Toward a New Vocabulary of Human Genetic Variation” (by Pamela Sankar and Mildred K. Cho, in *Science*, Vol 298 No. 5597, Nov. 2002, p. 1137) called for researchers to carefully consider for what purposes they are using classifications of race, and for what purposes they felt it necessary to use race as a descriptive measure. “Race is not a fixed biological entity,” they wrote, “but only one way among many to describe human variation.” This may seem like a small thing, but what if all the forms you filled out for various purposes did not ask you to check a race box. What if we stopped using racial terms to describe ourselves and each other. It would take time, but this would make a huge difference.

* We can learn about human origins and the evolutionary story of our dispersion over the world. Knowing how genetic variation and similarity happen is part of Obama’s “truth is

a good corrective” motto. “The more we understand both our genes and our instincts, the less inevitable they seem.” (www.sfgate.com) “The [real] science of human origins can help to heal the many wounds that pseudo-scientists have inflicted upon us.” (www.trinicenter.com)

* We should continue to put our efforts into laws that uphold justice and equity in all areas of difference, including race. The law is not always perfect, but it does serve as a kind of national memory. Our history of laws regarding human rights illustrates “a long-running conversation [of] a nation arguing with its conscience.” (Obama, p. 432)

* Finally, and perhaps most importantly, let us work to improve our race relations by actually having relationships with other races. Psychologists say “that when racial groups work together for a common goal they learn to trust each other in a way that makes race and prejudice secondary to their relationships.” (www.sfgate.com) The way to make people ignore race is to give them another stronger cue to coalition membership, like being on the same sports team, or having graduated from the same school, or being members of the same congregation, or working on the same community project. For example.

We are in a race to understand ourselves before we destroy ourselves. It is *the* human race. I hope, with all my heart, that we will win this race, come to love every other being, and to be ready for SETI, before it is too late.