

I know I have been up here more than my fair share lately, but I could not pass up the opportunity to talk about inclusion. When I was a kid in Billings, Montana I could not understand the ugly prejudice towards Native Americans. I was honestly convinced that I was part Indian and loved what little I knew about their culture. I don't think I saw a black person until I was probably 8 years old. I have had moments in my life when I have been ashamed of being white because of our history; and don't really know what to do with that emotion.

But before I share my thoughts, I found this UU sermon online and want to share a part of it. This is "Social Inclusivity and the Colors of Perception" by Rev. Cynthia A. Frado from 9/17/17

" Back in the mid 1970's when I was studying in Germany, I took a college seminar called The Psychology of Race Relations in the United States. I have two powerful memories from that class that still resonate with me today. The first was required reading of the book, *Black Like Me*, by John Howard Griffin. In 1959, a Texas journalist by the name of John Howard Griffin decided to embark on a scientific research project that profoundly changed his worldview and which rocked white America. He wanted to know what it was like to be a black man living in the segregated south. As a devout Roman Catholic, he had grown up with the mantra, *If you want to understand the suffering of another, you must walk a mile in their shoes*. So, with the help of a dermatologist and the support of his family, Griffin underwent a grueling treatment that altered the pigment of his skin, until he eventually appeared black. He then traveled through the southern states of Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Georgia for 6 weeks, experiencing life as a black man. What he discovered shocked and sickened him. His interior journey was just as profound as his external one, and he came to realize that the world was skewed toward white privilege to the exclusion of all other races. He saw the ugly underbelly of fear and prejudice on one side, as well as the pain and suffering of those whose rights as human beings were being denied. He came to tremble at the

stare of hatred that he received from white folks, and he embraced the sanctuary of kindness and acceptance from those who were black. What was most challenging for him was his own self-examination as a white man who had prejudices he didn't even know that he had. The second memory I have from that psychology class on race relations was a documentary that had been made during school integration in the South called, "The Children Were Watching." When the integration of schools was ordered in the southern states, a videographer went to several different elementary schools and videotaped black children getting off of buses at previously white only schools. Always there were crowds of white parents, carrying babies and toddlers, holding their own frightened school children tight by their sides, all the while yelling and swearing at the little black children who were terrified and brave: Niggers, go back to the zoo! We don't want your kind here! There were many other obscenities spoken, and some of the adults and their parroting children spit on the black kids or threw rocks. All the while, the videographer was quietly filming—the bus arriving—the parents screaming and hurling whatever they could find—the black children facing the terrifying crowds—and then last but not least, the white children...**watching**. Watching and learning to hate others who looked different from them. There was no dialogue that I can remember...just the video and the statement at the end which hung there in silence: The Children Were Watching. It was a very poignant observation about how racism, and all other isms for that matter, get passed down from generation to generation. The two questions our professor posed were these: How do we dismantle our inaccurate assumptions and often misguided beliefs, and how does each succeeding generation deal with inherited guilt, shame, and inaccuracies, and then transform them all into a fair and balanced society that is affirming of everyone? It was especially interesting to have that discussion in Germany! The answer was the same for both questions: Listen and learn from each other, and make peace with your own fears and biases. Only then can you grow together and create something new. Now, I will share my story.....

Inclusion is defined as “the act of including” or “the state of being included.” We can actively include others, and we can seek out ways to feel included. This is in line with one of our UU principals to accept the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Another word for inclusion is *simply kindness*.

The work I did for twenty years with special needs children was a daily lesson in inclusion. As I tell these stories I want to acknowledge Jo Lynn Andrews who was the kids case manager and supported us in our work. My job was **not** to teach academics to our kids, but to teach them community skills, social appropriateness, and how to have fun. We took our kids horseback riding, ice skating, swimming, to a summer camp, to grocery stores, movies, etc. etc. We tried to find ways to include them in activities. Most of the time we had fun and were “tolerated” if not fully included. However, there were times that we were excluded. I remember taking a child with autism to a gymnastics class. He was strong and had such good balance that we thought it was worth a try. I don’t know what triggered his nervous system, but he had a major meltdown in the middle of the class. As I was trying to get his coat on to leave, one of the fathers of one of the cute, perfect little girls came up to me and said, “That’s quite a little animal you’ve got there isn’t it?” I was shocked and I don’t remember if I even responded, but it affirmed my goal to seek out ways to help our kids find joy and feel included. And also, to teach such judgmental people that our kids deserve the same chances as anyone. If that happened today, I would have the confidence to call him out, but that wouldn’t have changed his attitude. Some of our kids looked “normal” so that was a challenge because people didn’t understand and made assumptions. Another time that was difficult was when a child who struggled to keep his clothes on stripped off everything while playing in McDonalds play land and I had to climb up and gather him and his clothes. I know there were people watching and it was hard, but I continued to take him there and just insisted he keep his clothes on. One day in Walmart one of my kids who

we called “inspector gadget arms” because he was so impulsive and had very long awkward arms pulled an older ladies oxygen tube out. It was stressful at times, but we kept going out into our community finding ways to be included. One thing I am proud of is that I tried to find a balance between discipline and realistic expectations. There were consequences if the kids were blatantly disrespectful or physically aggressive; but we always took into consideration their disability and known triggers.

Currently I work as an ELL para at Highland Park Elementary School, and I watch as my students are included by most but judged and rejected by some. I have several Hispanic students, as well as a child from Russia, Ukraine and Germany. Some students are fascinated by their new classmates, and their language, and treat them with kindness and help them along the way. I can tell you there is a huge difference in the fact that my ELL students value the education they are receiving. Many kids and their parents take the same education for granted. Once our ELL students feel safe and depending on if they are coming from a traumatic situation, they thrive. They love the books we have; they learn new games on the playground, and they thank us all the time. They bring us a lot of joy.

Unfortunately, I have heard more negative comments from adults. One parent insisted their white child not be in the same class as one of my kids. Out in the community I was sharing with someone about my job and was asked, sarcastically, “Well do their parents work.” My reaction was silent, but in my mind, I was thinking that they would never ask me that question about any other child I’ve worked with. I don’t know, nor should I know the status of any of my kids, but I do know that their parents are grateful, generous and kind because they appreciate the education and safety that their child receives at our schools. When I was asked that I also thought about how hard working these families are when they come to this country. Do you **not** notice who is working on your roof when it’s 95 degrees outside. Do you not realize the fruit you buy at the store has been picked by many hard-working Hispanic individuals.

Lisa Friedman said, "Inclusion is a philosophy that embraces the idea that everyone has something of value to contribute and that everyone has a right to belong."

I also liked what Helen Henderson said, "Inclusion works to the advantage of everyone. We all have things to learn, and we all have something to teach." – Helen Henderson

I can't pretend anymore that there is a separation of church and state because it's been purposefully, blatantly mixed in our current political environment. So, I won't hold back speaking about the horror of what is happening in our country right now. Supposedly our clearly racist president is doing away with Black history month. Pride month and basically anything that supports the progress we have made in this country. We aren't just going backwards we have fallen most of the way down the hill. I can't stop thinking of Martin Luther King and all the work and sacrifices he and many others made to fight for inclusion, equality and basic human rights. I am afraid, ashamed and angry.

Currently, as you know there are many legislative bills in Wyoming of deep concern. HB 200 states that a teacher can't discuss inclusion without every parent's permission. I am concerned that some of our legislatures and community members want to erase history and accept White Nationalism in this country. We are better than this.

On the playground every day I witness children trying to fit in and feel included. Children don't see the color of skin or care about the religious or political views of their peers. They just figure out who likes the sport they like or the game they love to play. There are kids who prefer to sit in the sun and read a chapter book. There are others who want to be the king of the snow forts. There are boys who love the latest dramatic theatrical game the girls are playing. And there are girls who can play soccer or basketball as well as the boys, sometimes with a stronger competitive spirit. To them and their innocence it is **not** about how you look but what you have in common. That is what I see in the early grades 95% of the

time. Then I can see when a parent interferes with that, and their child becomes a bully because they hear their parents talking about excluding these kids. If left to their own way of thinking kids will always include everyone. I don't think humans are innately racist or judgmental; that is learned behavior. I think it's time that the powerful, rich white men that are ruining this country go back to preschool and learn how to play.

Catherine Osborne Johnson