

Changing the Way We Think About Race
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Tri-County Unitarian Universalists
Summerfield, FL
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In October of last year, the NPR show “Here and Now” featured the Canadian rapper Shad. The feature began, “When Canadian rapper Shad began producing his latest album, he thought about a skit where Chris Rock pokes fun at the idea of Black excellence.” I shared a joke from that skit with you earlier. The “Here and Now” feature notes that, “Rock’s joke was the jumping-off point for Shad’s latest work, which interrogates the idea of Black excellence. Shad basically says: Black people should be allowed to be just average.

“‘Black Averageness,’ one of the singles off his latest album, “Tao,” talks about the pressure of these expectations.”

“In his personal life, Shad has said he’d be happy if his daughter were average. It’s what his parents wanted for him when they moved from East Africa to Canada. He pushes against the notion that being average carries a negative connotation because, at its core, Shad believes the choice to be average coincides with the freedom to be fully yourself.

“‘What I was taught was that average means that, practically speaking, you can do anything,’ he says.

“While there are limits to that — not everyone will walk on the moon or win an Olympic gold medal — it’s about offering what you can uniquely contribute to the world, he says.

“‘I think the message there is, yes, liberation to be who you are, to try things, to fail,’ he says, ‘and I think also liberation from this obsession in our society with achievement.’” [Canadian rapper Shad on spirituality, profanity and the right for Black people to be average | NCPR News \(northcountrypublicradio.org\)](https://www.ncprnews.org/news/2021/10/20/canadian-rapper-shad-on-spirituality-profanity-and-the-right-for-black-people-to-be-average)

But there is a price to pay for being African American and failing. Isabel Wilkerson in her book Caste writes, “When you are raised middle class and born to a subordinate caste in general, and African-American in particular, you are keenly aware of the burden you carry and you know that working twice as hard is a given. But more important, you know there will be no latitude for a misstep, so you must try to be virtually perfect at all times merely to tread water. You live with the double standard even though you do not like it. You know growing up that you cannot get away with things that your white friends might skate by with—adolescent pranks or shoplifting on a dare or cursing out a teacher. You knew better, even if you were so inclined...”

Perhaps having parents who came from East Africa has spared the rapper Shad from some of the fullest brunt of the racism of North America. When I served the UU congregation in New Bern, NC a native African American wife insisted that her husband a now African American who immigrated here from French Guinea did not understand racism like she did. Unfortunately, life here tends to teach lessons in racism that one probably did not necessarily want to learn.

Last Saturday I listened to “This American Life.” There was a section about Jerry Craft and Katy, Texas. Craft wrote a graphic novel about a 12-year-old black kid who goes to a new school, New Kid. He

says when he was growing up there were two sections of books at the library- general books and the black books, and the black books were all history and misery. He wanted to write the book that he had wanted as a kid, a book where the biggest decision the protagonist has to make is whether to play X-Box or Play-Station. He includes experiences of daily racial slights in the book, being called by the only other black kid's name, having people touch his hair, but his character finds these confusing and annoying not tragic. Still when he was invited to give an author talk in Katy, Texas a white mom, Bonnie Anderson got up a petition that garnered more than 400 signatures to stop the event and ban the book. She claimed the book taught Critical Race Theory. She said she couldn't believe many of the events in the book could happen, even though most of them were based on things that had happened to Craft when his parents had sent him to a private school. Anderson claimed that Craft's book would poison the minds of her children and make them feel bad for being white. Strangely in a life imitating art sense, one of the biggest things that happens in the book is that the protagonist loses his sketch book in which he has recorded some of the racial slights that have happened to him. His white teacher finds it and confronts him. She tells him he is angry and ungrateful. He should be glad for his opportunity to be at the school. The protagonist learns that while he may experience racism it is not okay to let white people know it.

Katy, Texas eventually put the book back on the shelf and rescheduled the author visit, but parents gathered at the next school board meeting to protest that decision. Eight states have recently restricted teaching about race. Twenty more states have legislation in the pipeline. The legislation worries that white children might feel discomfort, guilt, or anguish if racism is discussed. [Talking While Black \(thisamericanlife.org\)](http://thisamericanlife.org). Lest you think UUs are above this, let me share that I have been to antiracism workshops in which a white reaction to a sharing of an incident of racism by a black person was to cry and be upset and say that the hurt the black person expressed was not the intention. The writer Robin D'Angelo calls this white fragility. Any hurt to black people is subjugated to hurt feelings of white folk.

Back when I served a UU congregation in Columbia, MD an African American member there said that he thought Unitarian Universalism needed black congregations. Mark Morrison-Reed in his book [Black Pioneers in White Denomination](#) shares how when black ministers tried to start such congregations they were not supported. There is more than one reason why Sunday morning is the most segregated hour of the week. One of them is that there aren't that many places where people of color get to be fully themselves. My daughter reported that my now 13-year-old grandson when he was about 10 came home from school one day and told her he knew how to be black and he knew how to be dark white. He didn't know the word codeswitching, but he already knew how to do it and that he needed to do it. Most work and cultural spaces require people of color to walk around being dark white. A black church or a Native Church or a Latinx church may be one of the few places they get to just be themselves. That is why it is so important that we as Unitarian Universalists now have spaces like BLUU, Black Lives of Unitarian Universalists, and DRUMM, Diverse & Revolutionary UU Multicultural Ministries. These are spaces within our denomination where people can be fully themselves. They can be the rapper Shad's black average.

Back in 1903 W.E.B. Dubois ended his essay, "The Talented Tenth" by writing, "The Talented Tenth of the Negro race must be made leaders of thought and missionaries of culture among their people. No others can do this work and Negro colleges must train men for it. The Negro race, like all other races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men." [Talented Tenth :: W E B Du Bois . org](http://TalentedTenth.org). One hundred and nineteen years later people are getting tired of being told by their grandparents and parents that they need to be exceptional. But the black dentist is still not as likely to live in Chris Rock's neighborhood as

the white one. And the black children of this generation are still, as in Isabel Wilkerson's, not as likely to get away with the things their white peers do. And a black child in a private school today is no less likely to be confused and frustrated by racial slights than Jerry Craft was as a child.

Dr. King said, "Shallow understanding by people of goodwill is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding by people of ill will." We are the white people, we hope of goodwill, in the work and educational and cultural spaces where people of color are feeling they need to be dark white. We can work on changing the ways we relate to make that less and less necessary. I return again this week to our twentieth century Unitarian Universalist theologian, James Luther Adams who said, "The essential meaning of human life ...(is) the struggle to shape and reshape a just and compassionate community."

I end with this meditative poem by civil rights activist, lawyer and Episcopal priest, Pauli Murray.

"Hope is a crushed stalk
Between clenched fingers.
Hope is a bird's wing
Broken by a stone.
Hope is a word in a tuneless ditty—
A word whispered with the wind,
A dream of forty acres and a mule,
A cabin of one's own and a moment to rest,
A name and a place for one's children
And children's children at last...
Hope is a song in a weary throat.
Give me a song of hope
And a world where I can sing it.
Give me a song of faith
And a people to believe in it.
Give me a song of kindness
And a country where I can live it.
Give me a song of hope and love
And a brown girl's heart to hear it." Ashé, Amen.