Race, Poverty and Privilege: Working for Justice in Divisive Times

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The divisive, antagonistic, violent climate of our times can be challenging and discouraging for Friends. Not only in the United States, but around the world, populist political movements have capitalized on fears of "violent extremism" and economic stagnation by closing doors to immigrants and refugees; by rallying under banners of nationalism, isolationism, racism; and by resurrecting the specter of a global crusade that pits Islam versus Christianity.

Turbulence and violence are not new, not to the world, to our country or to the Religious Society of Friends. Quakers emerged amid the political upheaval of 17th century England and those circumstances forged the Peace Testimony. American Friends' understanding of and commitment to this defining testimony against war and violence was repeatedly challenged in the 18th and 19th centuries by the Revolutionary War, numerous wars against Native people as the United States expanded westward, and the Civil War. All these wars were shaped by violent and oppressive racial dynamics that were inherent in the founding of our country and continue to challenge our understanding of the equally-defining Quaker testimonies of equality, integrity and community

Faced with a world so violently divided, how do we Quakers act on our commitment to speak to that of God in everyone, to live lives that promote peace and justice for all? For me, this discernment begins with a spiritually-grounded re-examination of the history—of our country and our religious community—that brought us to this time and place. To faithfully live our testimonies today, we must examine politically charged issues like race and poverty through a spiritual lens—a lens of continuing revelation—and be willing to act on what we learn.

In looking at these issues with you tonight, I share my personal journey to examine my own privilege and power around race. What can I as an individual do? Many of you are without a doubt ahead of me on your journeys and I look forward to learning from you tonight, as well. Then I draw on the 100-year journey of the American Friends Service Committee to be a prophetic Quaker voice for peace and justice. What can we do together through our Quaker organization?

<u>A Truer History of the United States</u>

Vaclav Havel said that dictators keep their power because people are willing to live within the lies perpetrated by the regime; tyrants lose their power when people insist on living within the truth. But before we can live within the truth, we must work together to rescue and reclaim it from the lies. At AFSC we have come to understand the importance of changing the false narratives used to support to violence and oppression. The patriotic history of the United States—land of the free, welcoming the immigrant, with liberty and justice for all—is one such narrative that needs to be challenged.

We know, of course, that Columbus did not "discover" America, that European explorers divided up the "New World" guided by the Doctrine of Discovery. In 1493 Pope Alexander VI issued Papal Bull "Inter Caetera" declaring that any land not inhabited by Christians was available to be "discovered" and exploited by Christian rulers who would spread "the Catholic faith and the Christian religion" and overthrow "barbarous nations."

The European colonists never questioned their rights to the land. One complaint against King George III in the Declaration of Independence is still read aloud today on National Public Radio every July 4: "He has … endeavoured to bring on the inhabitants of our frontiers, the merciless Indian Savages whose known rule of warfare, is an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes and conditions." Indeed, this same "Doctrine of Discovery" became the foundation for the United States' western expansion. In 1823, the US Supreme Court's unanimous opinion in the case *Johnson v. McIntosh* held "that the principle of discovery gave European nations an absolute right to New World lands."

Like many aspects of institutional racism, the Doctrine of Discovery is deeply ingrained in the way we recount our history today as in the Wikipedia entry on Pennsylvania: "In 1681, King Charles II handed over a large piece of his American land holdings to William Penn to appease the debts the king owed to Penn's father." We still don't question King Charles II right to "give" William Penn the land of Pennsylvania with no thought that the Lenni Lenape or Susquehannock people might have the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness on the well-managed land they had long occupied.

Here is what we know: the founders of the United States held African slaves kidnapped from their homeland and considered native inhabitants to be barbarous savages with no rights to their homeland. In 1790, the original United States Naturalization Law further limited citizenship by limiting naturalization to immigrants who were "free white persons" of good character. This was formal beginning of the long effort to keep America white.

In 1865, the Thirteenth Amendment ended slavery with one important exception—slavery could continue "as punishment for a crime," a loophole that was fully exploited by the prison farms in the post-Reconstruction South. 1868, the Fourteenth Amendment in principle granted citizenship to former slaves. One hundred years later the right to vote was still routinely denied to African-Americans in many states, but at the time the ratification of the Fourteenth Amendment fueled fears among many white Americans that other non-white groups—especially Asians—might next be offered the possibility citizenship.

Reacting to this perceived threat, in 1875, Congress passed its first immigration law, the Page Act of 1875, banning entry of "undesirable" immigrants including Asian contract laborers, Asian woman who would engage in prostitution, and convicts. In 1882 the Chinese Exclusion Act, excluded all Chinese laborers for 10 years. This law was renewed in 1892 and 1902 and followed by other restrictive immigration laws in 1907 and 1917 often framed as protecting beleaguered poor white working class folks from predatory immigrants.

In 1917, the Great War in Europe was a more pressing concern to Friends than racist immigration laws. Minutes from the April 30, 1917 meeting at which AFSC was founded—just three weeks after the US entered the First World War—spoke of "requests continually coming in as to what Friends can do in this crisis."

The prevailing narrative then, as now, was that democracy was threatened and the only response was to use military force. Spurred by the vision of three young men in their 20's, a group of theologically diverse Quaker yearly meetings came together united by their commitment to pacifism to offer a Friendly alternative to military service as way to work for peace.

The immediate result of that April meeting was a centrally-coordinated project that inspired the active participation of Friends from meetings across the U.S. Hundreds of mostly young men trained at Haverford College in June 1917, and were working in France by September, addressing needs of those displaced by war.

When the war ended with the Treaty of Versailles in 1919, there was discussion of laying down the Service Committee. "We should not go on unless we are sure that we have a vital mission to perform."

However, many of those who returning from service in Europe were now called to a mission more vital than merely offering relief after war—they wanted to build firm foundations for peace that would prevent future wars. AFSC workers in Germany after the armistice saw the seeds of war in the injustice that was punishing German children for the sins of their fathers. The situation was not much better in the U.S. where Henry Cadbury, one of AFSC's founders, lost his teaching position at Haverford after publicly expressing what were labeled "pro-German" sentiments in 1918.

The end of the Great War did not result in the democracy promised in the recruiting posters. The U.S. in 1919 was in the grip of fear and violence, much as now. On May 1, 1919 newspapers headlines reported on a plot by anarchist followers of Italian Luigi Galleani who had sent letter bombs to 36 U.S. leaders. Following a call to "Close the Gate" on "undesirable" foreign immigrants, Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer conducted a series of raids, arresting and deporting many Slav and Italian immigrants labeled as anarchists, communists, and radical leftists.

In 1921, congress passed the Emergency Quota Act, severely restricting immigration until lawmakers could agree on a "permanent solution." In 1924, the Johnson-Reed Immigration act was passed and reluctantly signed into law by President Calvin Coolidge. Even more restrictive than the Emergency Quota Act, the 1924 law put an outright ban on Arab and Asian immigrants and established national quotas based on the 1890 U.S. census, greatly increasing visas for those from the British Isles while restricting entry from Southern and Eastern Europe.

Mitchell's Red Scare also spilled over into brutal, violent responses to union efforts to improve working conditions. In West Virginia, for example, coal miners striking for better working conditions were locked out by mine owners until they and their families faced starvation. At the same time, African Americans faced race riots, lynchings, and the rise of the second Ku Klux Klan.

J. Edgar Rhoads wrote to Rufus Jones in 1924, "America has not learned the lesson of the war, nor has our own Society learned it. We are still thin and superficial in these deepest issues of life." One of the lessons not yet learned was the concern for better "interracial relationship, a new spirit of understanding and fellowship between different racial groups, particularly, of course, Negroes, Japanese and Italians." Given the climate of the times, it is no wonder that after returning from Europe the American Friends Service Committee embraced the need to engage in "Home Service," on behalf of justice for West Virginia miners, African Americans, Native Americans, and Japanese immigrants among others.

Much more could be said about this long history of efforts to "Make America White," to use race to divide people with shared economic interests. While well-known to people of color, this history is largely missing from public school texts. The suppression and distortion of this history lies at the root of the divisive political climate we see today. What is our responsibility as individual and corporate Friends to challenge the lies and tell the true narrative of our country?

<u>My Personal Journey with Racial Justice</u>

I offer my personal experiences, my struggles with race and privilege—sometimes successful, sometimes not so successful—because I believe that sharing our personal journeys and our aspirations will support us in developing a beloved community that truly embraces, celebrates, and thrives on diversity. This story begins long before I joined the Religious Society of Friends because the Spirit and Light were at work in my life well before I had a clearness committee for membership.

I was born in New Orleans, Louisiana in a working-class Catholic family. My father lied about his age to enlist in the Navy and fight in World War II. After returning home and trying a brief stint in civilian life, he re-enlisted and became a career soldier. We moved frequently when I was young. In 1952 we moved to London, England, just six years after the end of World War II, where I experienced firsthand the aftermath of war—bombed out buildings, coal and foods still rationed, and people still dealing with physical and psychological scars.

From London we moved to Bavaria, to a U.S. Army base in built on what had been a concentration camp, a feeder camp for nearby death camps. The foundations of the prisoner barracks were still visible field where my friends and I sometimes played. Walking among those ruins, I felt the presence of the liberated prisoners I had seen in Life magazine photos, people looking like living skeletons.

We next moved to Verdun France, a center of World War I as well as World War II hostilities. In 1960, farmers were still uncovering unexploded ordinance from World War I as they plowed their fields. By this time, I had become an avid student of war, especially World War II and the Holocaust. What I read left me appalled. Kristallnacht. Mass incarceration and deportation based on religion. How could people let this happen? Why did so few of the good Christians of Europe speak up about the oppression of the Jews? As a Catholic I was especially offended by the complicity of the Catholic Church in the deportation of Jews in Italy. As I prayed, I asked God: How could anyone simply stand by in the face of such evil? I was 13 so I was full of righteous indignation at that point.

God has a way of answering our prayers in unexpected ways. In 1960 after nearly eight years living in Europe, I arrived in Ozark, Alabama at the height of the civil rights movement to be enrolled in an all-white segregated high school.

Racial prejudice had always been an undercurrent in the Army, that as a white woman I had the privilege to ignore. Once the base commander, a white Southerner, revoked the rights of my Girl Scout troop to meet on military property because an African American girl had been admitted into our previously all-white troop. For a moment, looking at this young woman, I thought "I'm glad I 'm not black," Then immediately felt guilty realizing that she was born black and there was nothing she could do to change that. Now, living in Ozark, the unjust consequences that followed this accident of birth was an issue I was challenged to face.

The brutal, dehumanizing treatment of blacks in Alabama in 1960 was orders of magnitude beyond any "prejudice" or "discrimination" I had ever witnessed. The "N-word" was regularly used as a careless insult and as part of terrifying physical attacks by armed angry white men—many of which were broadcast on the nightly news. I recognized the treatment that Jews experienced living under Hitler.

The Freedom Rides were a riveting struggle to force Greyhound and Trailways to integrate their interstate buses and waiting rooms as they were legally required to do. One of the buses was surrounded and set on fire in Anniston, Alabama and the Riders miraculously escaped with their lives when the daughter of one of the arsonists intervened. Rev. C. T. Vivian was one rider who spoke about what it meant to be a Christian who was living his faith, fighting brutal oppression in the most forthright yet loving way imaginable, seeing the possibility of transformation even in those who seem to be the most implacable enemies.

I knew that what I was seeing all around me in the South in1960 was not what God called us to do with each other. Now I had to come face-to-face with the courage that it takes to speak out against a system of oppression when everyone around you is supporting it—aggressively, urgently, desperately supporting it.

How did I try to live up to my Light at that time? I have to say that my Light was pretty dim. I did not march. I did not stand with the protestors. I mail ordered the album *Pete Seeger at Carnegie Hall* (it would not have been available in local stores!) and in the quiet of my

basement, I listened to "We Shall Overcome" and watched the March on Washington on TV. I chose a college as far away as I could from the South in Cambridge, Massachusetts, which I assumed would be highly enlightened. I could say more about the de facto segregation and racism I encountered in the North but that is a story for another time.

My experiences in Alabama and in Europe led me to become first, a pacifist, then a Quaker. In college, I became active in the antiwar movement as the war in Vietnam was heating up. That was a mostly white undertaking. The issue of race receded a little from my consciousness at that time—again, the privilege of being white.

Then after graduating from college, I went to Oakland, California for a summer job. Racism was suddenly in front of me again. In those days, the Oakland police were recruited from Mississippi and the deep South. The police drove through the city with a shotgun on display on the dashboard so that you could see it and be afraid. The Black Panthers rose to defend their community, but unlike the Freedom Riders, they were armed they were militant. The Panthers also did many good things like free breakfast programs and reaching out to serve the needs the community.

When I went to Yale in the fall of 1968 the public health school was in the middle of a black ghetto, the Hill District, a neighborhood with very little in the way of public health. For the first time in my life I became friends with African-Americans, fellow students--dentists, nurses, doctors--and a group of us began to do work in the Hill neighborhood to try to improve the health in that area.

Here's what I discovered: I was embarrassed to tell my new black friends that I was born in New Orleans and that I had gone to high school in Alabama. It took some effort but when I did, it led to rich and deep discussions. Many of them had been deeply involved in the Civil Rights Movement.

How did I live up to my light then? I took a course in black history, read many books--W. E. B. Du Bois, Franz Fanon, Eldridge Cleaver, heard speakers. I decided that my children were not going to grow up in the same kind of white cocoon that I had.

I was looking for day care for my one year old daughter. A friend suggested an African-American nurse who had started a day care center on Dixwell Avenue a black neighborhood in New Haven. When I enrolled my daughter, I learned that Mai Huggins, one of the other children there, was the daughter of Ericka Huggins, a Black Panther on trial for her life alongside Bobby Seale in the courts of New Haven. Ericka had been widowed while she was pregnant when her husband was shot after the FBI had planted false evidence to stir up a fatal rivalry among Black Power groups in Los Angeles. She had come to New Haven only to be arrested and thrown in jail when Mai was six weeks old. Following Erika's trial made the reality of racism and the injustice in our criminal justice system much more personal. I will not forget the day that I went to pick up my daughter and Ericka Huggins had just been acquitted. She was reunited with her child after two years. I couldn't imagine what that felt like.

About this time one of the Black Panthers that we had been working with took me aside. He said, "I know you mean well. But if you want to do something about the conditions you see in this community, you need to go work in your community. We black folks can take care of ourselves. The real problem is with the white folks and I really wish you would go work there."

This was difficult to hear. I knew how hard it was to speak up in your own community. I had been there in Ozark, Alabama and largely failed. I was a lot easier to do "good works" in the Black community.

I was moving into an academic career and I tried to bring that message with me. I worked not just for affirmative action for disadvantaged students, but making sure those students were supported to succeed and valued for the unique gifts they brought. I worked with an American Association of Medical Colleges program to mentor minority faculty. I watched people brought in as window dressing so the school can say we have an African-American or Latino faculty member and then given so many public responsibilities that they would never get tenure.

I also undertook a long project of the People's Republic of China. That project gave me and my family the experience of living for about eight months in a sleepy little provincial capital of 2 million where we were one of about 20 Westerners. My children went to a Chinese school that had never had non-Chinese students before.

I was a Quaker by then. With the help of my monthly meeting, Santa Monica Meeting, I acted on a leading to become an Alternatives to Violence Program facilitator. About 24 people from local meetings took the first basic course and ten people ended up being facilitators. I was connected through an Intern at AFSC with the Native American spiritual advisor at the Heman G. Stark Youth Correctional Facility in Chino, California where we began offering AVP workshops.

The warden was concerned that we would be bringing in youth from different gangs, gangs that were segregated along racial lines. We facilitators agreed at the beginning that we would only work with interracial groups. The warden tried to scare us, warning that we were risking a couple of dead white facilitators before the end of the workshop. During the first training, the warden kept calling in expecting to hear bad news. He finally came in person on Sunday and walked in on a giant group hug. He couldn't believe it.

What was living up to my Light like at that point? For me—I was able to get to know young men of color who were not academics, doctors or middle-class professionals. These young people had almost nothing in common with me in terms of background and experience and yet the miracle was that we connected. AVP helped me overcome the implicit bias that reacts to young, tattooed Black and Latino men as threats. Now they looked like young people I knew and loved and cared about. How could they be anything but a child or God?

I'm sorry to say I'm a very slow learner sometimes. Eventually, my AVP work let me grasp the meaning of white privilege. Here's how it works. If one group is being discriminated against that means somewhere there is a group that is getting an advantage, a privilege. When I went to MIT in 1964 they had separate admission processes for men and women. It was harder to get into MIT as a woman. You had to have higher grades and better scores. And the women did better than the men when they got there. Yet men came up to me all the time and said "You're taking the place of a man" and I just put my head down. My class had 45 women out of 950. When gender-blind admissions were finally tried a couple of years late, it revealed that there should have been 225 women. This meant that there were 180 men who were taking the place of a better-qualified woman. One in five of the men in my class. It didn't mean any particular male friend of mine shouldn't be there or should be burdened with guilt. He, like me, was trapped in systemic racism.
So when a bright black or brown child doesn't get the education he or she deserves while a white child gets a smaller class size and a tutor after school, that's structural racism. That's privilege.

Our friends in communities of color understand deeply—because they live it every day—that systemic racism results because these kinds of small privileges happen over and over and over again. It is not some individual consciously discriminating. Getting a tutor for your white child, you are not thinking "Oh, this is a racist act." But the complex web of historic discrimination in income, housing, and education reinforces and is reinforced by these small acts.

AVP helped me realize that I was called to do more direct work on peace and justice, probably at AFSC. I had been involved with AFSC since the 70's when I had gone to the Cambridge office for help in becoming a tax resistor. I had been on program committees, had friends who worked for AFSC, but I never had applied for a job.

In 2002, I applied for the regional director position in the Pacific Southwest region and began work in January 2003. AFSC staff were incredibly valuable teachers, helping me understand the whole history of immigration, the role of imperialism, conquest and colonialism in what had happened to the indigenous people of Arizona, New Mexico, California and Hawai'i. All these things I learned in a new and much more personal way through my work with AFSC staff and partners.

As a white woman and a Quaker in a Quaker organization, I am definitely a privileged person. I have privilege and power beyond whatever my job title is. I will always as a white woman and as a Quaker receive and process information differently from a Black man, a Latina woman, or an Ethiopian staff member working in our Nairobi office. We all have different life experiences on which to frame the things we see and hear.

There is an ever-present tension though. AFSC is a Quaker organization with practices and traditions that are firmly rooted in 17th century England—not the most diverse place at the time. We are committed to having a Quaker board of directors. Our board legally must be 80% Friends. However, in recent years, we have only had one or two non-Friends out of 25 board

members. We have achieved our goal of having 30% of our Board come from communities of color, despite the fact that the Quaker yearly meetings from which we draw our board members are notably, visibly mostly people of European descent. The good Friends who serve on the board, on committees and in other ways have been on the same journey I have struggled with—and some of them have made much more progress than I have had on this path—yet they cannot change their lived experiences, they cannot have the lived experience that would be present if we had more diversity in those committees and on the board. And we must always ground what we do in the testimonies and values of the Religious Society of Friends.

Here is where my Light has finally brought me. That Black Panther who spoke to me back in 1971 was right. I need to be a witness for racial justice in my own community, my Quaker community, among those who share my privilege. It is not that my progressive neighbors in Santa Monica or the Religious Society of Friends are consciously unwelcoming to people of color. We are just too much shaped by our privileged life experience to really understand what it would mean to be welcoming to people who come from very different backgrounds and experiences.

Let me offer an example: on a Sunday after the verdict came down in the Trayvon Martin case, I went to worship at Bright Hope Baptist Church, a thriving African-American Baptist church in Philadelphia. I have never felt more welcomed. Early in the service a 10-year-old boy stood at the pulpit and asked newcomers to stand up so they could be welcomed. For five minutes nearby members of the congregation came over and introduced themselves, asked my name, why I had come that morning. At the end of the service, I was surrounded by new friends who smiled, shook my hand and welcomed me to fellowship. How would it feel to come into a Quaker yearly or monthly meeting with that as your culture, with that as your expectation?

Within the Society of Friends racism is a hard word to hear. I have sometimes used trainings on class to get into the same issues. Class and race are definitely intertwined in our society. But here is the challenging truth: the same systems, habits, and cultural norms that disadvantage and marginalize African Americans actively confer privileges on the white middle class, privileges that it is very hard for we who benefit to see. It is very hard for me to say that I am here on the backs of people who are not.

Working for racial justice in the Society of Friends and in the world must not be left to people of color. I have been thinking about racial justice in light of the Shared Security framework jointly developed a few years ago by AFSC and FCNL to reimagine US foreign policy.

- Security is freedom from fear and want, which requires the presence of healthy, just relationships
- Security is a common right for all based on the dignity and value of all human life
- Security is a patient practice and an intentional process of building inclusive communities, just societies, and equitable relationships
- Security is a shared responsibility – its challenges belong to all of us and should be democratized accordingly

Militarism and domination does not make us secure. Security is achieved by caring for each other. If everyone feels secure, we don't need to dominate. We don't need to rely on military might. I believe that this is also a framework that we could use in our lives and in our meetings. What would it mean if our neighborhoods made everybody feel equally secure, equally safe to walk down the street? What if our meetings made everyone feel equally safe to speak whatever is on their mind, equally able to be heard, equally able to be included, equally able to be wrong equally, able to be stupid—all those things. Shared security would be an application of the wisdom of an Australian aboriginal saying, "If you have come here to help me you are wasting our time, but if you have come because your liberation is bound up in mine, then let us work together."

As we saw in our last election, people can feel excluded based on economics, education, religion, and culture, not just the destructive social construct of race. We who seek an end to racism need to reach out to all communities. In *Hillbilly Elegy* J. D. Vance poignantly described the wisdom and necessity of listening to all those excluded Hillbilly voices he grew up with. The environmental activist who works to save the spotted owl or end dependence on coal must also care about securing new livelihoods for those who cut the trees or mine the coal.

I am here today, Friends, to invite you to join me in envisioning what it would mean for our neighborhoods, our meetings, our country to fully reflect and celebrate the extravagant diversity of God's creation. What must we do to repair the damage our history has done to those our white forefathers were so quick to label as "other" those who are black, red, brown, yellow, immigrant, Jewish, Muslim, gay, transgender.

The road to reconciliation starts with seeking the truth, exhibiting a willingness to listen and to change our own minds. Only then can a genuine apology be offered. Only then can we join together to repair the damage that has and still is eroding and dividing our country.

An old Quaker query asks: Was thee faithful? Did thee yield? What would yielding mean to our democracy? What would it mean to our fellowship? What would it mean to our worship?

Poor people and communities of color have known for a long time that our so-called democratic systems were not serving them. Now many of us who have been protected by our privilege are feeling threatened by our dysfunctional institutions. AFSC's Centennial Celebration in April included an Academic Symposium where we heard thoughtful analyses of past work and calls to action for the future. In her inspiring keynote address Erica Chenoweth traced the recent unprecedented reversal around the world of what had seemed to be stable democracies into autocratic regimes. Her message: Our democracy is, indeed, in danger of such a reversal, but if we commit ourselves to envisioning truly just democratic systems and taking disciplined, nonviolent action to bring about change, we can reclaim our broken civic institutions. I urge you to watch her talk at the AFSC web site: https://www.afsc.org/video/keynote-erica-chenoweth

I don't yet have the Light in me to make this vision a reality, so I shared my story today because I believe that collectively we have the Light. And I know that if we each live up to the measure of Light we are given now, more Light will be given us. I leave you with this advice from the Jewish tradition:

You are not expected to complete the work in your lifetime. Nor may you refuse to do your unique part.