

Joseph's Dream
From Poverty to Privilege
By
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While being interviewed by the Ministerial Fellowship Committee many years ago, the final step in becoming a credentialed Unitarian Universalist minister, one of its members, another white male, wondered if I understood “white privilege,” and asked if I could give an example. He seemed troubled that I had used the word “oppressive” to describe some of my experiences. In logic his question betrays the informal fallacy of division, in which the qualities attributed to a group are attributed to its individual members, that is, when one thinks what is true of the whole must also be true of its parts. The argument, America is the wealthiest nation on Earth. You are an American. Therefore, you must be wealthy, is an example. It’s related to the fallacy of composition, which conversely presumes the qualities attributed to the individual members of a group must also be true of whole. The terrorists responsible for the 9/11 attacks were Muslims. Pat is a Muslim. Therefore, Pat must be a terrorist. From these examples, you can understand why these fallacies lie at the root of all prejudice.

I was troubled by the interviewer’s question, not because I haven’t realized some of the benefits of being white and male in our society, but because it felt as if these were the only things, the dominant things, he recognized about me, and made assumptions about me, my life, my experiences, my knowledge, or lack thereof, because of what he saw on the surface. It felt as if, by looking only at my color and gender, he couldn’t really see me. As I’ve mentioned before, the root of the word *respect* means “to see,” as in *spectator* and *spectacle*. This is why prejudice is such a painful thing to experience, whether it’s because of one’s, so called, race, or gender, or sexuality, or religion, or nation of origin, or language, or income, or job, or age, or anything else, because we are reduced to a stereotype.

Since, as a whole, my society has long favored whiteness, maleness, and straightness, any negatives experiences with prejudice I’ve had have been made up for by the positive prejudices they produce in my favor. Still, as person fully capable of empathy—feeling with—and compassion—suffering with—I can imagine how difficult it must be to continuously move about our society without the cover of whiteness, maleness, and straightness. As a husband of a woman I love, and the father of a daughter I cherish, as one who has known the bond of friendship with many women, with gay and straight women and men, and with nonwhite people who have been like brothers and sisters to me; and as one with a functioning brain, including mirror neurons that allow me, as their discover, Giacomo Rizzolatti, put it, “to grasp the minds of others not through conceptual reasoning but through direct simulation; by feeling, not by thinking;”¹ and as one who has been a victim of child abuse and lived in poverty most my life, I feel I understand and have every right to use the

¹ Lehrer, Jonah, *How We Decide*, Mariner Books edition, New York, NY, 2010, p. 185.

word *oppression*. My fight for justice is personal, and I'm not going to let anyone take this word from me.

So, when I use the word *ally*, I use it in the lexical and traditional sense, as one who joins with others to fight for a common cause. But I'm not just standing on the sidelines to offer my support when asked. It's still might fight. It should be enough that we are human beings to grasp that the causes of racial equality, gender equality, gay rights, immigration rights, and economic equality, belong to us and are our duty and responsibility to take on. None of us suffer in the same way, or as intensely or prolonged as others might, but if we suppress our suffering, or let others convince us it doesn't count, then we lose the one thing that moves us to fight for justice.

In *Exodus*, it's written that, "You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress them, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt,"² a statement repeated verbatim in *Deuteronomy*.³ And *Leviticus* puts it this way, "The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love them as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt..."⁴ The point and beauty of these statements is that we can't harm or oppress others, or allow them to be harmed or oppressed because, sometime in the past, if not in the present, we too have known what it's like to suffer; because, on some level, we can relate, and in this recognition of our relationship with others, their suffering becomes our own.

On a blogpost I read this week, entitled "Hey progressives, can we stop using the tools of social justice to tear one another down?," the writer spoke of a workshop they attended during which the instructor asked them to pair with a partner then take turns looking at each other while the other had their eyes closed. "Look at your partner," our facilitator instructed... 'watch as they inhale and exhale. Remember that just like you they have loved and been loved. Like you, they have had moments of joy and happiness, and they too have suffered pain and disappointment. Like you, they too have gone through heartbreaks and loss.'"⁵ The author, who says how terrified they have felt about risking "the collective public pile-on that often occurs when someone says something that provides a different perspective to the group's general perspective," asks us to remember, "All of us are affected by systemic injustice: We are affected in different ways and in different degrees, but all of us are affected, and so all of us must care and work toward a just society."⁶ This is pretty much what these Hebrew verses are getting at, that by remembering our own suffering, we can relate to the suffering of others and are moved to help.

Each of us has been to Egypt, not in the same way as everyone else, but each of us has suffered in our lives. Maybe, you're still there. Maybe you find yourself going back and forth, like Persephone who can never fully escape the darkness she once experienced in Hades. Whatever your Egypt is, I know it gives you a reason and purpose to struggle for justice. I

² Exodus 22:21

³ Deuteronomy 10:19

⁴ Leviticus 19:34

⁵ <http://nonprofitaf.com/2018/09/hey-progressives-can-we-stop-using-the-tools-of-social-justice-to-tear-one-another-down/>

⁶ Ibid.

know, because of it, "You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress them, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt."

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who often used the metaphor of Egypt in his struggle for racial and economic equality, also saw it as metaphor that belongs to us all. "This story symbolizes something basic about the universe," he said in his 1956 sermon, *The Death Upon the Seashore*;

It symbolizes something much deeper than the drowning of a few men, for no one can rejoice at the death or the defeat of a human person. This story, at bottom, symbolizes the death of evil. It was the death of inhuman oppression and ungodly exploitation. The death of the Egyptians upon the seashore is a glaring symbol of the ultimate doom of evil in its struggle with good. There is something in the very nature of the universe which is on the side of Israel in its struggle with every Egypt. There is something in the very nature of the universe which ultimately comes to the aid of goodness in its perennial struggle with evil.⁷

Perhaps it was his universalism, his insistence that we are all one, "tied together in a single garment of destiny," traversing a moral arch that's slowly bending toward justice, that enabled Dr. King to dream so big, to dream that one day, "little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers." We're all still struggling to fulfill this dream today, a dream that also includes gay and lesbian sisters and brothers, transgender sisters and brothers, Latina and Latino sisters and brothers, immigrant sisters and brothers, impoverished sisters and brothers, refugee sisters and brothers, Palestinian sisters and brothers, and just our sisters, and so many others included in this big, universal dream.

Erich Fromm once complained, "Equality today means sameness, rather than oneness."⁸ Like Fromm, Dr. King understood we don't all have to be exactly the same, or to share exactly the same experiences, or suffer the same, in order to relate to each other and to know that we are brothers and sisters through our shared humanity, the garment of genetic destiny that enwraps us all. So, in my opinion, we can't let anyone, on either side of the struggle, convince us that because we are not exactly the same we can't wholly relate to each other, that we are not one, that we are not brothers and sisters who can fully use our powers of empathy and compassion to stand beside each other, as equals in the truest sense of the word, as one people in our common struggle toward justice, a struggle, King says, that ultimately belongs to the entire Universe.

Yet the myth of segregation and separation, that we must be exactly the same to relate to each other, is an ancient one that continues to slow our slow progress toward this big dream. All this further reminds me of another famous dreamer, Joseph "and his amazing technicolor dreamcoat," symbolizing that patchwork of diversity that makes up one humanity. His story originates in *Genesis*, which has a remarkably coherent message, considering it contains stories from many traditions, like a coat of many colors itself. In its entirety, *Genesis* seems

⁷ <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/death-evil-upon-seashore-sermon-delivered-service-prayer-and-thanksgiving>

⁸ Fromm, Erich, *The Art of Loving*, A Bantam Book, Harper & Row, New York, NY, 1956, 1963, p. 12.

to be a story about how the pattern of favoritism, the belief that some are more privileged and special than others, usually leads to murder, hate, injustice, and inequality.

It begins with the first murder among the very first brothers on Earth, Cain and Abel. Cain becomes jealous when Yahweh, of all beings, favors Abel. In a moment of rage, when nobody is looking, Cain slays Abel. "Where is your brother Abel," Yahweh asks, "I don't know," Cain replies, "Am I my brother's keeper."⁹ So Cain, who for the Hebrews represented an entire tribe, the Canaanites, reflects this ancient pattern of segregation, of denying that we are one and, thus, aren't responsible for the welfare and happiness of our brothers and sisters. As a coherent work, this is the question, the problem of humanity that *Genesis* seeks to answer. So, as it continues, it repeats the story of favoritism and segregation, of power and oppression, of freedom and captivity, of privilege and poverty.

After trying to have a serious conversation about his father's alcoholism, finding Noah drunk, passed out, and naked on the floor, Ham's brothers, Shem and Japheth walk backward into their father's room, so as not to see Noah in the nude, and cover him up with a robe—a symbol of not facing the truth and covering it up. The next day, Noah is so enraged he banishes Ham and his son, Noah's own grandchild, "Cursed be Canaan; may the Lord bless the tents of Shem, and may Canaan be his slave. May God enlarge Japheth so that he lives in the tents of Shem, and may Canaan be his slave." This story offers yet another excuse to separate the human family, and the right of some nations to ostracize and oppress others.

Next comes Abram, "And the Lord appeared to Abram and said, 'I give this land to your descendants,'"¹⁰ reflecting a religiously driven sense of entitlement to a region of the world that exists to this day, resulting in real and terrible abuses against the Palestinian people, including kicking them out of their homes back in 1948. Abram, now called Abraham, favors his youngest son, Isaac, conceived with his wife Sarah, over Ishmael, the son of his slave. "Banish that slave and her son," Sarah insists; "I will not let the son of that slave share the inheritance with my son Isaac."¹¹ Though reluctant, Abraham banishes his slave Hagar and their son Ishmael while he's still only a child.

When his favored son, Isaac grows up and has sons of his own, he too favors one more than the other—Jacob, the second born, over Esau, his twin. As the firstborn, by just minutes, Esau was destined to receive his father's blessing. But Jacob tricked his blind and aging father into giving it to him instead, which created a feud between him and his sibling, forcing Jacob to flee for his life. The blessing, by the way, was pretty much just that, his father saying, "bless you." I don't know if the writer of this story meant it to sound so trivial at the time, though, given the two boys were born so close together and were twins, the idea that one should be considered better than the other should seem absurd in any age. By today's standards these brothers were torn apart over little more than who their father said "gesundheit" to.

⁹ Genesis 4:9

¹⁰ Genesis 12:7

¹¹ Genesis 21:10

Jacob, whose name is later changed to Israel, continues this familiar familial pattern by favoring his youngest son Joseph more than his other eleven sons, symbolizing the twelve tribes of Israel. One day, Joseph, unwisely tells his already jealous brothers, "Listen to this dream that I dreamed," before describing images suggesting they would all one day bow down to him. At this point, Joseph, who has only known privilege and favoritism his whole life, is but a dreamer of dreams. But unlike Dr. King's big dream, Joseph dreams only of his own greatness at the expense of everyone else.

Imagine his shock when his brothers throw him into a pit, where they plan to let him die, until they seize an unexpected opportunity to sell him as a slave to a passing Egyptian caravan. They then tell their grief-stricken father that wild animals have killed his favorite boy. Life isn't easy for Joseph as a slave, including being imprisoned for a crime he didn't commit. But it is here, after his first real pitfall in life, after losing his freedom and his privilege, that he goes from being a dreamer of dreams to an interpreter of other people's dreams. Somehow his suffering awakens his empathy and he begins to recognize the significance of other people's dreams. As translator, Stephen Mitchel puts it, "Joseph has to fall into darkness and slavery and great suffering, he has to learn a deeper humanity and become a clearer vision of God than his favoredness has thus far permitted."¹²

Eventually his ability as a dream interpreter makes him one of the most powerful persons in all of Egypt, second only to Pharaoh. But instead of making people bow before him, as he had once dreamed for himself, he uses his authority to establish a social security system guaranteeing nobody in the kingdom will ever go hungry. Instead of basking in his own glory and power, he uses his place of privilege to guarantee the welfare of others, especially the most vulnerable in his society.

It so happens, after many years pass, he encounters his brothers who have come to Egypt to buy food during a widespread famine. Though they don't recognize him, Joseph could have them all put to death for their treachery, which he initially wants to do. But, instead, he provides them with a feast, and gives them as much grain as they can carry, and, in the end, tells them who he really is. "I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. Don't be troubled now, and don't blame yourselves for selling me...' And he kissed his brothers and wept as he embraced them. And only then were his brothers able to speak to him."¹³

And this is how the Book of Beginnings ends, full circle, with a story in which the family pattern of favoritism, blame, anger, and oppression, which has segregated and separated the human family, all the tribes of the world, is finally broken when Joseph, whose own suffering makes him able to see other people's dreams, to have compassion for them, and to want to help, embraces his family so they can all weep, and kiss, and forgive, and speak to each other again.

When I was in Romania a few weeks ago I saw many brightly colored buildings. This is so because, during Communism, all the homes had to be without color, a consequence of the

¹² Mitchell, Stephen, Genesis, Harper Collins Publishers, New York, NY, 1996, p. L

¹³ Genesis 45

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State's puritanical definition of equality to mean "sameness" rather than "oneness." But we don't have to be the same to embrace one another, or relate our unique suffering and joys, for that matter, to the unique suffering and joys of others. We can embrace our differences and still embrace each other fully as sisters and brothers. We can even celebrate human diversity by stitching all our uniqueness into a fabric of many shapes and colors to fashion one beautiful humanity.

But, to do so, like Joseph, we must remember the pitfalls we've experienced, the banishment, the prejudice, imprisonment, and the oppression we've known, that we might recognize something similar in others and be moved to help, and to not repeat the egregious mistakes of humanity's past. So, don't let anyone convince you your suffering doesn't count because it was different, or that you can't relate to others because you are different, or that the universal struggle for justice doesn't belong to you too.

Isn't it remarkable that the story of Joseph, the healing that happens after generations of favoritism and separation, takes place in Egypt, the Hebrew symbol of slavery and oppression. Perhaps this is meant to suggest we too must return there, to this place of suffering, to heal ourselves and our own society, and the whole of humanity; to recognize the dreams and needs of others, to remember that, "The stranger living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were strangers in Egypt."