Words Matter. Let’s Use These.

Writing today after participating in a multiple protests in our region this week, I am not hopeful. But I am uplifted in a number of ways. I am uplifted because in this week I have witnessed thousands of my fellow San Dieagans taking to the streets with vigor and discipline and intelligence to decry racism and violence. And I believe that many do so still expecting that this rich country, hiding behind persistent, idealized images of itself as a beacon of justice and democracy, might yet come to conform more closely to such ideals. One of America’s key activists and public intellectuals has said that he does not speak and work for a better America because he knows it will be realized. Rather, he does so because in taking on such work we reaffirm our humanity in standing against the worst we can be. Sometimes we must be satisfied with the possibility that the process will be as close as we get to the destination.

When you look at me, you see a white person, no matter how I might prioritize my own identities. And that ‘whiteness’ carries with it a whole complex of meanings and privileges in this society, as it does largely throughout the world. I say that because over the whole of American history, those with power and wealth and influence – white people – have worked consciously to make it so. Racism has been used as a tool of control. White is the American default, a status that those defined as other-than-white either have had to earn (e.g. Italians, Irish, Jews) or from which they have simply been excluded. This is particularly true for African Americans, who, no matter their achievements or standing in this society, are seen by many of their fellow Americans as, at best, less-than-fully-vested citizens, and at worst, as less than fully human. Donald Trump won his office in part by questioning the citizenship, religion, and rectitude of our first African American President Barack Obama.

When I was a child in the 1960s I heard white adults speak about the ‘Negro problem.’ What I have come to understand – and what African Americans have understood for hundreds of years – is that the creation of white identity and the easy privilege inherent in it is the organic American problem: the warped nature of American society and many of its social and economic ills are inextricably tied to this society’s persistent dedication to racism generally, and anti-Black racism specifically. I believe that the only way to shift this paradigm is to accept, down to the marrow in our bones, that America has a white problem, and that we white folk, as the long-term beneficiaries of that privilege, bear the burden of achieving revolutionary changes here.

Which brings me to the other reason I feel some uplift at this moment. There is a language that has evolved over the last 30 or 40 years to speak about the realities of race in America, used primarily by activists and writers and academics. This vocabulary includes terms such as white supremacy, systemic racism, white privilege, structural racism, mass incarceration, the school-to-prison pipeline, and anti-racism. It seems to me that until quite recently the use of this language was considered taboo or fringe by many institutions and individuals. These terms and concepts generally were not used in corporate newsrooms or uttered by most elected officials.

What I see now is the popularization of this language and the concepts behind these words. This week, CBS News aired a national segment entitled “What is White Privilege? What Questions should Americans be Asking?” In every sizable American city and many small towns Americans are walking down the middle of their Main Streets with signs extolling ‘Black Lives Matter’, ‘End Systemic Racism’, and ‘Curb Your White Privilege.’ I have heard commentators state that Americans lacks the language to speak about race. Well, here, this week, is that language, available for generalized use. We’ve experienced the equivalent of a whirlwind weekend seminar on white privilege, Black oppression, and how to speak about both. My hope is that White Americans take this moment to seriously consider how their privilege relates to the negation of others’ humanity, and therefore to the negation of their own humanity. I hope that having done so, we find at least a thimble-full of the courage that so many of our African American brothers and sisters have found over the centuries to stand against bigotry and exploitation and murder. I hope that we embrace within ourselves the potential anti-racism that will allow us to transcend our whiteness, and fully realize our humanity. While I don’t necessarily have hope, I do have these hopes.