

“Won’t you be my neighbor?”

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“It’s a beautiful day in my neighborhood, a beautiful day for a neighbor. Won’t you be mine, won’t you be mine, won’t you be my neighbor?” Mr. Roger’s Neighborhood was an integral part of my childhood. The show’s last episode aired in 2001 but with the release of the documentary “Won’t You Be My Neighbor” Fred Rogers is back in the limelight. For thirty three years, he gave kids space to process some of the most challenging issues of our time and he always relied on his Number One philosophy: No matter who you were or where you lived, you were his neighbor and he loved you. Simple as that. Mr. Rogers believed we should love our neighbors and love ourselves and that both were powerfully intertwined.

He was also instrumental in showing kids that neighborhoods could grow and change and “newness” was welcome and natural. To prove that, he often invited new people onto his show. One of those people was named Officer Clemmons.

Officer Clemons was played by the actor Francois Clemmons. During an episode that aired in 1969, Rogers was resting his feet in a

plastic pool. It was on a hot day and according to Clemmons, Mr. Rogers “... invited me to come over and to rest my feet in the water with him. The icon Fred Rogers not only was showing my brown skin in the tub with his white skin as two friends, but as I was getting out of that tub, he was helping me dry my feet.”<sup>1</sup>

Looking back at the summer of 1969, swimming pools had just been desegregated and the Fair Housing Act was only a year old. Change was coming--and Mr. Rogers Neighborhood presented an aspirational world where desegregation was peaceful, welcomed, and imminent.

Yet in the end, our neighborhoods didn't change very much. Red-lining, the controversial practice of restricting “undesirables” no longer exists, outlawed by the Fair Housing Act of 1968. But, fifty years later, we are more segregated today particularly in schools, and segregation is most pronounced, perhaps surprisingly, in the Northeast.<sup>2</sup> In fact New York is one of the most segregated states in America today.<sup>3</sup> The Pew Research foundation found that our neighborhoods are more ideologically differentiated, too: we tend to

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<sup>1</sup>Staff, NPR. “Walking The Beat In Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood, Where A New Day Began Together.” *NPR*, NPR, 11 Mar. 2016, [www.npr.org/2016/03/11/469846519/walking-the-beat-in-mr-rogers-neighborhood-where-a-new-day-began-together](http://www.npr.org/2016/03/11/469846519/walking-the-beat-in-mr-rogers-neighborhood-where-a-new-day-began-together).

<sup>2</sup>Nazaryan, A. (2018, March 23). School segregation in America is as bad today as it was in the 1960s. Retrieved from

<https://www.newsweek.com/2018/03/30/school-segregation-america-today-bad-1960-855256.html>

<sup>3</sup><https://www.pbs.org/newshour/education/new-york-state-singled-segregated-schools>

live with people who have similar views.<sup>4</sup> So we are more likely to reject people who don't look or think like us. We use short hand and simply call those people "other." Dr. George Fredrickson, an influential professor of American history, tells us: "It originates from a mindset that regards 'them' as different from 'us' in ways that are permanent and unbridgeable. This sense of difference provides a ...rationale for using our power advantage to treat the . . . Other in ways that we would regard as cruel or unjust if applied to members **of our own group.**"<sup>5</sup>

Fred Rogers emulated a teaching of Rabbi Akiva: he said that "Love your neighbor as yourself" is the most important law in the Torah."<sup>6</sup> Ben Azzai took that directive one step further and quoted a different line from Genesis: "This is the book of Chronologies of Adam."<sup>7</sup>: meaning: we are all literally, "Children of Adam" or as it's regularly translated: humanity. Each of us is created in the image of God, therefore we shouldn't worry only about our neighbor as Rabbi Akiba suggests, but we should love all of humanity.

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<sup>4</sup>DeSilver, D. and DeSilver, D. (2018). How the most ideologically polarized Americans live different lives. [online] Pew Research Center. Available at: <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/06/13/big-houses-art-museums-and-in-laws-how-the-most-ideologically-polarized-americans-live-different-lives/> [Accessed 1 Sep. 2018].

<sup>5</sup> George M. Fredrickson, *Racism: A Short History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 9.

<sup>6</sup>Jerusalem Talmud, Nedarim 30B

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*

My teacher, Rabbi Andrea Weiss, Ph.D. put this teaching into action, with a letter writing campaign called: “American Values Religious Voices: 100 Days. 100 Letters.”<sup>8</sup> She and a coalition of interfaith scholars wrote public letters lifting up core religious truths that they appreciate about our country. One of those letters was from Rabbi Aaron Panken, Ph.D. of blessed memory. He began with a classic teaching, on the worth of a single life, and went on to note: “The mishnah<sup>9</sup> concludes by reminding us that no one’s ancestry—and thus no one’s humanity—is greater than anyone else’s. No American deserves to suffer the disgrace of discrimination, whether due to gender, race, religion, sexuality, economic status, or any other facet of their individuality.”<sup>10</sup>

No one deserves to be seen as the Other. Yet we live in a country where “otherness” persists. We the people still, overtly and covertly, act as if certain “others” are not quite as human as we are.

For the past six years members of WRT have traveled to the American South on a Civil Rights Journey. Hundreds of our congregants and I have explored the civil rights struggle in the 1960’s and how the legacy of slavery persists. How it evolved with the help of heinous Jim Crow laws that gave African Americans an

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<sup>8</sup>Values and Voices. (2018). American Values Religious Voices | 100 Days. 100 Letters.. [online] Available at: <http://www.valuesandvoices.com/> [Accessed 1 Sep. 2018].

<sup>9</sup> Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5

<sup>10</sup>Values and Voices. (2018). Letter 50 | Values and Voices. [online] Available at: <http://www.valuesandvoices.com/letter50/> [Accessed 1 Sep. 2018].

institutionalized Otherness and how that Otherness is still reinforced today.

In Montgomery, Alabama we visit the Equal Justice Initiative. One of the first things we see is a map of America with bright red dots, next to shelves lined with hundreds of bell jars full of dirt. Each of those dots represents a lynching, and each jar is full of dirt from the ground underneath the noose. As a part of their presentation, legal associates from the Equal Justice Initiative argue that lynchings never really ended: they evolved into death row executions.<sup>11</sup> They believe that the myth of racial difference has found new ground in America, via new expressions of injustice like mass incarceration. According to their projections, one in three black boys will go to jail in his lifetime.<sup>12</sup>

One year ago, the city of Charlottesville became synonymous with racial animus. White supremacists shouted “Jews will not replace us!” and Heather Heyer, a counterprotestor, was killed by a rampaging driver. Yet that is only one side of the coin of racism: the public side. We all can agree that Nazis and White supremacists are bad. On the other side, our society has allowed for another kind of

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<sup>11</sup>Toobin, J. (2018). The Legacy of Lynching, on Death Row. [online] The New Yorker. Available at: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/08/22/bryan-stevenson-and-the-legacy-of-lynching> [Accessed 1 Sep. 2018].

<sup>12</sup>Npr.org. (2018). NPR Choice page. [online] Available at: <https://www.npr.org/2014/10/20/356964925/one-lawyers-fight-for-young-blacks-and-just-mercy> [Accessed 1 Sep. 2018].

racism to evolve. Dr. Robin DiAngelo argues that racism today is most present through unconscious bias, and the way in which those people perceived as white have privileges that people of color do not.<sup>13</sup>

Emily Bazelon of the New York Times Magazine spoke about this in her article: “White People Are Noticing Something New: Their Own Whiteness.” She talks about implicit privilege and unconscious racism. Her report began in a Starbucks in Philadelphia. Two black men were arrested for asking to use the bathroom without ordering anything and “...a white customer... tweeted video of the ensuing arrests, adding: ‘All the other white ppl are wondering why it’s never happened to us when we do the same thing.’”<sup>14</sup>

Starbucks’ response reflects a new nationwide trend among companies to offer implicit bias training. The training challenges each of us to admit and reflect on our biases. For decades, across America, and even at WRT, we’ve imagined a world where Color-blindness was possible, that we would simply see a person

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<sup>13</sup>Waldman, K., McGrath, B. (2018). A Sociologist Examines the “White Fragility” That Prevents White Americans from Confronting Racism. [online] The New Yorker. Available at: [https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/a-sociologist-examines-the-white-fragility-that-prevents-white-americans-from-confronting-racism?mbid=social\\_twitter](https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/a-sociologist-examines-the-white-fragility-that-prevents-white-americans-from-confronting-racism?mbid=social_twitter) [Accessed 1 Sep. 2018].

<sup>14</sup>Bazelon, E. (2018). White People Are Noticing Something New: Their Own Whiteness. [online] Nytimes.com. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/13/magazine/white-people-are-noticing-something-new-their-own-whiteness.html> [Accessed 1 Sep. 2018].

and ignore skin color. Yom Kippur 1968, Rabbi Jack Stern Jr. stood on this bimah and hailed color-blindness as a hope for the future.<sup>15</sup> Supreme Court Justice John Harlan wrote in his dissent to Plessy v. Ferguson, the case that upheld racial segregation: “Our Constitution is color-blind and neither knows nor tolerates classes among citizens...”<sup>16</sup> . Then vice-President Johnson declared on the 100th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation: “Until justice is blind to color...emancipation will be a proclamation but not a fact”<sup>17</sup>.

For decades, Color Blindness was a common talking point, but today we know that this approach misses the context: it assumes everyone’s experience should be the same. But how can that be possible? By pretending our own biases don’t exist and that societal biases don’t influence our people’s experience in the world, we allow for our own subconscious biases to influence our actions, unaware of how they color our encounters with others.

How can we respond? The **least** effective approach to combat racism is to say “Implicit bias is everywhere.” It suggests a sense of fatalism that ensures that we will actually do nothing. The **most** powerful action we can take, as reported by The Atlantic, is “... observing [that] stereotypes arise [within us] and mentally

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<sup>15</sup> Parent to Parent YK 1968 Jack Stern Jr.

<sup>16</sup> Chnm.gmu.edu. (2018). Plessy v. Ferguson, 1896, Judge Harlan's Dissent. [online] Available at: <http://chnm.gmu.edu/courses/nclc375/harlan.html> [Accessed 1 Sep. 2018].

<sup>17</sup> Johnson, L. (1963). [online] 100th anniversary of the Emancipation proclamation. Available at: <http://www.usmemorialday.org/Speeches/President/may3063.txt> [Accessed 1 Sep. 2018].

replacing them, actively looking for situational explanations for a person's behavior, and trying to imagine what the world would look and feel like from another person's point of view."<sup>18</sup>

One of the most challenging moments I've had as a Rabbi was at our Martin Luther King Jr. Shabbat five years ago when we welcomed our friends from Greater Centennial AME Zion Church in Mt. Vernon. That particular Friday night we ran out of space in our parking lot. As we sat down to dinner, our executive director told me that the police were on the phone. Many of our guests had parked on streets in the community and our neighbors had called the police to ask them to investigate the black people dressed in suits and ties walking through their neighborhood. Now every January I feel anxious wondering if we are going to be called again. I think about whether our implicit biases will impact another evening and I feel embarrassed because I know Pastor Pogue never gets a call from the Mt. Vernon police when our congregation reciprocates and visits his church.

I don't know what it means to live as a person of color in America. I do know that I experience America differently than people of color do. But my father knows what it means to be the "Other". My dad and his family came to Israel from Iraq in 1950.

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<sup>18</sup>Nordell, J. (2018). Does Starbucks Understand the Science of Racial Bias?. [online] The Atlantic. Available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2018/05/starbucks-unconscious-bias-training/559415/> [Accessed 1 Sep. 2018].

They traded their comfortable home in Baghdad, for a tent city where social services and food were rationed. From the moment they set foot on Israeli soil, they felt as if they were the Other. The Israeli elite thought that their darker skin was a sign of their inferior intellect and mocked their style of dress. I cannot count the number of times my father said that Israel was a third world country back then: It was hard to survive and it was worse for Mizrachim: the Jews that came from Arab lands. When I began learning Hebrew for Rabbinical School, frustratedly I asked my dad why he didn't bring us up bilingual as both my parents were fluent in Hebrew. "I didn't want you to have an accent." he told me. He didn't want me to have a reason to be the Other. My father is olive-skinned and has a thick Middle Eastern accent. Every day in America he gets a sidelong glance in a way I can't quite understand because I don't walk in his shoes. I don't walk in Darren Martin's shoes either.

Darren Martin was interrogated by the police in Manhattan in the foyer of his new apartment building. A neighbor had called to report a potential break-in, but Darren was just trying to move into his apartment.<sup>19</sup> A young woman named Lolade Siyonbola fell asleep in a Yale common room, and was awakened by police, because

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<sup>19</sup>A black former White House staffer was moving into a new apartment. Someone reported a burglary. (2018, May 01). Retrieved from [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2018/05/01/a-black-former-white-house-staffer-was-moving-into-a-new-apartment-someone-reported-a-burglary/?utm\\_term=.693735674231](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2018/05/01/a-black-former-white-house-staffer-was-moving-into-a-new-apartment-someone-reported-a-burglary/?utm_term=.693735674231)

residents thought she had broken in. Lolade is a master's student at Yale and she was in her own common room.<sup>20</sup> Or Reggie Fields, a 12 year old boy who was greeted by police while mowing a lawn on his block. He had accidentally cut a portion of another neighbor's lawn and that neighbor had called to complain.<sup>21</sup> Or State Senator Jesse Hamilton who was campaigning for reelection in Brooklyn, when the police arrived. Someone had called the police because they didn't like his politics. Senator Hamilton has now introduced legislation to make 911 calls like this a hate crime in the state of New York.<sup>22</sup> We see that time and again, unconscious anxiety and bias lead to real consequences.

As we began the long confession on Kol Nidre, we said: *Al cheyt shechatanu l'fanecha b'zadon u'vishgagagh*: For the sin we have committed against you, God, deliberately and unintentionally. Every Yom Kippur we speak these sins communally to remind us all to look inward and examine the poor choices we may have made, whether we were deliberately cruel or unconsciously so. Today is a day for us to check ourselves. To ask ourselves the hard questions not only about how we acted consciously, but to consider moments

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<sup>20</sup>A black Yale student fell asleep in her dorm's common room. A white student called police. (2018, May 11). Retrieved from

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/grade-point/wp/2018/05/10/a-black-yale-student-fell-asleep-in-her-dorms-common-room-a-white-student-called-police/?utm\\_term=.35b0060e4318](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/grade-point/wp/2018/05/10/a-black-yale-student-fell-asleep-in-her-dorms-common-room-a-white-student-called-police/?utm_term=.35b0060e4318)

<sup>21</sup>Williams, D. (2018, July 01). Neighbor calls police on a 12-year-old boy for mowing the wrong lawn.

Retrieved from <https://www.cnn.com/2018/07/01/us/police-called-lawn-mowing-boy-trnd/index.html>

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.cnn.com/2018/08/20/us/911-call-bill-trnd/?no-st=1536180838>

where maybe, just maybe, our own unconscious biases made us turn a human being created in the image of God, into the “Other.”

Mr. Rogers’ invitation was powerful in its simplicity: Won’t you be my neighbor? In it he expressed an openness that we all need to cultivate: that anyone in the human family is welcome to be our neighbor. He challenged us to welcome anyone we meet without our judgments, but with our love. Can each of us make that offer?