

Office for Systemic Justice Newsletter

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If We Were Writing Our Own Scriptures, Which Stories Would We Tell?

Sue Wilson, CSJ

How Do We Understand Ourselves?

Do you see yourself as an individual (whole in yourself) or part of a collective (part of a larger whole)? Both, right? But which lens is primary in your life?

It's not just an abstract question. The answer shapes what we see when we look at life; it steers our choices and actions; it limits or expands our attentiveness to God's presence in our world.

History will understand us collectively, evaluating how our generation deals with climate change, inequality, attacks on democracy and environmental pollution. But we tend to respond primarily at the individual level – using the car a little less, donating to shelters for the homeless, voting and avoiding the use of plastic water bottles. We tend to respond at a level where we feel we have some agency and some control.



How Do We Understand God?

It's almost a mantra in this world: Focus on what you can control. But what if deep change isn't about control? What if it's about seeing the whole and how everything fits together; participating in a communion we can barely intuit; sensing how grace is uncovering leverage points

for change? **What if it isn't about control but cooperation?**

Isn't that what we see in so many of the great stories and figures in the Judeo-Christian scriptures?

Certainly, in the scriptures, God loves the individual, singularly, deeply and fully. We see this, for example, in God's

relationship with Moses, Ezekiel, Deborah and Mary. Still, as these individual figures are encountering a sacred depth in their life, they are also engaging with a much wider and more complex canvas – the transformation of peoples and empires.

In and through God’s relationship with creation, the intensity of divine love is revealed – and human eyes are opened to spiritual insights. In and through God’s relationship with Moses, a people are led



out of slavery to a new land – and they risk a new kind of relationship with God. In and through God’s relationship with the prophets, a people learn to read the big social, political and economic events of their life through the eyes of faith – and they deepen their relationship with God. In and through the lives of Mary, Joseph and Jesus, we see personal, social and economic means of exclusion discredited – and God is manifest more fully and more intimately in human lives.

Inner Change and Systemic Change in God’s Communion

Scripture is not simply about inner transformation, be it individual or collective. Rather, political powers are engaged (e.g. armies and kings). Institutions are challenged (e.g. Temple, barriers in society). And social norms are confronted (e.g. how to understand poverty, Fellowship Table).



In scripture, the spiritual and material, the inner and outer, the individual and collective are integrated. The structures and energies of the mind, heart, conscience, society, politics and economy are interwoven and interacting.

And so it is in our lives.

God is present and acting in it all.

God’s communion is impacted by the individual, ecological, social, political, and economic forces of this world. At the same time, God’s way of being and acting in the world is always opening possibilities for

transformation – if we will but take hold of these possibilities and engage.

Moving back and forth between an individual lens and collective lens expands and deepens our spirituality. If we’re only discerning God’s presence in our individual life, we’re missing a lot of what God is doing. It’s not just about how we experience healing (or growth, creativity, new life...) in our individual life but where we see healing in politics and society. Just as important, where are others experiencing and seeing healing? And how is my own healing linked with this wider healing in society?

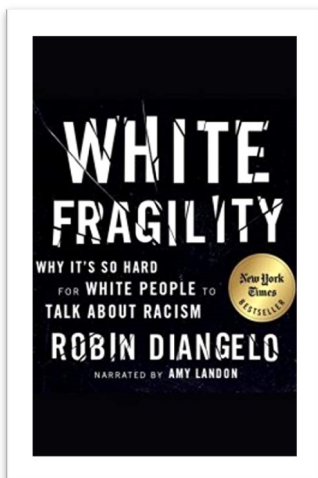
What might this look like in ordinary life?

The Federal election campaign opened questions of racism. People were quick to condemn putting on blackface as racist and, for the most part, the social conversation was about individual morality. A few voices tried to talk about systemic racism but it didn't go far.



It was a good example of how our cultural tendency to view things through the lens of the individual blinds us to much of what's going on, and blinds us to what God may be doing to bring about greater wholeness and justice.

Robin DiAngelo, who is white, wrote a book called *White Fragility* (2018). She insists that white people are all racist, and whites



who think they're not racist cause the most damage of all. DiAngelo explains "we are taught to think about racism only as discrete acts committed by individual people, rather than as a complex,

interconnected system" (3).

The individual framing of the issue means we can focus on changing a few individuals who say or do hateful things. It means we

don't have to examine our own unconscious racist assumptions. It means society doesn't have to change, just individual 'bad' persons.

In our society, whites have held, and continue to hold, nearly all the positions of social, political, and economic power. So, the pre-judgements (thoughts, feelings and assumptions into which we are socialized) which whites tend to hold about people of colour have become institutionalized; that is, white prejudice has shaped the structures and systems of our society.



DiAngelo points to a [New York Times article](#) from 2016 which illumines the degree to which white people still hold the seats of power. The article is based on the U.S. context but is relevant to Canada. Here are a few examples:

- Ten richest people - 100% white**
- Highest-levels of politics – 90% white**
- People who decide which television shows are available – 93% white**
- People who decide which books are available – 90% white**
- People who decide which news is covered – 85% white**
- Teachers – 82% white**

www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/02/26/us/race-of-american-power.html

These statistics reveal “power and control by a racial group that is in the position to disseminate and protect its own self-image, worldview, and interests across the entire society” (31).

Whiteness becomes the norm, while other races are ‘othered.’ The impacts can be devastating:



- Racialized people in Canada are significantly more likely to live in poverty. The 2016 Census showed that 20.8% of peoples of colour are low-income compared to 12.2% of non-racialized people.
- In 2015, there was a 69% high school graduation rate for Black students and 50% for Indigenous students, versus 84% for White students.
- People of colour living in Ontario have higher unemployment rates than White residents. Racialized men are 24% more likely to be unemployed than non-racialized men. Racialized women are 43% more likely to be unemployed than non-racialized men.

<https://colourofpovertyca.files.wordpress.com>



Writing Our Own Scripture Stories

Let's return to the blackface incident in the election campaign. If we use only an individual lens, we end up judging an individual person or action as 'bad.' And nothing much changes. On the other hand, a collective lens calls for collective soul-searching.

This is a place of grace. This is where God is present and acting. If we were to write our own scriptures, this is one of the stories we would tell.

When the system becomes visible, and we see how we are a part of the system, how we benefit from the system whether we want to or not, a moment of choice emerges. ***A moment of grace emerges!***



To see how we are part of the system is to begin to see the whole. How is God's communion impacted by these patterns? What are some connections between my own healing and the healing needed in society? Where are the openings for growth and new life – in myself as an individual and in the collective?

To begin to see the whole picture is grace. To see connections between my own healing and that of society is grace. To surface questions for healing, growth, transformation and new life is grace.



Responding to Grace

If grace opens us to see the connections between the individual and the collective, surely God calls us to act from this space of interconnection. Some possible places to begin might be:

- ◆ To read *White Fragility* as a group and discuss together, making links with your own thoughts/feelings/assumptions and those you see operating in society.
- ◆ To pray to be open to receiving feedback (without defensiveness) about how our words and assumptions might impact racialized persons (to accept that I can have the best of intentions and still say/do harmful things).
- ◆ To listen and reflect carefully when you hear racialized persons talk about systemic racism.
- ◆ To support politicians and policies which begin to shift racist structures and institutions.

With our choices and actions, we write our own ending to this scripture story.

