

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York  
**“Zero-Sum Dilemma”**

Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore January 9, 2022

## Reading

From Heather McGhee’s book *The Sum of Us* (pp13-15 edited)

Psychologists Maureen Craig and Jennifer Richeson presented white Americans with news articles about people of color becoming the majority of the population by 2042. The study authors then asked the subjects to “indicate their agreement with the idea that increases in racial minorities’ status will reduce white Americans’ status.” The people who agreed most strongly that demographic change threatened whites’ status were most susceptible to shifting their policy views because of it, even on “race-neutral policies” like raising the minimum wage and expanding healthcare—even drilling in the Arctic. The authors concluded that “making the changing national racial demographics salient led white Americans (regardless of political affiliation) to endorse conservative policy positions more strongly.”...

It was a dramatic finding, but it still wasn’t clear to me why white people would view the presence of more people of color as a threat to their status, as if racial groups were in a direct competition, where progress for one group was an automatic threat to another. ...

But then again, they weren’t getting that idea out of nowhere. This zero-sum paradigm was the default framework for conservative media—“makers and takers,” “taxpayers and freeloaders,” “handouts,” and “special favors”; “they’re coming after your job, your safety, your way of life.” **Without** the hostile intent, of course, aren’t we all talking about race relations through a prism of competition, every advantage for one group mirrored by a disadvantage for another? When researching and writing about disparities, I was taught to focus on how white people benefited from systemic racism: their schools have more funding, they have less contact with the police, they have greater access to healthcare. Those of us seeking unity told that version of the zero-sum story; the politicians seeking division told the other version—is it any wonder that many white people saw race relations through the lens of competition?

But was that the real story? Black people and other people of color certainly lost out when we weren’t able to invest more in the aftermath of the Great Recession, or tackle climate change more forcefully under President Obama, or address the household debt crisis before it spiraled out of control—in each case, at least partly because of racist stereotypes and dog whistles used by our opposition. But did white people win? No, for the most part they lost right along with the rest of us. Racism got in the way of all of us having nice things...It is progressive economic conventional wisdom that racism accelerates inequality for communities of color, but what if racism is **actually driving** inequality for everyone?

## Spoken Meditation

Let us take Heather McGhee's question inward...

Black people already know, on a daily basis,  
the harm they encounter because of racism  
and the American system of white supremacy.

The truth is  
any form of hatred causes harm.  
It causes harm to everyone  
whether they are an active or passive participant.

Unless you are actively interrupting the system,  
the system of white supremacy  
you are a cooperating part of that system.  
you are a participant,  
enabling the harm of others  
And being morally, spiritually and emotionally harmed too.

The system operates to hide this truth  
and distract you from the harm being done  
by you, through you, to you ...  
unless you are Black or a Person of Color  
and then the system wants you to feel the harm  
so you'll be afraid, stay in line, and remain silent.

This status quo system of oppression  
thrives on lies and secrecy,  
on silence and inaction.

May we uncover the lies  
reveal the secrets  
Speak truth into the silence  
and act in solidarity for the good of all.

## Sermon

This has been a sobering week as COVID cases keep climbing exponentially and we remember the invasion of our nation's capitol during the joint session of congress to certify the Presidential election one year ago Thursday. Our previous president's unwillingness to accept defeat and the dense web of lies he put together to defend his self-image as a winner and the bulk of the Republican party willing to go along with this totalitarian undermining of democratic principles for their own political survival are putting our whole system of government at risk.

All in the service of "zero-sum thinking." There are winners and losers. You are either a winner or a loser. We win when we elevate one leader, and loyally follow. This Republican strategy was

crafted by Newt Gingrich in the 1990's to unify Republicans as a block that only voted together. No independent debate only loyalty mattered. It is us or them. Our previous President was a master of this kind of aggressive thinking to denigrate and dehumanize the other.

This is the opposite of what Unitarian Universalism is all about. We cherish diversity and inclusion. We welcome everyone. We are not about one way or following one person. We believe we can be stronger, more caring, more creative, more joyful, by listening expansively to each other, by being willing to be changed by each other, and by a commitment to lifelong growth and development as individuals and as a congregation.

What is lost in zero-sum, win-lose thinking is the possibility that our differences can be resolved through discussion, negotiation and compromise that result in win-win solutions. Rather than seeing life as a competition, the survival of the fittest and the extinction of the weak, there is another way that succeeds through cooperation and mutual self-interest. It is a grave error to interpret evolution as the competition of all against all. The species that survive and thrive are the ones that learn how to cooperate and share, the cells that merge to create multicellular organisms are stronger together than they are apart.

I think a lot about how to transform zero-sum approaches because we are not immune to that kind of thinking here. It is very easy to fall into. The middle of the twentieth century was riven with the Humanist-Theist controversy. The dualistic approach to belief in God or rejection of God comes to a height on Sunday morning with the theological language we use that is either theistic or atheistic. I've spent a lifetime carefully crafting my language to affirm both these contributions to the diversity of belief and unbelief in our congregations, seeing that diversity as a strength rather than a zero-sum competition. I live it with a deep love of God while rejecting the belief in God and feeling the benefit of being able to draw from both worlds.

Where I'm always looking for ways out of zero-sum thinking in our congregation and in American society is around the issue of race. For way, way too many people who categorize themselves as white, they engage non-whites through zero-sum thinking. So when I heard about a new book by Heather McGhee titled, *The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone And How We Can Prosper Together*, I was immediately attracted to it. Racism grounded in zero-sum thinking misses the tremendous, unrealized potential of this nation to show the world the win-win results of a pluralistic approach. It is also the tremendous, yet unrealized potential of Unitarian Universalism for religion.

McGhee builds her credibility to make this argument by writing and talking publicly about her love of numbers and statistical analysis. She isn't looking for ideological arguments to beat people over the head, she wants to know what the data says. She is grounded in the real world not in dreams of how things ought to be. She wants to prove her case by using real world examples of what happens when people come together across race and class lines and work together for the common good.

I can't bring you the power of her arguments in just one service. So, today I'll talk about the problem of zero-sum thinking. Next Sunday, I'll present McGhee's research on the "sum of us" approach that unlocks the power of diversity and inclusion.

Let's begin by defining the zero-sum thinking problem, with a timely example. My sister and I would gleefully open our presents we discovered on Christmas morning under our attractively

decorated, freshly cut tree adorned with ancient bubble lights. Once all the packages were opened we'd line up our gifts to compare them. We were looking for favoritism. If one of us got more, or better, gifts than the other, it was a sign one or the other parent or both loved one of us more than the other. We rejected the idea we could be loved equally. It was a competition and only one of us could win.

Zero-sum thinking is rooted in the belief that there is a limited supply. If someone else gets more, that will mean I will get less or be at risk of losing something of value. There are only winners and losers. Your gain is my loss. My sister and I were playing out one dimension of this thinking. Parents do have favorite children. My sister and I were always alert to see if my father or mother paid more attention to one of us than the other. I could tell my sister was my dad's favorite as she went into science and academics. I had the edge with my mom because we both had health issues and connected empathetically. My parents claim, that they loved us equally, just didn't align with our childish zero-sum thinking.

Zero-sum thinking becomes quite dangerous when it is practiced by groups of people against other groups of people. It becomes toxic racist thinking if the groups become categories of people with physical traits. While individuals can compete with other individuals with limited effects, when categories of people organize to control and oppress other people, tremendous damage can be done.

The problem with zero-sum thinking is its scarcity frame. As children, my sister and I believed that my parents could only express a limited amount of love. If my sister got more, I got less. It was a false understanding of scarcity. My parents had the capacity for an abundance of love and care for both of us, more than we needed or wanted. We each got enough and there was plenty more for them to share with their friends and other relatives. There was enough love of our community for my mother to run for state legislature, wearing out several pairs of shoes going door to door campaigning for people's vote.

European elites brought the zero-sum frame with them to America in the 1600's wanting to build a new life for themselves. They didn't see any "us" as they encountered indigenous people. What they saw, instead of people, was land to exploit for profit. They didn't see Africans brought to work the land as collaborators in making the land agriculturally productive. They dehumanized them into an underclass of permanently enslaved people, reduced to a cost on a balance sheet. They didn't sense affinity with the poor Europeans who had come before them to work the land. In their minds, these folks could occupy a buffer class defined as "white" and given social status and privilege that separated them from "Black." And Americanized racism was born and took deep root in this land. For group identity and social status trumps collective economic opportunity and interracial cooperation just about every time – much to author Heather McGhee's distress.

McGhee's book does an excellent job demonstrating how racism is deeply reinforced by zero-sum thinking to the detriment of whites. This is so important because most people who identify as white have no clue how they are harming themselves by cooperating with the ubiquitous white supremacy culture all around us. They believe they are better off. What they don't recognize is the poverty they have created for themselves by zero-sum thinking.

Investment in public goods such as education, health care, and public transit, has been in decline for a long time. It comes under the disguise of rejecting big government – but that doesn't tell the full

story. The decline in public investment tracks the gradual increase in access to those goods by people categorized as non-white. That's because for most of the history of this nation, the beneficiaries of America's free public investments were whites only (page 35). One glaring illustration of this McGhee features in her work are the decline of public pools.

From the beginning of the twentieth century, Americans started building public pools. Towns and cities competed to build bigger ones. The 1930's Works Progress Administration built hundreds more.

“By World War II, the country's two thousand pools were glittering symbols of a new commitment by local officials to the quality of life of its residents, allowing hundreds of thousands of people to socialize together for free... Officials envisioned the distinctly American phenomenon of the grand public resort pools as “social melting pots.” Like free public grade schools, public pools were part of an “Americanizing” project intended to overcome ethnic divisions and cohere a common identity—and it worked.” (p. 37)

Those divisions they wanted to overcome, unfortunately, didn't include skin color. The fight to integrate pools during the 1950's brought out a strong racist energy of resistance. The courts said the pools should be integrated. The reaction by whites was horrific, as if the black children who dared to enter a pool had contaminated them with a toxic chemical. Rather than share pools, the cities and towns drained them, filled them in, and in some cases paved over them and turned them into parking lots or fields for growing grass. People started building them in their backyards and private, exclusionary clubs formed to build pools so they could keep them segregated. Non-wealthy whites were left to suffer the hot summers without the refreshing public spaces of free public pools, yet they supported their elimination. Their segregated white identity was far more important than the public pool to enjoy.

Where most working class folks who identify as white might see the greatest benefit of cross racial affiliation is unionization. Industrialists have long attempted to break strikes by recruiting Black, Hispanic, and immigrant workers to cross picket lines. Early union organizers realized they had to bring everyone together to build the solidarity needed to hold out long enough to cause enough pain to the owners to get them to negotiate in good faith.

McGhee researched the efforts to organize a union at a Nissan plant in Mississippi. The workers had many grievances to bring them together. But the biggest barrier to voting for the union was race. The perception of the white workers was this would benefit Black workers. And if they were going to benefit, the white workers voted no. Racial identity was far more important to many of the white workers than the potential benefits they might gain through unionization. The unionization effort failed by just a few hundred votes. Race was a key factor in that defeat. If the Blacks were for it, the whites would vote against it. A zero-sum choice.

McGhee's book is an inventory of zero-sum losses for white folks who vote against their economic, health and social best interests. For what? To be able to identify with rich capitalists like our former President. The real elites who deftly feed their illusions of white identity and superiority even as non-rich whites' well-being steadily decrease. And there is always the transference of blame from the real agents of their misery, the wealthy elites, to the discriminated against and oppressed at the bottom, especially Black folks.

It doesn't have to be this way. There is another story to tell. There is a story of the many benefits of social solidarity that crosses race and class. When I speak about dismantling white supremacy culture, this is the social benefit I'm after. Dismantling these false zero-sum impulses and replacing them with sum-of-us approaches and attitudes has the potential to unlock the greatness of the American vision. The ideals of a pluralistic nation of unlimited opportunity and equal justice remains the unrealized dream of this nation.

Next week, I'll tell that story, a story lifted up by the ones who have suffered the most deprivation. We will honor that dream of who America can be ... and has yet to realize.

## **Prayer of Affirmation**

Prayer for While in The Struggle by [Margalie Belizaire \(adapted slightly\)](#)

Spirit of light and love  
 Spirit of resistance  
 Spirit of generosity  
 That which serves as our conscience in this work  
 That we do to dismantle white supremacy  
 To empower the marginalized  
 To insist that black lives matter,  
 We have been angered  
 We have been saddened  
 We have been pushed to the brink again  
 Again, we are inspired and resolved to do better  
 To not simply get to the other side of this moment  
 But to get there morally healthier  
 To get to a safer space for black bodies

Spirit, help us to understand  
 that we each have a role in justice work  
 For our liberations are tied to one another's

Give us the clarity of mind to know  
 our individual part is in the struggle  
 That there are many ways to protest injustice

Help us to find our way and commit to it

Spirit of life and love,  
 we ask for guidance  
 Send us strength and endurance  
 Help us to give our all to this

And hold nothing back

For precious lives depend on it

We will be imperfect

Rest assured that we will mess up over and over again

And we must do it anyway.

May we summon the courage to tear down this system of injustice

And get busy creating a “world community with... justice for all.”

May it be so.

Amen