

## **"Collaborators, Quislings, and Accomplices"**

A talk given by Rev. Jim Foti, Assistant Minister  
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When "Sesame Street" made its debut on public television, I was 14 months old. In addition to helping me learn my letters and numbers, "Sesame Street" had an overriding message about how human beings could best be together. The program regularly showed that different kinds of people (and Muppets) could be friends, and even live on the same block. And there were many songs and skits about cooperation. Whether you were making lemonade or doing the dishes, cooperation was the way to get things done.

These messages were reinforced a few years later by "Free to Be You and Me," a TV special that was also a bright-pink record album, with songs about doing housework together, and about boys and girls playing together without regard for gender roles. If the early Baby Boomers who were raised on "The Lone Ranger" became the Me Generation, Generation Xers were getting the opposite message, a message of "we." Cooperation was portrayed as a force for good in the world.

But as soon as my family turned off "Sesame Street" or put the "Free to Be You and Me" record away, we were back in a nearly all-white and heavily gendered world. There were no Gordons or Susans or other African-Americans on our street, and we didn't know anyone with names like Luis or Maria. And although my parents didn't really assign gender roles for chores – I washed dishes, my sister mowed the lawn – there were, all around us, less flexible messages. For example, you never, ever saw a woman driving a car if a man was in it. And I remember at a young age being surprised to learn that most chefs were men, given that none of the men I knew knew the first thing about cooking in a kitchen.

Enormous and longstanding and largely unquestioned systems kept people in their assigned roles – racial roles and gender roles. And these systems were able to do so because of near-universal cooperation.

This morning I want to explore this other side, this underside, of cooperation. Because despite what "Sesame Street" tells us, words like cooperation and collaboration are actually neutral and can go either way. It's one thing to collaborate with your classmates on a project; it's quite another to collaborate with the Nazis. Vidkun Quisling, the puppet dictator of Norway, did exactly that in World War II, and that's how his name

became a noun meaning traitor. Many forms of damaging cooperation fill our history books and our present day, upholding the misogynist and racist culture that we all inhabit, a culture that poisons all our lives in countless ways. How might we cooperate less?

Here's a small recent example of the kind of poisoning I'm talking about. I'm riding the train across downtown Minneapolis on a sunny day. The train stops at a station, and a woman gets on. And a guy who remains standing on the platform tells the woman to smile.

This just about makes my head explode, and let me tell you why. Women, like all people, should not have to talk to any stranger they don't want to talk to, period, ever. Women also should never, ever be told what to do with their bodies, whether it's the muscles in their faces or any other part or organ. And women, like all people, but especially women, should not be instructed on how to express themselves, especially to any man who would like them to conform to the stereotype of the cheerful, ready-to-please female. It doesn't matter whether that man is a stranger on a platform, or a Hollywood producer, or a Fox News host, or her spouse; it all needs to stop.

So the next thing that happens on the train is that the woman does smile. As millions of women have been discussing on social media in the wake of the Harvey Weinstein firestorm, there are a thousand calculations that women and girls must make to keep themselves safe. A smile, however fake, may be the way to avoid escalation. As hapless as the guy on the platform seemed, there was no way of knowing how he would react to a rejection of his command, and the woman avoided finding out. A patriarchal society requires women to be constantly vigilant in ways that many men can't begin to imagine, just as a racist society requires people of color to be vigilant in situations where white people don't even have to think about it.

So the woman smiles, briefly, and the man stays on the platform. And I make the choice to remain silent. That's because the whole situation was incredibly poisoned by not only sexism but also the problems of race. The woman who boarded the train was white; the man on the platform was African-American. In that moment, I couldn't figure out a way to get the guy to stop without my becoming a whitesplainer, a white man bossing a black man around, or a white man protecting "our white women."

I also could not figure out a way to say to the woman, "I bear witness to what just happened to you, and I'm sorry it happened, and I'm sorry the world is this way." I didn't say that because I also am a man she does not know, and there was not reason for her to trust me, either.

The train door finally closed, and the woman was able to go on with her commute. But this anecdote does not have a satisfactory ending, because it doesn't actually have an ending at all. The episode is one tiny chapter in a story going back throughout human history, a story that keeps happening every day, a story that damages so many women and poisons all people.

This is why the hashtag #metoo exploded all over social media over the past week. For those who may not spend much time on the Internet, the revelations about Harvey Weinstein's treatment of women prompted women around the world to lift their voices about sexual harassment and sexual assault to say "me too." To say, men have also done this to me. (And I choose that language deliberately – this is not something that "happens" It's not the weather; men do it.) Some women shared their stories online; others simply posted the phrase "me too"; still others remained entirely silent, preferring not to disclose or relive their experiences, or not feeling safe in doing so.

That virtually every woman could say "me too" was not a surprise to women, or to those who listen to women and believe them. And Facebook and Twitter showed screen after endless screen of names of those impacted by the near-universal damage of rape culture, a culture in which women are treated as objects to be used for the satisfaction of men. Rape culture exists at every socioeconomic level in America, from expensive Hollywood hotels to the sidewalks of Minnesota. It is everywhere, and it exists because of a great deal of cooperation.

It's important to note that the "me too" movement was not started a week ago by a white actress, as many people had assumed. Rather, it was begun a decade ago by an African-American activist and advocate named Tarana Burke. Burke has long worked to help women and girls, particularly those of color.

"I think that women of color use social media to make our voices heard with or without the amplification of White women," [Burke said this past week](#). She continued: "I also think that many times when White women want our support, they use an umbrella of 'women supporting women' and forget that they didn't lend the same kind of support. In *this* instance, the celebrities who popularized the hashtag didn't take a moment to see if there was work already being done, but they also were trying to make a larger point. I don't fault them for that part, I don't think it was intentional, but somehow sisters still managed to get diminished or erased in these situations. A slew of people raised their voices so that that didn't happen."

This is a prime example of vigilance. Vigilance is required to survive and thrive as a woman or a person of color, or as a member of the LGBTQ community, or many other non-dominant communities. Vigilance is required to have basic safety, and to not have one's story or one's life erased. Vigilance is required to avoid cooperating with the grinding machinery that values so many lives less.

African-American feminists came up with the concept of intersectionality, to describe how all these oppressions are connected, and how they work together to form that grinding machinery that keeps a small group in power at the top. These oppressions and -isms are downright sinister in trying to keep races and classes and genders from cooperating to bring about change and redistribute power.

Intersectionality is one of the founding principles of Black Lives Matter. And it's one of the principles at the heart of the work of Dr. Ibram Kendi. Kendi is a 35-year-old African-American scholar who recently moved to American University in Washington to inaugurate a new research center on antiracist thought and policy. Just a few weeks after last November's election, Kendi won the National Book Award for nonfiction, for a book titled ["Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America."](#) Here at First Unitarian Society, we like to talk about how we're a safe place for dangerous ideas, and Kendi's radical, rock-solid take on U.S. history may pose a serious danger to the kinds of cooperation that keep America stuck in rape culture and racist culture.

For one thing, Kendi challenges the notions that many of us have about racial progress. A lot of people think that as African-Americans and other people of color see improvements to their legal and financial status, it means that racism is reduced. But Kendi says that whenever there's racial progress, there's a parallel innovation in racist thinking, and the racism keeps up. Whenever African-Americans have been able to move forward, racism takes a step forward, too. Kendi offers five centuries of examples across 500 pages; I'll cite just a couple.

In the early days of the colonizers, African slaves were not deemed human enough to be converted to Christianity. This was helpful to slave owners, because Christians couldn't be slaves. Religious leaders at the time eventually relented, allowing Africans to be baptized. At the same time, they reinterpreted the Bible to allow Christians to be slaves. And because the Africans were now being saved from an eternity in hell, slavery could be considered doing their inferior souls a favor. So, blacks experienced one step toward fuller humanity, but racist thinking adapted to keep them in place.

Throughout American history, any seeming gain for blacks has been accompanied by measures to benefit white elites, right through to present generations. African-Americans benefited from the end of Jim Crow laws only to be subjected to mass incarceration, which was designed to produce many of the same restrictions on their lives. The prison-industrial complex helps many whites stay fearful and puts money in the pockets of prison owners and stockholders. Racial fears also help fill campaign coffers.

Kendi also boldly questions the idea of who actually benefits from racism. As we heard in our reading, he describes what he calls “one of the oldest myths of the modern era... that racism materially benefits the majority of white people, that white people would lose and not gain in the reconstruction of an anti-racist America.” But in fact, he says, “A society of equal opportunity, without a top 1% hoarding the wealth and power, would actually benefit the vast majority of white people much more than racism does.”

This leads to Kendi’s next radical idea: he argues that racial discrimination leads to racism, and not the other way around. Racism is a product of discrimination, not the cause of it. Discriminatory policies and practices are generally created because of a profit motive or other self-interest, Kendi says. He describes how early land owners in the American colonies feared that poor whites and poor blacks would join forces against the wealthy. So the wealthy began to discriminate against blacks, in order to divide and conquer the poor. This encouraged racist thinking on the part of whites, who now had a group to look down upon. This kind of racism has endured for centuries, and this strategy is still working.

Kendi also cites slavery, which was driven primarily by the economics of sugar and cotton; the racist justifications for slavery were secondary and ever-changing. He writes this: “Consumers of these racist ideas have been led to believe there is something wrong with black people, and not the policies....”

Kendi sees little use in trying to change the minds of people he calls “the principal producers and defenders of racist ideas.” “No logic or fact or history book can change them,” he writes, “because logic and facts and scholarship have little to do with why they are expressing racist ideas in the first place.” So education is not the answer, he says – he sees little evidence that it has ever worked to change large groups of white people.

Nor is the answer what he calls *uplift suasion* – the idea that white people can be persuaded away from their racist ideas by seeing black people lift themselves up through positive behavior. This was tried for generations – centuries, really – and as

everyone in this room knows, one black person recently lifted himself to the highest office in the land and held it for eight years. Racist thinkers were not persuaded to change their minds; they were instead emboldened.

So what should people who are truly committed to liberation do? Kendi offers a number of antidotes to the poisons that pervade our country.

One approach, he says, is to focus on intelligent self-interest. Nearly every kind of American would benefit from the freeing of blacks from racism and the creation of a truly equal-opportunity society. He writes, " Supporting [the] prevailing bigotries is only in the intelligent self-interest of a tiny group of super rich, Protestant, heterosexual, non-immigrant, White, Anglo-Saxon males." Kendi wrote those words before the election; now these are precisely the people running the country, and our top leader is a proud participant in rape culture as well.

Kendi sees public protests as a step toward shifting the self-interest at the highest levels. He notes that the civil rights and voting measures in the 1860s and 1960s were passed "primarily out of political and economic self-interest – not an educational and moral awakening."

And he says this: "History has shown that Americans who have had the power to undermine racial discrimination have rarely done so. They have done so, however, when they realized on their own that eliminating some form of racial discrimination was in their self-interest, much as President Lincoln chose to end slavery to save the Union. [Powerful people] have also conceded to antiracist change as a better alternative than the disruptive, disordered, politically harmful, and/or unprofitable conditions that antiracist protesters have created." Kendi's bottom line is that not cooperating with business as usual is a required ingredient to bring about real change.

Ultimately, Kendi says, the goal is to get principled antiracists in power and get antiracist policies into place. He says this: "Any effective solution to eradicating American racism must involve Americans committed to antiracist policies seizing and maintaining power over institutions, neighborhoods, counties, states, nations – the world." To that small group at the top, Kendi's ideas are extremely dangerous.

Despite knowing all he knows and spending years steeped in researching the worst of human behaviors, Kendi cites numerous possibilities for action and ends his book on a hopeful note. And Roxane Gay, an African-American professor at Purdue who has been working against rape culture for years, keeps hope alive, too. "I do not dream of

utopia," [she wrote this past week](#), "but I do dare to dream of something better than this world we are currently living in."

For those who share that dream of a better world, it's a good time to reflect on cooperation, and how each one of us might do less of the destructive kind and more of the generative kind, to be accomplices who convert dangerous ideas into action. It's a good time for institutions to look at what they've cooperated with over the years – FUS will be doing exactly that work this coming winter in our Beloved Conversations racial-justice program. And it's also a good time for our congregation to think about what kind of priority being antiracist will be going forward.

"History has shown that Americans who have had the power to undermine racial discrimination have rarely done so." The track record around misogyny is similar. But Ibram Kendi and Tarana Burke and so many others who are in it for the long haul believe that the time for real change may be upon us. May those who can make it so, make it so.