Don’t just listen to what I say; notice what I say.

Three displacements.

This is Black History Month and I’m to talk about racism.  That seems patronizing, even tactless -- am I not so white it makes one’s teeth hurt?  I have neither the eloquence nor moral gravitas of Mr. Hailey or Ms. Adams on race.  Americans seem to think they own “racism” but I know it is just as bad and usually worse elsewhere.  Despite growing up in segregated rural Virginia, for me the puzzling experiences to think about are Central European.  Vienna was famously described before the First World War as “the proving ground of world destruction” -- not a bad assessment considering the firestorms of ethnic cleansing birthed there that convulsed Europe throughout the 20th century.  Plurality and diversity of communities is a dangerous thing, once again simmering in those regions.

Second, racism is considered a moral issue, but as I said in my first chapel talk, 20 years ago, I’m not comfortable with moral talk.  I prefer cognitive talk; it will cover everything or nearly everything in morality.  Some people don’t realize that my “moral comments” are never moral but cognitive.  Next time you think I’m moral, ask for my reasons and you will see it I’m making a cognitive claim.  I think the same holds for you.  Besides, it would be awkward for me to take a moral position.  I was once introduced as a teacher at SSES and back came the comment, “oh, so you help overly advantaged children increase their advantages.”  Not exactly a moral position to speak from.

Third, I’m slow.  *Je suis bête comme mes pieds*.  I’m as stupid as my feet.  I’ve always liked that French expression.  My feet are where they are, very local, but words, actions, even thoughts and feelings are not local; they are figurations of a context, what I shall call “the background” today. The noises you make with your vocal chords count as words in terms of the background of English.  The actions you take after chapel count as going to class and learning trigonometric functions in terms of the backgrounds of St. Stephen’s and of geometry.  These backgrounds are configured to make sense of our efforts.  I prefer the philosophical term “space of reasons” but for now the metaphor of “background” works better.  These “backgrounds” are very hard to get a grip on; it is too easy to reach for gross simplifications, trying to make the background as obvious and local as my feet.  Conspiracy theories are example of such crude simplifications; so are ideologies.  Backgrounds are extremely hard to understand, complicated and complex, but that is a different topic, one for a philosophy seminar on social ontology.

So here are my feet, very local, and from here, from my “stupidity,” I figure things out slowly.  Despite what some of you may think, I am very slow at figuring things out.  A military evaluation in the imperial archives states about my great-grandfather, “*er reitet und denket langsam*” and that has been a proud family motto ever since.  So what I say today will seem both labored and naive.  Some might say that is philosophy, certainly it was said of Socrates.

Have you ever felt awkward?  Of course you have!  Awkwardness is what makes you so cute to adults who like teenagers and so repellent to those who don’t.  Bodies are an endless source of awkwardness, but awkwardness only works relative to a background.  I’m rather tall. A conductor at Grand Central in New York said to my Hungarian friend as we walked off the train, “I had a tree as tall as him in my backyard, so I cut it down.”  Hah hah.  “What’s the weather like up there?”  Very funny.  Do I get to turn it around?  “Stand up when you speak to me! Oh, sorry, I guess you are.”  Suppose I mock the height of short people (aren’t they all?).  Why is it different, more awkward, if I mock the stubby little height of a boy than that of a petite girl?  Why does it sting more in the first case and not so much in the second?  Note the asymmetry: mockery of the short is cruel but mockery of the tall is just lame, maybe even envious.  The “background” about height flows in a certain direction: tall is good, short not so much.  A male should be tall etc.

Try this: there you are, in a foreign land, Lithuania, with a bit of knowledge of the language.  It is hard work but you are making yourself understood.  One day you meet another English speaker, and a flood of words comes out.  It is so much easier to talk with him because the current of the background (the English language) flows with your words and phrases, your English works in a way that your Lithuanian doesn’t.  You no longer have the hopelessness of ever being sure you said what you meant or understood what the other person meant.  At that moment, your English-speaking friend is your affinity group even if he would be an unlikely friend back in the States.  Those who remain linguidiots (only one language) don’t see that their one language is an assumed “background” that makes sense of their noises.  They don’t see the flow of privilege of their language competency.

This past summer I had a casual lunch conversation with short white Wall Street firm lawyer.  We talked about Brexit then slid into the topic of Black Lives Matter.  He exclaimed, “but I’m not privileged because I’m white.”  Really?  Does he not notice the flow of the background for race?  (for height?)  I was flabbergasted and didn’t know what to say, hence this chapel talk.

Affinity groups can work in various ways.  A candidate for French president, Villon, said, “France is not a sum of communities; it is an identity.”  Some of you know that I detest nationalism; I think Villon’s claim is idiotic, as stupid as his feet.  I’m not keen on affinity as identity; that usually leads to ethnic cleansing.  But affinity can work otherwise, like “girls night out” or “the man cave” (two events I do not want to be part of -- notmy affinity groups).  There is yet another use, more like my language example.  My junior year in college I was in the Stiles dining room setting props for a play, and listening to nearby table of African-Americans in a spirited and brilliant argument about Shakespeare.  What would have happened to that conversation if I had joined in? (I so wanted to!).  What would have happened if a “tall blond white man” had joined the conversation?  What background assumptions would have to be figured out, and tactfully or otherwise dealt with?  Do you think about the crosscurrents of backgrounds?  Do you notice them in your conversations?  In this chapel talk?  The Shakespeare conversation (minus me) shows that an affinity group can provide a freedom to think and discuss without calibrating for too many complex backgrounds.  That conversation wasn’t about race -- because I wasn’t in it.  (And I did not lack other opportunities for heated discussions of Shakespeare.)

Many of you students want to create affinity groups or capture a background by labeling.  Questions about my favorite music, favorite color, soccer team, etc. try to plot me on the coordinate and classificatory axes you use to map “the background.”  I always try to refuse your coordinate system or give you an absurd answer, a point that can’t be plotted, to get you to see what you are presupposing about backgrounds.  I have an undeserved reputation for sarcasm and cynicism.  It is part of the microaggressions of the world against my Socratic efforts (actually, I find “microaggressions” and “privilege” much too Stalinist in semantic intent and pragmatic use).  Socrates was a great nuisance, a gadfly, waking people up from their feet using odd comments, weird humor, irony (what you all think is sarcasm) to show that the situation is not quite what we take it to be.  We should not be too comfortable or feel too "safe."  Comfort and security drug clear thinking.  As Ta-Nehisi Coates writes in his excellent book (with a dig at MLK?), "the Dream thrives on generalizations, on limiting the number of possible questions, on privileging immediate answers.  The Dream is the enemy of all art, courageous thinking and honest writing."  What Coates calls the “Dream” is the background of racism; the limiting generalizations are the efforts to plot another person on your own coordinate axes; the privileging of immediate answers is what I call “being as stupid as one’s feet.”  MLK tried to bend moral language towards civic justice, but Malcolm X tried to wake us up.  Coates prefers Malcolm; so do I, even in my disagreement with many of his claims.

There is much more to say about backgrounds and feet and the mistake of taking someone to be a group, about the use of affinity groups to think clearly.  I shall stop here with a beautiful quote from Ta-Nehisi Coates that I think describes the effort to be aware of backgrounds, the whole point of intelligence:

"these [his childhood essays about his situation that his mother required him to write when he was upset] were the earliest acts of interrogation, of drawing myself into consciousness."

Don’t drift with assumptions, draw yourself into consciousness.