

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York
“Commitment to Justice”

Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore March 14, 2021

Opening Words

Unitarian Universalists can be addicted to self-righteousness. I know it well.

I love nothing better than to rail against injustice and confront an institution or a power broker or a government official so I can expose them. It feels great to reveal some evil doing without having any sense of responsibility or need for personal accountability. They are the bad guys and we are the good guys.

This is the easy path to a commitment to justice.

The harder path is holding the standard by which I would measure others, against myself. How am I doing at living up to my own principles and values?

The harder path is where I'll be leading the congregation this morning. You are welcome to join me to measure yourself in regard to how you are doing with your commitment to justice when it comes to diversity and inclusion. There will be no self-righteousness, I hope. More humility in the hard work of being faithful to my, *to our*, values, principles and commitments as Unitarian Universalists.

Readings

I bring you these quotes that frame the start of the Theology section of the final report of the UUA Commission on Institutional Change titled: [*Widening the Circle of Concern*](#).

James Luther Adams wrote: "The faith of free persons must tangibly make them free in a community of human dignity and equal justice."

—James Luther Adams, *A Faith for the Free*

This from Rev. Dr. Paul Rasor: "Liberation theology speaks to the 'underside of history' and offers perspectives on issues, such as poverty and oppression, that [white people] might otherwise miss. This is especially important as [they] respond to social problems. To be in solidarity with those who are oppressed *requires* empathy and imagination."

—Rev. Dr. Paul Rasor, *Faith Without Certainty*

In the 2018 Service of the Living Tradition at General Assembly, Rev. Dr. Sofia Betancourt said: "We are on a journey toward redemption. We have lived a year filled with lamentation ... with the strength of generations, the failures of the everyday, and the deep-down gritty messiness that is the promise of our salvation. There is inherent goodness that exists between and among us. I want to honor the weary, ragged miracle that is our living tradition."

—Rev. Dr. Sofia Betancourt, *Service of the Living Tradition*, 2018

Finally in the Commission on Appraisal report of 2005, Rev. Earl Holt said, "Such ambiguity and a concomitant tentativeness in articulating what we are about religiously is presently perhaps our greatest liability and the greatest obstacle to Unitarian Universalism achieving the fulfillment of its potential as an empowering and liberating faith for the twenty-first century. The fear that any such articulation somehow threatens the integrity or right of conscience of any individual is institutionally disabling and must be overcome by mutual trust and a sense of common purpose, the belief that we are joined together in religious association for more than merely instrumental reasons."

—Rev. Earl Holt, Commission on Appraisal presentation to the 2005 General Assembly

Spoken Meditation

The Promise and the Practice: Lamentation for Two Voices By [Erika A. Hewitt](#), [Rebekah Savage](#)

The words that you'll hear from Voice 2 in this reading are adapted from Michael Eric Dyson's [Tears We Cannot Stop](#).

Voice 1:

We need one another. This is the core of our Unitarian Universalist theology: we are the human agents of the Holy, the vessels through which redemption, healing, salvation occur. There is only us, and this short lifetime, to create the shimmering, glorious WE that *might* exist.

We needed one another before we arrived here, this morning. We needed one another before we found our way to this congregation. We have needed one another all along—and we have failed one another: we who are white have failed people of color and, by extension, the shimmering, glorious WE that might exist.

Voice 2:

One thing you must understand, beloved, is that whiteness isn't a solo act. It's got a supporting cast. Lots of other things got created to uphold and justify whiteness—and you, beloved, have benefited from them without questioning.

We need one another... but we have not needed one another equally. We contain equal amounts of dignity and worth, but we do not need one another equally.

If our need for one other were reciprocal; if our craving for each other's truth and experience were genuine—if we longed for others to feel as deep a sense of belonging as our own belonging—that need would have long ago forced us, my white kin of faith, to surrender our grip on our certainty, our preferences, our standards of comfort.

My dear friends, please try to understand that whiteness is limitless possibility. It is universal and invisible. You swim in its waters and breathe in its air and take for granted that whiteness is the status quo. That's why many of you are offended by any reference to race. You believe you are acting and thinking neutrally, objectively, without preference for one group or the next, including your own. You see yourselves as colorless until [people of color] dump the garbage of race on your heads... You have no idea how absurd and hurtful

that notion is, and yet we have grown accustomed to your defiance of our pain, struggle, and daily reality.

In our limitless possibility, consciously and unconsciously, we who are white have inflicted wounds on the spirits and psyches of people of color. So much has been lost.

Beloved, you must not be defensive when you hear our hurt.

We confess before the Spirit of Wholeness and Reconciliation that we have needed to be right, and needed to be white, *more* than we needed to listen. We have entrenched our white obliviousness in our identity as “good people.” So much has been lost.

Beloved, you must not be defensive when you hear our hurt.

The Gentle Mystery in whose heart we’re suspended calls us to make room for all people to be their fullest selves: seen, heard, valued, included, empowered. We who are white, we whose hearts are drunk with the wine of our own privilege, have not yet risen to that call. So much has been lost.

Beloved, you must not be defensive when you hear our hurt.

We need one another—in different ways. May we who are white hear the hurt, and resolve to do one better than we did before.

We need one another: now and moving forward. We need one another: now, though for some it is too late. This is the call of our Unitarian Universalist theology: we are the human agents of the Holy, the vessels through which redemption, healing, and salvation occur.

Beloved, we need each other. Let us live our calling in the world as a light of redemption and healing together.

Sermon

Every year, at the end of June, representatives of our Unitarian Universalist congregations gather for our annual meeting known as General Assembly. Before that meeting, the UU Minister’s Association has its annual meeting. Before COVID, the ministers started that day with a worship service known as the 25/50 Year Service. It recognizes the UU ministers who have served for 25 years and those that have served for 50 years. Through election by their peers, one among them is appointed to represent their class and give a talk. It is a great honor to be selected to lift up their classmates’ experiences and wisdom.

I greatly enjoy this service. Usually, I know many of the people in each class because of the distinguished service they have offered our congregations and our Association. Their words, especially the 50-year speakers, help me understand the changes we’ve been through over the years and how they have risen to meet those challenges. Ministry, in its many aspects, is a difficult profession to do well. I’m always listening to hear a pearl of wisdom that I can incorporate into my

ministry to serve more effectively. The service is an honoring of the heroics of ministry as well as both the determination and the humility required to endure and even thrive.

I look forward to it, enjoy it and celebrate it a chance for us to come together to honor the common work we do together.

I hope, with this introduction, you'll understand my distress when the leadership of the UU Minister's Association, the UUMA, [decided to eliminate it this year](#).

I was angry and upset. This venerable tradition that had been going on at least since the merger of Unitarians and Universalists felt like a violation of a sacred tradition. Who could be objecting to what I experienced and many of my colleagues experienced as so meaningful? I wrote a long email to the UUMA Executive Director, Melissa Carvill Ziemer, asking why they were making this change and expressing my feelings of loss.

Melissa emailed me back and invited me to have a conversation. As often happens in the process of resistance to change, there is another side to the story, of which I wasn't aware. In my conversation with Melissa, I found out my warm, positive feelings about the service were *not* universally shared. Black, Indigenous, and People of Color or BIPOC ministers had just the opposite experience. They felt excluded by this proud display of what they experienced as white supremacy culture. Nor did they see themselves potential 25 or 50 year speakers due to the problems BIPOC ministers have had in settlement in UU congregations due to endemic white supremacy culture. What they saw was support for the status quo of white supremacy in our ministry rather than challenge or transformation of it.

She pointed me to this section of [a formal letter of complaint](#) about the 25/50 year service:

We believe that the time has come for a faithful reinvention of our collective approach to the annual 25/50 Service, particularly in light of our denomination's ongoing commitment to dismantling and reimagining structures that embody barriers to inclusivity and diversity. To that end, we point out that while celebrating longevity of service is one potentially laudable lens from which to appreciate ministerial perspective and wisdom, it is also problematic: Those who hold the longest tenure in Unitarian Universalist ministry tend to disproportionately hold majority culture identities.

It is well established that those who embody identities that are relatively at the margins of UU culture experience greater difficulty in entering and maintaining tenure in Unitarian Universalist ministry.

The voices that we need to hear, that can help pave the future our movement is moving into, might *not now – or ever* – reach the 25 years of service or 50 years of service markers.

Our point is this: length of service is worth celebrating. Yet, when that is the only lens from which certain colleagues are consistently given a high profile platform from which to speak, year upon year, it represents an institutional codification – through a specific 'traditional' service – of white supremacy culture.

Making a commitment to diversity and inclusion is way, way bigger than I think most Unitarian Universalists realize. It is a direct challenge to the centrality (a.k.a. supremacy) of white culture in our congregations.

Today the white way of doing things is normative. To welcome diversity and inclusion, we have to de-center those norms. One of the ways we can do that is by centering the experiences and culture of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. And that is often uncomfortable for white folks. But, if we are serious about being diverse and inclusive, our congregational culture **cannot** be white. We must creatively evolve a new diverse and inclusive culture that **includes** white but is **not white supremacist**.

This is not a new problem. White UU leaders have been trying to figure out how to do this for a long time. In the 1960's, they tried integration. They welcomed BIPOC folks but required them to be assimilated into our wonderful white culture. That didn't work.

Next we tried tolerance. We'll be different and celebrate our differences ... but the power structure will remain white. Even though we've had a Black UUA President and a Hispanic UUA President, the power structures in Boston have remained predominantly white.

That is until the hiring controversy that precipitated the resignation of UUA President Peter Morales in the spring 2017. The last few months of his term was filled out by three Black co-Presidents, the Rev. Bill Sinkford, Leon Spencer, and the Rev. Dr. Sofia Betancourt. They set in motion a process to study systemic racism and white supremacy culture called the UUA Commission on Institutional Change. It gave its final report at General Assembly last June. Our whole Association is digesting this report, some of which you heard in the readings.

Changing the 25/50 year service is consistent with this report.

What is at stake is the harm caused by not changing it.

Uprooting white supremacy culture from the inside is quite difficult. In my pleasure and enjoyment of the 25/50 service, I, as a cis-gender, heterosexual, long-tenured, white male minister am deeply embedded in this culture. It takes a letter like the one I just quoted to get me **to begin** to question this tradition. One of our other great UU traditions, though, is to question authority. In this case, to question the authority of this service if it is being revealed as a source of harm.

How we currently talk about dismantling white supremacy culture is often through using the language of harm. The presence of white supremacy culture is detected by the harm it causes Black, Indigenous and People of Color. There is asymmetry here. The white folks who are happy with the culture aren't feeling that there is any problem. In fact, they might be bothered by BIPOC folks questioning their revered traditions. The ones who are feeling the harm must **make** the white folks **feel uncomfortable** enough to pay attention. When you are a marginalized group within a white power structure, this can be a risky business. Those who have the courage to object are likely to pay a price. If you do it often enough, you are likely to be threatened or forced out. This causes BIPOC ministers and leaders to feel compelled to leave UUism on a regular basis.

I hope you are sensing the unrecognized gravitas to the cheery, myopic embrace of diversity and inclusivity by most white people. What we are committing to by our commitment to diversity and

inclusion is a serious, revolutionary business that can be emotionally painful and disruptive. It involves taking risks and getting hurt.

But that is what a commitment to justice is all about.

So when the Rev. Dr. Todd Eklof self-published and handed out his short book of three essays, *The Gadfly Papers*, at General Assembly two years ago, he created quite a backlash in the BIPOC community. Eklof attacked much of the work done over the previous two years to address institutional racism inside the UUA. He also attacked, I'd go so far as to say libeled, the woman who started the controversy that precipitated President Morales' resignation. Well entrenched in all the privileged arguments, attitudes, and positions of white supremacy culture, Eklof argued to discredit all these efforts because they were illogical, they didn't meet the test of reason.

The effect of his book caused a great deal of harm to many marginalized communities. They condemned the book as did 500 ministers, your truly included.

This is an active controversy in our movement today and I don't have the time this morning to address it fully. Currently, it exists as an attack on the UUA and UUMA Boards by something called the 5th Principle Project. You might get an email from them that is circulating right now. If you do, I strongly encourage you to look deeper than the surface platitudes they use to bolster their cause against the UUA.

As I've looked more deeply into this controversy, what doesn't get addressed is responding to the expression of harm. Almost always, there is an unwillingness to address the harm caused by their actions. They want the freedom to say what they want whether it causes harm or not. In effect, they are saying, "If you experience harm from my words, well then, there is something wrong with you." This is quintessential white supremacist behavior. Blame the victim. You are a loser, as Trump loved to dismiss his critics, and I'm a winner.

I bring up Trump because he is emblematic of the culture war that now goes under the name "[Cancel Culture](#)." That was the theme for the Conservative Political Action Conference in Orlando this year. It is a magnification of the more civil discomfort within our UU movement, of an unwillingness to hear and take seriously the voices of Black, Indigenous and People of Color speaking their truth, seeking to build a more just and equitable UUism. Building something that is going to make white folks, at times, uncomfortable.

One thing I'll give Trump, however, is he understands power – for *that* is what is at stake here.

The argument of harm is the argument of the weak to the powerful to appeal for justice and fairness. It is an appeal to conscience, principles, values and ideals. Trump has no use for weakness because he has no commitments to values or principles to restrain him. There is nothing else *but* power, control, and winning for him.

That is not who Unitarian Universalists aspire to be. We are deeply bound by principles and values and condemn raw expressions of power.

Yet that doesn't mean UUs are insensitive to changes *in who has power* in our Association. And incrementally, the white cis-gender, heterosexual, older men are moving out of power in our Association and a more diverse leadership is moving in. It started with the male leadership

resignation along with President Morales and has continued under President Susan Frederick-Gray who is deeply committed to anti-racism work. I'd say we're making good progress. The small group of Eklof followers, don't agree. They see a consolidation of power that feels threatening.

Deepening our commitment to becoming a diverse and welcoming religious movement **will require significant structural change** to dismantle the white supremacy culture that continues to dominate our congregations. Marginalized communities **are the ones who can best name** the problems many white **members do not recognize**. That naming process is uncomfortable.

Yes, in that discomfort there could be a signal. There is a risk of danger. Any institutional challenge has the potential to be a self-serving grab for power. No matter who we are, we are all still human and subject to greed, hatred and delusion.

I urge you today, though, to not let this discomfort be a **misinterpreted** signal. What is being asked in these challenges is to be given the benefit of the doubt, for white folks to doubt their emotional reactivity.

When feeling challenged, the better response is to be curious. Investigate. Learn more. Don't depend on one voice, hear it from multiple voices.

But most importantly, listen deeply within, beyond one's attachments and aversions, for the ring of truth, **independent of emotion**.

That's what I've done, again and again.

I've worked through my attachments to the 25/50 service. I'm ready to find another way to honor the effort and commitment to ministry among my colleagues. I want all my colleagues to feel fully connected to each other in our traditions and systematically exclude none.

That's what a commitment to justice looks like.

So be it.

Prayer of Affirmation

It has been a year now.

And there has been so much death and loss.

Our hearts ache with the virus' victims and their families
and the survivors with chronic health conditions.

Our concern goes out to those
who have lost jobs, businesses and resources.

Our care goes out to those
isolated in their homes at risk of serious complications.

And we aren't so happy either.

We haven't sat together in Community Hall.

The choir hasn't stood up together
and lifted their voices in song.

We haven't sung together any of our favorite hymns.

No one has moved a stone
to acknowledge silently a joy or sorrow.

No coffee, tea or hot chocolate
has been drunk in Channing Hall during coffee hour.

I haven't shaken any hands after the service.

The building aches with silence
longing to be filled again with the buzz of our voices.

I'm grateful we've been able to zoom together
and we will continue to zoom together into the future

But I long to see your faces in the flesh without masks.

I long for us to be able to embrace once more.

For the return of dancing, live concerts, theater and parties.

Enough with takeout and grocery delivery!

Let us continue to be patient.

The vaccines are going into arms.

A day is dawning when masks will not be needed.

Let us be grateful for the continuity of our congregational community over this year.

We have maintained our connections.

We have stayed together.

We have stayed calm and carried on.

This pandemic will end.

Let's hope and pray we will be there to celebrate.