

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York

“Intersectionality, Trust, Community”

Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore February 3, 2019

Experiment

Please watch at least the first 5 minutes of this TED talk: The urgency of intersectionality by Kimberlé Crenshaw

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=akOe5-UsQ2o>

Sermon

Crenshaw doesn't tell you who these women are in her TED talk. I would like to do that now.

- Tanisha Anderson, died while being violently taken into custody by the police by throwing her to the ground and holding her there with a knee in her back at which time she stopped breathing – in a similar way that Eric Gardner died.
- Megan Hockaday was shot and killed by police responding to a domestic dispute. She was allegedly armed with a knife in her apartment where her three children were present.
- Aura Rosser was drunk and in a dispute with her husband, again brandishing a knife, and was shot dead by the police.
- Michelle Cusseaux was fatally shot by a Phoenix Police Officer after she allegedly threatened officers with a hammer when they went to serve a court order to deliver Cusseaux to a mental-health facility.

Clearly, these were dangerous situations dealing with emotionally or mentally disturbed individuals. All of them might have been resolved, however, without the excessive use of force. The excessive use of force quite likely happened because of racial bias by police. These stories mostly didn't make national news but there were local protests. What matters for us today is we didn't hear about them and if we did, we mostly don't remember them. Maybe now you will #sayhername.

There was a lot of negativity about this experiment in the comment section for this TED talk. Some of you may have objections too. The goal of the exercise is to raise emotional awareness. Being both Black and a woman isn't just having two different sources of bias and prejudice that work against you. The two intersect in a way that makes things far worse. The word intersectionality was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw back in 1989 to describe the isolating uniqueness of that intersection.

She found a focus for it in a Detroit automaker that wasn't hiring Black women. The company claimed it wasn't discriminating against Black people because they were hiring Black men to work on the assembly line, and in significant numbers. The company also claimed they were not discriminating against women because they hired lots of women to work in the front office. But the

assembly line supervisors didn't want to hire women and the front office didn't want to hire Blacks. The courts had no remedy for Black women because they had to decide if they were Black or women. When filing a claim, they didn't have standing as Black women because the laws weren't written to protect them.

Ijeoma Oluo, in her excellent book, *So you want to talk about race*, describes getting caught in another intersectional dilemma. A famous male Black singer was coming to Seattle. She doesn't name him but I'll guess she was talking about R. Kelly. She was venting on Twitter that the singer, who was getting a lot of positive buzz and filling up a concert venue, was also well known as someone sexually abusive to Black women and girls. Suddenly she started getting a flood of replies and threats on Twitter – by other Black folks. She had to go into overdrive to defend herself from the trolls who were trying to take her down and destroy her reputation with electronic mob violence. She survived to fight another day but the attack could have destroyed her online presence – a presence critical to her ability to work.

These examples give you a taste of a term that may feel a little abstract at first until you recognize the profoundly marginalizing effects that separate and divide oppressed people.

Each of us has multiple identities. Our gender, our class, our race, our sexuality, our heritage, our abilities and disabilities, our politics, our religious views, our education and so much more. Some of those identities experience marginalization and others don't. The privileged are the ones that get the affirming nod from the white supremacy culture, that is, those who are white, college educated, financially secure, cis-gender, heterosexual males. Everyone else has at least one strike against them. Having two or more strikes isn't just a little worse, it can be disastrous, especially if you are Black and female. Intersectionality unpacks that reality and gives it a name.

As Oluo's Twitter attack illustrates, having one marginalized identity doesn't mean the people who share that identity will have your back for another identity. During the Civil Rights Era, many Black women were very frustrated that their attempts to be part of the leadership were rejected – by Black men. Most Black churches do not embrace Marriage Equality. The Korean Presbyterian Church is very patriarchal and strongly resists the ordination of women. Unfortunately, experiencing one source of oppression doesn't translate into offering support for fighting all sources of oppression.

The intersectionality movement we see today, often led by Black women, strives to envision a different way for society to operate that dismantles all these oppressions. It hopes to bring people together across race, class, gender, sexual, educational – just about any category you can imagine – with a common focus of fairness, equality, justice and liberation for all people.

Toward that end, this movement is evolving away from the process of normalizing and privileging *any* identity. Being any gender or genderless shouldn't matter in how we relate to each other. My racial heritage shouldn't advantage or disadvantage me. Neither should my sexuality, or my ability. We should be striving to make accommodations for everyone to live to their fullest potential, bringing their gifts to the world of who they are in the uniqueness of their intersection of identities. This discourages the universalizing of any of those identities thus norming and privileging them. Each of our narratives bring a richness of our individual intersectionality as a creative source rather than an inventory of limitations.

As our society has begun to recognize that discrimination and oppression are unjust and don't fit with the purposes laid out in our US Constitution, legislation has been passed to address each one individually. We have laws to prevent discrimination against people in a number of different categories, or different axes. The problem with dealing with oppression one axis at a time is what happened at the plant Crenshaw describes. The intersectional approach says we need to pay attention to multiple axes of oppression at all times.

What unifies the intersectional approach is a focus on outcomes. The goal of the intersectional approach is promoting justice, equity, and compassion for all people regardless of their identity.

Does any of this sound a little familiar to you? You bet it does. I just described what the Unitarian Universalist second principle is all about: Justice, equity and compassion in human relations.

During the snow storm two Sundays ago, I read a new book, just out in November, titled, *Intersectional Theology*. As I did, I recognized in the author's intersectional approach to the Bible many connections with how Unitarian Universalists approach sacred text that aligned with our critiques of Christian theology. The authors were not looking for "the right answer" or "the correct, orthodox interpretation." Instead they read looking for a plurality of views that enrich the meaning of the text by seeing it in different ways through different lenses and interpretations.

Intersectionality is exploring exactly what we UU's have been trying to do all along. In our non-dogmatic approach to religion, we are decentering any theology or philosophy as normative for UUs. That allows Atheists, Humanists, Deists, Theists, Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Pagans and agnostics to be in community together here **knowing** that their identities **will not be marginalized**. Christian theism is not the center of our congregation ... but neither is Humanistic atheism. Taking the intersectional approach, we believe that we are **both challenged and enriched** by multiple identities rather than striving for a perfected norm. Underlying that approach is the recognition that we are not saved by our right thinking, we are saved by our ability to love and transcend difference.

I love this vision of who we can be as a community. Let me testify now to you about how **hard** achieving this goal is. Programmed almost into our DNA is the urge to merge with people who are like us – a kind of tribalism that breeds distrust of difference. It's the mentality of junior high kids who clump together as they strive to form a sense of identity in the first place. Intersectionality is a radically different way to build community.

Usually, the only reliable way to form strong communities that transcend difference is having a common enemy. Donald Trump has been a great gift to the fractious liberal left as a force of unification (sadly just as Barack Obama was for the reactionary right). The Women's March of 2017 was a great example. Over half a million women and men gathered in Washington DC two years ago, wearing their pink hats, to rail against the newly elected Trump. They let him know, in no uncertain terms, that he didn't represent them or their interests. The second march in 2018 held together pretty well too.

But after the punishing defeat of Republicans at the polls this past fall and the decline of Trump's power, that unity has started to weaken. The controversy about Mallory, one of the organizers, being a supporter of Farrakan and against Israel started splitting the movement up. Here in Albany

we had two marches rather than one. Planned marches were canceled elsewhere. On one level, it was an empowering moment for Black women to organize the march that started in front of our congregation. On another, it was sad that the beautiful intersectional unity envisioned in the [Women's March principles](#) couldn't be realized this year.

We have our own version of this within Unitarian Universalism around race. The intersectional vision that is deep in our institutional process of evolution hasn't come to fruition yet when it comes to full inclusion of diverse racial identities. Even when the music director is Black and the minister is Black, white supremacy culture still dominates in their congregations.

On Wednesday night (Jan 30, 2019) I [listened to a discussion](#) on Facebook hosted by [Black Lives of UU](#). Seven Black UUs, several fellowshipped, ordained UU ministers, talked about being Black in Unitarian Universalist congregations. They all talked about being attracted to the intersectional vision they sense here and are extremely frustrated and alienated by our inability to actualize it in our congregations. White culture organizes and guides most of what we do. And our democratic polity (said one person in the discussion) actually sets up a huge barrier to change that culture ... until enough of the congregation recognizes how they participate in alienating and marginalizing Black folks usually without realizing it.

But when these Black UUs have met in exclusively Black spaces to explore developing a non-white Unitarian Universalist experience, they get very excited and inspired. They may be able to create a new approach to UUism that is truly intersectional without centering white supremacy culture. This could be absolutely revolutionary for UUism and religion in general opening up tremendous opportunities for the growth and development for our movement among People of Color.

I experience this as both exciting for the future of UUism, and very threatening as a white, cis-gender, heterosexual male wondering if there is any room for me in that future.

This is what I struggle with today as I bring you the latest social and theological trends inside and outside our congregation. Let me be clear that, on one level, my self-interest is not served by all this. I am not the one who can lead this change on the UUA Board or as UUA President. I felt myself being emotionally defensive listening to Black UU's criticizing our heritage. That heritage has been a source of inspiration and support for me.

And as I look more deeply into the criticism, I begin to appreciate what is being said and expand my thinking *beyond* my emotional reactivity. Few of us like watching our sacred cows being cut up and dissected. Even fewer of us are willing to acknowledge it when the people doing the cutting ... are right.

Yet this is what dismantling white supremacy looks like in the congregational setting. It is extremely critical we all learn how to stop our reactivity and learn to pause. We have to learn to listen while also being uncomfortable. We have to learn to consider, to feel and to reflect on what we've heard as best we can from the other person's perspective as well as our own. And we have to learn to go behind our defenses to discover a deeper, more expansive and inclusive human reality.

What bolsters our willingness to go through the discomfort I'm describing is, at the same time, developing caring for and trust in the people who are the source of our discomfort. That trust needs to be developed through personal relationships that permit us to experience our common

humanity and emotionally bond us together. That has been my experience over the years of doing anti-racism work through the UUA. That trust isn't a sacrificial offering we give another person who hasn't earned it. It has to be a mutual experience that both people work at developing. This isn't easy when our emotions might be ready to marginalize someone who doesn't look or think in a way that is comfortable for us.

It isn't easy but it is deep and profound spiritual and transformational work. It can be trivializingly easy to spout platitudes like "we are all one" and "we are a universal human family" when it isn't the lived reality of our congregation. What is required is to walk with people who you might be tempted to judge and condemn and strive to recognize and to know them as human beings worthy of your love. Whatever your theological or philosophical frame for that effort might be, it actualizes the potential of Unitarian Universalism.

If you are up for this challenge, I hope you'll join us here in doing it and making it real. You don't have to go it alone, and we've got lots of tools and mutual support to help you get there. One of those supports is the book discussion on Wednesday!

All that is required is your commitment and your will to act and stay in motion.

Benediction

Intersectionality can be tough sledding but very necessary if we are going to build the kind of strong coalitions we need now to facilitate the change required to achieve climate justice. Ijeoma Oluo puts it this way:

Intersectionality is absolutely always important to all discussions of race and social justice; do not let other people bully you out of prioritizing it. It is important that our efforts to end oppression for some do not perpetuate oppression for others.

If we want to save this planet from ecological disaster, we're going to have to figure out how to do it together. Everyone is going to need to be on board.