

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York

“No Last Chapter in Our UU Story”

Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore May 23, 2021

Opening Words

Each one of us brings our personal story into our experience of this congregation. And we have such diverse life experiences. We come together from different cultures and backgrounds. We bring different sources of appreciation and celebration, sensitivities and wounds.

And through shared commitments and values, through a shared covenant of relationship, somehow, we develop a bond with each other *beyond our differences* that forms and reforms our Unitarian Universalist Congregation. Over time, that bond grows deeper than the people and the building that currently identify us. Over time that bond becomes ... a story that connects us in a love beyond belief.

And changing that story’s narrative ... to include new people, *as we must* if we are to grow and develop, continually tests and challenges us.

May we learn to *accept* rather than *resist* that ongoing growth and development *by participating* in the process of inner and outer transformation.

Reading

Our reading this morning is a fictional true story.

The composite events in this story are true but the storyteller is fictionally named Mallory Ramesh, a Board member of a UU congregation I’ll call First Church. Mallory is 35, of Indian descent, queer, and a social activist. Mallory’s story appears in the Final Report of the UUA Commission on Institutional Change. Let’s hear Mallory’s story:

I joined my local UU church after meeting some UUs at a Black Lives Matter rally.

The UUs I met were members of a church not close by to where I live, so I did some online research and picked my local church because they had information about becoming a Welcoming Congregation on their website.

After a couple of months of attending services and a book club, the minister asked me to join the Board.

I thought this was kind of rushed. At the book club, I’d noticed that whenever any question about Black concerns came up, I was the one everybody turned to look at. I’m Indian.

I thought it was funny, considering that my suggestion that we add pronouns to our nametags was dismissed by the woman heading the LGBTQ Council, even though I am also queer.

I thought I could do some good as a Board member, so I agreed. Despite reluctance by some established church leaders, we participated in the White Supremacy Teach-In, though *even then*, our involvement was limited to a single service and reflection.

At the following Board meeting, I inquired about how we planned to implement the recommendations from the Teach-in, adopting the eighth Principle and doing a church-wide racism audit.

Our outgoing settled minister shut down the conversation and suggested it would be more appropriate to bring up the issue with our interim minister. When I did so, at the following meeting, the interim minister said she wanted to wait until she'd gotten to know the congregation.

The next month, our interim said again that she wanted more time.

At the following meeting, the issue was pushed to the end of the agenda, and when another issue turned into a long discussion, the majority of the Board members decided it was too late to discuss anything else and voted to table it and adjourn the meeting.

Leading up to the next meeting, I wrote two emails to our Board secretary asking for the issue to be placed at the beginning of the meeting agenda. Both emails were ignored before they finally responded to the third.

At the meeting, I decided to bring up my concerns with how the recommendations had been handled, especially considering that the adoption of a practice regarding environmental justice had passed easily and with no similar delays.

The Board secretary, a white woman, immediately centered herself and her own discomfort, framing the situation as an attack on herself by me. The issue was left unresolved at the end of the meeting. This was *extremely uncomfortable* for me.

During this period, my relationship with the Board members in question soured, and several church members engaged in a whisper campaign against me, seemingly targeting my social justice views, with one member joking that I had "issued a fatwa" against mentioning US presidents in sermons after I'd related complaints about an Independence Day reflection.

Unwilling to encounter this on Sunday mornings, I stopped attending. Though I finished my Board term, I missed meetings. I dropped out of the book club and no longer attend anything at the congregation.

Spoken Meditation

This is a provocative story designed to bypass the mind and to speak to our emotions and our hearts. Notice what you are feeling right now. What emotions are stimulated hearing Mallory's story? Do you identify with her? Do you sympathize with her? Do you want to argue with her?

If Mallory were to walk into the room you are in *right now*, what question might you ask her? What would you want to know from her that isn't in the story? What about the Board Secretary?

The LGBTQ Council chair? The incoming and outgoing ministers? The member that made the fatwa joke?

As we enter the Silent Meditation, I encourage you to let go of controlling how your mind responds to this story and watch how it wants to respond, without judging it, evaluating it, correcting it or fixing it. Let your mind, heart and spirit just be with the story and be open to what comes up.

Sermon

The minister and Church Administrator of First Church will do their annual census report to the UUA and notice that Mallory has stopped attending on Sunday and contributing. They will wonder why Mallory hasn't been active given she was a Board member. Most likely, they will not ask her why. And if they do, it will probably be too late to get a response. Mallory, likely, will be *unwilling* to tell the truth and risk being rejected one more time.

This is a story that happens in many of our congregations. People with new ideas or ways of doing things are overtly or subtly resisted. When they point out the resistance or micro-aggressions, they are marginalized. If they persist, they become identified as troublemakers and socially isolated.

This doesn't happen as part of an *intentional plan* by the leaders of the congregation. Often quite the opposite – a reason Mallory was put on the Board. Unfortunately, these behaviors are the ways *any* group of people resist change. In our setting, as congregations led predominantly by white folks, it reinforces and privileges the white status quo. And that is why it gets labeled “White Supremacy Culture.”

First Church is quite fortunate to have Mallory there and striving to initiate change. The problem for her is she is a token. She has been put on the Board to make it appear as if they are a diverse congregation. It is the integrationist approach. First Church is quite willing to have Black, Indigenous and People of Color [BIPOC] involved in leadership *as long as* they fit themselves into the white status quo. What First Church doesn't understand is how resistance to change is working *unconsciously* in the congregational system when Mallory speaks up.

That systemic resistance to change has been a huge barrier for BIPOC folks involvement in our congregations. Even as congregations trumpet their efforts to be welcoming and inclusive, this resistance works to undermine them. And not just BIPOC folks, by the way. Today inclusion of Transgender folk and those with disabilities also meet similar resistance. More often than not, what happens is those people silently disappear from our congregations and leaders of First Church wonder why.

That's the old story. A new story has been emerging for about the last eight years or so, fed by changes that started as far back as 1994. The 1993 UUA General Assembly Jefferson Ball controversy initiated some powerful changes that continue to reverberate in our movement. That GA in Charlotte, North Carolina included a Southern Ball that delegates were invited to attend in period costume. The Black delegates were incensed wondering if they were supposed to come in rags and chains.

Institutional change is slow but the UUA General Assembly's commitment to anti-racism work made in 1994 and 1997 and the election of Black and Hispanic UUA Presidents supported the changes. Confirmation of those systemic changes came with the objections to the hiring process of an executive director for the UUA Southern region by leaders at a BIPOC event in 2017. The firestorm of criticism, the resignation of President Morales and white male senior staff, the three Black interim co-Presidents and the election of the first woman UUA President, Susan Frederick Gray, set the stage for sweeping transformations at the UUA. The appointment of the Commission on Institutional Change initiated solidification of that change. The charge to implement those changes are found in their final report, Widening the Circle of Concern, accepted and approved by the UUA General Assembly last year.

What supported and energized protests and this transformation of the UUA is social media. What we notice in the story about Mallory is her social isolation. She doesn't have a community of BIPOC folks in her congregation who support her. Even one or two allies who supported her voice would have made a big difference to her and her sense of inclusion. The Mallorys in many of our UU congregations have been finding each other on social media. This is especially true of our UU ministers who have intensive contact with each other on several social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook. Hundreds of them reacted in the 2017 hiring controversy and couldn't be ignored.

The Unitarian Universalist Association, having been stung by the hiring controversy and emptied of older white male leaders at the top, has had a chance to restructure itself and its work. The call by Black Lives of UU and other UU anti-racism groups to confront White Supremacy Culture in our midst has gone out and been embraced by many of our congregations. Even if we haven't been effective at becoming the inclusive and welcoming congregations we want to be, we are still committed to that work. The question is how do we get there and at what cost?

Enter the Rev. Dr. Todd Eklof, minister in Spokane, Washington, site of the 2019 General Assembly. At that GA, he passed out free copies of a self-published book titled, "The Gadfly Papers: Three Inconvenient Essays by One Pesky Minister." He critiqued the 2017 hiring controversy and several other controversies in ways that many people found biased, inaccurate, offensive and harmful.

And others found the book agreeable and supportive of their way of thinking.

The status quo backlash against the changes since 2017 found a voice. My opponent running for the UUA Board, Jay Kiskel, is a supporter of Dr. Eklof.

As I will be debating Kiskel on June 1 and during my campaign, I've been furiously studying this controversy striving to understand both sides. I'm pleased to see his claim he is committed to increasing the diversity and welcome in our congregations. Kiskel also claims to be committed to working for a fairer, more just society. He is committed to our Seven Principles. We have many values in common. Where we differ significantly is how we get there. And these differences can be the most vicious fights, among close siblings that share so much.

Here are a few of the bones of contention:

One is the language of white supremacy culture. UU's are anything but aggressive white supremacists - the haters that are unwilling to share power and control of our society with Black

folks and would offer them no sense of dignity or authority. UUs march for civil rights for all people, are open to immigrants and envision a pluralistic world. Our intention is inclusion of all people in society as well as our congregations. Calling ourselves White Supremacists is terrible PR.

Those who use the term “white supremacy culture” are guilty of being seduced by academic arguments for something called Critical Race Theory or CRT.

CRT says, in effect, white people are racists because they have this unconscious bias that is akin to the concept of original sin. White people are unaware of this and must do navel gazing to discover this defect and purge themselves through confession of their sinfulness. White people cannot be trusted with leadership because of this bias that will cause harm to marginalized people. They must be purged and allow the marginalized to show us the way forward to a better world, a beloved community, that *old white men* cannot hope to help us create.

And finally, if I, as an old white guy, want to critique CRT or woke ways of thinking, I need to shut up or I will be shut down and accused of causing someone harm. My freedom to argue rationally whether CRT is correct or not, whether this is a good approach to anti-racism or not, is curtailed by my identity as an old white man. My voice isn't relevant to this argument. Time for me to retire, go home and take up a harmless hobby.

I hope you're hearing some of the tenor of this argument. I know it well emotionally from the inside as an old white cis-gender heterosexual white guy.

And I disagree with it.

The missing element is intention vs. impact.

Mallory was welcomed into the congregation enthusiastically. In many of our congregations anyone who doesn't look pinkish and pale gets special attention, especially if they are melanin advantaged. First Church's intention, I don't doubt, was to welcome her. The impact, though, of their individual actions was just the opposite. The action of the outgoing minister and the interim minister resisting Mallory's suggestions was *very reasonable* in my opinion. The impact however was quite harmful. Each person's action could be argued to be rational. The overall impact was quite negative and isolating.

The lack of comprehension of intention and impact comes up again and again with the Gadfly book and the supporters of it. Eklof, so far as I'm aware, has never discussed the situations he brought up in his book with those who were harmed or offended by his presentation of those controversies. He cares about his logic and reasons *not* the impact of them nor the ways his reasons might be used to erase someone's identity as important or meaningful. He wants the freedom *to say* what he thinks is true *and not find out* if he is right or not nor be accountable for the impact of his words on others.

The missing link is *a willingness to be in relationship*. Again and again Eklof was invited to be in relationship to discuss the impact of his actions. He was happy to engage in the free search for truth and meaning if he can edit out the *responsible* part.

Here is the way forward if we are to build beloved community. We need to be in relationship and respectful dialogue with each other.

- Rather than being defensive when someone disagrees, or worse, feels harmed, **a better response** is to be curious. Something like, “Oh, I’m sorry the impact of my words or actions have caused you harm. Please help me understand **your experience**.”
- Rather than arguing with what another person says is true for them, **a better response** is to listen reflectively and inquire more deeply. Something like, “So when I said ‘I’m not a racist,’ you are suggesting I may not be aware of the impact of my micro-aggressive behavior. Help me recognize it.”
- Rather than trying to shut down the other person with judgmental statements and associations or by ignoring them or responding with silence, **a better response** is to be open to learning and responding. Something like, “I don’t fully understand or appreciate what you are saying right now. Please direct me to a resource so I can learn more. I want to find a way to preserve our relationship and be responsive to your concern.”

These were the missed opportunities by the members at First Church with Mallory. When she suggested adding pronouns to name tags, the woman who chaired the LGBTQ Council could have asked a question to understand more and reserved judgment. She could have brought the request to the Council where it could be discussed democratically rather than being preemptively rejected. The Council could have done some research to learn more. Both the outgoing and the incoming ministers could have been much more responsive to both Mallory and the will of the congregation rather than being elitist and trying to decide what would be best for the congregation. The Board Secretary, instead of getting defensive, could have acknowledged the harm of not being responsive to Mallory’s two emails, owned her resistance to responding publicly, and been willing to be open to the will of the Board by putting it first on the agenda.

In these cases, and in most situations where there is a conflict between intention and impact, the failure isn’t in the conflict, **it is in the response** to the conflict being identified. We are regularly tripped up by our good intentions that have terrible impacts. Such is the stuff of all situation comedies. What is funny is the way the perpetrators try to avoid the consequences of their actions. Unfortunately, it isn’t funny in our congregational contexts because people really do get hurt.

I can testify, through many failures of intention, that didn’t lead to the impact I desired, that these situations can’t be avoided. It is hopeless to try to be free from them. The **way through** these situations is **what you do next**. What is needed is to restore relationship **through** curiosity, inquiry, listening, learning and responding. Failing strategies to restore relationship include defensiveness, argument, ignoring and judging.

I see the UU Ministers Association and the Unitarian Universalist Association leadership **crafting a new way** to build our Association using principles **that prioritize** maintaining and restoring relationship **over** the freedom to write and to say what causes harm without a commitment to be accountable and responsive.

This is the better way to work through intention vs. impact problems.

This is the better way to build the kind of welcoming and inclusive UU congregations we desire.

This is **the new story** that will create **the Unitarian Universalist future we dream about**.

Prayer of Affirmation

From an Ecumenical prayer vigil for peace in Gaza. (adapted)

Pray not for Arab or Jew,
for Palestinian or Israeli,
but pray rather for ourselves,
that we might not
divide them in our prayers
but keep them both together
in our hearts.

When races fight,
peace be amongst us.
When neighbors argue
peace be amongst us.
When nations disagree
peace be amongst us.

Where people struggle for justice
let justice prevail.
Where there is conflict
let peace be our way.

Amen.

<https://www.christianaid.org.uk/resources/worship/ecumenical-prayer-vigil-peace-gaza>