



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

The Reverend Alison Wilbur Eskildsen, Parish Minister
The Reverend Don Randall, Community Minister

“Love Resists”

© by the Reverend Alison W. Eskildsen

Reflections delivered on September 10, 2017

At the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, GA

Centering Thoughts:

*For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment,
“You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Galatians 5:14*

*Power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic.
Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best
is love correcting everything that stands against love. Martin Luther King, Jr.*

*The love for justice that is in us is not only the best part of our being
it is also the most true to our nature. Cesar Chavez*

Justice without love is not justice. Love without justice is not love. Mother Teresa

Reflection:

Have you ever walked into a movie not knowing what it was going to be about or even what type of movie it was—romance, comedy, or thriller? That’s how, in 1976, I walked into the film based on Stephen King’s novel “Carrie.” The horror movie centers on a bullied teenage girl who vengefully destroys her classmates with her emerging telekinetic powers. I was totally sucked into the story and blown away by its power because I was so unprepared for it.

That’s what it felt like when I returned from sabbatical and went to professional Ministry Days and General Assembly this past June in New Orleans. I was not prepared for the stories I was about to hear.

As you may know, I was in Ireland on a spiritual pilgrimage to ancient holy sites this past spring. I occasionally checked email to make sure I hadn’t missed some emergency message.

None came, thankfully, though I noticed lots of email traffic from the Unitarian Universalist Association (the UUA) and the minister’s chat list. I read just enough to know there was a blow up over someone calling out the UUA’s hiring practices as racist. Eventually this prompted UUA President, the Rev. Peter Morales, and other leaders to resign. Clearly a storm brewing at home.

A storm I did not want to get buffeted by while abroad. I decided to disengage with the UUA drama until June in New Orleans.

And that’s why I was unprepared to hear the painful stories of racism ministers of color told about their experiences in our congregations. My white defenses hadn’t been put in place and their pain scored a hit on my heart.

Here's a sample story, portions of a poem by the Rev. Marta Valentín, who self-identifies as Latina. Her poem is titled "Call of Something More." A video and the full text is available at <http://www.uuma.org/page/berrystreet>. These are her words:

...the U and the U of it all
whispered that I was a valued human being,
said aloud that I was wanted,
bellowed that I was needed, and might eventually be loved.

...
It was believed as it was uttered to me.
I believed it as I heard it.
It seemed at the time a good fit,
but I never imagined *this* sacred theology
could get so distorted.
Ultimately, to me
and those of my siblings of color,
the words came to mean
painful, spirit-crushing, lies.

...
At least that was how the U and the U
was lived out in our presence,
where we learned that not all of us were accepted,
some were 'too much,' and others 'not enough,'
even as we were offered marginal platforms,
to teach the pale center.

...
As a form of survival and a strategy to belong,
we learned to perpetuate the lies.
I kept lying to myself, to you,
and most painfully to my daughter,
hoping that one glorious, sun-streaking down through the clouds day,
our life-affirming gospel would be true -
for each.and.every.one.of.us.

...
It's stomping time.
We humans of color have always reached for something more,
exercising and building up quite a resilient muscle
that is necessary against the many gatekeepers
still trying to deter us.

...
As a Latina in this painful and momentous moment of our movement,
it is not easy to confront our faith's flaws
especially when our Latinx history is ignored
and micro-aggressions pile up alongside tokenization.

Still, many of us have chosen not to roll, walk, or limp away
despite the pain we live with to stay in.
Despite our pale center's penchant for making false promises
toward real freedom,
and bleeding out what is already vital.

...

We need to change this pattern.
Let us band together as indigenous and people of color to be the shift
that knocks the U and U off the linear route it's been engaged in,
for in fifty years, all of the self-centeredness
has not led to a tipping point of self-awareness.

...

Let us beseech: is it *really* too much for our pale siblings
to acknowledge their privilege,
and do the work to dismantle every.ounce.of.supremacy.that.dominates.all.of.us?

...

We are focused on who gets to be in the center,
instead of strengthening our own centers.

...

Our individual cores are on fire, but one chalice flame they do not make.

...

If the pale center responds to the call for something more
they will turn and face the edges where we are,
a rainbow of faces and cultures
engaging in a Unitarian Universalism
that breaths love into its very core
from our well-worn hearts;
they will find us no longer waiting
but creating a Unitarian Universalism of our own
for everyone.

When I heard Rev. Marta's lament for what is and yet what could be, tears flowed. They continued to flow as each minister told their story. Each one shared how white supremacist culture within Unitarian Universalism had hurt them.

These were colleagues I knew and loved. Surely I hadn't contributed to their pain, had I? Surely they hadn't mistaken me for one who belongs to the Klu Klux Klan or wishes for the return of the Confederacy, did they? Surely I don't further white supremacist culture, do I?

During the course of Ministry Days and General Assembly, as we continued to dive deeper into white supremacist culture, I learned more of how I was indeed a participant in causing pain to my siblings of color.

I already knew I was a person of privilege because of my racial identity. My whiteness means I don't worry I'll be pulled over for driving while white. This was brought home to me recently when I gave a ride to Beto Mendoza to a community organizing event. I had forgotten that the meeting was to be held at the Watkinsville Library, rather than the downtown Athens

branch. So when Beto pointed out I had taken a wrong turn, I made a U-turn. Unprompted, Beto said, “White privilege.”

I understood. We laughed as I acknowledged that what I had done brown or black people could not do without fear of being stopped by police. If I hadn’t laughed, I would have cried for what my privilege allowed me, but not others.

I also understood how I was immersed in white culture. Twenty or so years ago I took part in an anti-racist training at All-Souls Unitarian in Washington, DC. I remember being in a small group of white people, several who denied white culture existed. They admitted to Italian and German culture, for example, but not white culture.

Now, if I asked the white people in the room to name some characteristics of black culture, I’m sure you could. Go ahead. Shout it out. *Soul or southern food, hip hop music or blues, non-verbal greetings, etc.* You may think that stereotypes black behavior, but stereotypes emerge from cultural norms. Stereotyping mistakes all members of a category as that way, whereas culture indicates dominance, not uniformity.

I remember when I briefly lived on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota one summer. The Indians kept reminding those of us who were white not to expect them to conform to our cultural norms. They had their own sense of time, and it was rez, or reservation, time. And if we wondered why they didn’t keep up their homes nicely or remove the trash from their yards, it was because that wasn’t important in their culture like it is in white culture. They cared more about their families. Money that might have gone to repair a washing machine went to provide a good funeral or have a party.

Whatever your color, can you name any white cultural characteristics? Shout it out. *Showing up on time, sticking to an agenda, classical music, individualism, respecting authority...* Even in our Fellowship, we exhibit white culture. Some get upset if the service lasts longer than an hour—and this one just might. If someone gets too emotional, we get uncomfortable. Hold hands? Cry? These are sometimes accepted, but whites generally are expected to be emotionally reserved.

If you’ve ever been to a traditional black church service, you know it has a culture different from our white dominant Fellowship. It’s often easier to see someone else’s culture than one’s own. We’re swimming in our own culture and we’re often not even aware of it until confronted by someone else’s.

In Rev. Marta’s poem she expressed how we say we welcome everyone, but we expect everyone to fit into the dominant white culture. If you’ve wondered why most UU congregations remain mostly white, despite our liberal attitudes about race and racism, I believe it is our lack of awareness of white culture that pushes others away. If we want to be truly multi-cultural, we who identify as white need to know how we participate in maintaining the dominance of white culture.

I believe white supremacist culture is not what we want here. That’s why I hope you’ll join me in decentering whiteness here. To be fair, we’ve been decentering some whiteness for a while. We feature many types of music, not just dead white guy music. I draw inspiration from a wide range of prophetic people, though I don’t usually identify their DNA by saying, “African American author Alice Walker” or “black theologian Howard Thurman” or “white poet Mary Oliver.” But if I were to only identify the people of color, I would be implying that white is normative. So normative, I don’t need to say it. That’s a clue that reveals the white culture and whiteness that sits at our center.

When I say I want to decenter whiteness, I don't mean reject it. I don't mean substitute another culture. I don't mean white culture is bad or those of us who are white should feel guilty. We who are white can celebrate our whiteness, but not at the expense of someone else's celebration of their identity.

I hope for more cultures at our table. Like King Arthur's round table, I don't want a dominant head seat. I want us all together as equals. I want our cultures to mix and mingle, for when we share, when everyone has a seat at the table, we will be whole and healed, happy and loved.

Love. Love lies at the core or heart of our shared Principles. Each Principle rests on a foundation of love. Without *agape* love, or unselfish love for others, our values of respect, freedom, democracy, and interdependence would be meaningless. Together, our Seven Principles make it possible for all people to thrive. Every person could fulfill their inner promise if we truly lived into our Principles.

We chose 'Love Calls Us On,' a phrase from Jason Shelton and Kendyl Gibbons' song, as our annual theme because the times seemed to warrant that reminder. The rise of hate towards particular people demands we remember love lies at our core. And love, whether we call it by another name, be it God, the Good, or Spirit, we must remember love whenever we might be tempted to be hateful to someone we disagree with.

'Love Resists' is the title of this service, as well as the UUA's initiative to create safe, just, sustainable and welcoming communities, because love is strong and powerful. Love is not just goodness and compassion. 'Love Resists' because love pushes back on hate. Love can resist white cultural dominance that disenfranchises others. Love resists injustice. Love calls us to be our best and it calls us to act our best.

Love is not passive, weak or fearful. Love is active, strong, and courageous. Love calls us to encounter new people and ideas, and to reflect on those experiences. Love requires us to speak uncomfortable truths to those who don't want to hear them. And love requires us to hear uncomfortable truths from others and be willing to change who we are to become better than we are.

Love calls us to do the work of justice. As Cornel West says, "Justice is what love looks like in public." That doesn't mean every one of us needs to be on a picket line or protesting at city hall. Justice also includes supporting those who are doing that work. Justice includes writing a letter to elected representatives. Justice includes being kind and compassionate. Justice includes giving what you have to give, be it time, talent, or treasure. And justice includes simply holding the hand of someone in need, or of lighting the flame for one whose light is fading. Justice comes in many guises, even when displayed on a t-shirt or banner.

May our love, our justice, be all these things.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion:

1. Do you agree that unconditional love for self and others forms the heart of the UU Principles?
2. When did you become aware of race and your own racial assignment? Do you identify with that racial category, and can you name some of its cultural characteristics?
3. How does race and racism affect you, your family, your congregation, and your community?
4. Does racism impact how you live out your Unitarian Universalist values? How are you called?