

Unitarian Church of Harrisburg
August 6, 2017

Read by Sara Palmer

With permission of the author, I am sharing the words of Margaret Rogers, White Director of Lifespan Religious Education, Northlake Unitarian Universalist Church. She shared this reflection at Northlake's Teach-In.

Thank you for being here.

I want to be honest that standing here makes me pretty uncomfortable, and I have had a lot of anxiety about speaking this morning. Over the last week, I asked myself: What was I thinking? How did I get myself into this?

And then, I saw my friend's post. A 15-year-old black youth, Jordan Edwards, had been shot. By a police officer. And I remembered the conversations that we have had about the experience of raising a black child in this country. And I knew why I had signed up to be here this morning.

Because I want to know that our Unitarian Universalist faith can hold the kind of grief that comes from living in a place where people with brown and black skin are at greater risk, the ever-present grief of needing to be more watchful, more wary. The grief of having fewer opportunities and of being marginalized, erased, or tokenized. Because I want to know that our Unitarian Universalist faith is working to change that reality - within our walls first and then in the world.

And so, today we are talking about white supremacy. The words white supremacy may make people very uncomfortable, even angry.

It's jarring, to see the words white supremacy next to Unitarian Universalism. White supremacy goes against our core values. We are not white supremacists! It is precisely because of our core values that we are engaging this conversation. We have been asked by a significant network of UUs - religious professionals.

and lay leaders - led by UUs of color and white UUs working together - to change our regular worship service to address issues that have come to the fore in the last few weeks within our denomination. The specific catalyst was a question put to the UUA President about why, even with significant growth in the number of religious professionals of color in our denomination, our paid staff leadership was still so lacking in representation. And then it became apparent that just that week, a Latina religious professional had just heard that she was passed over for a

leadership position that she had applied for - she was told that she was well qualified and the final decision would be made based on being a good fit.

I would like to share with you what Black Lives of UU wrote in the invitation to engage this work:

“White supremacy” is a provocative phrase, as it conjures up images of hoods and mobs. Yet in 2017, actual “white supremacists” are not required in order to uphold white supremacist culture. Building a faith full of people who understand that key distinction is essential as we work toward a more just society in difficult political times.

Let me be clear - this work is not about blame or guilt. We are all being asked to listen with an open heart to the experiences of UUs of color. This is a historic moment for Unitarian Universalism. This is an opportunity for our faith to live into our promise of building a more just world, from the inside out. This is our opportunity to be brave. I hope that you will join me in sitting with discomfort and allowing for the opportunity of growth that occurs when we stay engaged in conversation even when it is uncomfortable.

In this context, white supremacy refers to a set of institutional assumptions and practices, often operating unconsciously, that tend to benefit white people and exclude people of color. White supremacy centers white culture, voices, and stories, and erases or marginalizes the stories and cultures of people of color. White supremacy renders some invisible and gives others power, unasked for and undeniable.

This morning, we are going to center the voices of people of color. These are stories of experiences in Unitarian Universalism. Just as there is no single story of white Unitarian Universalists, and we each have our own lens, perspective, and opinions, the same is true for people of color - even those who share similar cultural contexts -race, class, family structure, and so these are individual stories.

The first comes from the book “Unitarian Universalist of Color: Stories of Struggle, Courage, Love and Faith”.

Yuri Yamamoto, the editor of the book, speaks of her experience as a Japanese immigrant in a UU church - she says that sometimes she feels invisible, as if her culture is erased. She writes: “defining ‘us’ as a monolithic group with a certain set of characteristics can lead to exclusive practices. While most members may feel pampered and cozy in such an environment, minorities and newcomers, especially those who do not share the characteristics, would feel alienated and marginalized.”

In the chapter written by Dr. Elias Ortega-Aponte (eh-lee'-as Ortega-Apohnte), an Afro-Latino

and professor at Drew Theological School, shares his experience in finding a Unitarian Universalist church after entering seminary, then leaving the faith of his childhood and beginning a search for something else.

I recalled seeing a UU congregation. Having no idea what Unitarian Universalism meant, I decided to do a quick check online. I liked what I read about UUs. I spent some time reading up on the Seven Principles, and after some reflection, I decided to give it a try. ...Shortly after my first visit, [my partner and I] picked a Sunday to attend together. In our next visit, the then minister of the congregation, Rev. Ian Forrest Gilmore preached a sermon titled “Bible Self-Defense.” It was a cathartic moment for both of us. We felt that we had found a place to call a spiritual home. ... A decade into my journey as a UU, I still feel that I have found a spiritual home. My experiences as a UU have allowed me to experience a degree of healing, centering and recommitment to a religious life that I thought doubtful during and after my seminary experience. Furthermore, I can find a place to wrestle with the questions of faith that led me to seminary in the first place. Some answers I have found; others I am still searching for.

Some of these things resonate with why many remain committed to being UU, such as the strong moral compass of our religious tradition that affirms the dignity of humans and the natural world alike. A commitment to work for justice for all, even if we often fall short of this goal. The embrace of the challenge to be a spiritual seeker and be open to new ways of understanding, seeing, and being in the world. But not everything is good. Some experiences have been painful and somewhat disconcerting for me. These experiences are centered on being a person of color in a mostly white religious denomination.

At the time I found UU, I was willing to negotiate the ways in which I would interact or not “in a racial sense.” I would pick and choose if and when to engage in racial conversations. While this may sound odd to some, it is a common experience for people of color in the United States; code switching is a necessary survival skill... .. Even though I’ve found a home among UUs, talking about what it has been like for me as a UU of color to participate and worship in sacred spaces where I am not fully seen has been difficult. I have been unsure how much to push for what I see as a need for deeper sacred conversations around racial justice.

Dr. Takiyah Nur Amin, a member of the Black Lives of UU leadership collective wrote: “As a black woman who claims Unitarian Universalism as my faith identity, I have felt compelled to clarify and yield to what’s truly most important to me in the last few months. The election and subsequent outrage, confusion, vitriol, and violence that has shown up in its wake have encouraged me to reaffirm my commitments to working for justice, as well as to recommit to protecting those who are most vulnerable, shaping my life in such a manner that it responds to and reflects what my values are as a black woman of faith in this tradition.

One reason I am a Unitarian Universalist is because it is a faith where I can bring all of the best

of what I was taught growing up in my multifaith family and because, as a religion grounded in principle and reflection, justice-making and righteous action are essential to our faith, not something ancillary.

This resonates deeply for me, and connects to my grandparents' social justice efforts as members of Baptist and African Methodist Episcopal Zion congregations, and to my parents' legacy as socially conscious, progressive Muslims.

My deep sadness as a Unitarian Universalist is that while this faith community has always been a space that welcomed my varied religious heritage, my blackness hasn't always felt at home here.

That is to say, I have never been able to take for granted that I would be welcome in UU spaces as a black woman. No matter how long I've been a member, what committees I've served on, or the number of times I've been a GA delegate, I've never been able to take for granted the sense of home and welcome and connection that I see my white UU siblings proudly proclaim.

Still, there are resonances that keep me going. I am motivated as deeply by the seven principles of Kwanzaa as I am by the Seven Principles upheld by our association and member congregations; these are all touchstones of my personal theology. The Seven Principles of Black Lives, created in 2015 by the Black Lives of UU Organizing Collective, act as another bridge for me, connecting me ever more deeply to this faith and to the work of the Movement for Black Lives.”

Dr. Ortega-Aponte and Dr. Amin speak to the ways that their Unitarian Universalist faith speaks to them and sustains them. They also speak to their desire for it to be more - more affirming of the diversity among us, more active in the struggle for justice.

There are many other stories, many deeply joyful and positive, and life affirming.

Our faith has so much to offer. We believe in inclusivity and in creating a space where everyone can come together. If we have missed the mark at times, it is not because of our intentions. We have an opportunity now. As Marley Dias noted, it matters whose stories we hear. It matters who is represented. It matters who is in leadership.

At General Assembly in 2015, Cornel West said, “Who is willing to tell the truth—good and bad, up and down, insights as well as blindnesses of ourselves first, then our communities, then our nation, then our world? I've got a lot of vanilla brothers and sisters that walk with me and say, Brother West, Brother West. you know, I'm not a racist any longer. Grandma's got work to do, but I've transcended that.

And I say to them, I'm Jesus-loving, free, black man, and I've tried to be so for 55 years, and I'm

62 now, and when I look in the depths of my soul I see white supremacy because I grew up in America. And if there's white supremacy in me, my hunch is you've got some work to do too.

If Cornel West can see that white supremacy lives within him, I can too. And dismantling it begins with acknowledging that it exists.

We cannot know the specifics of the hiring decision that led us to this conversation, but I have thought about the theoretical situation a lot this past few weeks. Given two strong candidates, would I have chosen a challenging, prophetic voice over a strong, comfortable fit? Without asking the question of where we want to be, I could have been the one who lost the opportunity to grow into our vision of inclusivity.

But if we envision a more inclusive, diverse future, we need to embody that in our leadership, in the voices that shape our movement.