

“The Healing is Not Done”

by Rev. Rebekah Savage (Delivered by Rev. Lyn Cox)

January 14, 2018

(We have been asked to center the voices and stories of Unitarian Universalists of color in today’s worship service, and so you will NOT hear a sermon or member reflection written by the Lay Liturgist or myself. This homily was written by Rebekah Savage, who is the full time Associate Minister at the UU Congregation of Rockville, MD, serves in the US Army Reserve, and is completing a Doctorate in Ministry at Wesley Seminary in Washington, DC. Let us hear her truth, spoken in love.)

I play this moment over and over again in my head: the day I heard of the Thomas Jefferson Ball, hosted by Unitarian Universalists in 1993. As a person of color, raised in a UU congregation, I felt a shiver down my spine as I learned something new and unsettling about the faith that I call home.

You may be wondering why this gathering of UUs in 1993 struck me as a profoundly memorable and painful moment. Beloveds, this is why: attendees were encouraged to wear period clothes to the Ball to celebrate Thomas Jefferson, who attended Unitarian churches. In the spirit of welcome, those who conceived of this social gathering did not take into account the centering of whiteness by asking people to attend in period dress. The organizers forgot or ignored the fact that in Jefferson’s time, we black and brown UUs would have been slaves: property to traded and sold, brutalized and subjected.

The matter was taken up at General Assembly when delegates challenged the appropriateness of holding this event. During a plenary session, delegates voiced their concerns by reading a statement of protest. In response, the organizers and other leaders gathered to consider how to proceed and came to a decision: the Thomas Jefferson Ball would proceed ahead as planned.

I ask myself: What would I wear? Would I be a house slave, favored for my lighter skin and “good hair”? My skin is a light brown that my daughter refers to as cinnamon, a product of a beautiful multi-racial family history. Would I catch the eye of a white man who could leverage any opportunity to take my body as his property?

What would I wear? Would I have had shoes on my work worn feet? Would I have stretch marks across my belly from babies that were taken from me to sell to other plantations? Would I sing to myself faithful, mournful songs of liberation, dreaming for the day when I can taste freedom for myself and my family?

What would I wear? Would I be allowed to come through the front entrance or directed to the back, to enter through the kitchen with the other slaves and servants? Would I be allowed to drink from the same punch bowl, eat from the same platters? Would I sit with the other people of color, in a separate room or at the back of the gathering? Would I be permitted to look a white person in the eye or even speak their name?

What would I wear, dear beloved UU's? Tell me: what I would have worn to attend this ball? What period clothes would represent who I would have been in Thomas Jefferson's time?

OUCH.

When we feel something deeply and are still finding the words: OUCH.
Seriously, OUCH.

Why do I raise this deeply wounding moment in our shared UU history?
Because this isn't just a reflection about my lived experience as a person of color in a majority-white denomination. This is also part of the story of how people of color experience sharing worship and community within our faith. It's a chapter in the story of who we are as a people, living in this country, swimming in the waters of white supremacy and centering whiteness, supported by centuries of indoctrinations and institutional structures.

I grieve for the hurts that this time in our history caused. I grieve for those who left our communities because of how this event was handled, which broke their trust in finding spacious rest in our congregations from the pervasive, violent racism in our country. I grieve for those who, at the time, were unable to traverse the gaps in their spiritual understanding of justice and belonging. I grieve that it has taken this long to have this level of conversation about centering people of color.

This Ball was conceived by well-meaning people, beloved kin of mine and yours, who were able to identify welcome only through the eyes of white privilege. That is the insidious nature of centering whiteness: it denies personhood and the God given right for all to be fully accounted.

To put primacy on whiteness as the default setting in how we see and experience our world means that we are being theologically inconsistent. We covenant to affirm and promote the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part, and yet we have devalued the full inclusion of too many.

In small ways, this trend emerges when music and readings for worship draw primarily from Anglo-European composers and writers and the paintings that hang in our

congregations disproportionately represent our white foremothers and forefathers. We see this trend when congregational leadership is cultivated without honoring the diversity in our midst as a rich source of inspiration and prophetic messaging. We see this in considering that people of color have been a part of our living tradition for centuries — but our voices have been overlooked, silenced, or outright rejected with hostility.

I ignite my flame of justice and shine a light on this scar because the healing is not done. The healing is not done because we are still called to do the work of dismantling white supremacy culture and decentering whiteness from our bones: from our congregations, from the ways in which we interact and support each other. We are called to fulfill the promises once made in the name of faith and proclaiming Beloved Community. We are called to match our words with our actions, to bring the holy into our midst by truly and without fear honoring the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

This is a beautiful time of opportunity, Beloveds, born of truly listening to people of color and beginning to repair the fabric of community that has been torn. Ripped asunder by years of broken and empty promises: words of good intention, unmatched by purposeful action.

I love being a Unitarian Universalist. I was birthed into this world with the calling of service on my heart; I was shaped and molded in our congregations. I also know that, as Dr. Cornell West shared with us [in his 2015 Ware Lecture](#) at General Assembly, if I have white supremacy in my heart because I was raised in this country, so do we all.

While I grieve, I also have much reason to claim hope. I celebrate where we are as a people of faith because we are bravely facing the devastation and illness of “othering” people. We are looking at ourselves in the mirror and seeking a new way. I celebrate that we have the moral and spiritual courage to listen deeply to voices that have been marginalized. I celebrate that beloveds are choosing to move back humbly, to make space for an evolution in leadership and consciousness. The spark of working towards the greatest good is seen in every moment of insight as so many are waking up to our participation in centering whiteness.

Beloveds, now is our time to lead with love and make right the ways our denomination has fallen short of our shared principles. We are a powerful, aspirational covenanted people and we are being called to account for our historic moral and spiritual failings, in order to move into authentic Beloved Community.

Now is our time to harness our ability to reflect inward in order to reemerge with a power greater than ourselves that gives rise to a new day. Beloveds, with love and peace in our hearts, may it be so.