Creating Racial Equality

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Tomorrow is Martin Luther King Jr. Day, and our topic this month is creation. I have worked to combine these topics into a timely presentation—because I asked to—and my creativity has failed me, although some of the issues I will describe cry out for a sensitive and creative solution. What follows, then, are some of the issues and a sample of proposed remedies that are being discussed throughout the Unitarian Universalist Association and beyond.

I'll start with a story. Last June at General Assembly in Portland we heard a speaker, the Reverend Rosemary Bray McNatt, President of the Starr-King School for the Ministry. Rosemary is a dignified, handsome, well-spoken African American, obviously well-educated and successful in her field. When I emailed her recently, she responded warmly and graciously to my question and signed her message simply "Rosemary." If I had the credentials to call myself President of one of the two UU theological seminaries in the US, I would be sorely tempted to list them under my formal signature in an email to a stranger, if I felt I wanted to take the time to reply. And especially because of what I learned about her last summer. I don't recall what her intended topic was that day, because she couldn't give it. She was too upset about the Charleston shootings at a prayer group in the Mother Emanuel AME Church that had happened just one week before. She was laid prostrate with grief and anger, and, in her distress, some of that anger was directed at us, the members of the 95%-white UU congregations. Her anger with us had to do with who we were: many of us blinded by a lifetime of relative privilege in education, safety, opportunity, and economic advantages. She challenged us as members of the dominant white culture to open our eyes and hearts to see what it was like to be an African American in these United States. She was an African American woman with an adolescent son, and she feared for his safety every day. When Rosemary heard about the Charleston shootings, she spent the next day at home, distraught, pacing, wringing her hands, and weeping.

Unlike Rosemary's view of her audience, our view of ourselves up to that point was more self-satisfied. Most of us there were baby boomers, lifetime liberals who felt we had come down on the right side of Civil Rights as well as a number of other things. The UU record in

the Civil Rights era is laudable to a point, and I'll get to that in a moment. Rosemary wasn't going to let us rest on our laurels (if we had any). However well intentioned we felt we were, it begged the question in 2015. She told us we were prejudiced in ways we couldn't even see, because the white dominant culture was so pervasive. We were like fish not even aware of the water they swam in. I thought of the insensitive remark some politicians uttered in response to "Black Lives Matter," expanding on the phrase by saying "All Lives Matter," and missing the point. Rosemary challenged us to start examining this invisible and pernicious prejudice by reading the 2011 article, *White Fragility*, by Robin DiAngelo, in *The International Journal of Critical Pedagogy*. Here is the abstract of this article to summarize the main point:

> White people in North America live in a social environment that protects and insulates them from race-based stress. This insulated environment of racial protection builds white expectations for racial comfort while at the same time lowering the ability to tolerate racial stress, leading to what I refer to as White Fragility. White Fragility is a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. These moves include the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation. These behaviors, in turn, function to reinstate white racial equilibrium.

The author describes how, when even a well-meaning white person, oblivious to the discomfort and disadvantages a non-white experiences in the dominant culture, reacts with White Fragility, their distress pulls the focus back to the white person instead of allowing for a meaningful expression of the experience of the person of color. Thus, the non-white person loses the opportunity to convey their reality, and the white person misses a chance to learn about what they don't see.

Rosemary was accusing her white audience of this same insistence on having things be the way that we—the dominant culture—feel most comfortable, failing to acknowledge—let alone understand—that this leaves people coming from another culture on the margins. Rosemary challenged those of us in the audience to look at our prejudice and know that it pervades the Unitarian Universalist Association right there at General Assembly.

So, the FIRST LESSON LEARNED: White Fragility exists throughout our society, even within a white liberal religious organization such as the UUA.

Next we turn to a little history.

First let me tell you about the merger of the Universalist Church of America (founded in 1793) with the American Unitarian Association (founded in 1825). By the 1950's several dozen pairs of these liberal congregations had already affiliated, and the two national organizations merged in 1961. At that point, the membership was about 95% white. The leadership began a complex process of integrating two governing bodies, selecting one President, merging their considerable assets, and so on, and most of it went well. But in there some place some administrative funny business happened that would come back to haunt us to this day.

In the 19th century, long before our two religions joined to become one, Universalism and Unitarianism both came down on the right side of history. Both organizations were in the forefront of religious groups who fought for the abolition of slavery and assisted in the Underground Railroad. Unitarians and Universalists were also among the first to work for women's health issues, care for wounded soldiers in the Civil War, and speak out for women's suffrage. So how did we do in the 20th century? Generally, pretty well. In 1961 when the merger happened, black UUs made up 5% of the membership. By 1964, African Americans made up 15% of the members, and constituted the majority in four urban congregations (Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland, and LA).

In Selma, AL in 1965, Civil Rights marchers were met with violence on the Edmond Pettis Bridge. After this event, known as Bloody Sunday, Martin Luther King Jr. put out a call to national religious leaders asking for their support. Some of you may recognize the name, James Reeb, a UU minister, who happened to grow up in Casper. He was serving an impoverished neighborhood in Boston when he saw footage of protestors being brutally beaten by law enforcement as they attempted to march from Selma to Montgomery. Believing that doing nothing in the face of injustice is as bad as condoning it, Reeb flew to Alabama, to answer Martin Luther King's plea for help. On Tuesday, Reeb and other

ministers were in the group that attempted to cross the bridge but stopped at the far end to pray before a barricade. Returning to Selma for the night, Reeb and two other Unitarian Universalist ministers walked to a small restaurant near the marchers' headquarters. After dinner, they started a short walk back to the headquarters. The three were confronted by several white men brandishing clubs and shouting racial slurs. One man slammed his club into Reeb's head, knocking him to the ground. "From the moment he was hit he wasn't able to speak intelligibly," one companion recounted. "I held his hand in the clinic as he went unconscious."

Reeb died two days later in Birmingham. The deaths that week of Reeb and another UU, Viola Liuzzo, spawned national outrage. Days later, President Lyndon B. Johnson made an emotional plea to Congress urging passage of the Voting Rights Act. This young minister and a young housewife who felt compelled to stand up and be counted to help right a wrong became martyrs that may have pushed the civil rights debate past the threshold of the nation's consciousness and into reality.

Events in Selma spread out over several days. On the final day, among the 30,000 who marched were several thousand UU members and around 250 UU ministers. That represented a third of all UU ministers. In addition, dozens of UUs spent time with other Civil Rights efforts in the South afterward; many UUs had leadership roles in their own communities to support Civil Rights, and a dozen UU ministers were part of the UU presence in Selma through the summer of 1965. It is estimated that half of the 710 UU ministers were actively engaged in this struggle. This experience changed lives and brought a sea change in attitudes to the UUA.

In 1961, at the time of the merger, black UUs made up about 5% of the membership. By 1967, they constituted 15% of the members, and accounted for more than 50% of members in four urban congregations (Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland, and LA). Current estimates, which are hard to find, suggest the percentage of black members is about 5%. What happened?

There was an event in 1968 that came to be known as the Black Empowerment Controversy. At General Assembly there were demands made by a black-only caucus asking to share power or have some say in the affairs of the Association. In response to these demands, a

Black Affairs Council (the BAC) was formed. They met and requested a budget of $250,000 a year for four years to use in service to the black community. Over the objection of the President and the Board of Trustees, the GA delegates voted 72% in favor of the BAC proposal. Interestingly, the first installment was given to several programs, including one proposed by Maulana Karenga (aka Ron Karenga or Ronald Everett) to develop a pan-African and African-American winter celebration that came to be known as Kwanzaa.

At that time only a few members of the UU leadership knew that an $8 million unrestricted endowment that was a part of the merger had been spent during an optimistic post-merger phase by the first president of the UUA. He was optimist that there would be rapid growth with a sort of "if you build it they will come" philosophy but that didn't happen. At that 1968 GA, the Treasurer's report combined restricted and unrestricted funds so it looked like they were flush with money. In fact, the unrestricted fund, which would have provided the funds for the initiatives approved at GA, actually had a balance of $0, but no one reported it. The President, Treasurer and Board of Trustees sat in the meeting and without a word of explanation allowed the General Assembly to cast votes and make promises that were impossible to keep. When it hit the fan, and the commitments were not funded, it was still not public information that it was an issue of no funds. After GA, the Board of Trustees overturned the decision to fund BAC so it was back on the agenda in 1969 at GA. In response, the co-chairs of the Black Affairs Council led a walk out with more than half the membership. Feelings were running so high, one member told another, "If I'd had a pistol I would have shot you." After the walkout, the UUA spent one whole 24-hour period not knowing if there would be a UUA by the next day. When they reconvened, the GA delegates again voted in favor of the BAC funding by a wide margin. But the basic problem of no money continued to exist and to be unreported. To keep the bank from seizing its assets, the UUA cut its budget by 40%, closed district offices, and laid off half of its staff. This second failed promise to the Black Affairs Council prompted an immediate and widespread exodus of black members. By the end of 1970, three of the four black urban UU churches closed their doors at the same time many whites fled to the suburbs. As if this weren't bad enough, the Viet Nam war was raging and UUs split down the middle on this painful issue. Beacon Press (founded in 1854 by the American Unitarian Association) made the decision to publish the *Pentagon Papers* in 1972, when no other publisher would take the risk. Editors made the decision on the basis of their commitment to publish works that

affirm and promote their principles, which were similar but not identical to our current seven principles (the inherent worth and dignity of every person; justice, equity and compassion in human relations; acceptance of one another; a free and responsible search for truth and meaning; the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process in society; the goal of the world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all; respect for the interdependent web of all existence; and the importance of literature and the arts in democratic life).

In response to the *Pentagon Papers* action, many of the pro-war UUs drifted away. By 1975, there were fewer adults and children in the UUA than there were at the time of the 1961 merger. That is the bad news. The trauma of the walkout and the fear that the UUA was dead was seared in the consciousness of the Association. They had learned a painful and expensive lesson when the behavior of leadership betrayed the trust of black UUs. By 1972, the UUA had formulated its strong theology of social justice, which has never wavered from that point forward. The first group to benefit from this change was the Gay Rights movement.

THE SECOND LESSON LEARNED: Our Unitarian and Universalist forebears created a noble history of service that challenges us even today. We also have to claim a handful of leaders whose conduct disappointed us. In spite of strong support for the cause of Civil Rights, underscored by many UUs showing up to march at the risk or their own safety, the behavior of a few people caused irreparable harm to African-American UUs and to the reputation of the UUA in what appears to have been an act of cowardice. Although UUs participated in more protest marches and community action, their highest aspirations and heroic deeds were not sufficient to undo the damage caused at General Assembly in 1968 and 1969 **or** to alter the systematically embedded patterns of racism in the dominant white culture of UU. Unitarian Universalism in practice, structure, and complexion remained out of sync with its values.

Finally, I will mention another critique of UU (from within) that is being published this month entitled *Turning Point: Essays on a New Unitarian Universalism*. Its contributing authors describe some patterns that have prevented UU from becoming a robust faith for a new age. Our shortcomings: individualism, exceptionalism, and anti-authoritarianism. An

excerpt from this month's *UU World* magazine makes a strong case against individualism—that which the author calls the worship of individuals. Reverend Cheryl Walker left her Muslim faith when she tired of its demands for conformity. She was delighted when she discovered UU; specifically, its religious freedom and acknowledgement that no one faith has exclusive ownership of the truth. She describes falling in love with "being an individual in a faith community." She believed UU gave her the freedom to be in community without losing herself as an individual, while providing her with the safety and security to explore what she believed. But she also discovered a shadow side. It required little of her. Unlike her experience as a Muslim, she found no discipline in this faith. She describes signing the book, and—boom—she was a UU. She realized that there was little cohesion beyond a single congregation, and really not much within that congregation. She concluded that this wasn't individuality, but individualism—worship of the individual. Although she still loves the faith, she wonders about its members. As a person of color, she wonders how we can affirm our Principles and yet fail to create a community where everyone can come and be who they are? She says, "We love our individuality so much we cannot make room for someone else's. We are unwilling to give up even a piece of our individuality to create a community where all truly feel welcome."

Despite our enthusiasm for individualism, people of color (including UU members of color) fault UUs for asking them to make the dominant white culture their culture. Rev. Walker cites the music we sing, our styles of worship, and they way we look at time as examples of the prevailing white culture that dominates. She gives UUs some credit for making attempts to accommodate other cultures at certain times of the year, but we have not yet created a new culture where everyone can see their native cultures reflected with honor and dignity. People of color struggle to hold on to their identity within UU congregations and feel that their cultures are not valued in the same way as the dominant culture. As a black woman she feels that she is asked to give up her individuality to fit in, while others hold on tightly to theirs. She is increasingly unwilling to give up some of her identity if others are unwilling to do the same. She concludes that true community occurs only when everyone is willing to relinquish some aspects of their identity as individuals in order to take on the identity of the group. Without this, we are merely a group of individuals sharing a space but not existing in community. To accomplish this we would have to move individualism out of the center and replace it with the notion of shared community. When everyone gives up a little, a lot

is achieved: affirmation, wisdom of others, support on our life journey, safety (because we are known at a deep level), and the knowledge that all are committed to the health of the community. Such a community has shared purpose and values, and the individual is affirmed but is not worshiped.

The authors of *Turning Point: Essays*… challenge us to create a new UU community by embracing promises shaped from our theology: generosity, pluralism, and imagination.

THIRD LESSON LEARNED: In spite of our first three cherished principles (inherent worth and dignity, justice, equity and compassion in human relations, acceptance of one another and encouragement to personal growth), we have not created a community where our non-white members feel at home. We are still locked in the dominant white culture, unable to see our own prejudice and attitudes that limit inclusiveness and compassion. UU leaders point out that we have been too enthusiastic about our individualism, exceptionalism, and anti-authoritarianism. We might be able to explain this as an over-reaction to the church experiences we came from, but it does interfere with becoming our best UU selves.

Think of this small community and what it has accomplished—or shall I say created—over the past 35 years. One earnest person reached out in search of like-minded individuals. What followed was a lot of work—preparation of talks, musical offerings, snacks; planning, cooperating, fund-raising, persevering in spite of the petty annoyances that we inevitably create for each other. Gathering and living in covenant is a creative and dynamic process that evolves over time. We have some important feedback about ourselves as we continue to grow as a small piece of the UUA—let us use the knowledge to learn more about ourselves and what we can do to welcome others whose journey has been more difficult. I can see that this community has committed acts of the three excesses discussed in *Turning Point* (individualism, exceptionalism, and anti-authoritarianism). Consider our continuing journey together as a chance to think about how to create a community that is more generous, pluralistic, and imaginative, and with less white fragility.

Closing Words

May the quality of our lives be our benediction and a blessing to all we touch.

Rev. Philip R. Giles

1.17.16

Global Chalice Lighting for January 2016

International Council of Unitarians and Universalists

As one small flame
fills a whole room with light,
So may we radiate
hope, courage and good cheer
in our homes, in our worship
and in all the corners
of our world.
—Rev. Celia Midgley, British General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches

Reading Before a Moment of Reflective Silence

All are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be.

-Martin Luther King Jr.

Extinguishing Chalice

We extinguish this flame but not the light of truth, the warmth of community, or the fire of commitment. These we carry in our hearts until we are together again.
Elizabeth Selle Jones