



# UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK  
Spirituality · Community · Justice

**Whose Side Are You On?  
The Legacy of Anne Braden for Today**  
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[frederickuu.org](http://frederickuu.org)

This summer at UU General Assembly, the author and activist Chris Crass (1973 - ) facilitated a workshop on “Collective Liberation.” One of his questions that stuck with me is, “**Who was it that got you involved in the movement for justice?**” That question made me pause in gratitude for all the activists whose sacrifices made possible the social progress we enjoy today. I also experience that question as an invitation to consider the way that we can inspire others to join the movement toward “peace, liberty, and justice for all.”

Crass’s question reminds me that as a straight, white, able-bodied, heterosexual male from South Carolina, it was *not* inevitable that I would become involved in the struggle for Collective Liberation — by which I mean the movement to dismantle racism, sexism, homophobia, ableism (and other forms of oppression) that we all might be free. Last week in a sermon on “Toxic Masculinity,” one point I invited you to consider is that **many straight white men have become so accustomed to the unfair advantages conferred on them by systemic racism, sexism, and homophobia that, “equality feels like oppression.”** But “**loss of privilege, the loss of unfair entitlements, is *not* the same as reverse discrimination.**”

Along those lines, I invite you to hear an excerpt from a reflection written by Chris Crass about his experience as a white **male who has chosen to wear a #BlackLivesMatter button as he goes about his daily life in Knoxville, Tennessee** — a city not exactly known as a liberal mecca. He writes:

**This is about breaking a centuries-old code of white silence and white consent for...racist violence...** white privilege and white entitlement. Entitlement to safety and comfort, at the expense of people of color having the same. Entitlement to our children not needing to think about the color of their skin or wondering if the color of their skin puts them at risk of socially- and state-sanctioned violence.

(As one of my colleagues wrote about the headline this past week, “13-year-old shot and killed by police in Columbus, Ohio”: **“Anyone who pays attention knows — without even clicking on the story — that the dead 13-year-old is black.”**) Crass continues about his choice to daily wear a #BlackLivesMatter button:

**This is about choosing what side of justice we put our bodies on....** I want to stand in the tradition of Unitarian Universalist abolitionists and Civil Rights workers, knowing that even within our...tradition it has not always been easy. I want to stand on the side of love, like we did on Marriage Equality, even when it was illegal in every state and scary for many of us to be publicly out for LGBT rights....

**I reflect on the moments I’m scared wearing this button, recognize how minuscule it is, and mediate on the daily devastation of anti-Black racism on the lives of Black people in my life and in society.**

And then I pray for my four year old son...and his little one-month old brother.... I remember how **when I grew up, the most vocal people in the white community speaking about race, were racists.** I pray that my sons grow up with courageous, passionate, visionary, white anti-racists leaders in every part of this society.

**I pray and call forward the names of ancestors from Harriet Tubman and William Lloyd Garrison to Ella Baker and Anne Braden.** I pray for the leadership of Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, Opal Tometi, Elandria Williams, Carla Wallace, Tufara Muhammad...and the many others who are building this deeply life-affirming movement, everyday.

I have heard Crass speak a few times now, and I've read both his books. Part of what impresses me is that he's done his homework. He has immersed himself in the history of the struggle for Collective Liberation and in building relationships with those on the frontline of justice movements today.

I'm a fairly well-read person, but in getting to know Crass's work, on more than one occasion, **he named a series of people, and I had no idea whom he was talking about.** The names are well-known in some activist circles, but there are many ways that our culture is biased toward dead white aristocratic males. I'm not saying we should throw out European culture. Rather, the invitation is to continue expanding our horizons to learn more about the perspectives of women, the working class, African-Americans, American Indians, the working poor, and immigrant laborers — both historically and today.

I don't have time to go through all of those activists named earlier. Some of them I recognized as leaders of the #BlackLivesMatter movement. But the name that most stood out to me from Crass's list was from the opening line: **"I call forward the names of ancestors from Harriet Tubman and William Lloyd Garrison to Ella Baker and Anne Braden."** I knew those first three names, but Anne Braden was new to me. Seeing her name mentioned in the same breath as those other three luminaries of the struggle for racial justice inspired me to read her biography, Subversive Southerner: Anne Braden and the Struggle for Racial Justice in the Cold War South by Catherine Fosl (University Press of Kentucky, 2006).

To give a brief overview of her fascinating life, she was born in 1924 in Louisville, Kentucky to a family with deep roots in that state (13). "Anne's great-great-great-great-great-grandmother — also named Anne — was one of the first few dozen pioneers to settle Kentucky with Daniel Boone in 1775" (4). Braden had what could be called a **fairly privileged "white southern childhood"** (30). She was groomed to be a debutante, and was in a sorority (48). She graduated from college in 1945, which meant that she **"came of age at the end of WWII, part of the last generation of southern whites to grow up under Jim Crow segregation so blatant and static that, for Anne, it took an internal explosion to throw off the lessons of her childhood (xxi)"**

The turning point for Braden was becoming a journalist and meeting colleagues — including her future husband — who were activists for racial and economic justice (95-96). Looking back on 1948, when she was just a few years out of college and in the early stages of her professional career, Braden wrote:

**I had grown up in** a totally restricted world, a world that was passé, **a world that was morally wrong**. In ways that I didn't analyze then, I was already questioning that world. On the other hand, **everything in my life had geared me toward becoming a success in that world according to its standards....**

**I came to identify with the oppressed instead of the oppressor, which changed my whole worldview.** When I realized that I had grown up part of a privileged class that enjoyed its place in society because not only black people but [also] because most of the rest of the population was subjugated, I really had to turn the world as I saw it and the world within myself inside out. (95-96)

Anne got married that same paradigm-shifting year — in a Unitarian church! — although she was not an active church attender (110).

Part of what is most impressive about Anne Braden is her **steadfast commitment to social justice for almost six decades from that pivotal year of 1948 through the end of her life in 2006 at age 81**. “She and several peers such as Ella Baker and Fannie Lou Hamer were among the few adult women to whom young student activists...could look in the early 1960s for elders who possessed capacities they could admire rather than reject as either too conservative or too subservient to men” (131). To give just one example on how her decades-long commitment to activism continued late into her life, **at age 72, she was arrested “with nine others demonstrating to protest lack of minority hiring for the Professional Golfers’ Association tournament in Louisville.”** They were successful because when the PGA returned to Louisville in 2000, one-third of the vending contracts went to minority firms.

Also impressive is that the early years of her activism for social and economic justice were in the late 1940s and early 1950s, *before* the Civil Rights Movement. Indeed, a week *before* the Supreme Court 1954 ruling (in *Brown v. Board of Education*) that school segregation was unconstitutional, Anne Braden and her husband served as a front to help a young black family,

the Wades, buy their dream home. Andrew Wade was a WWII veteran and electrical contractor, but **“there was not a single ready-built stone ranch-type house for sale to blacks in the entire Louisville metropolitan area.”** When the Wades had been told no by all the white families they knew, they asked the Bradens because of their reputation as white allies for black freedom (136-137). The lesson here is that **if you want to become a more multicultural person or group, become known as an ally in the struggle for justice — and you will find yourself increasingly in relationship with a wide diversity of people.**

There were consequences for their courage, including death threats. But with the anti-Communist hysteria of the McCarthy period, **the most impactful consequence was that Anne’s husband served two prison sentences (both many months long) on trumped-up charges of sedition that were really about silencing dissent against the racist *status quo*** (173). But because the Bradens had long proven themselves allies in the struggle for racial justice, in 1961, when they were seeking clemency for Anne’s husband, The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. signed the petition, which was a risk for King who himself faced unfair and exaggerated charges as a Communist sympathizer.

Indeed, I was stunned to learn that Chris Crass was actually not the first time I had ever heard Anne Braden’s name in a litany of social justice luminaries. Consider this paragraph from Dr. King’s famous 1963 “Letter from a Birmingham Jail”:

Oppressed people cannot remain oppressed forever..... I had hoped that the white moderate would see this need. Perhaps I was too optimistic; perhaps I expected too much. I suppose I should have realized that **few members of the oppressor race can understand the deep groans and passionate yearnings of the oppressed race, and still fewer have the vision to see that injustice must be rooted out by strong, persistent and determined action.** I am thankful, however, that some of our white brothers in the South have grasped the meaning of this social revolution and committed themselves to it. They are still all too few in quantity, but they are big in quality. Some—such as Ralph McGill, Lillian Smith, Harry Golden, James McBride Dabbs, **Anne Braden** and Sarah Patton Boyle—have written about our struggle in eloquent and prophetic terms. Others

have marched with us down nameless streets of the South.... **Unlike so many of their moderate brothers and sisters, they have recognized the urgency of the moment and sensed the need for powerful “action” antidotes to combat the disease of segregation.**

May we each find our way to recognizing the urgency of our cultural moment and sensing the ways that we can act in our spheres of influence for peace and justice.

Specifically regarding the #BlackLivesMatter movement, if you look back at what Braden said regarding the Black Power movement in her own day, I think it’s safe to say that if she were alive she would be a supporter of #BlackLivesMatter. In Braden’s words, **“Our society has lived by white power. Unless black people create their own power, there can never be a meeting ground”** (302).

That being said, I will admit that the struggle for Collective Liberation is complex. Starting this Thursday at 7 p.m., I’ll be facilitating a 6-session class on **“What’s Fair? Who Decides? Navigating the Ethics of Privilege”** in which we’ll reflect on the struggle for Collective Liberation from many different angles. You are welcome to join in one or more of those sessions as you are able. More information is available at [frederickuu.org/privilege](http://frederickuu.org/privilege).

Our UU Second Source is the **“Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love.”** Anne Braden is one of those modern-day social prophets. In 2002, looking back on her life from the perspective of her late 70s, Anne said:

Often people say to me nowadays, “Oh, you gave up so much,” referring to the fact that I left a life of privilege and became an outcast. But I think **I was lucky because I was able to escape from the prisons I’d grown up in and join the human race.** What more can you ask of life than that? (336)

In the coming days, I invite you to reflect on those people whose life stories inspire you. Jungians call that a **“Golden Shadow”**: **when someone’s life story particularly resonates with you, the invitation is to see the ways you are being called to live into the untapped potential within you.** And I look forward to exploring along with you in the future such figures as Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldúa, Suzanne Pharr, Angela Davis, Barbara Smith, Elizabeth ‘Betita’

Martínez, Ida B. Wells, Abby Kelley, Septima Clark and Ai-Jen Poo. For each of us to whom those are not household names, including myself for some of those names, we've got some homework to do. But it's good work, and I'm grateful to be with you on the journey.