



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK

Building a New Way

The Rev. Dr. J. Carl Gregg

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The theme of this year's UU General Assembly (GA) was "Building a New Way." Although the locations, dates, and themes of each year's GA are chosen years in advance, that topic ended up being particularly relevant to current events. The theme of "Building a New Way" is also deeply resonant with the history of our movement as UUs. In 1961, when the Unitarians and the Universalists gathered for worship to celebrate the vote to consolidate into the Unitarian Universalist Association, the processional hymn they sang included these words: **"a freedom that reveres that past, but trusts the dawning future more."** As a theologically liberal religious movement, we have the freedom to reach back into the past to draw wisdom, wherever we can find it, from the world's religious traditions. But we also have the freedom to balance inherited traditions with the best of twenty-first century knowledge.

We UUs have also long been a part of the movements to build new ways of hope and justice in our nation and world. And it was wonderful to be on the ground with thousands of UUs at GA on Friday, June 26 when the Supreme Court handed down the landmark ruling "Obergefell v. Hodges." To share only the conclusion of that remarkable opinion:

They ask for equal dignity in the eyes of the law. The Constitution grants them that right. The judgment of the Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit is reversed. It is so ordered.

That decision on June 26, 2015 — moving us as a society closer to the dream of our First

Principle of recognizing the “inherent worth and dignity of every person” — reminded me of a morning precisely twelve years earlier on June 26, 2003. I was in Charlotte, North Carolina attending another religion conference. I turned on the news that morning and heard the Supreme Court’s ruling in *Lawrence v. Texas*. Justice Anthony Kennedy, writing for a 6–3 majority had struck down the sodomy law in Texas and, by extension, invalidated sodomy laws in thirteen other states. One reason that the news of *Lawrence v. Texas* stopped me in my tracks is I had just spent the past three years attending seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, and serving as the graduate assistant all three years for the divinity school’s first out, gay professor — who experienced during that time no small amount of discrimination and controversy. So I was stunned to see the tremendous news that the highest court in the land had just made same-sex sexual activity legal in every U.S. state.

After turning off the TV, I went downstairs, and on the TV in the hotel lobby I saw the announcement that Strom Thurmond had died. That news also caused me to shake my head in disbelief. As many of you know, I spent the first 22 years of my life in South Carolina. And for all 22 of those years, Strom Thurmond was my senator. Indeed, he left office six months before his death as the only senator to reach the age of 100 while still in office.

As you may know, Thurmond ran for president in 1948 as the states rights’ Dixiecrat candidate, and switched his allegiance from the Democratic to the Republican Party to protest the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Previously, in opposition to the Civil Rights Act of 1957, he conducted the longest filibuster ever by a lone senator, at 24 hours and 18 minutes in length, nonstop. And although I didn’t know it at that time, the irony was that six months after Thurmond’s death, the news broke that when was he was 22, he had fathered a child with his family’s 16-year-old African-American maid. Although Thurmond never publicly acknowledged his daughter, he paid for her education at an historically black college and passed other money to her for some time.

Even without knowing that last ironic twist, I still remember the exact words that went through my mind that morning: “Wow. The world can change. You can have legal gay sex in Texas, and Strom Thurmond is dead.” (I should add, as we say in South Carolina, “Bless his heart.”)

Around that time, I read Andrew Sullivan’s now classic book advocating for LGBT rights titled Virtually Normal. In the wake of the recent Supreme Court decision, looking back over decades of activism in which there was no guarantee we would ever reach this cultural moment, Sullivan said:

I never believed this would happen in my lifetime when I wrote...my book, *Virtually Normal*...and the hundreds and hundreds of talks and lectures and talk-shows and call-ins and blog-posts and articles in the 1990s and 2000s. I thought the book, at least, would be something I would have to leave behind me — secure in the knowledge that its arguments were, in fact, logically irrefutable, and would endure past my own death, at least somewhere. I never for a millisecond thought I would live to be married myself. Or that it would be possible for everyone, *everyone* in America. But it has come to pass. All of it. In one fell, final swoop. Know hope.

There is still work to be done, including expanded non-discrimination laws for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender citizens of this country. But we are already building a new way.

And we are also starting to see new signs of hope for building a new way for racial justice in this country. The day after that landmark Supreme Court ruling, I was inspired by the boldness of the activist Bree Newsome in climbing the flagpole outside the South Carolina statehouse and removing the Confederate flag. I was graduating from a liberal arts college in South Carolina in 2000 when the flag was finally moved from above the State House to the monument where it flew until two days ago. So I had a front row seat for that debate, and Newsome’s act of civil disobedience was a strong reminder that taking down the flag was far too long in coming. And it never should have been put up there in the first place — which was done not in the 1860s, but in the 1960s as a symbolic step *against* the Civil Rights Movement and *for* White Supremacy.

And the lies that have been told for too long in the “white, Confederate-apologist” version of Civil War history are what created the environment that allowed a twenty-one year old boy to commit a mass shooting at “Mother Emanuel,” the oldest African Methodist Episcopal Church in the South. Ed Madden, the poet laureate of South Carolina, has written prophetically

about the Charleston Massacre in a poem titled "When we're told we'll never understand":

He is not a lone wolf,
he is not alien,
he is not inexplicable,
he is not just one sick individual,
he is one of us,
he is from here,
he grew up here,
he went to school here,
he wore his jacket with its white supremacist patches here,
he told racist jokes here,
he got his gun here,
he learned his racism here,
his license plate sported a confederate flag here,
the confederate flag flies at the state capitol here....
this is not unspeakable (we should speak),
this is not unthinkable (we should think),
this is not inexplicable (we must explain it),
he is not a symbol he is a symptom,
he is not a cipher he is a reminder,
his actions are beyond our imagining,
but his motivation is not beyond our understanding
no he didn't get those ideas from nowhere.

mental illness is a way to not say racism
drug-related is a way to not say hate
loner is a way to not say one of us
we'll never understand is a way to not say look at our history

Here at UUCF in our own communities, we too must speak out, explain, and act to correct injustice on both the individual and institutional level if we are going to continue to build a new way of love and justice. We must interrogate the ways that we — both consciously and unconsciously — are perpetuating racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, ableism, and other oppressions.

For me, the paradigm shifted from how I was taught South Carolina history when I read Howard Zinn's *The People's History of the United States*, which tells "America's story from the point of view — and in the words of — America's women, factory workers, African Americans, Native Americans, working poor, and immigrant laborers." I commend that book to you if you haven't read it.

A similar shift happened for me when I read Michelle Alexander's book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in an Age of Colorblindness*. More than a decade ago when I first did intensive anti-racism training, I found myself pushing back against the facilitator's claim that, "There had been no progress in working against racism in this country." I was willing to accept his counterpoint that racism had become more insidious, but I remained unconvinced that progress had not been made for racial justice. And although I still think that there has been significant progress in our country toward dismantling racism, Alexander's book forced me to confront facts such as that, "Today there are more African-American adults under correctional control — in prison or jail, on probation or parole — than were enslaved in 1850, a decade before the Civil War began."

We have a Prison-Industrial Complex that is deeply racist. But when I see the Confederate flag finally come down from the South Carolina statehouse grounds, I can't help but think that we have at least taken one more step toward building a new way. At the same time, I'm reminded that we are approaching the one year anniversary of when the 18-year-old black man Michael Brown was shot in Ferguson, Missouri by a white police officer. And I'm reminded of all the other names: Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice, Eric Garner, Walter Scott, Freddie Gray, and so many more. But these injustices are also galvanizing a #BlackLivesMatter movement that — like Bree Newsome's act of Civil Disobedience — is rising up to dismantle systemic racism in our country.

As the South Carolina-born poet Nikky Finney wrote after the vote to remove the Confederate flag from the State House grounds:

We are not free to go on as if nothing happened yesterday, not free to cheer as if all our prayers have finally been answered today. We are free, only, to search the yonder of each other's faces, as we pass by, tip our hat, hold a door ajar, asking silently **who are we now? If we, the living, do not give our future the same honor as the sacred dead — of then and now — we lose everything.** What new human cosmos can be made of this tempest of tears, this upland of inconsolable jubilation? In all our lifetimes, finally, this towering undulating moment is here.

We are building a new way.

As Dr. King wrote decades earlier:

This is where we are. Where do we go from here? First, we must massively assert our dignity and worth. We must stand up amidst a system that still oppresses and develop an unassailable and majestic sense of values.... What is needed is a realization that power without love is reckless and abusive, and that love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love. And this is what we must see as we move on. (149)

In that spirit Dr. Cornel West said in his Ware Lecture, **“Tenderness is what love looks like in private, and justice is what love looks like in public.”**