



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK
Spirituality · Community · Justice

Spiritual Practices of Curiosity & Commitment #UUWhiteSupremacyTeachin

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Two years ago, I was trained as a facilitator for a UU Minister's Association program on "**Where Leads Our Call?**" As the first part of that program, I co-led a three-day retreat last year in Delaware for UU ministers in this area on "**Call & Excellence,**" reflecting on both the promises and perils of pursuing "excellence in ministry." This past week, I co-led the second part of the program on "**Call & Accountability.**"

When this curriculum was written, there was no way to anticipate just how relevant the topic of "Call & Accountability" would be today in the larger Unitarian Universalist movement. As it turned out, three weeks before the second retreat began, news broke that **The Rev. Peter Morales, President of our Unitarian Universalist Association, was resigning effective April 1 in response to a controversy around diversity in hiring practices.** This resignation came fewer than three months before the end of his eight-year term, which was scheduled to conclude on June 24 with the election of a new UUA president at the General Assembly in New Orleans.

Four days later on April 5, two more members of the UUA's Leadership Council announced their resignations: The Rev. Harlan Limpert, Chief Operating Officer, resigned effective April 20, and The Rev. Scott Tayler, Director of Congregational Life, announced his resignation effective June 30:

Tayler has been at the center of the controversy, which erupted after he hired a white man, the Rev. Andy Burnette, to replace another white man as leader of the

UUA's Southern Region, when a woman of color, religious educator and church administrator Christina Rivera, applied for but did not receive the job. All five regional leads are white. Burnette and Rivera were both UUA trustees when they applied for the position.

Rev. Burnette later declined the position in the wake of the controversy. This situation is further complicated because **Peter Morales was the first Latino president of the UUA, meaning that his resignation, in itself, lowered the percentage of racial diversity in the upper levels of UUA leadership.**

To temporarily fill this leadership gap, **the UUA Board of Trustees appointed three co-presidents:**

- The Rev. Sofia Betancourt, Professor of Theology and Ethics at Starr King School for the Ministry (our UU seminary in Berkeley, California) who will serve as Interim Co-President for the Commission for Institutional Change.
- The Rev. Bill Sinkford, Senior Minister of First Unitarian Church of Portland, Oregon (the first black President of the UUA, serving from 2001 to 2009) who will serve as Interim Co-president “for the roles of President as outlined in the UUA bylaws.”
- Leon Spencer, Professor Emeritus in Leadership, Technology, and Human Development at Georgia Southern University (and the 2007 recipient of the UUA's annual Distinguished Service Award) will serve as Interim Co-President for Constituent Outreach.

Looking to the future, **all three candidates on the ballot to become the next President of the UUA are white women:**

- The Rev. Susan Frederick-Gray, Minister of the UU Congregation of Phoenix, Arizona;
- The Rev. Alison Miller, Minister of the Morristown, New Jersey, Unitarian Fellowship; and
- The Rev. Jeanne Pupke, Minister of the First UU Church of Richmond, Virginia.

As another significant piece of historical context, **when Peter Morales was elected in 2009, “his election was the fourth contested election in a row in which a male candidate” was elected instead of a female candidate.** This summer's election will be the first to feature only female candidates—and it will be the first since 1977 with more than two candidates.”

Depending on how deeply you want to dive into the details around this controversy, there is considerable coverage on the [UU World website](#). I'm choosing to address this topic today because in response to the controversy and resignations, **the Black Lives of UU Organizing Collective called on UU congregations to host a #UUWhiteSupremacyTeachIn** on either Sunday, April 30 or Sunday, May 7. (A "teach-in" is a play on the protest strategy of a "sit-in," adding a connotation of an educational forum equipping activists for social change.) We are one of 633 UU congregations who accepted this challenge to host a #UUWhiteSupremacyTeachIn. I am beginning with today's sermon, and next week there will be a more traditional teach-in. Next week, if you are able, I encourage you to plan to come to the first part of the teach-in here in the sanctuary, starting at 10:40 a.m. during the Middle Hour between the two services. And our [Dismantling Racism Team](#) will host a second part in the chapel, immediately following the Late Service. Since the two teach-ins will be different, you are welcome to attend either or both. And our Dismantling Racism Team plans to continue to offer ongoing opportunities for discussion and action in the future.

As you can perhaps imagine—or may have experienced directly yourself—when leaders in a progressive religious movement begin resigning around accusations of perpetuating White Supremacy, a lot of people get triggered for a confluence of different reasons. So as I prepared this past week, to co-lead a retreat for nearby UU ministers on "Call & Accountability," I incorporated the following reading into the opening session on creating a covenant of how we were committing to be together for this past week. It's called "**An Invitation to Brave Space**":

Together we will create brave space
Because there is no such thing as a "safe space"
We exist in the real world
We all carry scars and we have all caused wounds.
In this space
We seek to turn down the volume of the outside world,
We amplify voices that fight to be heard elsewhere,
We call each other to more truth and love
We have the right to start somewhere and continue to grow.

We have the responsibility to examine what we think we know,

We will not be perfect.

This space will not be perfect.

It will not always be what we wish it to be

But

It will be our brave space together,

and

We will work in it side by side....

That challenge to co-create “brave space” reminds me of the quote that I reference each time we welcome new members of this congregation. We reflect on what it means, that **Unitarian Universalism is a *covenantal* rather than a creedal religious movement.** Our word “creed” derives from the Latin *credo*, meaning “I believe.” And creedal religious movements seek to create unity around a set a beliefs. In contrast, as Unitarian Universalists, we sometimes say that **“We believe in *deeds* not creeds,”** and that, **“We don’t have to believe alike to *love alike.*”** So, in the words of a former president of the UUA from back in the 1990s:

The memory we seek to embody is of forebears wise enough to put aside the creedal question...“What do we all believe in common?” for more profound, covenantal questions: “How shall we *treat* and *help* one another here? What *hopes* might we share? What *promises* shall we make to help deepen one another's lives in the time we have?”

Through creating “brave space,” **our goal is neither to enforce a creedal orthodoxy, nor to make people feel guilt or shame. Rather, the goal is to cultivate greater awareness of where one another is coming from**—to become *more conscious* of perspectives of which we are currently unconscious—so that we might more authentically build a beloved community.

In the brave space we sought to create in the retreat this past week, as part of how we reflected on how we are called to hold one another accountable as UU ministers, part of what we did was closely study the Covenant of the UU Minister’s Association. Some parts of that covenant are more uniquely applicable to ministers, but there are three parts of it that particularly stood out to me as potentially helpful for the larger UU movement at such a time as this:

We covenant together...

- To [be] mindful of our potential **unconsciously to perpetuate systems of oppression**;
- To seek justice and right relations according to our **evolving collective wisdom**...
- To **cultivate practices of deepening awareness**, understanding, humility, and commitment to our ideals;

I'll say more about each in turn.

First, covenanting together “To seek justice and right relations according to our **evolving collective wisdom**” is a reminder that none of us has it all figured out. I would even go one step further to say that there is not even the *possibility* of perfection. Rather, at our best, we are *evolving*—seeking to learn from the past to avoid repeating the same mistakes, and to draw increasingly wide circles of inclusion.

And often, it only becomes possible to draw those increasingly wide concentric circles of inclusion once we become more aware of ways we have unintentionally excluded others in the past. (As the saying goes, “Intention does not equal impact.”) Or in the second of our three points, we covenant together “to [be] mindful of our potential **unconsciously to perpetuate systems of oppression.**” This commitment is perhaps the biggest paradigm shift we are invited to wrestle with regarding the #UUWhiteSupremacyTeachIn.

We are *not* talking about the common understanding of White Supremacy as people “out there” like the Ku Klux Klan, who are *conscious, aspirational* White Supremacists, seeking to *intentionally* create a more racist society. You might think of **learning to denounce conscious, aspirational White Supremacy as the entry level of dismantling racism**. It is a vitally important starting point, and I'm all for it.

But I want to invite you to consider that there may also be a **more advanced level of dismantling racism** in which we are asked not only to condemn the blatant, conscious White Supremacy “out there,” but also to **look in the mirror and investigate the ways that being raised in a racist, sexist, classist society has caused each of us to sometimes “unconsciously perpetuate systems of oppression” in various ways.**

I invite you to notice not only that word *unconscious*, but also the word *system*—because the problem is so much larger than any of our individual perspectives. It is about the systems and institutions, laws and attitudes all around us. We need to do the work of dismantling on both the individual and systemic level: **interrogating our own implicit bias as well as working together to write more equitable laws**. We are called to an increased awareness that if we do not set up accountable processes for dismantling systems of oppression, then we reinforce and perpetuate those systems of oppression, both unconsciously and consciously.

The third part of the covenant that I am inviting us to consider is “To **cultivate practices of deepening awareness**, understanding, humility, and commitment to our ideals.” What sorts of practices might that refer to? When approaching difficult topics like racism, practicing *humility* can mean reminding oneself that we are entering into brave space to seek evolving collective wisdom. None of us has all the answers, and a practice of humility can invite us to move from defensiveness to *curiosity*. If you hearing the term #UUWhiteSupremacyTeachIn makes you feel anger, sadness, confusion or shame, those are understandable human responses. I invite you to both feel those emotions and to consider experimenting with the **spiritual practice of curiosity**. Ask yourself, what might I have to learn from reflecting on Unitarian Universalism from the perspective of “our potential unconsciously to perpetuate systems of oppression.” I am not telling you that you have to embrace some pre-determined orthodox perspective. Rather, I’m inviting you to take a new perspective for a test drive, open to what new realizations you might potentially become aware of.

Also, with respect to covenanting “To **cultivate practices of deepening awareness**, understanding, humility, and commitment to our ideals,” I am struck by that word “commitment.” When discussing difficult topics, a **spiritual practice of commitment** can mean staying at the table and cultivating a capacity for just “being with” our discomfort. That’s the difference between safe space and *brave* space. There are certainly times when we need safe spaces, but I invite you to consider that there are also times when we need brave spaces, when we are willing to show up and listen to new perspectives and be willing to sit with our discomfort rather than retreating. Co-creating such a space together is not easy, but it is the authentic, life-affirming soul work of building a beloved community.

Now, there are so many other things I would like to say—about my personal experiences, UUCF, and the UUA, and we will have a chance to further explore both at next Sunday’s teach-ins, and in future beloved community conversations.

But before closing, as many of you know, I plan my sermons a year in advance. And last year about this time, I planned to speak about the **renegade Baptist preacher Rev. Will Campbell**, who died about four years ago at age 88.

There will not be time for me to say much about Campbell explicitly this morning, but the lives of Campbell and other ancestors in the movement for racial justice have deeply informed my approach to this sermon specifically, and to the UUA controversy generally. (If you want to learn more about Campbell, a good starting point is Will Campbell: Radical Prophet of the South, by Merrill M. Hawkins.)

Born in 1924, Campbell was part of the fifth-generation of his family to be born in Mississippi (4). He was a **white man raised in a deeply racist context**, but the dissonance he experienced between the divisiveness of racism and the reconciling teachings of Jesus led him to become a lifelong activist for racial justice. In 1957, when a court ordered the schools in Little Rock, Arkansas to be desegregated, **Campbell showed up to help escort those young African-American students through the angry mob. That same year, he was the only white person present at the first meeting of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (42).**

There are many other stories about Campbell along those lines, but he was known not only for showing up for racial justice, but also for seeking to minister to members of the KKK (70). He sought to practice Jesus’s call to “love your enemies.” Or, in the words of The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. when he delivered the Ware Lecture at the UU General Assembly in 1966: “We will not only win freedom for ourselves; we will so appeal to your heart and conscience that we will win you in the process, and our victory will be a double victory.” Both Campbell and King sought not to defeat their enemies, but to draw a wider circle that would bring all sides into a beloved community.

In that spirit, how might we covenant together “to be mindful of our potential unconsciously to perpetuate systems of oppression; seek justice and right relations according to

our evolving collective wisdom; and cultivate practices of deepening awareness, understanding, humility, and commitment to our ideals?”