

*Is It Me?* – White Supremacy Teach-In  
The Rev. Paige Getty  
Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Columbia  
Sunday, May 7, 2017

### **CENTERING THOUGHT:**

*Words are sacred. They deserve respect. If you get the right ones, in the right order, you can nudge the world a little.*

— Tom Stoppard

### **CALL TO WORSHIP –**

[[Covenant](#) first.]

Last week while you were here celebrating rain in worship, I was in New York City, worshipping with other participants in the Revolutionary Love conference. Throughout the weekend, conference speakers had been exploring the idea of what Revolutionary Love is and is not.

It is not passive; it is not self-centered; nor is it entirely other-centered; it does not happen in isolation; love is not a finite resource.

No, revolutionary love is active, and sometimes angry; it requires serpent power that strategizes and acts, as well as the dove power of spirit, connection, relationship. Revolutionary love is reciprocal.

And on Sunday morning, Rev. Lewis said as part of her sermon that revolutionary love means that, “when your heart is broken, I’m crying your tears.”

*When your heart is broken, I'm crying your tears.*

Today’s worship service invites us into a space where we grow more capable of understanding our marginalized neighbors’ broken hearts, that we might be better able truly to love one another – in sympathy, in empathy, and with the understanding that injustice for any one of us is a threat to our collective well-being.

We promise to be a congregation that is safe and welcoming, where we promise to nurture one another and struggle together and challenge each other. Let us do that today.

*When your heart is broken, I'm crying your tears.*

Come, let us worship.

**CHALICE LIGHTING** – from Laura Esquivel's novel Like Water For Chocolate:

“Each of us is born with a box of matches inside us, but we can't strike them all by ourselves; we need oxygen and a candle to help. In this case, the oxygen for example, would come from the breath of the person you love; the candle would be any kind of food, music, caress, word, or sound that engenders the explosion that lights one of the matches.

“For a moment we are dazzled by an intense emotion. A pleasant warmth grows within us, fading slowly as time goes by, until a new explosion comes along to revive it. Each person has to discover what will set off those explosions in order to live, since the combustion that occurs when one of them is ignited is what nourishes the soul.”

**INTRODUCTION TO THE REST OF THE SERVICE –**

The Black Lives of Unitarian Universalism is an organizing collective that is leading the effort in our religious association to address the oppression and discrimination that exists in our world – not just outside our congregational walls, but within them, as well. At the national level of the association, some recent hiring decisions have reminded us that the effects of systemic racism run deep, and that to be spiritually whole, we must address these realities. They have asked those of us who are white to address more candidly the reality of white supremacy in our world – to educate ourselves, to do some self-reflection in ways that are likely to be uncomfortable, to accept white supremacy as a description of the reality in which we live, and to make an effort to be more awake to our part in perpetuating the negative impacts of that reality. We're doing that this morning by hearing from several different voices – including poetry from poets of color, but starting with the perspective of UUCC member Michael Bonilla, who works in the proverbial trenches of addressing racism in our world...

**REFLECTION** – On Voter Disenfranchisement (Michael Bonilla)

**READING** – [“Healing”, by Adam Lawrence Dyer](#)

**READING** – [“An Invitation to Brave Space”, by Micky ScottBey Jones](#)

I've been thinking about authority – as in, who is the legitimate source of authority on things? Whose knowledge, experience, and insight is most credible?

I've been thinking about authority, different from power – power is the ability to act, to influence, sometimes to control, and may be based on authority, but may also be based on more nefarious things like violence or coercion or sheer force of numbers.

Authority and power do not always go together. Sometimes the source with the most influence is not the most credible authority, and yet still ends up having much power.

We see it in what influences children, right? Their peers, the things they read and see in books, on television, in movies, online. Those things have a lot of power and influence in their lives and the choices they make, regardless of how legitimate the actual source of information. And so those who have pledged to help raise those children into healthy, whole human beings – their parents and godparents, their religious community, their teachers – must take care to provide them with a foundation that is deep and broad and strong, to help develop the skills of listening and learning and critical thinking and flexibility, lest they should be brittle and vulnerable and incapable of distinguishing among, or standing up to, the various powers in their lives.

And our religious traditions have a lot to say, implicitly and explicitly, about sources of authority. What an individual believes about authority certainly affects their choice of religious tradition. And the religious tradition itself exerts a lot of influence on those who've given their hearts to it.

In this regard, Unitarian Universalism is interesting. So many of us have chosen this tradition – a few are home-grown Unitarian Universalists, but most of us came here later, having felt too confined by the limits of the authority of traditions in which we were reared, seeking instead a community of faith that would help us to feel grounded while also encouraging exploration and freedom of thought.

We affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person. And we affirm and promote the interdependent web of all existence.

The individual has agency over her own mind and body. And she is connected with, and therefore accountable to, her fellow beings in the web of existence.

(The theological house metaphor applies to us individually and collectively, those houses being neither entirely the same, nor entirely independent.)

And from within that tension arise the other seven principles of Unitarian Universalism – then ones that call on us to encourage one another, to be responsible in seeking truth and meaning, to cultivate justice and equity and compassion in the world.

Which brings me to today's topic of white supremacy and the insidious and far-reaching effects of racism in America, including in our own congregation and religious association. At the request of Persons of Color in our association and in our congregation, we are talking about this.

Perhaps more importantly, we are being asked to listen. To listen to voices that are often silenced – to respect and honor the legitimate authority of those voices, even though we live in a society that gives the most power to whiteness.

Whiteness has power in concrete and more subtle ways. Not only is the power of the market (that is, wealth) and the power of government concentrated among white folks, but white culture is the standard of normalcy here, too ... white ways of thinking, white ways of being civil, white ways of expressing outrage, white ways of speaking and studying and writing.

And, not to mince words – it is us white folks who have the luxury of choosing whether we give any attention to race and racism. We are the ones who get to say, "I'm tired of this." I don't want to talk about it anymore. Let's give our attention to something else.

The biggest elephant in the room is the words – I know that. I know that there are many among us for whom the conversation just shuts down at the mention of the words *white supremacy*. When someone says those words – when I, your minister, say those words – it feels like a slap, an affront, an accusation. It feels like someone – maybe me – is calling you a White Supremacist, associating you directly with hate-mongering persons who hang black men from trees and deface Jewish community centers with spray-painted swastikas and burn crosses in the front yards of people perceived to sympathize with anyone who is not white.

But if that is you, then I am asking you – begging you, really – to choose differently. To remember our 'wounded words' sermon series from a few years ago, where we invited ourselves to reframe words like church and God and prayer and worship, finding meaning and value beyond the negative associations they might have for us.

Language is not static. Languages evolve and die and new ones are created. Words are added to dictionaries. Their usages change. And in our effort to make sense of the world and our place in it, we use language to explore possibilities, and to shape those possibilities, and then to express ourselves, almost always inadequately.

Language, says one of my favorite linguists, is a very inefficient form of communication.

Some people insist on limiting their adolescents sex education to “don't do it”, but we know that their children are still going to engage in sexual activity. And we know that the better informed they are, the less disastrous that activity is likely to be.

Similarly, we can avoid saying the words “white supremacy”, but white supremacy will still be the water in which we Americans swim without even realizing we are wet. The fact that it is not the conscious, intentional, aspirational White Supremacy of the Aryan Nations doesn't negate the fact that we live within very real, and often implicit and unconscious, systems of racism and oppression.

The organizers of the Unitarian Universalist white supremacy teach-in say that “White supremacy [is] a set of institutional assumptions and practices, often operating unconsciously, that tend to benefit white people and exclude people of color.” (definition from Teach-In resources) As I said in a sermon a few weeks ago, white supremacy is an accurate description of our reality – where whiteness is the standard of ‘normalcy’; where, implicitly or explicitly, whiteness is prioritized; where non-whiteness is less visible, or invisible; and where, therefore, whiteness is supreme.

A few weeks ago, a woman asked me why my “pink pussy hat” was brown. I said, “because not all pussies are pink”. She is a physician. And a Black woman. “Oooohhh...”, she said, wide-eyed. And that led her to share a story of being in medical school not that long ago, and having a professor describe what happens to a woman's areola during pregnancy – it starts out rosy pink, but may deepen in color and turn brown during the course of the pregnancy. The two Black students spoke up and said, “Our areolas are brown already. We haven't been pregnant.”

The white body's experience held up as the standard of normalcy in a medical school classroom in America. That's white supremacy.

A UUC member's experience in an interviewing workshop recently, where she overheard several African American women having a lengthy discussion about how they should and should not wear their hair to get a job. That's white supremacy.

Disproportionate numbers of Black men in jail and prison on drug charges, while White men engage in the same activities with impunity. White supremacy.

A White girl who speaks out of turn in class is going to be a leader. A Black girl is sassy. White supremacy.

A person with Middle Eastern heritage who commits murder is a terrorist. But a white man who murders a group of Black folks in bible study is 'disturbed' and 'unstable'. White supremacy.

15-year-old Jordan Edwards couldn't get home safely from a party last weekend because of white supremacy.

Van Jones told us at the conference last weekend, "I'm a ninth generation American, but I am the first one in my family born with all his rights recognized by the US government." White supremacy.

In the center of your order of service we've printed a resource that helps make these concepts more concrete. I encourage you to read it, to think about how it applies to the world in which you live.

There is part of me who wants to find different words, to make this work less off-putting for those who don't like the words "white supremacy". But there's a stronger voice that says, "But if I do that, who am I serving and who am I excluding?" Some of us don't like how the words white supremacy make us feel. Meanwhile, others are literally dying because we refuse to address the reality of white supremacy.

One time I preached a sermon in which I mentioned that I am pro-choice – I believe that abortions should be legal, safe, and rare. A person who heard that sermon thanked me later for making her feel seen and accepted. It wasn't even a sermon about abortion rights or reproductive justice. But she was a person who had felt judged and ostracized by religious communities – she had been on the margins – and hearing positive and open language from the pulpit about reproductive choice, she felt like maybe should could be accepted and belong.

And people of color are telling us they also feel marginalized in our communities. Unsure whether they can truly belong here, they are asking us white folks to say the words, to address the inequities in our system, to do the real work of being in relationship and in community. Not just to maintain comfort, but question our own assumptions and to disrupt systems that perpetuate injustice.

And those of us who have chosen to turn our attention toward those realities, understand them better, investigate our own biases, examine our own behavior – we know that our lives are better for it. As Dr. King wrote in his letter from Birmingham City Jail,

*All [persons] 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... This is the inter-related structure of reality.*

This is not about finger-pointing or about anyone being a bad person. It's about resisting the seductions of inertia and complacency. It's about accepting the invitation into real relationship. It's about building the world we dream about. Where you and I and all of us are who we ought to be.

Like Micky ScottBey Jones wrote,

*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...*

May the right and the responsibility be ours, too. Amen.