

Reflection on Anti-racism, Anti-Oppression, and Multiculturalism
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I have carried in my heart a deep and unfulfilled desire for racial justice most of my adult life. My understanding of systems of oppression has grown over the years as I've struggled to make a difference through teaching, service, and building community. Being a Unitarian Universalist has awakened and galvanized my belief in the beauty of each person and the interconnection of all. This faith has given me the ability to more fully live my values. I know that we are profoundly tied to one another and in that knowing I am inspired and empowered to work for a world where all are collectively liberated. I am waking up to how long the journey has been and how far we have to go.

When I began attending a Unitarian Universalist church, my husband and I were seeking to adopt a second child through an African American adoption program. I immediately felt at home at the Unitarian Church of Evanston but I was also concerned by the lack of racial diversity there. Not long after becoming a member of the church, I became pregnant and so we did not adopt, but I remained troubled and heard the question again and again in my congregation, "Why are we so white?" I have come to believe that the diversity we reflect within our congregations is secondary to and will only come as a result of our commitment to create a more racially just society and world. If we are seeking primarily to reflect diversity so that we can pat ourselves on the back, we are missing the point. At the same time, building an anti-racist, anti-oppressive, multi-cultural world can begin in our congregations. It requires rigorous self-reflection, relationship building across difference, and a commitment to stay lovingly on

the journey. Our churches must be where we practice and build our capacity for the hard work of justice making.

In my time as Membership Director and Social Action Coordinator, the congregation I serve has developed meaningful associations with local, interfaith organizations addressing homelessness, hunger, and racial and economic injustice. Building connections across difference has raised challenges for many of us and brought us to a deeper understanding of the pervasiveness of inequality and injustice in our community and country. It has deepened our commitment to work toward a more equitable world and to address our own internal racism. It has made me ever more aware of the need for supportive and challenging relationships along with spiritual sustenance so that we might remain engaged in the work. By remaining committed to relationship building, listening and making room for marginalized voices at the center we can remember that the freedom of each of us depends on the freedom of all of us.

Dismantling oppressive systems begins with honest self-reflection, a willingness to be uncomfortable, and an ability to recognize and share power. I learned something about power and privilege and my own family history when I preached last summer and shared the story of Clyde Ross, told in the Ta-Nehisi Coates article from the Atlantic Magazine, *The Case for Reparations*. My mother was moved to tears hearing the story describing government-sponsored practices of redlining and predatory contract lending that created the ghetto of North Lawndale, because she was a part of that story. Her white family had fled North Lawndale at the same time that Clyde's black family moved there, which I didn't know until she approached me after the service, visibly shaken. This experience opened up a transformative dialogue between us that might not have

been possible otherwise. Ministry creates a space for us to hold the complexity of our suffering, the hurt we cause and experience, and makes a way for healing.

I have benefitted from being a part of a congregational focus on racial justice at the Unitarian Church of Evanston, which has deepened my own commitment and illuminated how much work there is to be done – within myself, in our movement, and in the world. I have been assessed using the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity and participated in several workshops focusing on how to move from minimization to acceptance. One key way of doing that for me has been to become more aware of my own culture. True to the minimization stage, I did not recognize or appreciate my Italian, Irish Catholic background. Reading *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950*, by Robert A. Orsi, helped me to better understand some of my own family history and culture, which gives me a more authentic appreciation of multiplicity.

Many Unitarian Universalists are in the minimization stage, which leaves us ill equipped to address injustice in our painfully divided and broken world. We would rather gloss over difference and dwell in the belief that we are all one. To move forward, we must see where differences matter, to pay attention to whose voices are being silenced and where power is abused. Those of us with white skin privilege don't often put our bodies on the line for racial justice. We may not attend rallies or protests with great commitment. Most of us are not willing to be arrested or to die for the cause of racial equity. It is easy to choose comfort over challenge and we may need to choose to be present to our families rather than dedicated to activism. But I feel a deep, passionate commitment to a ministry that challenges those with privilege (including myself) to use it

in whatever ways we can - to step up to and beyond the edge of our ease and to keep showing up in the ways we are needed, to listen and to be led.

I understand that ministry will require me to keep learning and growing. It will ask me to collaborate with a congregation, to inspire and challenge, and to offer hope. I will nurture the spirits and challenge the complacency of those I serve so that we may mutually empower and collectively liberate. Although it is easy for me to diminish or hide my power in defensive self-protection, I am called to uphold the inherent worth and dignity of every being and to share my belief that we are all profoundly interconnected. I know that my ministry will include relationship building – within the congregation I serve and the community beyond, through interfaith and secular organizations. We will need to practice holding our brokenness with as much compassion as we can cultivate. Being in a position to speak with prophetic voice requires the courage to resist systems of oppression and ask others to resist with me. I hold dear the words of Adrienne Rich, “My heart is moved by all I cannot save: So much has been destroyed I have to cast my lot with those who, age after age, perversely, with no extraordinary power, reconstitute the world.” The only way to dismantle oppression and to build a more whole and connected world is by moving forward step by step together. It is messy, painful and can seem hopeless but there is no other way. We must make a way out of no way together.