

Unitarian Universalism at the Crossroads: Report from New Orleans

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Good morning! It is good to be back here among you. It has only been two weeks since I occupied this pulpit last, but I feel like I've been to the moon and back in that time period. It was an intense experience to gather with fellow UUs in New Orleans at such a critical juncture for our movement in its struggles with racial justice, and then I moved to Star Island New Hampshire, ten miles out in the ocean, for an equally intense conference on climate change. I'll report on Star Island at another time. Let me try to sum up in the next few minutes what has happened in New Orleans and where we are.

First, a little history for context. The Unitarians and Universalists, two denominations about two centuries old, joined forces in 1961 to create the Unitarian Universalist denomination. The struggle for civil rights for African Americans was in full swing in those years. Ministers and lay people from this tiny new combined denomination had responded out of all proportion to their numbers to Dr. Martin Luther King's request for support in Selma in 1965. We showed up and one white UU minister and one white UU layperson were killed in that effort, and those deaths gave impetus for passage of the Voting Rights Acts of 1965.

We white liberals were comfortable supporting the movement so long as it seemed aimed at racial integration, eliminating color discrimination. But when the Black Power movement arose a couple of years later and its advocates demanded that blacks take control of their own liberation and do so by forming organizations from which whites were excluded, many whites would not go along.

The Black Power movement came to the new Unitarian Universalist denomination in the late 60s in what is called the Black Empowerment controversy. A Black Affairs Council (BAC) demanded funding from the denomination, and secured a vote approving that funding from the General Assembly. However, the UUA Board and executive refused to go ahead with that funding because the denomination didn't have the money. In the ensuing controversy, many black UUs became disillusioned and left the denomination. Some of them, like our first African American President Bill Sinkford, returned later, but many of them did not.

I joined a UU church a decade after this controversy, and it has been my experience that the denomination has always been committed to combating racism, but it has the same reservations white liberals have always had. Many of us want to say that since science tells us that our notions of race do not correspond to anything in the real world, everyone should just ignore the concept. Of course, this is hypocritical since the whole world acts as if race has some meaning, and maintains a hierarchy which favors whites.

The UUA's anti-racism effort had been guided by the UUA staff until recently. Now there has arisen a grassroots movement in the denomination as a whole. Black Lives Matter was a national movement formed around killings of African Americans; you will recall we considered putting up a banner two years ago, but could not reach consensus on it. In the meantime, an organization called Black Lives of UU (BLUU) has sprung up within the

denomination.

I only became aware of their activities in 2017, but it appears they have been working since at least 2015, if not before. In advance of the 2016 General Assembly in Columbus, BLUU put together enough money to publish an offer to pay the GA registration for any Black UU in the country, and said they would also try to help with travel expenses.

In October of 2016, BLUU met with the Board of Trustees of the UUA and secured from them a commitment of 5.3 million dollars in funding over several years. Apparently this commitment was made without the Board consulting staff or advertising the action. I knew nothing about it until April of 2017.

With that background, let me remind you briefly of the events of this past spring. A particular hiring decision for senior staff at the UUA was between a white male minister named Andy Burnett from Arizona and a Latina church administrator named Christine Rivera from Virginia. Burnett was chosen, and Rivera publicly claimed that she was passed over because of a culture of white supremacy within the UUA. The controversy prompted a letter of concern from more than 100 ministers, which I signed, but it ultimately led to the resignation of the UUA President, Peter Morales, and two top staff people. The Board, under the leadership of moderator Jim Key, responded to Morales' resignation by appointing three distinguished UUs of color, including past President Bill Sinkford, as Interim Co-Presidents. They set about interviewing many stakeholders in the denomination to try to ascertain what direction we could move in.

Within the UU Minister's Association, the Executive Director Don Southworth penned a letter in April highly critical of the Board's grant to BLUU, questioning whether Rivera was qualified for the job she didn't get and whether there was any racial imbalance in hiring at the top levels of the UUA. His letter, in turn, sparked a strong reaction from the Board of the Ministers' Association, and in late May, Southworth resigned the position he had held for eight years. Jim Key, the moderator who had come up with the interim solution, discovered he had an advanced cancer, resigned from his position and soon died.

So I approached the ministers' meeting and General Assembly in something of a state of shock. I knew there were some familiar faces I wouldn't see, but I didn't know who I would see. I had some sympathy with Don Southworth's criticisms, and yet I wanted the denomination not to fall into factions and name-calling.

Most particularly, I was concerned at how this latest attempt to move forward on racial justice would be seen against our history, particularly the Black Empowerment controversy almost 50 years before. I think historical reenactments have their place as ritual, but they don't get you to real justice in the here and now. Yes, race was a problem in the 1960s and it is still a problem but the problem has evolved and so have the people dealing with it.

Let me just say that I am acutely aware that I don't have all the answers, or even some of them. I accept that I have some white fragility. White fragility is a discomfort among white people in talking about their own role in maintaining racial oppression. It is easy for those of us who identify as white to minimize our own roles and to want to react defensively. I think we have to accept that discussions about race are not easy discussions.

Many of the discussion at Ministry Days and at General Assembly were uncomfortable, and yet what I kept finding is that in that discomfort it was possible to glimpse a way forward. I think we all want the Unitarian Universalists to be in the forefront of the fight against racial

injustice, as we have been in the past, and as we have been more recently in the forefront of the fights for LGBTQ justice and immigrant justice and reproductive freedom. We want to be a more inclusive denomination in order to do this work.

The first act of the three interim co-Presidents on assuming their office was to institute a hiring freeze across the board, except at Beacon Press. They wanted to look at the hiring practices at all levels. They then announced a tentative goal to bring UUA hiring up to 30% people of color.

The co-Presidents met with the ministers on Tuesday and then gave two reports to General Assembly on Thursday and Friday. In each, the message was the same. Bill Sinkford expressed the recent history succinctly:

“The charges of racism in hiring shocked our community. Many white UUs asked how this could be? But most UU people of color were not surprised—only surprised that it had been called out. And that difference in reaction was itself a shock and challenge to our community that we want to call Beloved.”¹

The three co-Presidents immediately helped the hiring statistics, though that will be only temporary. But they are establishing a Commission on Institutional Change to continue their work, examining the culture of white supremacy in the denomination.

Ultimately the message of the co-Presidents was of hope. “There is a fundamental hope in our values and our aspirations that speaks to persons across the boundaries of race and culture and language and economic circumstance and ability,” said Sinkford. “It is our culture and not our theology that has been our biggest obstacle. And because that is true, our final message is a message of hope. We can change our culture if we have the will to do it.”

This dovetailed with what Bryan Stevenson said the next day at the Ware lecture: “Our hopefulness is the one thing we cannot compromise. You are either hopeful or you are part of the problem.”

Black Lives of UU was given the distinguished service award by the co-Presidents. They not only spearheaded the teach-ins in April and May in which over 600 congregations participated, they did an amazing amount of work to get people of color to General Assembly. Visual assessments are notoriously unreliable, and I have yet to see official statistics, but my impression in walking around General Assembly was that between 20 and 25% of the attendees were people of color. It was quite noticeable, and gratifying.

It was reassuring to put faces to the names I had been reading about. We heard from Christina Rivera, who sparked the whole controversy, as well as from Lena Gardner, the director of Black Lives of UU. I attended a session where members of the UUA Board, including Rivera, talked candidly about the future direction of the denomination, and were explicit about the fact that much of it was unknown.

I went to a workshop led by Dr. Sanyika, one of the elders who had been a central activist with BAC back in the Black Empowerment controversy at the UUA in the late 1960s. While I am skeptical, as I said, about attempts at historical reenactment, it was very powerful to hear from him as he endorsed BLUU as the present-day successor to BAC. The workshop room was standing-room only with a crowd that was probably 50% people of color, and they gave him a

¹<https://www.uuworld.org/articles/co-presidents-report-2017-ga>

standing ovation after he spoke.

One black voice I heard was a bit different, emphasizing that each of us approaches these things differently. It was our neighbor, Rev. Kristen Harper or the UU church of Barnstable, one of the presenters of this year's Berry Street Essay, which is the climax of Ministry Days. Kristen, whose family has been UU for several generations, was one of the first ministers of color to be called to be the sole minister in a UU congregation.

Kristin began by describing the racism she had encountered in divinity school and in trying to get into the ministry. She almost quit at several points.

Speaking to her largely white audience of ministers, Kristen said,

“We have not reached the ‘promised land,’ but there is hope. I think some of you are seeing some of us for the very first time. We aren’t all invisible any more. I’m witnessing some of you listen to the pain and the rage and not turn away, you’re not saying we are ‘misunderstanding’ or that we are ‘overreacting’ or even more common, we are ‘lying’ (at least not most of you). Some of you are beginning to acknowledge our stories as part of the larger UU narrative.”

So Kristen identified the pain of being black in a largely white denomination, but she also had this to say about the phrase white supremacy:

“And yet, I feel out of place in this conversation about White Supremacy. It’s not that I don’t understand what it means in academia, but I also know what it means to many in the congregation I serve. I know what it means to the outside world. I know what it means to the White Supremacists—the ones who kill people because of their race, their ability, their religion, their gender identity, their sexual orientation.”

Finally, she admonished us all not to call each other names and to remember our Universalist roots in forgiveness. She asked a very pertinent question: “How do you center what is marginalized without marginalizing that which has been centered?” My own spin on this question would be, is the remedy for white supremacy black supremacy? I was very moved by her brief but eloquent talk.

I had to leave GA early for Star Island, and cast my vote for President while I was in an airplane approaching Logan airport Saturday afternoon. That meant I missed the Ware lecture by the lawyer and activist Bryan Stevenson, yet another distinguished and caring person of color. The candidate I voted for, Rev. Susan Frederick-Gray, was elected, and, with her track record of fearless advocacy for immigration rights in Phoenix, is well-poised to lead the denomination through the next phase.

You may have heard that two UUA employees were attacked in the French Quarter Saturday as the convention was drawing to a close. It was not a hate crime, so far as we can tell. It was a simple robbery. One of the victims was badly injured, but it looks as if he will make it; please keep both of them in your thoughts and prayers. Four suspects were taken into police custody. The whole incident was caught on video from a security camera.

Her presidency just a few hours old, Susan Frederick-Gray issued a pastoral statement on the attack in which she invoked the words of Bryan Stevenson to remind us that true compassion should extend to perpetrators as well as victims:

“Throughout the General Assembly, we reflected on the narratives and wider

systems of oppression that perpetuate both systemic and personal violence. This week, those reflections became personal and proximate.”

“[Remember what Bryan Stevenson said]: ‘simply punishing the broken—walking away from them or hiding them from sight—only ensures that they remain broken and we do, too. There is no wholeness outside of our reciprocal humanity.’”

Susan Frederick-Gray invited Unitarian Universalists to hold the attackers “with the universal love” they also hold for Curran and Byrne.

A UU community minister who works in New Orleans has followed up on social media, writing that the attackers are typical of a lost generation of New Orleans children of color who have been cut off from their families since Hurricane Katrina in 2006.

I hate that this attack happened, but I love that our leaders urge us to respond to it with compassion for all concerned, victims as well as perpetrators.

And so I return from New Orleans with the fond hope that we can make real much of what we preach, that we can get the real world closer to the Beloved Community. Where we go from here will depend a lot on what happens in the congregations. We have taken important steps forward in New Orleans. Let us take the next steps in Chatham. What do you think those ought to be?

Amen.

Reading for crossroads; from UU World

<http://www.uuworld.org/articles/stevenson-2017-ware-lecture>

“The opposite of poverty isn’t wealth—it is justice,” said Bryan Stevenson, founder and Executive Director of the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI) in Montgomery, Alabama, Saturday night at the Ware Lecture at General Assembly 2017 in New Orleans. He received a standing and thunderous ovation that lasted over a minute at the conclusion of his remarks. Stevenson, a widely acclaimed public interest lawyer who has dedicated his career to helping the poor, the incarcerated, and the condemned, gave UUs clear direction on the work that must be done to create a more just world, including fully accepting our history as a racist society.

“I’m not interested in punishing America for this history—I want to liberate America,” Stevenson said, because on the other side of confession comes freedom. Stevenson is author of *Just Mercy*, the critically acclaimed New York Times bestseller and the UU “Common Read” for 2015-16. ...

There are four essential things that we must do to create a more just and equal world, Stevenson told UUs: Get proximate to the poor, the excluded, neglected, and abused; change the narratives that underlie racism and other inequalities; stay hopeful about creating justice; and be willing to do uncomfortable things...

Stevenson referred to the UU faith’s members repeatedly as “Universalists,” which caught the attention of several social media users. Unitarian Universalists are more commonly referred to

colloquially as “Unitarians.”

“I can’t help but wonder if calling us Universalists was intentional,” wondered one UU attendee.

Changing the narratives that underline racism is critically important, Stevenson said. Oppressors justify oppression with a narrative of fear and anger, he said, which leads to a culture that tolerates injustice. For example, the narrative that many black and brown children who commit crimes aren’t children at all but rather are “super predators” created the school-to-prison pipeline. He urged UUs to resist fear and anger, examine how we treat poor children, and acknowledge that we live in a post-genocidal society given that more than 10 million native peoples died of disease or murder in the U.S.

Stevenson said that the great evil of American slavery wasn’t involuntary servitude, it was the narrative of racial difference that was used to justify slavery, which even the U.S. Supreme Court adopted. ...

Stevenson urged UUs to make a choice to do uncomfortable things, say uncomfortable things, and be in uncomfortable places, and to stay hopeful about creating racial justice. Hope makes us speak out, so fight against what makes you hopeless, he urged.

“Our hopefulness is the one thing we cannot compromise,” he said. “You are either hopeful or you are part of the problem.”