

My husband, Ashok, and I were in England during the week leading up to the vote about Brexit. We watched an interview of a businessman who was one of the leaders of the Brexit movement. The reporter said, “Originally, you did not agree with the current strategy of the movement. What do you think of it now?” He responded that they had begun their campaign by talking about the economic benefit of leaving the European Union and had found that their cause was not gaining traction. He said that when they began talking about immigration the movement really gained momentum. That evening when we looked at one of the free newspapers given out at the tube stations we saw a full page ad for Brexit. It depicted a flood of brown skinned, desperate, poor people carrying bundles of meager belongings, obviously flowing in to England.

One interesting note is that the immigrants that present economic challenges for Britain are, in reality, mostly from Eastern Europe and not brown skinned

at all. The intention, clearly, was to appeal to the fear of the “other”, someone not like me.

The Brexit vote was, as you all know, one of a frightening number of situations in which the fires of racism are stoked by carefully crafted rhetoric. We can see it in our own country in this election. In England, the clarion call went up to keep the brown skinned masses from flooding in to the country, and, more to the point, one’s own neighborhood. In the United States, the call is to prevent the “others” from upsetting the established social order. Making America great again is code for reestablishing the order of privilege. It is an extraordinarily effective call because that order guarantees privileges to certain people who have become so unconsciously attached to those privileges that losing them feels like oppression.

We say that Obama is hated because he is Black. What we mean is that, because he is Black, Obama is disrupting the social order by being the President and

he is hated for it. On a side note, the reason that Hilary is so hated is that she could be President while being a woman, which also upsets the order of privilege. The men who hate her feel like they are being oppressed by her. The women who hate her are afraid of what will happen if the social order is disrupted.

Look at the reaction to the Black Lives Matter movement. Why does it make white people so angry? Because within the system of privilege black lives and white lives cannot matter at the same time. So when one says “Black Lives Matter” they are hearing “White lives don’t matter”. Within the system of privilege, mattering is a zero sum game. There isn’t that reaction to something like We Must Cure Cancer. The response isn’t No, We Must Cure Everything. It isn’t either or in our minds. Of course, it is possible to cure cancer and heart disease at the same time. But it is not possible, within the system of privilege, for Black Lives and white lives to both matter.

Obama as president and the Black Lives Matter movement are upsetting the apple cart of privilege, the tool and the result of our society. I understand that. Lots and lots of people understand that.

However, if we unpack this further, we see that there is a deeper layer. Privilege is a social construct that is kept in place, in large part, because it is built on that fundamental fear of “other”. That fear manifests as bias or prejudice against the other group.

When we had a group on racism against African American people here at UUMAN, there was a homework assignment to take the Harvard implicit bias test on line. I took the test and it showed that I did not automatically favor white people over African American people. I was not biased. To prepare for this sermon, I went back to the site and took the same test about Arab-Muslims and other people and it showed that I have a moderate automatic preference for Other People over Arab Muslims. On a lark, I took another test that showed that I strongly favor

President Obama over President Jefferson. Not sure what to do with that information.

That I do not have bias against African American people is not surprising. Black people are not “other” for me because I spent part of my youth living in an all Black neighborhood. At the age of 13 or so, one of the kids I hung out with (actually it was probably more like following around than hanging out) was an older teenage girl of whom I was pretty much in awe. Two of my children are mixed race. I tried to live in a way that would help them be strong and that meant, among other things, sending my son to the El Haj Malik El Shabazz School and being a part of a group of mothers whose children also attended. My point here is that I am as comfortable around African American people as I am around white people because I have spent much of my life relating to African American people as people.

This does not hold true for Arabs. I am not completely comfortable around them. Between the ages of 5 and

9, I lived in Saudi Arabia but was in a compound surrounded by tall fences. The feeling was that we needed those fences (or should I call them walls?) because the Arabs were dangerous. The Arabs we encountered mostly had jobs like bus driver, commissary worker, or cleaner. I do not have any Arab friends. As an adult, I feel the foreignness of Islam. Women wearing burkas and being stoned for adultery. A belief in an afterlife that seems to continue the oppression of women. The lack of separation between church and state. And killing people in the name of Allah.

When I see a young Arab man with short hair and trimmed beard, I don't wonder if he is a terrorist but I do think about terrorism. I associate him with terrorism. I don't wonder what his job is or what he had for breakfast because I don't see him fully as a person.

My fear and prejudice influence my response to the anti-Muslim rhetoric and anti-Muslim actions that are

taking place. When Trump calls for a data base of Muslims in the US, my conscious mind is outraged. At the same time, there is another part of my mind that wonders if that might not be a good idea. Wouldn't that help to contain that threat that they pose?

Those of you who know me can imagine how disturbed I am by this. I am a Unitarian Universalist. I affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person. That is our first principle. Yet, even while I actively affirm the worth and dignity of every Arab, there is that part of me that will be afraid. My fear is stoked by the media, almost on a daily basis. I don't see myself being able to fundamentally change and it distresses me greatly. It troubles my very soul.

At the same time, as little as I know about Arabs, there is one thing about them that I know very clearly. Not one Arab, anywhere in the world, lies awake at night thinking, "Shelley Nagrani is prejudiced against me. Whatever shall I do??" My inner feelings don't enter in to their lives at all.

So, it is not for Arabs that I need to work on my prejudice, it is for myself. It is something that comes between me and the first UU principle. In my personal belief system, prejudice comes between me and the Divine. It is what we sometimes call a shadow self. Carl Jung says that the shadow is, “that hidden, repressed, for the most part inferior and guilt-laden personality whose ultimate ramifications reach back into the realm of our animal ancestors.” Yes, fear of the other does go back to our animal ancestors when it was necessary for survival.

Jung goes on to say, “To become conscious of it involves recognizing the dark aspects of the personality as present and real. This act is the essential condition for any kind of self-knowledge...”

I need to face my own racism against Arabs as part of my human journey and as part of my spiritual journey, as part of my responsible search for truth and meaning, which is our fourth principle. Whether

or not I have success will determine the quality of my life, not the quality of life for Arabs.

So, where does that leave me in the world? Just because this work is personal and internal doesn't mean that it is disconnected from the social and external world. As someone who is conscious of my own bias, I have a greater responsibility. I need to work to mitigate the impact of people like myself on the Arab community.

What does this mean?

To me, the first thing that it means is that I distrust my own opinions. When there are conversations about Arabs, I need to keep quiet and listen. Knowing that I have bias means that I need to learn. What I have to offer to the conversation is suspect.

I will tell you that this is not an easy thing for me to do because of what I see as the position of women in Muslim countries, particularly in the Middle East. I believe that women in those countries are frighteningly oppressed. Because of my position in

the battered women's movement, I have many opportunities to talk about this. What I try to do, when it comes up, is talk about something about which I am trustworthy. In response to comments about the oppression of Muslim women in Arab countries, I talk about the oppression of women here, in our own country. I have become adept at changing that subject. When people talk about violence by Islamic fundamentalists, I used to try to deflect by talking about all the atrocities committed by Christianity. But that was disingenuous because, really, I don't know that much about it. So now I try to tell the truth. I just say, "I really, really do not understand it," which is the truth for me.

I need to learn more about the political realities of the Middle East. I know that so much gets left out when talking about oppression and fighting oppression. For example, the role that the US has played in stoking the fires of terrorism is not part of my daily thinking. I do know that the US supported the Taliban at a time when we still thought of them as

anti-Soviet freedom fighters. Our government worked with Pakistan to recruit radical Muslims from around the world to fight with the Afghan Mujaheddin. In thinking about the Middle East, I must keep in mind that European, Russian, and American leaders have divided up Arab lands and redistributed them according to their own interests, primarily interests in oil, with no regard for the needs or dreams of the people living there. My perspective needs to be more rooted in the political history of the region.

The second way in which I can mitigate the impact of my prejudice on the Arab community is by being an ally, even when it does not come from the deepest part of me.

I am not talking about being an ally by giving up privilege. I know that I cannot give up my privilege. Privilege in our social order is like a sorting machine in a factory, where items are pushed over holes that get progressively larger as they go. The largest items cannot just decide to fit in to a smaller hole. We

cannot just decide that we will not have privilege. And even if we do find a way, how is that helpful for anyone else?

I need to think about what Arabs HAVE called on allies to do. I know that allies would fight against profiling. I know that allies would defend the right of Muslims to build mosques wherever they choose. Allies would demand that Israel be held accountable for acts of aggression against the Palestinian people. Allies would demand that the US be accountable for the deaths of civilians by drone strikes. Allies would ensure that Muslims living in the US are not discriminated against in employment, housing, and healthcare.

As a conscious human being, in spite of my deep seated fears and biases, I am able to act as an ally. To me, at this time in history, that means fighting against the person who is calling up my own prejudice against Arabs and that person is Donald Trump. It is because he resonates with a part of me that I am particularly

responsible for silencing him. To be clear, I am not speaking for UUMAN in this. I am speaking about my own spiritual journey. Because part of me resonates with his rhetoric, I understand how dangerous it is. Because I believe in the second principle of Unitarian Universalism, “Justice, equity and compassion in human relations,” it is up to me to silence that rhetoric.

I can act as an ally by promoting Shoulder to Shoulder a coalition of 32 religious denominations and organizations, of which the Unitarian Universalist Association was a founding member. They have called upon the RNC and the DNC to commit to protect religious minorities during this campaign. To quote from the letter sent to both committees, “We write to urge you to include, in your party platform, an explicit commitment to work against anti-Muslim bigotry and discrimination against religious minorities in the United States.

When candidates for the highest office in our nation suggest banning Muslims from the US, or registering Muslim citizens, or surveillance of mosques without warrant, we are compelled to lift our voices collectively to say that this exclusivist vision of America harms us all. As people of faith, we are pained by rhetoric that goes against the convictions of our own religious traditions, and as Americans we are alarmed by the way this discriminatory speech undermines the very ideals of religious freedom and pluralism that each and every one of our religious communities relies upon to thrive in our democracy.”

I recognize that my life experience and my position in society have created a shadow in my character. I have a bias against a group of people that are under threat. I believe that I am really not much different than most of us in this. Aren't we fortunate that we have tools to help us grow beyond where we are right now. We have the UU principles to provide motivation and to guide our development as spiritual seekers. We

have a denomination that provides opportunities for us to make a concrete difference in the world.

If you go to the UUA website and click on “Who We Are” you will find this. “We are brave, curious, and compassionate thinkers and doers. We are diverse in faith, ethnicity, history and spirituality, but aligned in our desire to make a difference for the good.”

I love that this is who we are. As I struggle with the shadow of racism in myself, I can hold on to the other truth about myself. I am a brave, curious and compassionate thinker. Let me be a doer, as well. In spite of my shadow, let me make a difference for the good.

Closing words

We know that active, tangible expressions of love, justice, and peace are what make a difference.

Embracing peace, love, and understanding that goes beyond individual belief systems, let us be creators of positive change in people and in the world.