

UUMAN BLUU Teach-In - May 14, 2017

Words to Enrich the Spirit

“The moment we choose to love, we begin to move against domination, against oppression. The moment we choose to love, we begin to move towards freedom, to act in ways that liberate ourselves and others.”

– bell hooks

Call to Worship “A Prayer for Living in Tension”

by Joseph M. Cherry

If we have any hope of transforming the world and changing ourselves,
We must be
Bold enough to step into our discomfort,
Brave enough to be clumsy there,
Loving enough to forgive ourselves and others.

May we, as a people of faith, be granted the strength to be
So bold,
So brave,
And so loving.

The Call

Heather Moll-Dunn

Today we join a large group of Unitarian Universalists who have shifted our regularly scheduled Sunday morning worship to participate in a teach-in on racism and white supremacy. We are participating with thousands of UUs around the country in this large-scale historic action.

This call to action and worship comes from a growing network of religious professionals and lay leaders led by both UUs of color and white UUs.

According to *UU World*, the article “Critics Decry White Supremacy in Hiring Practices,” recounted the recent hiring of a white, male minister to a regional leadership position within the Unitarian Universalist Association, which highlighted the fact that almost all of the top staff are white. This sparked calls for the UUA to examine whether the association is living its stated racial justice values.

The controversy ultimately led to UUA President Peter Morales resigning, stating he was not “the right person to lead our association as we work together to create the process and structures that will build the diverse staff we all want.”

The Black Lives of UU organizing collective (BLUU) also responded with a statement on UU & UUA power structures and hiring practices, including that “[BLUU] believes strongly in the

promise of Unitarian Universalism. At our convening in New Orleans a few weeks ago, we witnessed — through intense worship, joyful celebration, organizing work, and hard conversations — seemingly limitless possibility of what this faith can be. Getting there will be uncomfortable, and messy, and impolite — just as work for justice has always been.”

Black Lives of UU also initiated a call to UU Congregations around the country to disrupt our regularly scheduled Sunday morning plans to instead host a White Supremacy Teach-IN. The task is both simple and challenging: devote our program to exploring white supremacy, and help our UU community commit to resisting it.

According to BLUU, the fact that more than half of UU churches have signed up for the White Supremacy Teach In is a signal to both their own members and to the larger community. It says that our faith takes racism seriously, especially within our own walls, and will push our faith toward the beloved community we all seek.

UUMAN’s Social Justice Committee and other members who followed the controversy agreed, meeting with Rev. Dunn to begin planning for our congregation’s involvement.

The religious professionals of BLUU who have created and shared the resources that helped us create this service state that “The commitment to combat white supremacy must be strong and urgent. Battling racism in its many forms is not easy. Everyone has to start somewhere, and it takes a commitment to disrupt business as usual.”

Voices of Black Lives of Unitarian Universalism

Sheila Smith

Also known as Black Lives of UU (or BLUU for short) is an organizing collective of Black UU's working to expand the role and visibility of Black people within our Unitarian Universalism faith. Listen to their voice.

When I think of the best I've seen of Unitarian Universalism, I think of courage, of joy in 'POC' spaces despite it all, and I think of people just showing up for one another. I think of the courage to stay at the table, to sit with discomfort instead of rushing through it. Some people call the black women leaders in Black Lives of UU instigators, or harsh, or rude, or faith-killers. I call them some of the truest Unitarian Universalists I know. Unitarian Universalism is changing. We're being more honest about our selves and our stories. Yet I have more faith in us than ever. Let's "take courage" and keep on working. ~Kenny Wiley, Senior Editor of UU World, Founding member of Black Lives of UU

So I ask you now, to stop being afraid and to lean into the power of our faith. Understand that we have set the table in an *impossible* way and we must now leave that table and forge a new way. We must be bold, we must not give up, we have all that we need —and we have capable people of color who are willing to lead and we cannot do it alone. The usual order and process of things have been disrupted, and my friends this is a blessing because that process, that order that was so comfortable was fraught with deeply rooted and harmful problems. Let us go now, together, on a journey of building a new way and uprooting white supremacy within our communities, in the world around us, and in our own hearts. This can be a new beginning if we make it so. ~Lena Gardner, Executive Director of Black Lives of UU

"The spiritual part of this journey means you can't worry about being right, you've got to focus on being real." ~Adam Lawrence Dyer, seminary student at the Pacific School of Religion.

"Experience open minds and open hearts here today at UUMAN." If you are a member or a frequent visitor here, how many times have you heard this? This month's theme is embodiment. Today's service is a wonderful opportunity for embodiment. How do we open our hearts and minds to a topic some would rather not discuss? How do we open our minds and hearts when our first response may be to dismiss or become defensive? How do we open our minds and our hearts when we're uncomfortable? We lean into our faith and our principles. The best way to affirm the principles of our faith is to put them into practice --- right here, right now. This teach-in is not about blame or shame. It is about truth and reconciliation. This teach-in is about listening and learning. This teach-in is a call to action. This teach-in is about creating a brave space and building a new way. This teach-in is about moving our faith toward the beloved community we all seek. Come, experience open minds and open hearts." ~Sheila K. Smith

Covenantal Message

Kate Hudson

In our UUMAN mission, “***we aspire to come together to create an environment that celebrates our differences, nurtures transformative growth, and promotes an open-minded search for truth and justice both within our walls and beyond.***” Celebrating these differences, nurturing *transformation* in ourselves and our world, seeking *justice* in our communities isn’t easy work. With that understanding, some of what you will hear today may be hard to hear. Some of it might challenge you in ways that are new. If today makes you uncomfortable, we invite you to sit with the feeling, to ponder what it might teach. In the spirit of our UUMAN Covenant, we ask that you open your heart, and “*seek to understand by listening deeply, actively*” to the ideas, the feelings and the opinions expressed here. Even when... *especially* when, our words may challenge each other, we are called to listen with humility, to listen *with love* to another’s truth. Pema Chodron, the Buddhist nun, reminds us that “when we touch the center of sorrow, when we sit with discomfort without trying to fix it, when we *stay present* to the pain of disapproval or betrayal, and let it *soften* us, these are the times when we connect with bodhichitta,” our *awakened heart*. In bodhichitta, we let go of our attachments to beliefs and illusions, and embrace *what is* with compassion and love. Love is the doctrine of this church, and service is its law. “Whatever we do here, we do in covenant with each other.”

Recognition

Steve Smith

Why in the world are we here, on Mother's Day, talking about white supremacy? I mean, we're UUs, for crying out loud! We're a progressive, free thinking lot with open hearts and open minds, right? We stand at the road side with our Black Lives Matter banner singing We Shall Overcome! (let's pause just a moment to ponder the apparent absurdity of a bunch of mostly upper middle class white folks standing on the side of the road singing We Shall Overcome...)

We're here today, talking about white supremacy, because we were asked to by an organization called Black Lives of UU. Out of the troubling controversy surrounding the hiring practices at the UUA that resulted in the resignation of UUA President Peter Morales last month, Black Lives of UU called on every UU congregation to interrupt their regularly scheduled programming and hold a "teach in" on white supremacy. UUMAN was one of almost 700 UU congregations who answered that call, because even we well intentioned, progressive, UUs will fall victim to white supremacy if we do not understand it, recognize it, and actively work against it.

Show of hands, who here is a racist? Anyone? Well, of course we're not, because racism is not a character trait that defines a certain type of person. A racist is not something one is or is not. We need to start thinking of the word racist as an adjective instead of a noun. We all, on occasion, do and say racist things, but that does not make us *a* racist. This is where a lot of discussions with white people about race go off the rails, because, for some reason, we have a hard time not personalizing racism: "Don't you think that joke you told is a little racist?" "I'm not a racist!!!"

Racism, or white supremacy (and I'll use the terms interchangeably), is an historically based, institutionally perpetuated system of exploitation and oppression of peoples of color by white peoples for the purpose of maintaining and defending a system of wealth, power, and privilege. That's a long definition, so let me say it again: an historically based, institutionally perpetuated system of exploitation and oppression for the purpose of maintaining and defending a system of wealth, power, and privilege. White supremacy is a system of power. It is not a natural occurrence, and it didn't happen by accident. It is designed. It is intentional.

I found an essay online titled "What Is White Supremacy" written by Elizabeth Martinez, in which the author lays out a wonderfully concise history of how white supremacy was established and ingrained in America, and I will share that with you now.

"Every nation has a creation myth, or origin myth, which is the story people are taught of how the nation came into being. Ours says the United States began with Columbus's so-called "discovery" of America, continued with settlement by brave Pilgrims, won its independence from England with the American Revolution, and then expanded westward until it became the enormous, rich country you see today.

That is the origin myth. It omits three key facts about the birth and growth of the United States as a nation. Those facts demonstrate that White Supremacy is fundamental to the existence of this country.

1) The United States is a nation state created by military conquest in several stages. The first stage was the European seizure of the lands inhabited by indigenous peoples. Before the European invasion, there were between nine and eighteen million indigenous people in North America. By the end of the Indian Wars, there were about 250,000 in what is now called the United States, and about 123,000 in what is now Canada. That process must be called genocide, and it created the land base of this country. The elimination of indigenous peoples and seizure of their land was the first condition for white supremacy's existence.

2) The United States could not have developed economically as a nation without enslaved African labor. When agriculture and industry began to grow in the colonial period, a tremendous labor shortage existed. Not enough workers came from Europe and the European invaders could not put indigenous peoples to work in sufficient numbers. It was enslaved Africans who provided the labor force that made the growth of the United States possible.

There had been slave revolts from the beginning but elite whites feared that discontented whites -- servants, tenant farmers, the urban poor, the property-less, soldiers and sailors -- would join Black slaves to overthrow the existing order. As early as 1663, indentured white servants and Black slaves in Virginia had formed a conspiracy to rebel and gain their freedom. In 1676 came Bacon's Rebellion by white frontiersmen and servants alongside Black slaves. The rebellion shook up Virginia's planter elite. The main fear of elite whites everywhere was a class fear, so their solution was to divide and control. Certain privileges were given to white indentured servants. They were allowed to join militias, carry guns, acquire land, and have other legal rights not allowed to slaves. With these privileges they were legally declared white on the basis of skin color and continental origin. That made them "superior" to Blacks (and Indians). Thus whiteness was born as a racist concept to prevent lower-class white people from joining people of color, especially Black people, against their class enemies. The concept of whiteness became a source of unity and strength for the vastly outnumbered Euroamericans. Today, unity across color lines remains the biggest threat in the eyes of a white ruling class.

The third major piece in the true story of the formation of the United States as a nation was the take-over of half of Mexico by war -- today's Southwest. This enabled the U.S. to expand to the Pacific, and thus open up huge trade with Asia. It also opened to the U.S. vast mineral wealth in Arizona, agricultural wealth in California, and vast new sources of cheap labor to build railroads and develop the economy.

The United States had already taken over the part of Mexico we call Texas in 1836, then made

it a state in 1845. The following year, it invaded Mexico and seized its territory under the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. A few years later, in 1853, the U.S. acquired a final chunk of Arizona from Mexico by threatening to renew the war. This completed the territorial boundaries of what is now the United States.

The roots of U.S. racism or White Supremacy lie in establishing economic exploitation by the theft of resources and human labor, then justifying that exploitation by institutionalizing the inferiority of its victims.”

So, what do we, white UUs, do about white supremacy? The first thing we must do is open our hearts and minds and unlearn what we've been taught about how and why our society allocates wealth, power and privilege the way that it does, because what we've been taught is a lie. The second thing we must do is learn to recognize white supremacy in its myriad of obvious and subtle forms. We can't fight what we can't see. Most of us proudly pat ourselves on our non-racist backs for denouncing the Klan and shunning the use of the N word, but how many of us understand that the popular, well intentioned statement “I don't see color” says to the person of color, “I choose to overlook the difficulties you face in our society because of the color of your skin and pretend that we're treated exactly the same.” Though well intentioned, “I don't see color” is a racist statement.

I saw a political cartoon recently that perfectly exemplified this point. The first panel was a little white boy standing at his front door calling out, “I'm going out, mom!” and his mother responding, “Put on your jacket!” the second panel of the cartoon was a little black boy standing at his front door calling out, “I'm going out, mom!” and his mother responding, “Put on your jacket, but not a hoodie, don't run, keep your hands in sight at all times, don't seem scary, don't make any sudden moves, keep your mouth shut around police, don't give them a reason to hurt you, ...”

As progressives, we may be more tuned in to the anti-racism issues of police brutality, anti-immigration policies, school to prison pipeline and other topical issues, but how often do we fall into the trap of paternalism, white savior complex, the virtuous victim narrative, or instinctively fearing people of color? I am guilty of these things daily. But I am also making a conscious effort to educate myself and practice not doing these things so that each day I do and say fewer racist things than I did the day before.

As the beneficiaries of the unjust power that the system of white supremacy bestows upon us, we have a choice to make every single day. We can act in ways that perpetuate that system, or we can act in ways that dismantle it. I ask everyone here today to commit to beginning the work of dismantling it.

May it be so.

Homily

Dave Dunn

The ten ox-herding pictures are a pictorial representation of the path of Zen. The pictures generally show a young man looking for, finding, taming and ultimately transcending an ox with the final picture usually entitled “In the World.” This final picture usually shows a fat, happy monk being and acting in the world with a heart of compassion.

The ox is a symbolic representation of the mind.

What the ten ox-herding pictures do not show is its prequel. Why is the young man looking for an ox in the first place? Well, the young man is unhappy. Why am I not happy? Why am I so frustrated? So he goes to see a Zen master who tells him that his mind has clouded his perception. His mind is unknowingly telling a story to himself about himself; essentially telling the young man an unhealthy narrative as to what he needs to be happy. The young man forms desires and attachments which may be fulfilling over the short term but ultimately unfulfilling over the long term. The Zen master then tells the young man that to be truly happy and free “In the World” one must look for, find, tame and ultimately transcend his deluded mind.

I’m not going to talk about all 10 pictures – just a few.

The first picture is titled “Seeking the Ox.” The young man has heard about this ox yet doesn’t see it anywhere. “Hmmm...I don’t see any ox.”

The second picture is titled “Discovering Footprints.” “Hey, there is an ox! I don’t see it but I see the tracks!”

Then the young man notices a few somewhat troubling things. First, there aren’t just a few tracks. There are lots and lots of tracks. In fact, they’re everywhere. And even more troubling, the tracks are in his own front yard – all over! And even more troubling, after putting his fingers in the tracks he discovers that they aren’t fresh. They’ve been there for a very, very long time. They are baked into the soil. They’ve hardened, almost fossilized to become part of the very ground upon which he walks.

Why haven’t I noticed this before?

For the purposes of this teach-in, the tracks - instead of representing the effect, the imprints of our mind on all that we think and do - could be said to represent privilege, white privilege, supremacy of a dominant narrative.

In subsequent pictures, the young man eventually finds and tames the ox but I want to skip to the 7th picture called "The Ox Forgotten." The picture usually shows the young man sitting quietly looking at the moon. He has gone past his deluded mind and finally sees things as they are. He has gotten past that old story his mind unknowingly told himself about himself.

In an effort to reduce complexity and add stability, the mind likes to label, categorize and conceptualize things (i.e. good, bad, Republican, Democrat, religious, secular, real news, fake news, etc) Yet this labeling adds a thin, sometimes not so thin, layer of conceptualization that separates us from reality. This is the natural working of the mind.

We communicate the individual labels we've come up with using language yet we really have no true agreements between one another as to what any particular label actually signifies.

Educator Dorsey Armstrong says that Postmodern philosophers, like Zen practitioners, believe that "... language and human communication are inherently complicated; meaning is endlessly delayed and deferred and the only way that two speakers can ensure they understand each other is to be inside each other's minds (Dorsey Armstrong, The Great Courses: Great Minds of the Medieval World, p7)"

The point here is that language, although it's what we have to work with, always needs to be transcended (The Ox Forgotten); because language, much of the time, is not helpful. It results in confusion because we inherently don't agree on meaning, nor does language accurately reflect reality. Often, we can't agree on the meaning of words and phrases like "racist," and "white supremacy" and "white privilege." For many of us, the meaning of such words and phrases have changed over time.

So, when we talk about difficult things, when we work to see, understand, tame things for the first time, do yourself a favor. Don't get caught up in labels and language. Don't get caught up in someone else's binary language definitions of things. Words obscure the nature of reality.

Back to the young man who discovers the Ox's tracks.... We simply can't be aware of everything all the time. Our deluded minds won't allow it. You can't blame the young man for not seeing the tracks. It wasn't in his awareness. You can't blame the fish for the water in which it swims. And although the water in which I swim might seem fine to me, especially because it's the only water I've ever known, it might be toxic to others. Although the water in which I swim might seem fine to me, only unnoticeably toxic even for me, what if there were better water elsewhere...healthy water in which all could swim. Might that healthy water be worth finding? I think so.

It takes courage for me to investigate the possibility of finding better waters – to give up the waters I know because I believe there are better waters elsewhere.

This fall, I'm going to begin to look for better waters. This fall, we will be offering an adult enrichment course called "Living the Pledge" that Leigh Ann will speak about. It is my hope that this curriculum will lovingly help us see the supremacy of the dominant narrative in which we live. The waters in which we swim. I hope you will have the courage to join me in this. Like the hero's journey I mentioned last week, our "Living the Pledge" journey may involve some sacrifice. There will be bumps in the road... and it may involve some scarring. But, I promise you, you will always have helpers with you who will have nothing but your best interests at heart. That I promise you.

On this "Living the Pledge" journey, here's what else I will promise you. That although it will be done out of love, it won't be perfect. Because we have to use language, sometimes we will be misinterpreted and misunderstood. Yes, I'm afraid that will happen at times. Yet we ask that you, despite the language, as we take this "Living the Pledge" journey together, assume best intentions. I believe there is better water to find.

The ultimate goal of all this however is not to see the tracks, the water, the privilege – that's only picture #2! The ultimate goal is to get beyond all that and be like that fat, happy monk in the world – the fat, happy monk who not only sees the world as it is but who also lives and acts in the world with a heart of compassion. A fat, happy monk who does things "in the world." That's what we need to aim for because that is part of the mission of this congregation – it enables us to carry out our "open-minded search for truth and justice both within our walls and beyond."

Again, I hope you will have the courage to take this hero's journey with me.

Action/Vision Statement

Leigh Ann Luscan

"Spirit of Life and Love, Dear God of All Nations,

We have so much work to do. We have only begun to imagine justice and mercy. Help us hold fast to our vision of what can be. May we see the hope in our history and find the courage and the voice to work for that constant rebirth of freedom and justice. That is our dream. Amen."

Reverend Bill Sinkford, former President and current co-President of the UUA

Oh, my friends, here we are. Taking steps. Together. Are you nervous? I'm kind of nervous. And honored. I am honored and humbled that we, as a faith, have been given so many chances to get this right and we are still here, with yet another try. I am grateful that our UU siblings of color are still willing to do this work with us, together.

So what is "this work?" What is "our vision of what can be" that we might need help holding fast to?

How many of us already feel like we're doing the work of dismantling white supremacy, on some level? How many of us feel like we don't have a clear understanding of what that even means? How many of us get a little irritated or mad when this phrase "the work" comes up, *because* we don't really understand what is expected of us? I'm a little of all three, on any given day.

So please let me share with you a couple of visions of what it could look like to move more deeply into doing the work of dismantling white supremacy, on a very personal and community-based level. Some of you know that my previous congregation was First UU Church of Richmond, Virginia. In December of 2014, as we approached the 50th anniversary of Selma, we had a powerful worship service where we were asked to make a personal pledge to dismantling the racism that exists, when it occurs in ourselves, our communities, or friends and family. It was called the Richmond Pledge to End Racism, based on the famous Birmingham Pledge, and hundreds of members walked forward and literally signed the pledge. And then we all looked at each other, like "Ok, What Now?"

And then there was a workshop. Created by two women from the congregation, one Black and one white, where we worked together to figure out how we could live the actions of this pledge we'd signed. It's called Living the Pledge and it is beautiful and powerful and imperfect and it's working. It spans about 12 hours total. There is work into our own internal biases. There is a break-down of what microaggressions are and how they play out alllll the time right here in our churches, and we role-played what we can say and do when we see them happening. There is deep, spiritual work in small groups with facilitators, and occasional affinity-group caucusing to make space for healing. The resources to bring this workshop here are available to us. Another vision is the enormously successful work of Safety Pin Box, which was created in the wake of the election. While so many of us were reeling, two Black women, one of whom is UU's very own Leslie Mac, got straight to work and created a monthly subscription box for people who want to be more effective allies for racial justice. After compensating themselves, the rest of the proceeds go to support Black Women Being and they've given over Fifty Thousand Dollars. So far this year. Some of the tasks for this White Supremacy Teach In come from Safety Pin Box and they are preparing to release material designed for people to do in groups. So we have these resources available to us, which have the added benefit of putting money directly into the hands of Black women activists and therefore into Black communities. So there is a vision of us doing the work. And putting our money where our mouths are.

Neither of these action steps are perfect. I've done both and it is hard. And every time I feel like I've left behind the naivete that came with being raised by very good-intentioned parents to try to be colorblind while also having zero meaningful relationships with anyone of a different race until adulthood, more painful layers are peeled back and I feel all the feelings. Shame, guilt, anger, remorse. And then I have support, because I'm not doing this work of dismantling white supremacy all on my own. And I work through it and am able to do better, because I am more aware.

And that is the vision I hold fast to, that we, as members of this faith, can wade into this work together, with the faith that it will help us do better, have more meaningful relationships, stop unintentionally hurting people. And that we will do this work while trying to manage our expectations of perfection or painlessness. It's messy, vital work. And I am proud and nervous and honored to wade in with all of you. That IS our dream.

Closing Meditation **Kara Sweeney**

Compassion for suffering of injustice

Be aware of your breath in, aware of breath out, be aware of body, release tensions
Be aware of your heart, open your heart, notice the tenderness of your heart
Be aware of your emotions, holding in compassion, smiling, easing/releasing with breath
Notice your own suffering of injustice – be aware, notice how it manifests in body, emotions,
Hold this suffering in compassion, ease suffering with breath –
Be aware of this suffering as a pattern in the world– visualize how it affects many people, take in
this pattern of suffering, hold in compassion, send ease, wish for relief
Notice the suffering of marginalized people...what are you aware of? Feel in your body, your
emotions. Hold in compassion, send ease and relief in your mind...
Return to awareness of breath, ease, release of tension
Notice suffering of privileged people...see the...guilt, disconnection, shame, anger ... feel this
energy, hold in compassion, release, ease, send relief
Notice what came up for you during these moments. Breathe, ease and release.
Coming from the awareness of this morning, what are your deepest intentions for addressing
the suffering of injustice? What step might you take? How does this feel in your body, emotions?
Closing: what are you carrying forth from this morning?

(Close meditation, come back to the room when ready.)