SOUL WORK

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It's hard to talk about racism in a Unitarian Universalist congregation. After all, we like to think we understand things pretty well when it comes to equality. We point to the first principle our congregations covenant to affirm and promote—that of the inherent worth and dignity of every person—and proudly claim that our theology challenges us to treat all people with respect.

It's hard to talk about racism in a community where caring people understand that hatred and intolerance are wrong. We get that. We've crafted a welcome read at beginning of some our services that lists—in some detail—the identities we will not discriminate on the basis of, things that we understand often separate people outside of this room.

In our personal lives, we recognize when deeply-buried notions and prejudices are surfacing in our reactions and attiudes, and we take the time to correct ourselves and learn. We cringe when the news, again and again, recounts incidents of overt racism in our community, our region, and our nation. We know these things are wrong, we would never engage in such acts, because, after all, we're not racists, at least not on a personal level.

In this faith that spends so much time honoring the power of the individual, too often we don't go past the personal. We don't go beyond that to see the insidious ways in which racism has been institutionalized in our society, and the ways in which we've been educated (no matter what our racial background) to help those institutions perpetuate racism.

It's hard to talk about racism in a community where people would never think of themselves as racist, but who live in—and passively support—a racist society.

It's also hard to talk about racism in a faith community that rightly points to some proud moments in our history when it comes to racial justice.

Those who know Unitarian Universalist history will often respond to a discussion of racism by telling the story of 19th century Unitarian minister Theodore Parker, whose abolitionist beliefs and actions brought him numerous death threats, so many that he kept a loaded pistol in his writing desk out of fear that someone would attack him while he was composing a sermon railing against the injustices of slavery.

Parker, who once famously stated that the long arc of the moral universe surely "bends toward justice," was rightly an inspiration for Unitarian Universalist involvement in the civil rights movement of the middle 20th century.

The historians among us, when engaged in a discussion of racism, will often point out this history, which includes the historic response of ministers in our movement to a call by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr to march in Selma, Alabama as a witness for justice. In March of 1965, when Dr. King issued that call, almost every Unitarian Universalist minister around our country headed straight to Alabama. Our Association's Board, meeting in Boston at the time, recessed their meeting and reconvened it in Selma.

Two of the Unitarian Universalists who responded to that call were killed by angry white mobs in separate incidents, and we do well to remember the Rev. James Reeb and Viola Liuzzo as heroes of our faith.

I've heard it said that more Unitarian Universalists answered King's request than people from any other faith. Though I don't know if that's true, the magnitude of the Unitarian Universalist response to the call to Selma is something we can be proud of forty-two years later.

The good points of our history make it hard to talk about racism—even though this history itself is incomplete.

It's hard to talk about racism, but we need to.

Unitarian Universalist history also includes some pretty trying times in race relations and the struggle for racial justice.

Theodore Parker did not represent all of Unitarianism in his staunch abolitionist stance. In fact, his views were rather controversial in a faith largely made up of the wealthy urban elites whose livelihoods depended upon cheap raw materials grown and produced by slave labor in the South.

For every Theodore Parker in 19th century Unitarianism there was a John C. Calhoun. Calhoun, the US Vice President from 1825 to 1832, and later a US Senator from South Carolina, was a leading proponent of slavery in his time. He became famous for his pro-slavery speeches, including one he gave to the Senate in 1837, in which he declared that slavery was a "positive good" in our society, and that it was necessary that our society be run by an elite class who enslaved others.

John C. Calhoun represented pretty much the polar opposite viewpoint from Theodore Parker, and I've never seen him on a list of famous Unitarians in history. You can imagine my surprise, then, when on a trip to Charleston some years ago, I found a large monument to Vice President Calhoun in the graveyard of the Unitarian Church there.

I later learned that not only was Calhoun a Unitarian, but he was one of the founders (along with John Quincy Adams) of All Souls Church in Washington, DC, one of the largest congregations in our Association (and, ironically, one of the most racially-diverse congregations in our Association).

Though we leave him off of our lists because we cannot reconcile his views of slavery and racial inequality with our modern-day sensibilities, John C. Calhoun was a Unitarian.

Even in the 1960s, our legacy is not as pure as we'd like to pretend it is.

Unitarian Universalist involvement in the civil rights movement devolved over the course of the late 1960s into what has been come to be called the "Black Empowerment Controversy," a time when our denomination was split into factions that couldn't agree on the best way to address racism in our congregations.

Having marched alongside Dr. King, having sacrificed brave souls in our nation's struggles for racial equality, and having worked on personal attitudes again and again, Unitarian Universalists stumbled when it came to dismantling the institutional racism in our own congregations.

The Black Empowerment controversy led to many African-Americans leaving our movement, and it has left deep scars in the souls of many long-time Unitarian Universalists.

This controversy, though, helps connect my two themes today—the need for us to tell the actual stories of history in order to move forward to a more just future, and the need for Unitarian Universalists to go beyond the personal when it comes to race and racism.

It is an interesting quirk of history that Theodore Parker's famous quote is more likely to be remembered as something said by Dr. King in a 1961 speech, in which he paraphrased Parker in claiming that "the arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice."

The Reverend Rosemary Bray McNatt, minister of the Fourth Universalist Society in Manhattan, tells an interesting story about our history and theology. She has written of a time she was being considered to be the co-writer of Coretta Scott King's autobiography. She met with Mrs. King, who admitted that she and Dr. King had gone to Unitarian churches when they lived in Boston, and "gave a lot of thought to becoming Unitarian at the time." (McNatt in *Soul Work*)

Rev. McNatt remembers Mrs. King saying that she and Dr. King realized that they could never "build a mass movement of black people" if they were Unitarians. (Ibid.) As Rev. McNatt writes:

"It was a statement that pierced my heart and troubled my mind, both then and now. I considered what this religious movement would be like if Dr. King had chosen differently, had decided to cast his lot with our faith instead of returning to his roots as an African-American Christian. And what troubled me the most was my realization that our liberal religious movement would have utterly neutralized the greatest American theologian of the twentieth century. Certainly, his race would have been the primary barrier. In a religious movement engaged until the 1970s in the active discouragement of people of color wishing to join its ministerial ranks, Dr. King might have found his personal struggles to serve Unitarian Universalism as least as daunting as the Montgomery Bus Boycott." (Ibid.)

Rev. McNatt goes on to discuss the theological problems our movement has in dealing adequately with race and racism. She quotes Dr. King himself, who wrote that "Liberalism [has] failed to see that reason by itself is little more than an instrument used to justify man's defensive ways of thinking. Reason," he said, "devoid of the purifying power of faith, can never free itself from distortions and rationalizations." (Ibid.)

Unitarian Universalists, as inheritors of liberal theology, do a wonderful job of focusing on the use of reason without understanding its limitations. Dr. King saw one of the main ones: that all human knowledge comes in context. There is no such thing as "pure reason" unfiltered through human experience, untouched by an imperfect way of looking at things. Thus, if we are taught ways of thinking that perpetuate and justify racism, we will use our reason in those ways as well.

The Rev. José Ballester, in a response to Rosemary Bray McNatt's essay, saw a second weakness of liberal theology in the work of Latino civil rights leader César Chávez: if we see our religious movement merely as one which espouses freedom, reason and tolerance in religion, we miss entirely the power inherent in community and to relationship.

"Freedom, tolerance, and reason," he writes, "are accomplishments achievable by an individual. What Chávez extolled were the qualities of life that could only be accomplished by being in relationship with a community…. Individual freedom [counts] for nothing if the community [is] not free." (Ballester, in *Soul Work*)

I see yet a third weakness: the historical insistence in liberal theology on the inherent goodness of people. It is from this history that we get quotes like "each of us has a spark of the divine within." It is from this history that our first principle comes—the inherent worth and dignity of every person. And yet, how can inherent goodness be reconciled with the very real evils in society? How can inherently good people be racist? How can inherently good people let symbols of racial violence—nooses and flags and burning crosses—even exist in today's world?

The work of anti-racism asks us to understand that however good we might be, we might have long ago learned a way of being in the world that, despite our best efforts to cultivate a personal belief in equality, helps maintain the racism in our world.

For those of us who are people of color, Latina, Latino or Hispanic, or from some non-European ethnic group, you've been taught a way of looking at the world in which you are inferior, in which you deserve the treatment you get by the institutions of our society (or at the very least, that you are powerless to stop it, so you might as well get used to it).

You have learned to function in a society where European-American cultural norms such as individualism are society's norms. You might have even learned to put up with a religious experience that doesn't affirm all of your spiritual needs, that doesn't allow you to bring all of your racial or ethnic identity or all of your religious heritage to bear.

And for those of us who are white, we have learned that our passivity in the face of systemic racism will be rewarded. We have learned not to rock the boat, to, as the Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker puts it in the reading we heard earlier, disengage "with the social realities of our time." (Parker, in *Soul Work*)

We have formed our opinions and grounded our knowledge in a world whose systems are set up for us to see ourselves as superior, entitled, central and powerful. Even if we grew up in an economically-disadvantaged community, we were taught that we could escape that class reality.

Dr. Parker acknowledges in her essay that:

"the struggle for racial justice is a struggle to overcome the numbness, alienation, splitting and absence of consciousness that characterize my life as a white [person] and that enable me to unwittingly, even against my will, continue to replicate life-destroying activities in my society." (Ibid.)

That's hard to hear, and it's certainly hard to talk about.

Dr. Peggy McIntosh is famous for her essay entitled "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack" in which she looks at the many ways in which white people are given "invisible" benefits in our society—benefits we do not ask for, benefits we take for granted. She writes:

"I think whites are carefully taught not to recognize white privilege, as males are taught not to recognize male privilege. So I have begun in an untutored way to ask what it is like to have white privilege. I have come to see white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was 'meant' to remain oblivious. White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools, and blank checks." (McIntosh)

She then lists fifty things, and we all understand the list could be much longer. Here are five; I chose them from her list pretty much randomly:

"I can avoid spending time with people whom I was trained to mistrust and who have learned to mistrust my kind or me."

"If I should need to move, I can be pretty sure of renting or purchasing housing in an area which I can afford and in which I would want to live."

"When I am told about our national heritage or about "civilization," I am shown that people of my color made it what it is."

"I can swear, or dress in second hand clothes, or not answer letters, without having people attribute these choices to the bad morals, the poverty or the illiteracy of my race."

"I can take a job with an affirmative action employer without having my co-workers on the job suspect that I got it because of my race." (Ibid.)

You get the picture.

In discussing these privileges, McIntosh writes,

"I see a pattern running through the matrix of white privilege, a pattern of assumptions that were passed on to me as a white person. There was one main piece of cultural turf; it was my own turn, and I was among those who could control the turf. My skin color was an asset for any move I was educated to want to make. I could think of myself as belonging in major ways and of making social systems work for me. I could freely disparage, fear, neglect, or be oblivious to anything outside of the dominant cultural forms. Being of the main culture, I could also criticize it fairly freely." (Ibid.)

She continues:

"In proportion, as my racial group was being made confident, comfortable, and oblivious, other groups were likely being made unconfident, uncomfortable, and alienated. Whiteness protected me from many kinds of hostility, distress, and violence, which I was being subtly trained to visit, in turn, upon people of color." (Ibid.)

In the end, she concludes that awareness of these "invisible" systems is the first step in dismantling them. She writes:

"In my class and place, I did not see myself as a racist because I was taught to recognize racism only in individual acts of meanness by members of my group, never in invisible systems conferring unsought racial dominance on my group from birth.

"Disapproving of the system won't be enough to change them. I was taught to think that racism could end if white individuals changed their attitude. But a "white" skin in the United States opens many doors for whites whether or not we approve of the way dominance has been conferred on us. Individual acts can palliate but cannot end these problems.

"To redesign social systems we need first to acknowledge their colossal unseen dimensions. The silences and denials surrounding privilege are the key political tool here. They keep the thinking about equality or equity incomplete, protecting unearned advantage and conferred dominance by making these subjects taboo. Most talk by whites about equal opportunity seems to me now to be about equal opportunity to try to get into a position of dominance while denying that systems of dominance exist.

It seems to me that obliviousness about white advantage… is kept strongly inculturated in the United States so as to maintain the myth of meritocracy, the myth that democratic choice is equally available to all. Keeping most people unaware that freedom of confident action is there for just a small number of people props up those in power and serves to keep power in the hands of the same groups that have most of it already." (Ibid.)

And so, this is our challenge: to see what we don't want to see, what we've been taught not to see. We must understand that whatever our personal beliefs, we operate in systems that are larger than we are. We must understand that we have the power to change those systems—but to do so, it will involve overcoming what we've been taught about how we relate to others in the world.

We can no longer be satisfied that our faith has done some good things in history. We can no longer be satisfied that we have trained ourselves to believe wholeheartedly in equality. We can no longer be satisfied with freedom, tolerance and reason without understanding that all of those things come filtered through our experiences and our culture.

We must work together to peer into our invisible knapsacks, to discern what in building community together is inclusive, and what, despite our best intentions, perpetuates a Euro-American norm.

It will be hard to talk about. It will be very hard to talk about. It will certainly be hard to do. Still, I trust that you will go there with me.

May it be so.

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