

Draw the Circle Wide
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UUMSB
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A lot happened while I was in Portland, Oregon for a week. Same-sex marriage became legal in the United States. (I still love saying that!) There was the tragic shooting at the AME church in Charleston, South Carolina, vigils and memorials, and eight African American churches burned in 10 days across the South. Some of those fires were the result of weather and chance, but at least three are currently believed to be arson.

For those of you who do not follow the national work of our Unitarian Universalist Association so closely, here is a nutshell of what happens at our annual meeting, known as General Assembly or GA. We gather in plenary sessions to debate changes to the bylaws and do the business of the Association. We worship, participate in social witness, and attend workshops and training for professional and lay leaders to share best practices and learn new ways of approaching our work in community and deepening our spiritual lives. Each year a social justice luminary offers a lecture, this year it was Cornell West. We celebrate the lives of clergy who have died in the past year and those who are entering the ministry at the Service of the Living Tradition. It is five packed days. I will be offering a session after worship today to talk about what happened at General Assembly this year if you would like to hear more.

In the plenary session, thousands of delegates from congregations around the country debate and vote on something called Actions of Immediate Witness. These are social justice statements that let our Unitarian Universalist Association leaders know what is on the minds and hearts of the people. These statements are public support for particular justice issues, and offer calls to action in our congregations. We can choose three each year. One of the statements this year was on supporting the Black Lives Matter movement. The mission of Black Lives Matter, and the Unitarian Universalist social witness group Standing on the Side of Love, supporting Black Lives Matter, is to name the ways that black Americans have been dehumanized and cast aside in our country, and to affirm their inherent worth and dignity. In the face of racism, oppression and the prison industrial complex, our black friends and family need support, to know that they are not alone in their suffering and that Unitarian Universalists of all backgrounds will be present to speak truth to power, to help them know they are seen, and loved. The language of the Action of Immediate Witness is available on the UUA website, I encourage you to read it, there is a call for education and advocacy at the congregational level.

Our Unitarian Universalist Association president, Rev. Peter Morales issued this statement following the news of the burned African American churches:

“Where we choose to worship is sacred space. To violate that space is unconscionable. In less than two weeks, we have witnessed that violation again and again. First, with the horrific massacre during Bible study at the historic Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church in Charleston, SC, and now, with suspected arson at a number of African American churches in southern states.

As President Obama stated in his powerful eulogy for the Rev. Clementa Pinckney, a

pastor of the Emanuel AME Church and a state representative, ‘The church is and always has been the center of African American life: a place to call our own in a too often hostile world, a sanctuary from so many hardships.’

These acts of hatred, oppression, intimidation, and violence, are meant to shake that center of African American life. And we must harness the healing power of love to counter these acts in support and solidarity with these communities.

At the Unitarian Universalist Association’s General Assembly in Portland, OR, delegates overwhelmingly passed an Action of Immediate Witness entitled ‘Support the Black Lives Matter Movement.’ It calls our Unitarian Universalist community to ‘take initiative in collaboration with local and national organizations fighting for racial justice against the harsh racist practices many black people are exposed to.’

We must not just proclaim black lives matter. We must also engage and act with love and compassion. It is the only way to stop the hatred from spreading. We can make a difference, and we must. It is a matter of life and death. Black lives matter.”

Anti-racism work, and advocacy for Black lives is right at the intersection of some incredibly deep-seated and painful dysfunction in our social and political system. It touches on the shameful history of slavery and Jim Crow, violence against people for their race, civil rights, economic justice, class, privilege, and gender. It touches the very heart of who we are as people. As products of a racist system, how will white folks face our role in perpetuating it? This is big and painful stuff. As a community, we are called to engage with love and compassion. James Baldwin wrote, “Generations do not cease to be born, and we are responsible to them because we are the only witnesses they have. The sea rises, the light fails, lovers cling to each other, and children cling to us. The moment we cease to hold each other, the sea engulfs us and the light goes out.” We need each other.

Work for justice is holy work. It can be spirit filled, and bring us to new depths of understanding our own inner lives and story. It can connect us to one another. It can also bring us to the edge of despair, of feeling like Sisyphus pushing a rock up the hill, over and over again. It can be isolating. Doing justice work in spiritual community helps us on our journey. Doing spiritual work in a community that works for justice helps to ground us in the foundations of our faith and history. Robbie Walsh wrote, “Trust more the tensile strands of love that bend and stretch to hold you in the web of life that’s often torn but always healing. There’s your strength. The shifting plates, the restive earth, your precious life, they all proceed from love, the ground on which we walk together.” I was so touched by the video on the Berkshire Eagle web page, seeing the singing faces of Valerie, Zoe, and Karen at the vigil and worship service in Pittsfield for the victims of the Charleston shooting. I am sure many more of you were there. Thank you so much for showing up for our neighbors. We can continue to be good partners for the NAACP – Berkshire Branch and follow their lead, and our other partner organizations like Multicultural BRIDGE, advocating for people of color in the Berkshires. We can open our hearts and see what spiritual deepening and challenge may break forth.

We have done holy work as a denomination, and as individuals, for LGBTQ rights in this

country. Consider the ways we have deepened our commitment to love and compassion through this work. We are a small movement, but I believe that our commitment to showing up, being a part of the legal fights, marrying people even when it was not legally recognized, teaching ourselves and our kids about gender and sexuality, and loving one another better, made a real difference. In our lifetimes, our culture has made a seismic shift in its understanding of and relationship to LGBTQ people. This coming weekend, our Unitarian Universalist Association is working to match same-gender couples who want to be married, with ministers who will perform the ceremony for free, to hold 48 weddings, in 48 states, in 48 hours. We are on the list if any LGBTQ folks you know out here in the Berkshires want to be married right here next Saturday or Sunday. Of course there is still work to do. People can still be fired for being gay in many states. Violence against LGBTQ folks is ongoing, especially for our transgender friends, and so we will continue to fight injustice.

What might happen if Unitarian Universalists answer the call and show up for Black Lives Matter events? As we organize around issues of violence against black and brown people and the broken system of for-profit mass incarceration, what might be possible? The work of dismantling oppression and racism is intense. We may not see major change in our lifetimes, but then again, we have been surprised before! What might happen if all the white folks in this country really started pulling apart our bias, our assumptions, our racist underbellies? What if Unitarian Universalists followed the lead of black activists and were able to effect systemic change? How might our spiritual lives and connections to one another deepen in authentic relationship? I am ready for surprise. I am ready for grace and love to break through. How about you?

Teach and sing: “Draw the Circle Wide”

Amen. So may it be.