

Close to Home
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UUMSB

In Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King's speech, "I've Been to the Mountaintop," given the night before his death, he talks about the story of the Good Samaritan. This is the story of a man who after being beaten and robbed is passed by on the road to Jericho by supposedly holy men, and then is helped by the Samaritan, a man who was seen as less worthy by society. King reflected: "And so the first question that the Levite asked was, "If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?" But then the Good Samaritan came by. And he reversed the question: "If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?""

On Easter Sunday I asked the questions, "How do we challenge ourselves to be uncomfortable in an effort to know our neighbors? How do we put ourselves and our comfort on the line for others? How do we take care of ourselves in our own suffering?" We talked about practice. We talked about Jesus' ministry, breaking social conventions, comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable. We were invited to consider "what does it mean to love my neighbor, as myself," and to think about the vitally important question, "who is my neighbor?" Though we can't know every person's story, every creature's life, can't know every person's hopes and dreams, we can practice as if some day we might. We practice in our communities, building transformational, challenging, and uplifting relationships. Thousands of years after Jesus spoke the words out of his Jewish tradition, we are still working to live into his summary of all teaching, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Last Sunday we talked about *catharsis* and the power of engaging with challenging and tragic stories to help those who are suffering to talk about their experience and feel seen and heard. Hearing the stories of Job yelling into the whirlwind, and shouting at God, we remembered that we do not often hear what others are shouting to heavens. We do not know most people's story, we do not know how they understand their experience in relationship to meaning making. How might we hear our neighbor screaming into the whirlwind? How might we remember that each of us struggles with grief, loss, and making meaning in the midst of suffering? We can know we are part of a human community stretching and struggling through time. We can practice listening for the voices of those who need to be seen and heard. We can be present for one another, to witness to grief for things which cannot be changed, and just as importantly to be companions moving forward toward balance.

My intention was for these sermons to offer some spiritual grounding for today. This Sunday, we are participating with nearly two-thirds of all Unitarian Universalist congregations in talking about issues of racism and white supremacy. By white supremacy, we are talking about "a set of institutional assumptions and practices, often operating unconsciously, that tend to benefit white people and exclude people of color."¹ It means the cultural junk in the water all around us that makes whiteness and white culture normative. It's all the unconscious stuff that is absorbed by all people, no matter their identity and intentions. And today we are talking as congregations and as an Association about how we have absorbed this culture into our own, even with all our intentional work toward anti-racist and anti-oppressive policies and practices.

1 <http://www.blacklivesuu.com/teachin/>

The impetus for this Association-wide conversation was the realization that while we have goals set by our Unitarian Universalist Board and staff to follow certain hiring practices for our national and regional positions, that we have fallen far short in implementation. Some of our leaders of color who are participating on Boards and other volunteer roles note that our volunteer positions are much more diverse than our paid staff. This led to a broader conversation about how white culture, normative whiteness, or white supremacy are playing out even in our Unitarian Universalist Association.

Many of our leaders of color have shared stories and experiences that illustrate how far we need to go to build a truly diverse tradition. As part of our conversation, after worship we have planned a workshop that will talk briefly about the context in our Unitarian Universalist Association, and Gwendolyn Hampton VanSant has kindly volunteered to facilitate a workshop with me that will look at tools for having challenging conversations, and systems of accountability in anti-racism work. The workshop is based on a session that Multicultural BRIDGE has offered in the Real Talk on Race program, and I expect that it will be a helpful and hopefully inspiring conversation.

There are many staffing changes happening at the national level, and there will be lots of conversation and policy setting that will happen at our national gathering in June, but what does it mean for us, in this particular congregation? Rev. Joe Cherry wrote:

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.

In Rosemary Bray McNatt's reflection on Unitarian Universalist culture, she asks us

How, then, do we encounter those whose experience of church is different, whose experience of the holy is different... Where do they enter into the culture of Unitarian Universalist religious community? ... How do we—all of us—convert our ignorance into wisdom, manage both our shame and our earnestness, both our resistance and our desire to know?²

As part of our work to become certified as a Welcoming Congregation, a safe and inclusive community for LGBTQ folks, we had to look at the institutional assumptions, and unspoken barriers that we might have to being welcoming, and then sought to change them. Some concrete example are: we changed the signage on our restrooms, added preferred pronouns to name tags, and paid closer attention to gendered language in hymns and readings, updating language, or naming the context for particular language before using it. We had some thoughtful reflection on this work. Right now, we have an opportunity to look at the our congregation and denomination, and to dig into the assumptions and narratives that are deep down in culture and unconscious assumptions, and start clearing rubble so that as a faith, we might live into a future that we hope for. We have the opportunity to decide what shape this work might take. This may feel

2 ROSEMARY BRAY MCNATT | 2/22/2010 | SPRING 2010, UU World

daunting, or scary, or exhausting. Audre Lorde wrote, “Those fears are most powerful when they are not given voice, and close upon their heels comes the fury that I cannot shake them. I am learning to live beyond fear by living through it, and in the process learning to turn fury at my own limitations into some more creative energy.”

There is an incredible amount of pain in systems of oppression. When we are vulnerable with one another, we feel that pain. It can be hard, and can hurt. We also open ourselves to the possibility of more loving and genuine relationships with more people. Vulnerability is an opportunity to connect more deeply with people who have very different experiences. It is not up to *any one* of us to fix the world, to dismantle systems of oppression and prejudice, to see the layers of white supremacy effecting our culture. It is up to *all of us together*. We are people in interlocking communities with all sorts of forces and expectations acting upon us. In *this* community of spiritual seeking and faith, we gather to help each other through times when we feel despair, when we don't know what to do next, when we want to help, but we don't know how. We are here to help each other to recognize when our privilege is getting in the way of building relationships and moving forward, getting in way of changing culture. We are here to help each other be renewed, filled up with hope and the spirit, so that when we are on the road the Jericho, we ask "If I do not stop to help this person, what will happen to them?" We are here to be ready to listen to each other, to be vulnerable, to be transformed.

So may it be. Amen.