

Inherent Worth and Dignity
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Even when things are really hard, the universe can have a sense of humor. I have spent hours and hours this week reading, and watching, and listening--trying to find the right words to say today, leaning into the irony that I would ultimately be preaching about imperfection. There is no magical land where we have learned everything we need to so that we never hurt other people, but there are fundamental skills we can all learn to do better, to build more just communities, to live out our call to honor and protect the inherent worth and dignity of every person. We can learn how to fail, be imperfect and vulnerable, listen, and repair.

We could spend a day, or a week, or a lifetime, unpacking the historical, social and political factors that have brought us to this moment in our country. We could spend a day, or a week, or a lifetime, listening to stories of the impact of White Supremacy Culture on Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC). And that is worthy work. Today, we will take a little time to reflect on our Unitarian Universalist first principle, respect for the inherent worth and dignity of every person, how we understand it in this moment, and an invitation to stretch ourselves in response to white supremacy culture.

White supremacy culture is the institutional, political, and cultural system that holds white experience and lives as more valuable and meaningful than any others, and is in opposition to honoring and protecting the inherent worth and dignity of every person. I want to live in to a world that has a better baseline than “don’t dehumanize people,” but collectively, we are still working on that first step. White supremacy culture bestows unearned privilege to white folks that cannot be given away. Privilege doesn’t mean that white people don’t suffer, there is suffering in every life. One way to think about the relationship of white supremacy and suffering is that anyone might be hit by a bus crossing the street, but that Black and Brown people in our country have to live in the bus lane. Sometimes white folks can fall into a trap of believing that our suffering lets us off the hook for doing work to dismantle white supremacy and build an anti-racist society. It doesn’t. *But*, that suffering might inform the choices that white folks make on how to engage in that work, and we will come back to that later.

There is so much to unpack in looking at the scope and depth of the problem of white supremacy. Today, I want to remind us that policing in the United States began as the network of white men who rounded up escaped slaves, had networks of spies and coercion and violence, and brought human beings back to slavery. Policing is built from a foundation of seeing black bodies as property that needed to be controlled. As many have said, the system is not broken, it was built this way. Since the time of the Fugitive Slave Act, there have been some Unitarian Universalists fighting for the protection of black bodies, and some who stayed complacent.

You know how sometimes a person or book keeps coming up around you, until you give in and listen to them or read their book? Well, that was true this week for me of Brené Brown, the researcher and storyteller. I kept hearing her name, in UU circles, at Amherst, and even from my therapist, so I watched her TedTalks on vulnerability and shame. In her talk on shame, Brown shares that you can’t talk about race without talking about shame. In her words:

Because you cannot talk about race without talking about privilege. And when people start talking about privilege, they get paralyzed by shame. ...

Shame drives two big tapes -- "never good enough" -- and, if you can talk it out of that one, "who do you think you are?" The thing to understand about shame is, it's not guilt. Shame is a focus on self, guilt is a focus on behavior. Shame is "I am bad." Guilt is "I did something bad." How many of you, if you did something that was hurtful to me, would be willing to say, "I'm sorry. I made a mistake?" ...Guilt: I'm sorry. I made a mistake. Shame: I'm sorry. I am a mistake.

There's a huge difference between shame and guilt. And here's what you need to know. Shame is highly, highly correlated with addiction, depression, violence, aggression, bullying, suicide, eating disorders. And here's what you even need to know more. Guilt, [is] inversely correlated with those things. The ability to hold something we've done or failed to do up against who we want to be is incredibly adaptive. It's uncomfortable, but it's adaptive.¹

In her talk on vulnerability she reminds us that when we are afraid of vulnerability and don't embrace it as necessary and fundamental, we often try to numb that feeling. But you can't selectively numb emotion, so when we numb the hard stuff, we numb joy, gratitude, and happiness, and we are miserable and set up dangerous cycles for ourselves. When we are afraid of vulnerability we seek to make things that are uncertain, certain. I'm right and you are wrong. The more afraid we are, the more vulnerable we feel, and the more we seek certainty, which leads to polarization of positions, especially around ideas and belief, like religion and politics.² There are lots of ways we can be vulnerable and offer a piece of our real selves up for others to see. When we are vulnerable with one another, it can be hard, and can hurt or be uncomfortable. We also open ourselves to the possibility of more loving and genuine relationships and to seeing behind the veil of separateness that holds us apart. We are all interconnected, we are made of the same stuff. We are parts of the mystery of the universe out walking around, interacting with the rest of the universe.

In a webinar on decentering whiteness in worship last year Aisha Hauser, a leader in UU religious education and teaching anti-racism, suggested that we as Unitarian Universalists need to build an ability to sit in discomfort and to build communities not without pain, but without oppression. She also spoke to the emotional energy required for moving into discomfort and having to repair relationships when we make mistakes. Aisha believes we need to learn how to handle the impact of our words and actions and practice asking, "How can I make this right?"³ To risk being wrong, and vulnerable, is an opportunity to connect more deeply with people and move through discomfort to relationship.

When we are under stress or threatened, we respond in ways that are practiced, which is why we work to grow our spiritual toolboxes and practices, so we can respond to challenges from a place of spiritual grounding. Here is my challenge for all of us in a stressful time with many emotions and lots of vulnerability. Try something new. Our Unitarian Universalist Association has put out a number statements related to changing the relationships between police

¹ https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_listening_to_shame?language=en

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iCvmsMzIF7o>

³ <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/decentering-whiteness-worship-webinar>

and the communities they are supposed to serve, as have a number of organizations with whom we are in relationship, including the Movement for Black Lives, the Poor People's Campaign, and the NAACP. Read their demands for change, and if something challenges your assumptions, sit with that and pay attention to what is behind those feelings. Is it discomfort, fear of change, the unknown, of the vulnerability of holding another's experience with your own? Listen. Don't assume you already know the answer. Listen. Once you have listened, act, but before you do, reflect on the ways that you usually respond when you are asked to step up for folks in your community. Do you usually go to standouts and marches? Send money? Write to the paper or politicians? Make phone calls? Call and support friends and family on the front lines? All of these are good and important things to do. Now take a moment and think about *why* you usually respond in the way that you do and consider stretching to try something else. See if there is an opportunity to hold discomfort and learn more about why it is there for you.

In the interest of being vulnerable, I have realized that I am most comfortable in standing out for justice with my body. I love the feeling of being in community with people for a common goal, it is part of why I got in to ministry. At a march, I am an anonymous person in the crowd, part of a whole, and not in the spotlight. Where I am uncomfortable, is using my voice in public and being in the spotlight, because I don't want to say or do the wrong thing, *and* I don't want to be silent. I get nervous when posting sermons and messages that have to do with anti-racist work, because I am afraid of being vulnerable and imperfect. So I set a challenge for myself to be anti-racist in public, with my voice. I posted my intro from last week on Facebook, I will record and upload this sermon to our new podcast site, and I will own any mistakes, or injury caused by my words. I am going to lean into discomfort in an effort to amplify the important work of dismantling white supremacy culture, and of white people recognizing their role and privilege in that system.

We are in the middle of a pandemic and are once again shining light on the racism built into the fabric of our government and the system of public safety and policing. If you are running on fumes, maybe the way you stretch is to ask for help, or to check in with loved ones. If you are charged up and ready to speak truth to power, maybe this is your time to start being in the streets, or on the phone bank. If you are a white person seeing your privilege, or the militarization of the police with new eyes, maybe this is a moment to hunker down with a stack of books and articles that you have been meaning to read, or a training you have meant to take, or a difficult conversation you have been meaning to have, and get to them. Maybe it is time to listen to new voices in your community, and to read more about what is going on in Unitarian Universalism. Again, all of these are important. The opportunity for each of us is to practice some new responses, so we don't get stuck or avoid discomfort, but instead learn more about who we are, what we believe in, and what we will fight for. Black Lives Matter. No justice. No peace. May we build a community that honors the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Be vulnerable. Be wrong. Listen, and repair.

So may it be. Amen.

A selection of resources for support, listening, and learning about anti-racism and dismantling white supremacy:

UUA Resources:

- Lauren Smith: [A pastoral letter to Black Unitarian Universalists](#)
- Susan Fredrick Gray: [A message to white Unitarian Universalists about policing from UUA President Susan Frederick-Gray](#)
- Black Lives of UU: [BLACK LIVES UU](#)
- DRUUMM (Diverse & Revolutionary UU Multicultural Ministries): <https://druumm.onefireplace.org/>
- Allies for Racial Equity: <https://alliesforracialequity.wildapricot.org/about>
- Love Resists: [Love Resists Campaign | Love Resists | UUA.org](#)
- Side with Love: [Side With Love](#)

Partners and Leaders:

- Multicultural BRIDGE is doing a lot of work and training virtually, during the pandemic: [BRIDGE - Home](#)
- Movement for Black Lives: [WEEK OF ACTION – M4BL](#)
- Poor People’s Campaign: [Moral Monday National Day of Fasting and Focus](#)
- NAACP: [NAACP | An Update from NAACP: Our Demands](#)