

Growing Our Diversity
Association Sunday
Reverend Kent Hemmen Saleska
Unitarian Universalist Church of Minnetonka
October 4, 2009

FIRST READING

Testifying – a reading for five voices

Adapted from the UU curriculum, “Building the World We Dream About,” by Mark Hicks

Frances, an African American woman

To be African-American in this country is to face racism throughout life, however subtle. The love of one’s family is paramount in reducing the damage of racism on one’s wholeness. Unitarian Universalism is splendid as an affirming church family. Its primary commitment to justice seeking, its deep belief that every soul has irreducible value, and its belief that there is the spark of the divine in every one of us are powerful antidotes to the insistent racist voices among us. I find Unitarian Universalism not only soothing, but healing. It is a perfect medicine for the soul made sick by racism.

Claire, a White woman

Race was something to be spoken about only in hushed tones in the nearly all white town where I grew up. What a different experience my own kids have had! Thanks to the intentional work of the Unitarian Universalist youth movement, they have engaged with issues of race, class, and privilege. I treasure the conversations about how those issues impact their lives and mine. One of my greatest joys and challenges was to serve with my then teenage daughter on a district anti-racism team. We grew side by side in understanding and commitment. For a parent, it doesn’t get any better than that.

Cathy, an African American woman

After the September 11 terrorist attacks on the United States, the Muslim students at my daughter’s very diverse high school began to segregate themselves because of their sense of fear and isolation. My daughter, who has spent her whole life attending a Unitarian Universalist congregation, reached out to these students. She actually made the long walk across the high school cafeteria to sit with the Muslim students and talk to them about how they were feeling. When I asked her why she had done this, my daughter told me that her faith called her to do this. As a parent, I was so proud that my daughter had learned the lessons of non-discrimination and respect for all peoples within our Unitarian Universalist community. As an African American parent, I was equally proud that my daughter understood the connection between her struggles as a young black woman in America and the struggles of other often marginalized groups. This affirmed for me that Unitarian Universalism has helped me raise a wonderful young woman.

Peter, a White male

Here and now, I don’t feel affirmed living out issues of race. This is a dirty business willed to *us* by people who looked like *me*. However, what doesn’t kill me makes me stronger, and I can do nothing without doing some harm. I am moving from being an etherized white man ignorant of race to being a European American man discomfited everywhere; from living in the world as

oyster to a world without many places to belong. My participation at a self-consciously diverse Unitarian Universalist church, dismantling racism in fits and starts has offered consolation. Despite my being and my action, my brothers and sisters remain authentically engaged with me in things that I get right and things that I get wrong. Like an unreformed drunk (since my culture will not yet allow me to live one hour, much less one day at a time, privilege-free), I must lean on the good will of my fellow travelers in this religious community I have chosen to join. It's *their* good will and its reflection of their perception of my good will that offers affirmation.

Esha, an Arab woman

I grew up in a family that had all the answers about God; in a fundamentalist Egyptian Muslim home in New Jersey. We followed the very letter of Islamic law. I grew up with many unanswered questions about God and life. Much to my mother's chagrin, I never blindly accepted a fundamentalist faith. I eventually married a Jewish man. When I became a parent, I thought I could avoid raising my children any religion. I realized when my daughter was four and asking for Jesus, I could not get away with nothing. That is how I officially became a Unitarian Universalist. The most affirming aspect of being UU for me is the full acceptance of myself and my family. I continually feel affirmed as a religious educator of color when I interact with colleagues and discuss my views based on my life experiences. I am respected and seen as being able to contribute to my profession. It is truly the first time in my life that I have felt positive about being part of a faith community. Unitarian Universalists encourage the difficult discussions about racism, oppression and class. The answers aren't always to my liking and I am at times frustrated, however, there are enough people in this faith who don't turn a blind eye to racism, classism and oppression. It is by continuing the discussion and affirming the journey that we will grow and bring change to the world at large.

SECOND READING

From the Introduction to *Black Pioneers in a White Denomination*

By Reverend Mark Morrison-Reed

Homer Jack, secretary general of the World Conference on Religion and Peace and a founder of the Congress on Racial Equality, once aptly described Sunday morning as "the segregation hour."

This reality is painful for advocates of racial equality who feel that the lack of a significant black presence in liberal religious churches indicates latent racism...Indeed, I am frequently asked how the liberal church can be made more attractive to blacks. Yet since the advent of black power, when the emphasis in the Afro-American struggle shifted from human rights to black consciousness and to political and economic power, the once sacred principle of integration is held up ambivalently, if at all. Many have not been able to reconcile integration with black autonomy, and the resulting uncertainty leads them to acquiesce in their indecision. In this post-black empowerment era, most liberal religionists are no longer clear enough about their values or perceptive enough in their thinking about race to be able to move decisively. It seems the assimilation of the rapid changes that occurred in the sixties and seventies is a slow process. There comes the humbling realization that we in the church do not stand above the social attitudes of our times, but rather flounder among them with everyone else.

SERMON

Growing Our Diversity Association Sunday Reverend Kent Hemmen Saleska

The profound and painful history of race relations in the United States of America is well documented and indisputable. Yet for something so destructive to the core of our religious and human well-being, we religious liberals have been historically near paralyzed by our sense of impotence about how to confront, reverse, or dismantle the structures of racism in this country. Or perhaps to state it more accurately, we struggle with how to address oppression in general as it appears in many contexts, and have a particularly difficult time addressing oppression as it manifests itself in the form of racism and race relations. As Tracy Chapman writes in her song, the one we'll hear after the sermon, "Across the lines, who would dare to go, under the bridges, over the tracks, that separates whites from blacks?"

Part of our difficulty – and when I say "*our* difficulty" in this context, I mean those of us in the liberal Unitarian Universalist religious organization in the country of the United States of America on the continent of North America who are white – part of our difficulty with responding to oppression based on race arises from the degree of guilt we may feel based on the white color of our skin that affords us privilege and easier access to the power structures that govern our society. If we are born poor but then work through life to become middle or upper class, we can always donate money or even commit our life's work to going back to our roots to address issues of poverty, education and health care. In that context, we feel we earned our way out of a hard and painful existence, and it makes sense to look back and help out.

But to grow up white in this society means that we are born privileged and that we are born with easier access to power. In the context of color, the only thing we did to "earn" our position was simply to be born. Yet at the same time, just because we are born white or born black, or brown or mixed or any other color, doesn't mean we are inherently racists or inherently oppressed people. The Unitarian Universalist minister Mark Morrison-Reed, author of the book *Black Pioneers in a White Denomination*, once said, "I don't believe in original sin, and I don't believe people are born racists. It's a virus we catch because it's part of the fabric of the culture" (*UU World*, February 2009).

In the context of the issue of race and racism in America, and in the context of race and racism within our Unitarian Universalist movement – and this time, when I say "*our* Unitarian Universalist movement" I mean the religious movement that captivates and calls liberal religious people of all colors, races, abilities, ages, sexual orientations, and economic status – comes our third Association Sunday, an annual program designed to affirm the common bonds and purposes of Unitarian Universalism that help to grow our faith and heal our wounded world.

This year – today – is the date scheduled by Unitarian Universalist congregations all across the nation to celebrate and speak to the theme of this year's Association Sunday. The theme of the first Association Sunday in October 2007 was "Growing Our Numbers," during which the Unitarian Universalist Association raised over \$1.4 million to help fund a national marketing campaign and the Diversity of Ministry Team's initiative to support ministers of color.

The theme of the second Association Sunday in October 2008 was "Growing our Spirit," during which the UUA raised over \$350,000 to make grants available for lay theological

education programs, to help the UU Minister's Association expand their continuing education programs, to provide scholarships to seminary students, and to support new projects of the Diversity of Ministry Team's initiative to support ministers of color.

The theme for Association Sunday this year is "Growing our Diversity." After collecting the responses to an online survey from over 1,000 Unitarian Universalists across the nation, three initiatives are now in place that will receive the support from our collection this year:

- 1) Expand the "Building the World We Dream About" curriculum and associated resources and training. I will say more about this a little later.
- 2) Support congregations that are working to create a Unitarian Universalism that is racially, culturally, and economically diverse;
- 3) Enable UU congregations and districts to minister effectively to youth and young adults who identify as people of color or multiracial, and to their families, in the areas of spiritual development, racial/cultural identity development, and leadership development.

I am reasonably certain that everyone in this congregation will think these initiatives and programs are valid and worthy of support from the Unitarian Universalist Association, and even worthy of sending in the total amount of the collection we gather today. And yet, I suspect – based on both my knowledge of Unitarian Universalists in general, and on conversations and comments I've heard in this congregation in particular – that some of us might think, "Yes, given our liberal religious tradition of involvement in social justice issues, we know this is a great thing to support...but it won't have much impact on us or our congregation out here in these all-white suburbs."

To whatever extent this notion exists in our congregation, it seems to be a bit like saying, "well, no one I know has any health problems or problems with their health care providers, so it is not really meaningful or relevant for me to get involved in the health care debate or reform."

I challenge the perception that there are no people of color in this town or in our surrounding suburbs. Interfaith Outreach and Community Partners – better known as IOCP – is a non-profit organization that this congregation helped to create in 1979, and whose offices are three blocks away. The mission of IOCP is "To identify and respond to the unmet basic needs of people who live in our community, and to assist them in moving toward self-sufficiency through the creative action of an inclusive partnership of communities of faith, schools, government, businesses, community groups, foundations, health systems, and individuals."

When IOCP says they are working to respond to the unmet basic needs of people who live in our community, they specifically mean eight local towns and geographical areas: Hamel, Long Lake, Medicine Lake, Medina, Minnetonka Beach, Orono, Plymouth, and Wayzata.

In 2007-2008, IOCP served a total of 1,476 unique households that held a total of 4,248 people. The IOCP food shelf distributed 753,556 pounds of food in response to 12,267 requests. In the last fiscal year, 9.2% of all households here in Wayzata received some form of assistance from IOCP.

IOCP reports that the breakdown of race among the people they serve is this: approximately 31% of client household members identify as Black/African American, and nearly 5% as Hispanic/Chicano/Latino. IOCP also serves two primary immigrant or refugee populations – 8% of their clients are Russian or European and nearly 4% are East/West Africans. Even if we exclude that 8% of Russian or European people served by IOCP, that still means that about 40% of the people IOCP serves are people of color, or well over a thousand people.

People of color, and those who are homeless and jobless are mostly invisible in our American culture. Their populations are even more invisible in the suburbs. For those who think that only white people live out here in these beloved suburbs “of ours”, I ask you to simply take a look at the population served by IOCP.

And lest we think that the only people of color out here in the suburbs are poor people below the poverty line, I did some research on my own based on the demographics from the 2000 U.S. census bureau, and discovered that just in the eight communities served by IOCP – which do not include the vast geographic area from which we draw our current church membership – there are approximately 8728 people of color. I can only imagine how many more people of color there are if we expand this demographic to include places like Hopkins, Saint Louis Park, Maple Grove, Robbinsdale, Crystal, Golden Valley and Brooklyn Park, all of which are well within the geographic area from which we draw. To say or believe no people of color exist in our area is, at best, a form of willful naïveté that consistently chooses to ignore our neighbors.

Please do not misunderstand me. I am not saying that because we now know there are at least 8728 people of color in our immediate surroundings that if we just tell them about us they will all join our church. In fact, I am fairly confident that our theology and our beliefs will not appeal to many of them, just like our theology and our beliefs do not appeal to many people who are white. I am merely stating the fact that there are thousands of people of color in these suburbs and that if we ignore them, we do so at our peril.

I admit that this was a difficult sermon to write. It was not difficult because I lack an opinion or because I’m afraid of making a mistake. I do have my opinions, and I’ve gotten to a place in my life where I am much more open to learning from my mistakes than I used to be. No, the difficulty in creating this sermon had to do with where to even *begin* talking about this topic, where to explore *as* I talk about it, and where to *stop* talking about it. There is so much nuance, and there are so many entry points to the issue of race and oppression in America and in UUism that I could explore this issue from a thousand places.

From this point on, I struggle with what prophetic voice to use, and with what direction to promote or urge. Last week at our Social Justice Empowerment workshop, we decided upon three target areas for our Social Justice initiatives over the next year: the environment; Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian and Transgender (BGLT) issues; and health care. Issues of race and affordable housing were among the other top choices we talked about, but no one at the workshop signed up for either of those areas.

It was an extremely positive and whirlwind weekend, and to be fair, we all felt and knew that we needed to make some rapid decisions in order to focus so that we could get moving on some action rather than just talking about action (since we know how good UUs are at just *talking* about action!). We also made our decisions with the knowledge and awareness that our action would not replace any initiative in which we were already involved, and that our work could easily evolve into other issues in the coming years. So based on the fit and the opportunity of the three chosen issues, I understand – and I support – the need to focus on those.

And yet...and yet, I can’t help but wonder how much our decision to not choose race issues was based on mere practicality, and how much might have been based on internalized or subconscious racist attitudes of our own.

The issues surrounding race and race relations in general are hard and painful issues. Within our liberal religious circles we have struggled mightily with this for decades, if not our entire existence. On the one hand, we so much of which we can be proud: our Unitarian ancestors were in the forefront of the fight for the abolition of slavery; the Unitarian Horace Mann was a founder of public education; the Unitarian Clara Barton was the founder of the American Red Cross; during the civil rights era, Unitarians and Universalists marched and locked arms with Martin Luther King, Jr., in the streets of Georgia and Alabama and elsewhere.

And yet, on the other hand, we have much for which we can feel shame: Theodore Parker, who was perhaps one of the most outspoken abolitionists of his day, also believed that black people had nowhere near the intellectual capacity of white people. In 1980, the Reverend Mark Morrison-Reed wrote a book called *Black Pioneers in a White Denomination*, in which he chronicled the systematic racism perpetrated on two black Unitarian ministers in the early 20th Century by individual leaders and by the governing bodies of the American Unitarian Association. And in the late 1960s, our fledgling Unitarian Universalist Association, when it was less than a decade old, was rocked and divided by a controversy in which the white members of our Association did not follow through on a vote and a promise to financially support the empowerment vision of black Unitarian Universalist groups. The divide was deep and caused an estimated 1,000 people of color, including our immediate former UU president, the Reverend William Sinkford, as a young man, to become disillusioned and leave our association. The divide was *so* deep that it has only been in the past 10 or 15 years that our Association has been able to look at and address issues of race with a greater degree of honesty, compassion, consistent intentionality, and a genuine commitment to sit at the table of race through the hard stories and into emerging forms of reconciliation and sustained action.

In so many ways, the issue of race is not a black and white thing. There is so much nuance and there are no easy answers, just hard work. It also involves more than just black people and white people. In our discussions of race we consistently overlook those among us who are Native American, Latino and Latina, Asian, Pacific Islanders, or from the Middle East, and more.

If it is truly a goal of Unitarian Universalism to strive to “grow our diversity,” then we are saying we choose to live our lives in the margins. In this context, I don’t necessarily view the margins as a bad thing. When I was a youth worker, I read the book, *Reviving Ophelia*, by Mary Pipher. In that book she writes, “My horticulturist friend says that the environment is the richest and most diverse at the borders, where trees meet the field, desert meets mountains, or rivers cross prairies. Adolescence is a border between adulthood and childhood, and as such it has a richness and diversity unmatched by any other life stage” (*Reviving Ophelia*, 52).

A few years later, in a seminary class on race and religion in the United States, we read a book called *Voices from the Margins*, edited by R.S. Sugirtharajah. In the introduction he writes, “Although it is tempting to move in from the periphery and find a place at the center, whatever that center may be, my intention is to stay firmly at the margin...The aim is to re-perceive the margin...as a place pulsating with critical activity, a place alive with argument and controversy and a place of creative discourse...Moreover, innovation can be easier on the fringes of a culture, where the center’s hegemony is less fierce.”

Our Association Sunday this year asks us to envision, support, and work toward a faith that is more welcoming of racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity, and charges us to dismantle racism in congregations and the larger community. One of the three initiatives we will support with our collection today is the expansion of a curriculum called “Building the World We Dream

About: A Welcoming Congregation Curriculum on Race and Ethnicity.” This curriculum is written for entire congregations, and is modeled on the Welcoming Congregation curriculum that was developed to help congregations become more welcoming to people who are bisexual, gay, lesbian and transgender.

The curriculum is described as “a series of interactive seminars conducted over a 12-month period [in which], participants explore topics that increase their understanding of race and ethnicity, as well as systemic racism, through spiritual reflection, journaling, visual arts, poetry, music, theater tools, simulations, guest speakers, and field trips. [It] culminates with worship and creation of action plans for anti-racist, multicultural congregational transformation.”

We Unitarian Universalists – like society in general – have a history mixed with failure and success around issues of race. But it is a rich history and one that is guided by our belief in the goodness of humanity and creation. May we learn to lighten up, to know who we are, and to recognize the diversity that already exists within and among us. May our ineptitude be forgiven and our souls be rewarded as we strive to bring justice, equity and compassion into our human relationships.