

Liberation Sermon

In the third week of June, you sent me to Ministry Days and General Assembly for the Unitarian Universalist Association in Pittsburgh, PA. This sermon is pretty dense, because you sent me there and I want you to get your money's worth. UU jargon has changed a lot in the last 49 years since I attended a general assembly, so I came to some of the resolutions and verbiage with a sense of wonder. At least, attitudes of acceptance now more assertively and explicitly include different skin colors, genders, and sexual orientations.

Our values were familiar to me--sweet, reassuring--and just as troublesome as going home. T.S. Eliot wrote:

Home is where one starts from. As we grow older

The world becomes stranger, the pattern more complicated

Of dead and living.

The small, unique program in which I prepared for the ministry included mentoring by several Unitarian Universalist heavy-hitters and familiarity with headquarters staff, a great advantage. I had a good picture of the larger Unitarian Universalist community. But I stopped going to G.A. 49 years ago because it was no longer relevant to my ministry, so going again was like going home to the family farm—a lot of people and places the same, some jargon and rituals strangely different.

I seldom returned to the family farm outside Fremont, Nebraska after I went away to college. The house looked a lot smaller, almost all of the people I had known were gone, and life had moved on in ways that felt good in some ways and strangely constricted in others. My best friend from many years ago had formed a family and was pretty happy, although her teaching art at a high school was marred by students who were obnoxious and disinterested. The general political outlook was radically more conservative and ethnically prejudiced, so a referendum has severely restricted immigrants from working, doing business, or living anywhere in town. Likewise, General Assembly was like going home again, in that part was very familiar and part was greatly changed.

Today, I will partially celebrate our values discussed at General Assembly. Daily policy discussions were laborious but carefully respectful of everyone's rights and feelings. Worship services were, by turns, calming and exciting. Brian Broome spoke effectively of his experiences in writing and publishing his searing, poignant memoir, Punch Me Up to the Gods, about being a poor, gay Black man in Pittsburgh. I talked with any number of interesting, highly committed, innovative clergy. I experienced a guided meditation using poetry and discussion. In sum, Ministry Days and General Assembly were very positive experiences, with a couple of detractions.

The overall emotional tone of G.A. was celebratory and "liberatory" in content, with strong undertones of worry and defiance. The Rev. Cecilia Kingman gave the Berry Street Essay, the oldest continuous lecture series in America. This is perhaps THE most important lecture at General Assembly. She focused on how Unitarian Universalism (and I quote) "is moving away from individualism to communitarian values, from white supremacy culture to truly radical liberation." She asserted that fascists [and here I quote] "from within and without" are seeking to reinforce "social hierarchies in which Unitarian Universalism is rooted."

That was lots of jargon in two sentences, and it also felt like lots of blame and shame. I will unpack some of it. In June, an administrator with the Unitarian Universalist Association complained in an email posting that "white supremacy culture" was responsible for the critical feedback they received following a workshop where technical or organizational problems impeded smooth operation. That administrator transferred to another job a month later, perhaps as a result of negative feedback. Cecelia Kingman casually mentioned "white supremacy culture" (and that's white with a lowercase "w") in her essay so I researched several web sites and discovered that it applies to dynamics within organizations with an anti-racist, racial justice commitment. "White supremacy culture" theory aims at identifying social change organizations' problems and improving communication, making organizations more flexible and open to input from various levels, and is intended to be a both/and attitude. A centrally important website about the concept is a sprawling, speculative, and openly diverse discussion called: "(divorcing) WHITE SUPREMACY CULTURE:

Coming Home to Who We Really Are” moderated by Temu Okun. In Okun’s words:

White supremacy culture trains us all to internalize attitudes and behaviors that do not serve any of us. A belief that we can be perfect, or should be perfect, raises the questions: who decides what perfect is? Why would we want to be perfect? Worship of the written word is not in any way associated with the ability to write well. Worship of the written word is a cultural belief that something only has meaning if it is written down and only if it is written down according to a certain very “white” standard in a certain very “white” way. This belief leads us to ignore and devalue all the wisdom that comes to us intuitively, through our bodies. Through story. Music, film, and song. . .(whitesupremacyculture.info, page 4, August 8, 2023) [end of quote]

“White supremacy culture” is a concept that has been developing over thirty years but still has a vague and contradictory definition. I can’t follow the logical shift from “a belief that we can be perfect” to “worship of the written word” to “ignoring intuition” in one badly written paragraph. As Sean Thomas-Breitfeld said, “[white supremacy culture] is a useful article for reflection. . . to help white activists in multiracial spaces be more aware and self-regulating. [Breitfeld continues] But I don’t think it’s very useful in the contexts where we’re all seeing it used, as a tool for organizational change and nonprofit management.” (Sendola Diaminah, Scot Nakagawa, Sean Thomas-Breitfeld, Rinku Sen, and Lori Villarosa, “How (Not) to Dismantle White Supremacy,” April 20, 2023, pg. 5)

Cecelia Kingman’s essay struck a resonant chord at General Assembly. People listened attentively. I felt energized but disquieted. It wasn’t until I studied her train of logic that I understood something beyond what she said. We have been struggling with fascism for many years now, and will continue to struggle with how fascists are trying to shut down free speech, severely constrict school and public libraries, and limit acceptance of people of color, people with ethnic differences, and LGBTQ+ folks. A lot of fascist tactics base their power on a mythical “purity,” a rejection of even

minor difference from a presumed narrow standard of cultural and/or genetic purity. Although painful, it is necessary to describe fascism.

Here's a list of fascist tactics, from Cecilia Kingman and Jason Stanley: 1) A mythic past, as in MAGA glorification, a hazy pretense that there was a great past that has decayed. 2) Polarizing propaganda promoting "us" vs. some despicable "them." 3) Anti-intellectualism, as if science and critical race theory are threats to authorities. 4) Lies, 5) Adherence to inherited racial or ethnic hierarchy, and 6) Victimhood sentiment for those "unjustly" denied a privileged place high in a social hierarchy, such as allegations of a stolen election. 7) Law and Order violently suppressing protestors such as Black Lives Matter demonstrations. 8) Sexual anxiety that your children are under attack from queer, transgendered people. Here's this from the New York Times: "Jan Dvorkin had raised and nurtured his adopted son in Moscow [Russia] for seven years until the Russian authorities notified him they were revoking custody . . . because he was transgender and gay. The New York Times adds, The [Russian] government leverages the war in Ukraine as justification for greater restrictions on LGBTQ life" (New York Times, 8-2-2023, pg. A1 and A8) 9) Fearful disdain of cosmopolitan cities allegedly full of moral corruption, and 10) Evil, lazy loafers who do not work can be disposed of.

As Sendola Diaminah said, "When you are healing and figuring out a new paradigm—and you've been immersed in an old one that was so painful—having a framework that says the pain you've been experiencing is real and it was wrong is powerful. . . .you need something that gives you the strength to be like, 'Yeah, that was wrong. That was evil.'" [end of quote] (Sendola Diaminah, et. al, pg. 7.) But that moral outrage is not, in itself, very useful. The danger in a struggle with fascism is that we might become, in tone and logic, a mirror image of the force we are fighting. When I was teaching nonviolent struggle, we used an exercise where we instructed people to pair up and put their hands up in opposition to each other. They were then told to push on the other person's hands, to illustrate that simple opposition, in kind, produces no beneficial change. I think that the reaction to fascism in its own claim to ideological, moral "purity" is

becoming its own narrow definition for human excellence--a mirror-image of fascism. I am not disputing that the concept of white supremacy culture has some usefulness, only that it is being misused.

Once a shame-based accusation (such as white supremacy culture) is attributed to an organization or a person, a cold wind of personal blame and counter-accusation of racism blows through that interaction. Guilt and shame surges through people, like a wave of sludge overwhelming a sewage treatment plant. I saw this with a friend, who was president of an important nonprofit providing services for sexual violence survivors in two counties. As scandals broke out in her church, Roman Catholicism, and an acknowledged sexual predator became U.S. President, she became increasingly bitter and angry. She had a right to her rage, but it also drained her energy and availability for dialogue. She is still our friend, but we have learned to navigate the rapids of resentment. Given the small size of Unitarian Universalism, that kind of fracturing has been highly destructive in the past. I witnessed conflict within Unitarian Universalism in the late 60's and early 70's when our Unitarian Universalist separatist Black Affairs Council conflicted with our more integrationist people. An attempt by break-away Black Affairs Council members to form an independent faith group failed and some clergy and congregants left Unitarian Universalism altogether. That bitter, multi-year conflict miserably disheartened a lot of people. Then--and I fear it could happen again--a social change analysis of power and hierarchy in America became a source of labels that included some people in positions of influence and excluded others, which fostered accusations and hurt feelings. A sense of trusting each other during a search for truth dissolves. For example, a candidate for a psychology professorship was denied employment at the University of California at Los Angeles because—years earlier—he had issued a podcast that questioned the usefulness of individuals writing out their diversity statements. Even though he had written and signed a diversity statement outlining how he has fostered an inclusive or antiracist environment on his university campus as part of his application. (New York Times, “Diversity Statements by Faculty Complicate Hiring on Campus,” 9-10-2023, pgs. A1 and A18) Obviously, after this sermon I will never be hired as a UCLA professor. It is

as if we are ill. We have felt the body politic invaded by a fascist way of thought that seeks to constrict us from truth, to trap women and men and Blacks and librarians who believe in carrying informative books, and doctors who might conscientiously recommend abortions, and various ethnicities, and LGBTQ+ folks, in a web of shame and illegality. Understandably, but destructively, our first reaction is to fight--instead of comfort each other.

The political and conceptual thrashing about I witnessed may grow out of helpless frustration, but there are better things we can do. The Unitarian Universalism Association is countering oppressive attitudes by staffing UU agencies with approximately 50% people of many different skin hues, sexual orientations, and ethnicities. The intention is morally respectable and generationally necessary. If we don't alter our presentation of skin color, gender identity, and class complexions we will be sidelined in appealing to the general population. According to demographic forecasts, by 2050 the American population will be more than 50% people of color and diverse ethnicities. The latest census data shows that the younger American age cohorts are 25% Hispanic or Latino. Nobody at General Assembly alluded to that development, but Unitarian Universalism needs to become more inclusive or die out.

Remember the words of Jason Stanley about the challenges we face:

How do we maintain a sense of common humanity?

We can take comfort in the histories of progressive social movements, which against long odds and hard struggle have in the past succeeded in the project of eliciting empathy.

By refusing to be bewitched by fascist myths, we remain free to engage one another, all of us flawed, all of us partial in our thinking, experience and understanding, but none of us demons. (Jason Stanley, How Fascism Works, pg. 193)

We can devote ourselves to the principled search for truth and meaning—in a context of Love—and request that others join us in that loving attitude. Fascist tactics attempt to divide us against each other for

the purpose of authoritarian social control. Fascist tactics attempt to persuade us that who we appear to be--our apparent gender, sexual orientation, skin color, ethnicity, etc.-- determine who we are as individual people. In truth, we are individuals, and we need to know each other so deeply, so personally that we can respect each other knowingly. In truth, we are each so different from any one, two, or three apparent characteristics that our individual complexity is beautiful once it is truly known. Let us dedicate ourselves to Truth, wherever we find it, whatever it tells us, as a guide to who we are now and who we can best become.