

# First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, NY

## “Expanding Our Welcome”

Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore September 17, 2017

### Sermon

We welcome everyone. That is how our mission statement starts. You’ll find it at the top on the back of your order of service. The declaration implicitly invites the question, in the words of the Anthem, will you harbor me?

I know some think mission statements don’t matter much and aren’t concerned if they just collect dust on the shelf. That is not true for me. I take the words of our mission very seriously. It is the mission of our congregation and the Principles and Purposes of Unitarian Universalism that guide what I do as I serve as your minister on a day to day basis.

Welcoming everyone is a high aspiration that stretches all of us. The wider the diversity of people coming through our doors, the more challenging that welcome can be, and the more intentional we must be, to make it real and authentic. This is good and meaningful work for us to do ... but it isn’t easy. And in the process of doing it, we will be changed.

I was reminded of this challenge three years ago after a police officer shot and killed Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. The organization “Black Lives Matter” appeared soon afterward, followed by Black Lives of Unitarian Universalists. These organizations along with Michelle Alexander’s book, “The New Jim Crow,” sharpened my attention on the racial divides in our society and in our congregations. Putting up a “Black Lives Matter” banner on the side of our building back then was a good thing but only a token offering. Attending to those racial divides requires much more of us than putting up a banner to make a positive difference.

As we’ve now seen with the election of Donald Trump, electing a black President in 2009 didn’t actually change much about race in our society. Yes, as the result of the civil rights movement, we no longer had separate schools, rest rooms and drinking fountains. Yes, major changes happened with voting and public accommodations, higher education admissions and affirmative action hiring. But many systems of racism and oppression remained firmly in place. Worst of all, the most entrenched of those patterns remain firmly in place inside us.

The phrase currently being used to express these pervasive patterns of thinking and behavior is white supremacy. I know there is resistance to this phrase being broadly applied beyond the kind of K.K.K., Alt-Right, and Nazi sympathizers who showed up in August in Charlottesville. What helps me get my mind around the term is adding the word “culture” as in: White Supremacy Culture. All of us are swimming in the same white supremacy cultural sea.

The leaders of Black Lives of UU’s have challenged us to use the metaphor of swimming in the water of white supremacy. Unfortunately many white folks think they are standing on the beach and

watching people of color bobbing up and down and waving from that water. They see themselves separate from and not involved with that water.

I use this beach/water image because it leads to a key insight. It is commonly referred to today as the racist/non-racist binary. This is a crucial understanding to appreciate if we are going to actually be able to welcome everyone here in our congregation.

The racial binary thinking goes like this. Racists are those who hate people of color and would like to re-segregate our country, keep black people in menial jobs and subservient positions in society and definitely keep them out of positions of power. Non-racists are saintly people who don't see color, treat everyone equally, and want to help people of color integrate into American society. Non-racists are good, moral people and racists are bad, immoral people who have Confederate flags pasted to the window of their pickup truck and have swastikas tattooed to their necks.

The problem here is the polarization between who is a racist and who isn't a racist. The polarization of these two definitions doesn't make room for non-racists to have racist conditioning and behaviors and racists to be full human beings that can grow and change.

Intellectually this might make sense to us ... but emotionally, admitting to racist behavior and ideas by people who think of themselves as non-racists is very difficult. And it is especially difficult for Unitarian Universalists who are liberal social progressive do-gooders.

What makes it so hard is the moral underpinning to being a non-racist. Looking at pictures of the hatred in the eyes of counter-demonstrators during the civil rights era causes revulsion in most of us. We don't want to see any of that in ourselves. We are good, loving people who want to make this place a better world for everyone ... aren't we?

For Unitarian Universalists it goes even deeper. We rejected the idea of Original Sin long ago. We don't think that we should suffer for the mistakes of Adam and Eve – especially when we don't even believe the story in the first place. Why should northern white liberals be at fault for what those racist southerners did? Our ancestors rejected the Puritan ideas of human depravity and saw instead a kind of nobility in us, an inherent worth and dignity that could be developed.

Yet the system of white supremacy culture is deeply intertwined with the American story back to the time of Columbus in 1492. Slavery was baked into the Americas from the beginning. A few Supreme Court Decisions and a few laws can't change the white supremacy culture that underpins and influences the development of many if not most of our social institutions. My research a couple of years ago for a sermon on white privilege opened my eyes to the depth of northern complicity in slavery and northern neglect during the reversal of reconstruction.

This isn't just history, it is the present too.

The mistake here is to approach racism from this good or evil binary. There are better ways to think about racism by using a different model. A much better approach is to see racism as a *social disease* that has infected our minds and culture. It is a social disease we catch from our culture

through our family and playmates as children. It is so virulent that almost nobody is able to avoid being infected. None of us **chose** to catch this racism disease, just like most of us don't choose to catch a cold.

Time for another analogy. Many of you have probably heard of the Human Papilloma Virus called HPV for short. HPV is a virus that can cause women to get cervical cancer. How do they catch that virus? They get it mostly from men during sexual intercourse. It is a common sexually transmitted disease. The problem though is most men who have this virus don't know they have it. Without intending to do so because of their ignorance, they can transmit the HPV virus and put their female sexual partner at risk of getting a disease that can kill her if it goes undiagnosed and untreated.

I invite you now to think of racism as similar to the HPV virus. Almost all Americans carry the racism virus and many, if not most, white people don't realize they are carrying the social disease. In their interactions with each other and people of color, they transmit the disease. Mostly white folks are symptom free and don't notice their infection. People of color, however, are hyperaware of having this disease, living with this disease, and being re-infected with it on a daily basis. It is a disease that attacks their sense of self-worth, undermines their sense of value, gives them great emotional pain to deal with, and torments them as they struggle to find ways to cope with it. And just like the HPV virus, it kills people of color and leaves white folks untouched.

White folks in their blissful ignorance of having the racism disease often encounter people of color who want them to know they have this disease. It would be great, they say, if you wake up and realize you have this social disease that is causing us pain and do something about it.

But because white folks are operating from a good/evil dynamic around racism, they cannot for a minute tolerate the idea they might be racist and thus evil people. Remember this operates at a deep emotional level rather than a cognitive intellectual level. When a reinfection moment is brought to their attention, many white folks respond, "That wasn't what I intended. I am not a racist!"

In the good/evil dynamic this makes sense to white people because they think of themselves as good people who don't do evil things – and this is where intention should matter. In reality, ***intention doesn't negate impact***. When I innocently commit a micro-aggression against a black person, the pain the black person feels is real and a function of the racism disease we both have. If you take nothing away from my words this morning than this, remember the phrase, "intention doesn't negate impact."

I know this might be hard for the white folks this morning to listen to and I'm grateful you've stayed and listened to me to this point. So here is some news that will be a balm for your conscience. Almost all of us here in this room have this racism disease. None of us chose to get this infection. Our first words to our caregivers were not "teach me to be a racist!" And most of them didn't deliberately decide to teach white children to harm those who are different from them. But it got through anyway. It is hard to be immune to a virus everybody has. And you are likely to catch it if you came here from someplace else. So the good news is we are all swimming in the same water.

The problem is white people think they are asymptomatic so they think they aren't infected. White people are really good at ignoring the symptoms of this disease that is all around them. In fact keeping the infection going requires white people **NOT** to be aware of the water they are swimming in. It feels like the racism virus knows this all too well. If a virus harms its host too much, it may not get passed on to the next generation.

In reality, white people do suffer in many ways from the racism disease but don't make the right associations. One way you'll recognize the disease is as fear. Another way you'll recognize it is as hate and anger. The urge to segregate and isolate is another marker. The virus masks these reactions with rationalizations so white folks don't make the connection. What the virus can't hide from us is the result, the closing of the heart.

Let me say here, as a white person who is striving consciously to unmask all the symptoms of my racism infection, this isn't very pleasant. I really don't like seeing myself as a disease vector. I especially don't like discovering myself in the act of reinforcing or re-infecting someone with racism. The more I know, the more unpleasant it is to see the racism virus at work within me. Ditto for sexism and ableism two other nasty social viruses.

Now here is the really good news. If racism is a virus, then it is not who I really am. The virus wants me to be confused about this so I protect the virus and pass it on. But I know better now. That virus cannot destroy the beauty of what it is to be human and the power of love to heal and transform for the good of all. Love is vastly more powerful than the racism virus.

Curing this virus is really hard. Maybe someday we'll have a cure and a vaccine to prevent it. Right now the best we can do is get very smart about managing it and work to not infect or reinfect others, especially our children. Today, by the time they are three or four, children adopt the idea that it is better to be white than black. They are already infected at this tender age.

My hope is our congregation and Unitarian Universalism can be on the frontier of reducing and healing the racism disease. We don't have a cure for the AIDS virus but we've invested an enormous amount of energy in dealing with it. Today many who are infected can live mostly symptom free productive and satisfying lives. For the moment that may be the best we can do with racism too.

To do that white people need to get "woke," as the saying goes, to their infection and to recognize the symptoms and the effects. I'm offering a class for four weeks on this that begins Tuesday night working with material I brought back from anti-racism trainer Robin DiAngelo from our UUA General Assembly back in June. This is a ripe moment to do this work with all of the changes that have happened at the UUA in the last six months. It could be a sea change so to speak.

So to sum up, it is not your fault that you are infected with the racism virus. It is your responsibility to get well. That is my commitment and I hope it will be yours and our congregations too.

If we do so, then we will be able to make good on our commitment to welcome everyone.

## Benediction

I send you off with these poetic words by Margaret Wolff

We sit together and I tell you things,  
Silent, unborn, naked things  
    That only my God has heard me say.  
You do not cluck your tongue at me  
    Or roll your eyes...  
You stay with me in the dark.  
You urge me into being.  
You make room in your heart for my voice...  
I see my future Self in you...  
Just enough to leave  
    The familiar in the past where it belongs.  
I breathe you in and I breathe you out  
    In one luxurious and contented sigh.

In sweet company  
    I am home at last.