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UU Fellowship of the Eastern Slopes
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Humbled, dismayed and awake, may we “center” what matters.

Recording (in lieu of a reading): May '17 testimonial by DeReau Farrar, Director of Music at the Portland, Oregon UU church. Rev. Betsy met him at General Assembly in June—he directed the ministers' choir. Listen at <http://www.firstunitarianportland.org/director-music-dereau-farrar-offers-testimony/>

When the Game Changes

The words we just heard landed hard. We singers had enjoyed this choir director. He had chosen and arranged great music. Demanding, his standards high, he moved us through it at a fast clip, calm, patient and upbeat. Before coming upon his on-line testimony by chance, I would probably have told you that he had a hipness, too—clever with words, a wry sense of humor.

Then I heard him say, “There’s nothing that excites you more than my blackness.” That unsettled me. He was right—seeing him as “the other,” no matter how appreciatively, objectified him. I didn’t like seeing my distancing white self.

Many of you have asked about General Assembly, the annual meeting of UUs, which took place last week in New Orleans. You’ve also asked about what’s going at the UUA—the Unitarian Universalist Association, which has been in the headlines for several months. Please, don’t leave if you are a visitor! And stay if you are a regular, even if you may not feel especially connected to UU or the larger UU movement, because what’s been going on matters.

This denomination concerns itself, and always has, with human rights, rights we celebrate this weekend. Today, once again, we—and that means congregations, association staff and ministers—are wrestling with racism. With whiteness. With the enduring supremacy, or dominance, of white people in our present and in our past. These issues have relevance for every person of conscience.

In short, here’s what has been going on. Controversy flared up three months ago over a hiring decision. Yet another white person, a male, had been chosen for one of the five regional lead positions at the top of the UUA. At least one person of color had been a finalist. What ensued was a conflagration of reaction from all quarters:

When would the UUA live its inclusive language? When would it start to “center” not whiteness, but racially diverse leadership? When would action be taken about what amounts to “white supremacy” in our organization? Yes, white supremacy—loaded words that stir up images of the KKK and lynchings. White supremacy means making someone’s humanity small while others have power and control. Will we ever act on our professed faith and “center” people on the margins?

Almost at once, the President of the UUA, Peter Morales, resigned—the wording of an email from him had infuriated those who already were angry. Reaction to his resignation, swift and mixed, ranged from satisfied and determined to outraged that he would leave with only ten

weeks left in his term; from amazed that he didn't stay in the conversation to sad for our denomination and frightened for it.

Within days, two other top UUA staff resigned—gifted and committed leaders, apparently. An interim 3-person presidency was quickly established—all people of color, two males (one former UUA President the Rev. Bill Sinkford) and one female. They worked tirelessly and communicated frequently to the Association in long, dense, thought-provoking emails. Deliberately, they used that term “white supremacy” and called on ministers to do “teach-ins” about it this spring. More than half of our thousand congregations have had “teach-ins.”

Close peers and I, serving our first churches and fellowships, have waited to fulfill this request. For some of us, it feels early in our ministries to wade into this conversation. For my part—and you may have come to see this over the past year—I need to percolate...listen, understand and let the pieces in my head and heart settle before I speak, much less preach. Those pieces have far from settled, but last week's time in New Orleans was helpful and hopeful, and so here we are, beginning to address these issues.

Before we do, a bit more background. Facebook conversations raged all spring with divisive reaction to these events—a boiling mix of frustration, pain, anger and accusation. A month after Peter Morales resigned, Rev. Don Southworth, the executive director of the UU Ministers' Association, also tendered his resignation. Southworth had written a long, wandering, heartfelt letter and emailed it to all UU ministers. The letter contained unintended inflammatory language, and that set off another round of reaction. A difficult time with General Assembly weeks away.

Today I'm glad to report what feels like a shift in the Association. I think it has turned a corner. Last week, hundreds of ministers immersed ourselves in the work of truth telling. The bright lights amongst us, people I look up to with respect and hope, shared into the microphone their reactions to Peter Morales's and other UUA staff resignations, to Don Southworth's letter, to his resignation and to other controversial issues of this year.

Their points of view touched on so very many reactions to these events. That felt helpful. The first morning, we broke into small groups where everyone had a say, could share their opinions, their discomfort. People expressed sadness about the leaders no longer in the room. What evolved was a sense of healing and a resolve to move forward mindfully. Progress. When the convention hall filled up a few days later, the unfolding story again was told.

Who's not uncomfortable with the reality of race in America? Even here in the whitest of states, we don't know where to begin. It's too big. Too much. Too complicated. Too far away, some say. We may feel afraid that we'll make a mistake and make things worse. Who among us hasn't avoided an uncomfortable conversation that we know needs to happen? When it comes to questions of white privilege or racism, who wants to go there? The thing is, not going there is tantamount to accepting the way things are. As the bumper sticker says, “If you're not outraged, you're not paying attention.”

This isn't the first time our denomination has led an anti-racism initiative. The Black Empowerment Controversy of the 1960s and 70s, which ended badly and with disappointment

all around, is well documented on line. A daunting 600-page book, *The Arc of Justice is Long*, assembled in 2009, chronicles our denomination's history of whiteness and its work over the years toward change. It's on my bedside table, but I don't often open it—we can be weary of this work. When I do pick it up, I can't put it down—the stories and voices in that book will break your heart.

There will be a time after the service today for your questions about this and about General Assembly last week. For now, a few words about change. It takes so long. The work is never done. A notice this spring from the organization, Black Lives of UU (BLUU), tells it like it is: “Everyone has to start somewhere, and it takes a commitment to disrupt business as usual.”

Life gifts us with insights. When we least expect them, a phrase or story suddenly shifts our understandings. Let us pray for this.

In A.S. Byatt's book, *The Matisse Stories*, a young woman describes the power in first seeing the paintings of an artist friend: “They are miraculous, they are like those times when time seems to stop, and you just *look* at something, and *see* it, out of time, and you feel surprised that you can see at all, you are *so surprised*, and the seeing goes on and on, and gets better and better....”¹

Think of moments like this that have taken you by surprise...and inched you forward in your awareness. The testimonial we just heard was such a moment for me—imagine constantly diluting your skin color, a huge part of your identity, in order to move in the world, to do your job, to *survive whiteness*. Imagine wrestling with this reality most of the minutes of every day while the congregation you serve sits serenely, obliviously content, listening to the music.

I offer three lasting takes from last week—game-changers for me:

First: *No one wants to go here.* Many ministers were ambivalent about going to New Orleans after the string of resignations, headlines and emails about white supremacy, all while serving our congregations. I imagine lay folks felt the same way. I'm so glad and grateful to have been there. Coming together, listening to each others' hurt and confusion and hope, was hugely encouraging. Healing. No wants to go there, yet going there can transform us.

Second: A story from Rev. Meg Riley, senior minister of the UU Church of the Larger Fellowship, a wonderful on-line UU church. Meg's child had been wrestling with gender identity. (I forget whether the child identified at birth as male or female—let's say female.) At a social gathering, an adult asks about Meg's son and someone else loudly corrects them, “But Meg doesn't have a son!” Later in the car, she comments to her child on what has happened: “I felt uncomfortable just now,” Meg says. She describes her child looking over at her with “a long gaze....‘How long,’ the child asks, ‘were you uncomfortable?’”

Think of your own awkward interactions, perhaps with those whose race is different than your own. How long have *you* been uncomfortable, compared to how long they have been uncomfortable?

¹ A.S. Byatt, *The Matisse Stories*. New York: Random House, 1993, p.53

Third: The pale center and the idea of what we center. Imagine concentric circles of power in our culture. The *center* of power is pale. Almost entirely white. In America, where the 4th of July Declaration says that all “are created equal,” whiteness is centered, lifted up, dominant. Our society has a pale center.

Imagine the rainbow fringe of the outermost concentric circles—a rainbow of skin colors, differing abilities, fluid gender identities, sexual orientations and beliefs. What will it take for us to center not whiteness but that rainbow? What, in your life, do you *center*?

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I wrote to DeReau Farrar to ask permission to share his testimonial with you today. It would have been far easier to just do it. Take it, coming from my pale center of power. After all, asking would mean engaging with him in this conversation about race, and no one wants to go there. I’d feel uncomfortable...but for how long?

Showing it without permission seemed cowardly, especially given the impact his words have had on my awareness. And so I struggled, over several drafts, to thank him for his message and to tell him, in my request to share it, what moved and unsettled me: how his blackness must be “diluted” all the time... how he constantly wrestles with the realities of “surviving whiteness” while the congregation he serves sits, content and oblivious.

Hitting Send, I sat anxious. The reply came at once. “I’m honored,” he wrote. Thank you for asking. Yes, of course, use it however you think might help.”

“And I am humbled,” I responded, “humbled, dismayed and a bit more awake....Thank you.”

People came to New Orleans last week and spoke of anger, bitterness, pain, lifelong discomfort, confusion, relief, annoyance, weariness and more. We were reminded of the need for kindness and forgiveness—something that had been missing on Facebook. Kindness and forgiveness: so often missing, so simple to offer.

Yes, our country and even our faith has a pale center—all we know, the air we breathe, our very personalities have been formed by a hurtful, limiting system that elevates white people and oppresses people of color. And yet...our mighty little denomination keeps trying. We know we can always do better—all 200,000 of us, including kids...1,000 congregations.

Looking forward: a week ago last night, after a vigorous campaign, the Rev. Susan Frederick-Gray was decisively elected our next president. She is serious, thoughtful, deliberate, appealingly earnest.

May we all work together to *center* what matters, center the rainbow that the world is. Humbled, dismayed and awake—may we create a bright future.

So may it be.