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UU Fellowship of the Eastern Slopes  
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*Become part of the story.*

### *What Difference Can I Make?*

The first time around, I missed the title of the poem Barbara just shared, “Nine-Eleven.” Even without connecting it to this week’s anniversary, the poem had read so true. It tells the story of any of our days and how we live closely alongside people we don’t know. We see each other all the time – in the check-out line, mailing a package at the post office, scheduling our next appointment.

“You passed me on the street,” the poet writes. “I ate with you in the café... We hunched our shoulders against the sleet...”<sup>1</sup> Yet I’ve never known your name, much less the battles you face. “Be kind,” the familiar saying goes, “for everyone you meet is fighting a battle you know nothing about.”<sup>2</sup>

What does it take for someone else’s story to get through to us? What does it take for our neighbors’ pain to break into our daily routine? How to make room in our own personal dramas for the story of others? Or is there such a thing as “others,” since we’re all in this together?

“We live white here,” someone said the other day – a local person, generally open-minded. What does that mean? That we accept the way things are? Or that New Hampshire people are in good shape when it comes to race and perhaps the people with real work to do are somewhere else?

This spring, a bright porch light was a symbol of our fellowship’s pledge drive. When the new administration in Washington had begun taking aim at the rights of Muslims, immigrants, transgender people, inmates – and let’s not forget women – the idea behind the porch light was that UUFES be known as a supportive, welcoming presence to neighbors who might be affected.

The mosques in Dover and Portland had come to mind. Shana led trips to both, warmly received. You may also have seen the local presentation, “Ask a Muslim Anything.” At the time those contacts were fresh, some of us wondered what more could be done in the way of keeping our porch light on.

Recent events call that question to mind again. How to keep our porch light on given the pain of our neighbors?

Last month, members of the Indonesian community in Rochester, Madbury, Somersworth and Dover traveled to Manchester for their regular check-in at ICE headquarters. (ICE stands for Immigration & Customs Enforcement.) Many had lived here some fifteen years working jobs, raising families, buying homes. On this day, they were stunned by the order to return in a month with plane tickets to Indonesia – where their own children would be considered infidels for being Christian. This deportation machine has continued every week as people stuck in the process of

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<sup>1</sup> Charlotte Parsons, “Nine-Eleven,” <https://writersalmanac.org/episodes/20170911/>.

<sup>2</sup> Multiple attributions, including 19<sup>th</sup> century ministers, Plato and Aristotle!

getting documentation check in at ICE. Just before school started, Dover teachers were advised that some sixty families now faced deportation. We are no longer living white here in NH.

This week came the wrenching story of Quincy, an 8-year-old biracial boy in Claremont, NH. Recovering now, he was the victim of a lynch-style attack in late August. Pushed off a picnic table by teenagers, a rope around his neck, he managed to free himself and was flown to the hospital, images of his bloodied neck on social media.

Ten days passed before the incident was reported. That upset people as did an official's early comment that "...it was an accident, and there's nothing we can do."<sup>3</sup>

Claremont is close to home. Lynching isn't how we think of New Hampshire, but now we are a national news story, in the NY Times and Washington Post this week. Townspeople gathered in a Claremont park last Tuesday. You can hear, watch and feel what happened by clicking on the link in last week's Mail Pouch. Powerful.

Among the speakers was a 22 year-old local activist, Olivia Lapierre, who came to Vermont from Ethiopia when she was 5. She called the incident "part of a larger narrative in which... black and brown people are lacking in some serious visibility in white rural America.... We are out here alone and most of our stories go unheard," she said.<sup>4</sup>

In a *Newsweek* story yesterday, Lapierre said: "They say that what happened to the boy is not representative of Claremont or New Hampshire. What happened to him," she went on, "is absolutely representative of Claremont, New Hampshire and the United States. Law enforcement and public officials need to acknowledge this as a hate crime. How can people of color feel safe living here if law enforcement is not acknowledging the lynching of an 8-year-old as a hate crime?"<sup>5</sup>

The race conversation has come to New Hampshire. We are no longer living white here.

Do we have a problem? Some would say no, or at least be surprised by the possibility. Last week, a Portsmouth woman was excited about a fund-raiser she was organizing for abused children in South Africa and didn't know anything about the Indonesian situation, though it was unfolding the next town over and had been in the local headlines for weeks.

A doctor expressed surprise about our vigil in support of NH people of color. "But there aren't any here!" he said. Despite the news of deportations, despite Claremont incident, he hadn't

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<sup>3</sup>Jamie Seaton, "Police Slow to Probe Biracial Boy's Hanging in New Hampshire, Family Alleges," *Newsweek* 13 September 2017, <http://www.newsweek.com/hanging-boy-biracial-8-years-old-black-white-new-hampshire-lynching-claremont-664415>

<sup>4</sup>Olivia Lapierre, Claremont Racism Response (4/6), 12 September 2017 at "Time for Reflection" on Broad Street Park, Claremont, NH <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5rqYUKQhK1Y>

<sup>5</sup>Olivia Lapierre, follow-on Seaton article, *Newsweek*, 16 September 21 2017, <http://www.newsweek.com/hanging-boy-biracial-8-years-old-black-white-new-hampshire-lynching-claremont-664415>

connected the dots – or hadn't chosen to. Somehow, he hadn't engaged with issues of race in our state. Maybe we don't want to hear it. That sounds like a problem.

A survey here a few years ago indicated that social action was by far this congregation's top priority. Social action is in the UUFES mission on the front of your order of service and a current Governing Board goal. We engage in social action on Sundays, when our services address human rights, white privilege, transgender rights or keeping our eye on the prize of justice. We engage when we hold community evenings around important issues. We engage in social action through Dinner Bell suppers, Special Collections, the Food Pantry and UUUsed – and when we host the Farmers' Market, veterans' counseling, All Addictions and Girl Scout meetings. This year our Social Action Committee has worked hard to discern more ways that UUFES can make a difference – and it *is* hard work.

We make a difference individually, too. The Dept of Health and Human Services suggests that simply offering friendship to strangers makes a difference. Dare to pull out your rusty Spanish with the check-out person at the grocery store. A friend of mine did – and is now helping that person apply for a job to help others with their language skills. Another friend teaches English to refugees. Volunteer Match.org says you can help people build reading, writing, math and English skills in Concord; in Manchester, you can tutor migrant youth; further west in the state you can tutor farm workers.

Last week in Claremont, the young activist beseeched the crowd to *do something*: “Please folks,” she begged, “do something. Do not just send prayers, do not just thank people of color who are out here working trying to bring attention and support for Quincy's family. Please do something! Call your local institutions. Do something! You could support by looking at the legal allies in NH that are focused on hate crimes. Please anything, do something, because when you're neutral, and you're silent facing injustices, then you've chosen the side of the oppressors.”<sup>6</sup>

Today after coffee and refreshments, we will gather for a peaceful vigil outside on our street corner. We will stand – or roll – and hold signs for passersby to see: Liberty & Justice for All, Families Belong Together, Let Them Stay, Peaceful Warrior of Love, Black Lives Matter.

If you are wrestling with whether to do this, even for a little while, let me share my morning at a recent interfaith prayer vigil in Manchester: a structured event, covered by the press, with an order of service, speakers, readings and song lyrics. We marched around the building seven times, just as the Israelites circled Jericho, blowing their trumpets, before its walls tumbled down.

Did going to the prayer vigil make a difference? To me, it did. Though it took up most of the day, an hour's drive each way, I will long remember the faces in line of families standing against the gray cement of the building, waiting their turn, awaiting their fate. Do I feel better about them now? Heck no, I think about them all the time. That's hard. And...I'll go back. To show people they're not alone. To let them know that they matter. To help grow awareness of what's

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<sup>6</sup> Olivia Lapierre, Claremont Racism Response (4/6).

happening. To stay engaged. I'll go back to feel less helpless. To explore what we can do. And to feel the solidarity and hope of community.

Some of us may be long-time protestors. For others of us, venturing into the public square feels edgy. It's one thing to proclaim our principles together within these walls, to sing them loud and strong. Going public, though with who knows who driving by, takes some courage. Whoever comes out today, we'll be in it together! If only one person drives by and sees us, we'll have moved ahead in our goal to make social action a priority at UUFES.

I hear frustration here about progress, about what we can do and how we can do more. "Making a difference" doesn't happen overnight or with one sparkling event or a Black Lives Matter banner on the side of our building. With justice, there is always more to do...and *every* effort matters. While success is hard to measure and results often a long time coming, persisting is the name of the game. We can't know the impact we will have on our neighbor's pain, but we always have a choice: to remain at a distance from that pain or move toward it. Once in motion, we become part of the story, no longer observers. And that, good people of conscience, is why we're here.

So do something. Write a letter to your representative about the deportation machine. About cutting back, not expanding our prisons. About promoting policies to help people of color in this part of the world live freely and fully. Or come outside today and feel the solidarity of standing and rolling together for the worth and dignity of every person. Feel the possibility of change under the real sky, for all to see.

So may it be.

READING: "Nine-Eleven" by Charlotte Parsons

You passed me on the street  
 I rode the subway with you  
 You lived down the hall from me  
 I admired your dog in the park one morning  
 We waited in line for a concert  
 I ate with you in the cafes  
 You stood next to me at the bar  
 We huddled under an awning during a  
 downpour  
 We dashed across the street to beat the light  
 I bumped into you coming round the corner

You stepped on my foot  
 I held the door for you  
 You helped me up when I slipped on the ice  
 I grabbed the last Sunday Times  
 You stole my cab  
 We waited forever at the bus stop  
 We sweated in steamy August  
 We hunched our shoulders against the sleet  
 We laughed at the movies  
 We groaned after the election  
 We sang in church  
 Tonight I lit a candle for you  
 All of you