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April 29, 2018

On showing our values in the public square.

Reading: From Towards the “Other America” by Chris Crass

To help me have courage in these times, I have created a ritual out of putting on my Black Lives Matter button, and I invite you to create one for yourself, as well. I put on my Black Lives Matter button as a ritual of rededicating myself to daily action for racial justice. I hold my button between my hands and pray. I pray for the movement to continue growing more and more powerful....

...I reflect on the moments I'm *scared* wearing this button....

...I rededicate myself to actively supporting UU congregations...standing on the side of Black Lives Matter through banners...vigils...inviting Black Lives Matter leaders to preach at their pulpits, writing op-eds for the local newspapers....

I spoke with a UU minister of a majority white congregation who has had their Black Lives Matter banner vandalized multiple times....I listened to her talk about how the congregation is struggling through fear of feeling under attack, confronting their white privilege, and, despite the racist backlash, staying true to their values. We talked about this being the moment for...white UUs...to either open their hearts more fully and act with courage, or move back into white silence white consent, and white privilege. These are the times that our church was intended for, to help us act with courage in the face of fear and hate.¹

Sermon: Siding with Love

It started at the airport when the TSA alarms went off—the metal in my wrist, I figured. “Lady, take off the pin, please,” said the guard. What? I’d forgotten about the Black Lives Matter button on my lapel. I kind of liked the reminder and took it off with a measure of pride. After getting through security, I put it back on, again feeling pleased. I had no idea what was to come.

I’ve always loved the racial diversity in airports, enjoying eye contact with fellow travelers, feeling “all in it” together. You can do that when you’re traveling incognito, which is to say, white. Today was different. The Black Lives Matter button made me visible. Marked. Not always comfortable. Alone, too. I wondered: is this what it’s like to be a person of color arpmid here? I felt some irritation, too. Was that righteousness creeping in? As if to say, what are you looking at? You SAY you believe in this, but what are YOU doing about it? Where did that attitude come from?!

People’s eyes went right to the black and white button—then quickly away. What was going on? Were *they* uncomfortable? Why would they be? Maybe they disagreed. Or maybe they felt bad

¹ Chris Crass, *Towards the “Other America”: Anti-Racist Resources for White People Taking Action for Black Lives Matter*, St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2015, 161-2.

not to be taking a stand themselves—I’ve certainly been there. In the airport, more vigilant than usual, I noticed that everyone working at Starbucks, Legal Seafood and the newsstands were people of color, many women in headscarves.

The pin hadn’t seemed so edgy at home. I’d put it right on when Ricky gave it to me last week. And there it was on my dresser the next day, a question: When are you going to put it on again? Oh my, what if I wore it on vacation? That felt big. It’s not as if we were going to hip New York City or multicultural San Francisco. We were headed south, for a wedding deep in South Carolina and then on to Atlanta. On the one hand, what could go wrong? On the other, that may not be Black Lives Matter-friendly territory.

Wearing the button for the world to see was an experiment of sorts that turned into a week of revelations. A few minutes after take-off, my husband John turned to me: “How long are you planning to wear that button this weekend?” Where did that come from? Again, I’d forgotten it was on.

“I don’t know,” I said. I hadn’t gotten that far.

“Well, it is a family wedding, you know.” How interesting that *he* was reacting. “You might get some pushback down there, you know,” he said, with conservative media stirring people up about how people of color are taking their jobs, threatening their rights. He wondered if people might equate the bold graphic with militancy and violence. But it’s not! I said. BLM is a *non-violent* movement to end white supremacy. It comes from the saddest sentence ever, posted by Oakland activist Alicia Garcia the day Trayvon Martin’s killer was acquitted: “I continue to be surprised,” she wrote, “at how little Black lives matter.”

“Yes, but people don’t know that,” he said.

The attention my button had already garnered and now this from John caused a worm of doubt to enter my thinking. Was this button too much? Was it too visible? Would a less “out there” button be better? Like “Make Racism Wrong Again”? The thought of taking it off lest I get push-back in South Carolina or make people uncomfortable at a lovely social occasion filled me with shame. At the same time, I was glad my scarf covered part of it. Not a comfortable feeling.

How easy it is to have liberal beliefs as long as no one knows about them....

Our son joined us. He hadn’t thought much about this. Don’t all lives matter, he asked? I said, So you think it’s OK to be killed in cold blood by a police officer while reaching into your pocket for your ID? *Well, no.* Is it OK to be shot in the back in your own grandmother’s backyard? *No.* Did those lives matter? *Well, yeah.* Is it OK that Black Americans are incarcerated at over five times the rate of white Americans?²

² According to the NAACP. <http://www.naacp.org/criminal-justice-fact-sheet/>

Meanwhile, at the BBQ place, were customers looking at us funny? Maybe because of our northern accents...or maybe the button! Quite aware of it by now, I'm not proud to say that it had moved down off my lapel to the purse at my side.

I did not expect a button story last week. A story of angst. Feeling unsettled. Conspicuous. Judged. Confused. And enlivened too! The button came up continuously with strangers in stores and restaurants, with politically liberal cousins at the wedding. They thought it was great—easy for them to say! Meanwhile, I was beginning to feel tired. Tired of being noticed so much. Tired of that constant awareness. Tired of needing to be ready with a verbal defense. The thought occurred to me that if I take off the button, I can relax. Wow.

I'll long remember three bright spots from last week:

First, mid-weekend when the talk turned again to the button, our son said, "Well, Mom, at least you changed one mind." Really? Whose? "Mine," he said. Aw!

Second: Getting a snack at the airport gas station, where everyone was black, I connected with the cashier, young and smiling. "May I ask you something?" I said. My purse on the counter, I touched the BLM button: "I'm from the north. Is this OK down here?" *You bet it is!* she exclaimed. "Thanks," I said. "Someone had suggested I remove it." *Don't you take that button off!* she said. *You leave it right there, honey!*

Third: Landing late in Boston, the young black woman next to me was en route to Cape Cod that night, traveling from Jamaica to work at an inn. Twenty-seven, our son's age, having worked five years as a bank teller, she'd resigned to come here. "I had to make a bold move," she said, "I want to go farther than my mother did." Lit up with BLM urgency, I gave her my sweatshirt and put her on the right bus with a breakfast sandwich. We sat in the cold rain and chatted. Noiw wishing my button were more visible (!), I told her she'd landed in a place with few black people and wondered...what else could I do to help?

Religion comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable. This religion, Unitarian Universalism, has taken "afflicting the comfortable" seriously over the years: promoting the kindergarten movement and the abolition of slavery in the 1800s, fighting for women's right to vote, actively engaging in the civil rights movement, leading the equal marriage movement. Today's UU campaign "Siding with Love" focuses on ending white supremacy.

Siding with love can push us beyond our comfort zones. You may have heard the NPR RadioLab episode about exposing ourselves to discomfort in order to grow. How forcing ourselves to connect with who we don't want to connect with or actively pursuing what scares us enriches our life.³

How comfortable do you feel in your life? Or uncomfortably comfortable? We hear stories in the news and our hearts hurt, right? That ache? It's love—love for the frightened one, love for the one

³ <https://www.npr.org/programs/ted-radio-hour/606073044/comfort-zone>

being treated with unimaginable cruelty, love for the one who's been turned against, left out, left behind. How to act on that love?

"These are the times," says Chris Crass, "that our church was intended for...." Acting can feel risky. The vigil we held last fall on the corner comes to mind—in support of NH people of color, remember? Some of us hadn't protested before, hadn't carried a sign announcing our values, and it felt edgy...and good.

Ever wear an edgy button? What message would you be willing to wear in the public square? Hey, what would you wear this week? Tuesday night, profit from every pizza sold at Flatbreads will go to UUFES. Maybe wear a button? A rainbow streamer?

An unnamed poet writes,

Why am I afraid to live,
I who love life and the living colors of earth
and sky and sea and changing seasons?

Why am I afraid to believe,
I who admire commitment, sincerity and trust?

Why am I afraid of love? I who yearn to give myself in love?

...While these days of tribulation awaken us to the truth of what we are,
They must also quicken within us the reality of what we can be.

Maybe we can create a button together—we can have them made for \$1.50 each. If the BLM bold graphic evokes the raised fist of the 60s, we could try something else. "Make Racism Wrong Again" is catchy, but as much about Trump as racism. Let me know if you'd like to brainstorm a button. They're small but mighty: A way to share what matters to you. To meet people and expand your network. They're a way to start conversations...enliven your day...help you wonder what else is possible in your life.

New Englanders can hold our love close, but it's right here. We think and talk with safe friends our heart's desire. We ache with it. And we only live once. What would it take to show the world what we believe? What would it take to expand our comfort zone and go public with our love?

The Black Lives Matter button beckons on the counter. A little thing with a big question: "Today?"