

## **GETTING TO THE PROMISED LAND...THE RIGHT WAY!**

Rev. Scott W. Alexander, Preaching

Sunday, November 17<sup>th</sup>, 2019

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Vero Beach

I must begin my sermon this morning by addressing (in particular) our visitors and newcomers...

*[and let me pause right here to (once again) extend our warmest welcome...we are so glad you are here with us for worship!]*

But I must confess (as I begin) that I am terribly ambivalent about delivering this sermon with you here listening this morning. I am ambivalent because I am going to be addressing a **serious controversy in our Unitarian Universalist faith tradition**...an important (and yes, terribly divisive) controversy that we must (as a faith tradition) confront and resolve (with both principled wisdom and grace) if we are secure a healthy and viable institutional future. And I am fully aware that for me to speak of these messy internal “ecclesiastical” matters (in this public Sunday morning context) is a bit like **“airing our dirty denominational laundry”** for all to see...which I hesitate to do for fear (frankly) of scaring some of you **“newcomers”** off!

But then -- on the other hand...and thus to my real ambivalence this morning – I also realize that perhaps it is good for people **“checking out”** our liberal faith to know that (like all religious traditions) we Unitarian Universalists sometimes find ourselves strenuously disagreeing with one another over very important spiritual, social, and ethical matters. Such is the case with my focus this morning. **So if you newcomers take only one thing from this morning’s sermon, let it be that we Unitarian Universalists are a SERIOUS RELIGIOUS PEOPLE willing to SERIOUSLY GRAPPLE with SERIOUS MATTERS.**

**[PAUSE...]**

Alright...So...whether you are a first-time visitor this morning (who knows little about faith tradition)...or are a long-time member (fully immersed and imbued in our unique **“UU culture”**) I ask that you **“bear with me”** now as I try to (in an understandable...and hopefully fair and balanced way) **“unpack”** and **“analyze”** the details of this significant, emerging controversy within Unitarian Universalism...a controversy (again) that (depending on how we address it) has the potential (as I have already said) to greatly affect the health and future of our faith.

**[PAUSE...]**

So where to begin??? Well...because this conflict we find ourselves in (which is about how to best create and sustain **real racial justice** both within our denomination and the culture at large) is both historical (and terribly complex)...let’s go way back to the beginning.

Since our earliest days as liberal Christian sects in colonial times, the Unitarians and the Universalists (and since 1961 when the two faith traditions merged) **Unitarian Universalists have been deeply concerned with the issues of social justice...most particularly RACIAL justice**. While to be sure (over these almost 400 years) our efforts were not all that they ideally could have been...including some notable failures of **“moral imagination and will”** along the way (including the moral failure of some rural southern 20<sup>th</sup> Century Universalists churches to integrate when they should have)...Unitarian Universalists have always fought hard for racial equality and justice. We played a significant role in the Abolitionist movement (in the early 1800’s), worked for (and celebrated) the emancipation of the slaves at the end of the Civil War (in 1865), fought the heinous oppressions of Jim Crow and the KKK (in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries) and more recently

were a visible and active moral presence in the civil rights movement -- one of our ministers, James Reeb, died on the streets of Selma...and other Unitarian Universalists made tremendous sacrifices. And since then we have actively supported decades of societal and governmental efforts to bring economic, educational, and social empowerment (and equality) to racial minority communities. While all this time being an overwhelmingly **“white”** and (for the most part) a decidedly economically and culturally **“privileged”** people – that’s who we have always been demographically -- Unitarian Universalists have been well-meaning (and reliable) allies in the struggle for racial and social justice for marginalized populations, most especially African Americans. But again, it must be acknowledged that all this well-meaning effort (as a predominantly White faith tradition) has (notwithstanding its sincerity) has often been expressed within the confines of our (admittedly-insulating) privilege.

And so over recent years – fully aware (now) of both the dynamics of what is understood as the American **“culture of white privilege”** and our continuing moral responsibility as a religious people to do more – Unitarian Universalists have allocated significant time and resources and effort to what is called **“Anti-racist,” “anti-oppression”** and **“multi-cultural”** work within our congregations, our UU Association, and the society at large. It is very important for every one of you to realize that the current controversy we find ourselves in has arisen **NOT** because there is significant disagreement about the GOALS (and moral importance) of these efforts – that being to establish truly equal rights...ensure the full protection and empowerment for all marginalized people...and (in the process build) a truly just society. These are goals which most Unitarian Universalists (because of both our long history as a social justice tradition and because of our 7 outward-looking – and humanity-affirming principles) passionately support. **The problem has arisen because of (and here is where I begin to reveal my personal place in this controversy) what I (and many others) believe to be:**

- the rather dogmatic and ideological **PARADIGMS** and...
- the inflexible and heavy-handed **METHODOLOGIES**...

which have been embraced by much of the leadership of the Unitarian Universalist Association (and the UU Ministers Association) to guide us in this “anti-racism” work. Simply put, It is NOT the **“WHAT”** of our social justice efforts here that has gotten us into conflict with one another – we all agree on the moral imperative here -- but rather the **“HOW”**...the intellectual framework, the methodologies, the “tone” and the process by which we will address the “anti-racist” work that is yet to be done.

In a lengthy essay naming **“the tumult”** that now exists within the UUA -- and warning of the dangers of the current inflexible and autocratic approach taken by much of the leadership of our movement -- the Rev. Mark Gallagher of Vancouver, Washington, writes:

**[PICTURE AND CAPTION OF REV MARK GALLAGHER IS PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREENS]**



**Rev. Mark Gallagher, Vancouver, Washington**

Stating the **“dogmatism and fanaticism are incompatible with our UU tradition”** Gallagher expressed concerns and reservations about the inflexible **“ideologies”** of:

- 1) **Critical Race Theory (CRT)**, and
- 2) **White Supremacy Culture (WSC)** analysis

Which have been whole-heartedly adopted by many UU leaders in this work.

and hang with me here, folks, for all this gets really complicated and nuanced, really fast:

**“In recent years, the [ANALYTICAL PARADIGMS] of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and White Supremacy Culture (WSC)**

**[And let me pause right here to briefly explain each]**

- **White Supremacy Culture** is the unacceptable idea that white people and the ideas, thoughts, beliefs, and actions of white people (which is reinforced by all the institutions of our society) are superior to People of Color and their ideas, thoughts, beliefs, and actions...and...
- **Critical Race Theory** is a recently developed framework in the social sciences that uses **“critical theory”** to examine society and culture as they relate to categorizations of race, law and power – and proposes that **“white supremacy”** systematically operates to perpetuate racial injustice.

So back to Rev. Gallagher...

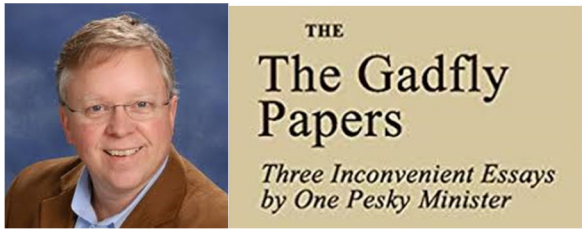
**“In recent years, the [ANALYTICAL PARADIGMS] of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and White Supremacy Culture (WSC) have been proclaimed by ‘UU Identity Activists,’ and adapted to [address not only the oppressions suffered by racial groups, but also those experienced by sexual, gender, and disability minorities. Apparently...] one of the tenets of CRT and WSC [Gallagher goes on] is rejection of the necessity for members of oppressed groups to explain or persuade on a rational basis, as rationality itself is [viewed] as a characteristic of the oppressive culture being denounced. Accordingly, it has become common for ‘identity activists’ [within the UUA and elsewhere] to present their interpretations of events [and dynamics] as indisputable ‘truth telling.’ Any disagreement, challenge or even doubt is dismissed as [to the paradigm of] ‘White Fragility’ or ‘White Privilege’...and condemned as ‘harmful’ [or ‘racist’]. In White Supremacy Culture theory (itself presented as non-negotiable) the testimony of members of oppressed classes is the “final word.”**

**[PICTURE AND CAPTION OF REV. MARK GALLAGHER COMES DOWN OFF CHANCEL SCREENS]**

So...this controversy between:

- 1) the passionate advocates of this rather dogmatic **“Anti-Racist” “Anti-Oppression”** approach (that again are defined by very specific assumptions and understandings of **“Critical Race Theory”** and **“White Supremacy Culture Theory”**)
  - 2) other – dare I say more skeptical Unitarian Universalists (including one notable African American scholar and minister in our movement) who want to question these theories and their analyses and methodologies...)
- came to a head this past June at the annual meeting (the **General Assembly**) of the UUA.

[PICTURES OF REV. TODD EKLOF AND HIS BOOK JACKET ARE PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREENS, SIDE BY SIDE]



Rev. Dr. Todd Eklof

One of our ministers – the Rev. Todd Eklof -- a long-time social justice advocate and the minister of our thriving congregation in Spokane, Washington, the host city of the meeting – passed our free copies of his recently published book ***“The Gadfly Papers: Three Inconvenient Essays by One Pesky Minister”*** ...which aggressively QUESTIONED (using classical logic and formal, polite-but-insistent argument) the wisdom of approaching the remaining work Unitarian Universalists admittedly needed to accomplish (when it comes to social justice and empowerment for all “marginalized” populations) within the framework of ***“Critical Race Theory” (CRT)*** and ***“White Supremacy Culture (WSC) Theory”*** that (which I have said) has been so fervently (and totally) embraced by many UUs recently. Expressing his sincere intellectual reservations, Eklof concluded that ***“UU culture”*** has recently become characterized by ***“Safetyism,” “Political Correctness”*** and ***“Identitarianism”*** – stating his opinion that that free speech (and genuine engagement and true dialogue) about the issues and methodologies of our ***“anti-racism,” “anti-oppression”*** work are dangerously no longer accepted in our Association. As one colleague has written, ***“A central theme of the book is that in Unitarian Universalist today, open and robust engagement of ideas is not tolerated. Instead, [a new] orthodoxy (about White Supremacy Culture and anti-racism work) is proclaimed and dissent or challenge is shamed and silenced.”***

And...as if to almost prove the main point of the book -- that dissent in these matters is no longer tolerated by anti-racist advocates within our movement -- as soon the book was made available, a fire-storm of passions erupted. Rev. Eklof (when he refused to immediately disavow his own published thoughts) was asked to not come back to the Assembly by denominational officials in charge. Within a day, the UU advocacy group ***“People of Color and Indigenous”*** denounced the book for its ***“racism, ableism, classism, homophobia, and transphobia”*** ...and its ***“vitriol and destructive rhetoric”*** that had ***“harmed”*** many marginalized persons -- without citing a single instance of such alleged rhetoric (or harm) in the book. And they went on to reject the idea that ***“logic”*** (which Rev. Eklof seeks to employ) can be used to address ***“racism.”*** Similarly, within just days, 300 ***“White”*** UU ministers (many of whom later admitted they had not read the book) also sent an open letter to Rev. Eklof condemning the book and denouncing his use of ***“logic”*** and ***“reason”*** calling these ***“the foundational stones of White Supremacy Culture.”*** And other ministers have subsequently accused Rev. Eklof of writing a ***“racist”*** book...with some outright calling him a ***“Racist.”***

And then, several weeks later (again without there being any respectful attempt to create a genuine opportunity for Rev. Eklof to discuss and defend his writing with others) the ***Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association*** sent Rev. Eklof a ***“Letter of Censure”*** which reads, in part:

***We understand from your book that you want to encourage robust and reasoned debate about the direction of our faith. However, we cannot ignore the fact that logic has often been employed in white supremacy culture to stifle dissent, minimize expressions of harm, and to require those who suffer to prove the harm by that culture’s standards. Further, we believe that dismissing testimonies of real people to the profound and pervasive pain of white supremacy culture and its many forms of***

***oppression by simply categorizing them as safety-ism or political correctness is both morally wrong and antithetical to our values as a faith tradition.***

***We believe that you have violated the spirit of the Ethical Standards in our Code of Conduct detailed in our Guidelines for the Conduct of Ministry.***

**[PAUSE...]**

Now...let me pause for just for a moment here and observe that it **USED TO BE** (for many generations in Unitarian Universalist circles) that when someone published a book or wrote a sermon with which some disagreed, we would OPENLY ARGUE (back and forth) the ideas and perspectives involved...sometimes vociferously. But now it seems that instead of ENGAGING the controversial ideas of others, we would rather try to censure, silence and bully the person expressing them. What I would like to say to those within our movement who want to censure and silence Rev. Eklof (by calling his ideas “immoral” and dismissing him as “racist”) is: ***“Are your arguments in defense of your perspectives on ‘anti-racism’ work so vulnerable and fragile that they cannot withstand this minister writing a reasoned critique of your assumptions and approach? Don’t attack him of being an unethical (or unenlightened) person...intelligently refute his argument.”***

Well, in any case... since this whole controversy erupted this summer – with so many UU leaders and ministers chastising Rev. Eklof for just writing and distributing his book -- many other ministers (yours included, you must know) have written essays and open letters in defense of Rev. Eklof and his right (as an independent-thinking Unitarian Universalist religious leader) to write his book, express his opinions, and use logic – and rational argument -- to express his reservations about the current direction our religious movement is taking in regards to these important matters. Since the General Assembly, Unitarian Universalists ministers and lay people have (in droves) been ***“taking sides”*** for-and-against Rev. Eklof and the current ***“anti-racism”*** approach that for many of us seems like the new ***“dogmatic party line”*** which will tolerate absolutely no challenge.

**[THE FOLLOWING IS PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREENS]**

Simply put, the “battle lines” have now been drawn between:

- Those supporting Rev. Eklof’s right to voice his concerns and perspectives...and...
- Those who feel fervently that this anti-racism work must be done URGENTLY and PRECISELY as the paradigms ***“Critical Race Theory”*** and ***“White Supremacy Culture Theory”*** dictate.

with both sides sure that they have the right and principled arguments on their side.

Alright... so as I move on now to further try to ***“unpack”*** and ***“make sense of”*** this divisive controversy within our liberal faith for you this morning, I must once again confess (FULL DISCLOSURE!) that I am a **VOCAL PARTISAN** (on one side of) this current struggle. As one Unitarian Universalist minister (who has spent my whole life within this liberal faith tradition of ***“free thought”*** and ***“open dialogue”***) I passionately believe that:

**[THE FOLLOWING IS PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREENS]**

No matter what the issue, goal, or controversy that is before us as Unitarian Universalists, our core values demand that we must always:

- encourage genuine debate and open dialogue...
- defend free-speech...
- employ reason and logic...
- express toleration for perspectives that differ from our own...
- and keep our minds open to the truths that others see.

This is why I (and many others) have expressed ourselves widely -- both within the UUA and the Ministers Association -- in defense of Rev. Eklof's right to publish his book and share his perspectives -- EVEN THOUGH THEY DIRECTLY (AND RATHER-POINTEDLY) CHALLENGE AND CONTRADICT THE PREVAILING PARADIGM OF "**ANTI-RACISM WORK**" THAT NOW SEEMS TO HOLD SWAY OVER SO MUCH OF THE LEADERSHIP OF OUR ASSOCIATION. I think it is outrageous and dangerous for Unitarian Universalists (historically committed -- as we have been -- to freedom of speech and expression) to be "**censuring,**" "**shaming**" (and, yes, outright "**bullying**") one another for sincerely expressed beliefs and ideas that question what has become "**The Prevailing Ideology.**"

**[PAUSE...]**

But, with all this said, let me now pause...and take **one-step-back** -- from my own very strong and impassioned opinions here. Let me see if I can't try understand how those who disagree with me (and Rev. Eklof) about anti-racism methodology have gotten to the place where they feel it is morally necessary to try to censure and silence dissenting voices.

To do so, I need to draw your attention to the "**7 Principles**" of Unitarian Universalism that we have printed this morning (as we do every Sunday) on the front cover of your order of service. You will notice that Principles 1, 2, 6, and 7 (in particular...a majority of the seven) are focused on **our core religious and moral responsibility to ensure that human beings everywhere are affirmed, protected, empowered, and treated with justice, equality and respect.** These four principles in particular are the foundation of our centuries-old Unitarian Universalist commitment to social justice and equality...and they drive our work to create genuine justice and equality for all marginalized people today. So it should not surprise anyone that in these early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (as the continued dehumanization and marginalization of many minority groups has become apparent to everyone paying attention) that Unitarian Universalists (along with other progressive voices) have led the way in speaking up in this culture, demanding that things must change, and must change **RADICALLY** and **NOW**. As I said at the beginning of the sermon, our faith tradition -- because of its centuries-old belief in "**the inherent worth and dignity of all persons**" and the moral goal of "**justice, equity and compassion**" for all -- understandably wants to work to undo the unjust dynamics of "**white supremacy and privilege**" and work toward the creation of a social order where everyone has equal access to full human dignity, respect and opportunity. I "**get it**" when colleagues of mine (most especially many my "younger" colleagues who are really impassioned about this cultural struggle) say that we UUs (who...as I have said...are mostly "white" and mostly "privileged") must listen (and listen intensely) to

the experience and pain of all marginalized people...and then work to radically change racial dynamics both within Unitarian Universalism and the culture at large.

But – and this is a huge and important **“BUT”** -- I believe this moral commitment to building a social order of true justice and equality must always be done within the bounds of what I call our “process” and “procedural” principles – specifically numbers three, four and five...which are intellectually anchored by principle # 4 -- the promise that Unitarian Universalists make to one another to always pursue **“a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.”**

**[PICTURE AND CAPTION OF DR. EARL MORSE WILBUR IS PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREENS]**



Dr. Earl Morse Wilbur 1888-1956

**Our faith tradition is built on three timeless, bedrock affirmations: “Freedom, Reason, and Tolerance”**

A few weeks ago (in a sermon on the dangers of living in a **“post-truth”** society) I shared that in his 1945 classic history of Unitarianism, Harvard Professor Earl Morse Wilbur summarized the foundations of our 500-year-old liberal faith as being built on **three timeless, bedrock intellectual (and moral) affirmations: “Freedom, Reason, and Tolerance.”** Unitarianism (he wrote) has always been (and must remain!) a religious movement that insists that we systematically employ:

- our **“freedom”** (freedom from dogma, ideology, and creed)...
- our God-given **“reason”** (to always use logic and our mind’s reasoning power to live and think wisely) ... and
- our **“tolerance”** (always in defense of diversity of human thought, expression and being)

in our unending quest for truth, goodness and understanding – both within ourselves and the society at large.

For our entire 500-plus-year history as a free faith tradition, we have always insisted on doing the work of religion (and ethics...and social justice) in **an open, inclusive and dialogic way**. And (as I have already said) the painful conflict we are now experiencing within Unitarian Universalism has arisen not so much about precisely **WHERE** we want to **END UP** (in terms of social justice as a faith community) but more (the all-important) **HOW** we will get there!

**[PICTURE AND CAPTION OF EARLE MORSE WILBUR COMES DOWN OFF CHANCEL SCREENS]**

Let me say all this a bit more colloquially. Given who we are as a liberal faith community -- historically-committed to freedom of expression and belief -- it matters profoundly (and morally!) **HOW** (together)

we journey toward *“The Promised Land!”* If – on our way to seeking the most perfect social order we can imagine -- we **violate, trample or ignore** our long-standing core operating principles:

- **FREEDOM...**
- **REASON...**
- **TOLERANCE...**
- **INCLUSION...**

then we will never, ever successfully arrive in *“the land of milk and honey”* of which we dream. What I fear is happening within the Unitarian Universalist Association today is that the advocates for this rigid *“anti-racism”* approach that is now in favor seem to believe that the *“ENDS”* (the goal of true and total racial equality) justify the *“MEANS”* (censuring, scolding, and trying to silence anyone and everyone who is uncomfortable with any aspect of this new institutional paradigm and dares to speak up). I passionately believe that without sacrificing or muting any of our lofty social justice GOALS, we can still faithfully honor our Unitarian Universalist commitment to **DOING** religion in an open, inclusive and reasoned way. I, for one, refuse to choose between LOFTY GOALS and SOUND PROCESS.

Let me say this EVEN MORE COLLOQUIALLY! 30 years ago, a parishioner in Plainfield new jersey gave me a humorous gift for my office...

**[PICTURE AND CAPTION OF FIRE HYDRANT IS PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREENS]**



**PLEASE CURB YOUR DOGMA!**

A Two-foot red-plastic high fire hydrant which simply said, *“PLEASE CURB YOUR DOGMA!”* This is what I am passionately saying to my UU colleagues -- and Unitarian Universalism as a whole. In all matters (spiritual, ethical, moral, social political) **PLEASE CURB YOUR DOGMA!** Resist the dangerous temptation to be certain that **YOUR** approach (to truth and goodness) is the **ONLY** approach to truth and goodness. Please...remain true (even in these demanding times) to our 500 year commitment (as the free church) to argument, dialogue, and inclusion.

This is my passionate “bottom line” this morning, dear friends. Unitarian Universalists -- committed as we are to *“a free and responsible search for truth and meaning”* that affirms *“the inherent worth and dignity of every person”* -- have always distinguished ourselves – from other dogmatic and rigid faith traditions, which have felt free to trample reason, science, and intellectual dialogue. As important as our current *“Anti-Racism”* and *“Multi-Cultural”* work is (and however appealing it is to come to quick working agreements as to how to proceed) we must never surrender our commitment to respect and honor the differing perspectives that always come with our open (and therefore necessarily diverse!) approaches to religious and moral matters. I want (with all my Unitarian Universalist brothers and



sisters) to reach ***“The Promised Land”*** of full racial justice and social equality...**but I want to get there without trampling the principles of freedom of speech (and genuine inclusion of everyone’s thinking.**

So let me – in conclusion – return to addressing our visitors and newcomers this morning. Despite our recent denominational struggles involving our ***“anti-racism”*** and ***“multi-cultural”*** work (that I have just spelled out in painful detail) I can promise you that in **THIS** Unitarian Universalist congregation there will always be room for your most deeply held personal beliefs and perspectives – even if they are a minority viewpoint. Here in this liberal religious community, we will always strive to show you respect and consideration for what your heart and mind tell you is important, right and true. It’s a hard journey sometimes -- this open and inclusive approach to important issues. But (ultimately) this is the only way we Unitarian Universalists can do religion...and we welcome any and all to this (open) and complicated journey.

Amen.