

## In the Center of the Storm Sermon September 2019

### In Defense of Liberal Religion Rev. Rick Davis

Lately, I've become aware, yet again, that I do have my fair share of flaws, and honesty and humility compel me to share some of mine with you a bit at a time, lest you fall prey to any illusions that clergy, gurus, rabbis, imams and other spiritual leaders are a cut above the rest of humankind – which a VERY dangerous illusion that has too often had dire and destructive consequences. So today, the shortcoming I will acknowledge, as I have before, is that I tend to be conflict avoidant. Actually, I see this as a strength in many instances because many potential conflicts can and should be avoided because they only cause harm and don't serve any meaningful purpose. Yet some conflicts are necessary and I don't like that, darn it. (In the fifth grade I was punished for saying that – “darn it,” so forgive me if that was too much for you to handle.)

Well, the universe appears to have taken note of my pronounced reluctance to engage in conflict and has put me in a place where I am now in the midst of the biggest one of my professional life – apparently, so I can have yet another opportunity to grow. This makes me think that the powers that be, call them what you will (I call this the “sacred mystery”), has a great sense of humor. “Thought you could run from all conflict, did you? Well think again...”

Let me tell you about this conflict because it actually involves all of us, although this has nothing to do with any internal congregational conflict here. It has to do with the larger Unitarian Universalist Association to which our congregation belongs.

Where to begin? There are many entrance ramps I could take, but I'll make it personal so you'll understand why I am so directly involved and why I believe it will be a good thing, eventually, for Unitarian Universalism. A few years ago when I was at a ministers' gathering a male colleague I scarcely knew made a comment in a large gathering which was mis-heard (I confirmed this later), and he was instantly attacked by another colleague for his sexism. There is, indeed much good in choosing our words carefully so as not to unwittingly cause harm. In this case, however, he hadn't actually said anything wrong or harmful. Nevertheless many seemed to assume that he had, and he felt humiliated and ostracized.

Especially because of an official role I play in the UU minister's association I felt called to reach out to him. I am what is known as a “Good Officer” – a position I've been elected to by my colleagues four separate times over the years. Briefly, our role as Good Officers is to be with ministerial colleagues during times of distress to offer them support and counsel. So I reached out to this minister and I also brought this matter to the leaders of our ministers' chapter to contend that such treatment was not fair. They agreed that it wasn't, but the damage was done. He no longer feels welcome or safe at our gatherings and no longer attends. I can't blame him. I've seen the same thing happen to others in UU settings as well – too many times. I have been told that this is fierce love that speaks truth to power. Maybe we need “fierce love” sometimes, but too often I have witnessed the fierce but not the love - It feels punitive, vindictive, gratuitously cruel – not a good learning environment for spiritual growth.

Afterwards I periodically checked in on this minister to see how he was doing, and we struck up a friendship. I soon came to admire him for his intelligence, warmth and integrity and his steadfast commitment to social justice. Prior to entering the ministry he was fired from his previous job because of his stance in favor of marriage equality for Gays and Lesbians. He has also been active in challenging racial injustice and environmental harm – he’s about as liberal and progressive as they come.

During my conversations with this minister, the Rev. Dr. Todd Eklof in Spokane, we shared our misgivings about a disturbing trend that is occurring not only in our religious association but in many liberal circles and organizations: As one lay member of our association has written: “Unitarian Universalism is falling victim to a larger national trend of liberals silencing and publicly shaming other liberals who present critiques of a very specific version of (rigid, dogmatic approaches to social justice). This trend has had a chilling effect on open and honest discussions around the difficult and crucial question of how to best balance equality and individual freedom (both within Unitarian Universalism, as well as society at large).” This trend is especially concerning coming as it does when we have a morally unfit, master of mendacity in the White House who is openly racist, nativist, anti-environmentalist who poses a threat to our democracy and the well being of all of us. I’m reminded of the Monty Python movie “The Life of Brian” set during time of Jesus where the two groups seeking liberation from the Roman Empire spend all their energy squabbling with one another instead of undermining Roman rule.

Here’s a prime example of what Todd and I and many others are questioning: First, let me say that it’s important that the issue of racial injustice within our association and beyond be seriously examined and alleviated – that is a good thing. This is one of the reasons I am a Unitarian Universalist. We have a history of advocating for racial justice. However, the approach leaders in our associations are taking is, according to many, not the most effective. For example, the leadership of our association is insisting that we acknowledge our association to be a “white supremacist” organization – not in the sense that we support white supremacy but in the sense that we, like most institutions in our country, unconsciously embody systemic racist practices, which I think is true. If I were a person of color I imagine I could see that more clearly. Indeed, the evil institution of slavery and racist ideology has profoundly shaped American culture in ways that we are only beginning to recognize and need to recognize. Yet characterizing the UUA as “white supremacist”- as the leaders of our association do - sends the wrong signal, internally and externally. When people hear this they naturally think that we are saying that we promote white supremacy, not that we unwittingly embody white supremacist culture and systemic racism in our congregations and need to learn how to become aware of this and change it. Yet I also think we unconsciously embody other harmful things – like classism – that also deserve our attention.

Furthermore, our association has been promoting anti-racist workshops that many feel are counter productive and have led more to feelings of spiritually paralyzing shame instead of leading to spiritual transformation. Instead of appealing to love as a motivator for change – a love which can lead to awareness and genuine feelings of remorse, these workshops, according the testimony of many UU’s, come across as an angry demand for change, without clear guidelines as to how to actually bring this about. So people often leave feeling resentful instead of enlightened.

In response to this some proponents of the current approach that say that those who question it are showing their “white fragility” and displaying their reluctance to give up their “white privilege”. Maybe sometimes this is true, but listen to what Buddhist practitioner Claire Greenwood has to say about renunciation: “the key mistake I made during my monastic career was the belief that renunciation is supposed to hurt...that it can be compelled from the outside in, rather than the inside out. I believed I could will myself to renounce. But renunciation comes from understanding, not force. Renunciation ...clears away the psychological clutter in our lives that get in the way of joy.” I think many of us UU’s are at a place in our spiritual journeys where we feel motivated to renounce white privilege not because someone tells us we have to but because of our love for those who are marginalized.

There are a variety of programs for becoming aware of and dismantling the unconscious racist structures that pervade religious communities and society in general, and I think the UUA should consider alternatives that will be more effective and transformative, yet the UUA is currently promoting a model that feels more like political re-education camp than opportunities for deepening spiritual awareness. The Black UU theologian Thandeka has characterized these as “race campaigns” that are filled with “rancor and anger, divisive strategies and devastating conquests.” Similarly black feminist Loretta Ross has written that “call out culture is toxic” and that “there are better ways to do social justice work.” I think so.

Then there’s this: Here in Oregon, which has a racist history that originally did not allow blacks even to reside here, we have a very low black population but a significantly growing Hispanic one, yet it seems that there is no recognition in the UUA that different regions are called to address racial inequality in different ways in our different contexts.

Last winter Todd sent me a rough draft of some of his reflections critiquing the leadership of our association which struck me as honest and insightful. Little did I know what was to come! It so happened that the annual General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association was in Spokane, where Todd serves as the minister of the UU Church of Spokane. Thousands of UU’s would be right there at his doorstep. At this assembly in June he distributed free copies of this essay and two others in a self-published book entitled: “The Gadfly Papers: Three Inconvenient Essays by One Pesky Minister.” Such a charming, innocuous sounding title.

The night before he distributed his book he reflected upon the momentous step he was about to take and felt considerable anxiety, but he realized that if he did not take advantage of this rare opportunity to share his honest views with fellow UU’s he would be remiss in his ministerial calling. So he decided to do what his conscience bid him do, however severe the consequences. Little did he realize how severe they would be.

The Gadfly Papers has gone on to become the number one seller among Unitarian Universalists and has gotten quite a few positive four and five star reviews from members, but the response he got at the General Assembly from the UUA and five hundred of his fellow ministers was severely critical. The book was quickly characterized as “racist, homophobic, transphobic and ableist” (without citing a single passage in the book to back that up). In fact, many who have now read it are scratching their heads wondering if perhaps his harsh critics had read a different book.

This was just the beginning – during that tumultuous General Assembly white Unitarian Universalist clergy quickly crafted a letter condemning the book and directly suggested that Todd is not fit for our ministry. Furthermore, they strongly recommended that people not read the book which, of course, has had the opposite effect. Lesson: never tell a UU NOT to read a book, unless you actually want them to read it. (This harsh, judgmental letter from these 500 white UU clergy – which has no hint of compassion or love in it - is a public document posted online should you care to read it).

As soon as I became aware of all of this I had my own moment of anxious moral reckoning – I felt much more fear than I did last summer when I was arrested with other clergy in front of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) for blocking their entrance to protest their unjust treatment of asylum seekers. Yet my conscience directly informed me that I had to act, regardless of the consequences. I emailed Todd just before he was to preach to his own congregation the following Sunday and I asked him read a short note from me stating that although 500 of my colleagues had condemned this book, 1200 of us (there are about 1700 UU clergy in North America) had not spoken and I did not know what the others thought but I supported his freedom of conscience and expression and thought he was a courageous minister. I told him to be sure to speak my name from his pulpit. He did. This sermon was live streamed to the outside world. I did this because I could not let my brother, this very fine minister, face this wrath all alone. I sort of felt like Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn when he helps the escaped slave Jim even though he has been taught that this will lead to his eternal damnation - "alright then, I'll go to hell." In my case it wasn't eternal hell I feared, but facing the same damnation by my many colleagues that Todd was facing.

Todd accepted my offer to serve as his Good Officer through this whole ordeal, which continues. One important aspect of the Good Officer role is to defend the liberal ministry. That is what I honestly believe I am doing – defending the liberal (free faith) ministry and beyond that, defending liberal religion, especially our right to dissent, to challenge whatever orthodoxy might be in vogue.

Late last month Todd and I were forewarned by a member of the board of the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association that they were about to publicly censure him, which they did. We were dismayed and stunned. I don't know how Todd felt after this conversation but I was overwhelmed with fear and wondered: "Am I next?" and I threw up – in my truck. Yet after "losing my cookies" I felt much better and figured I would be OK even if I was censured. After all, Todd is doing fine now, although he is generally distressed that such a thing could ever occur in our free faith tradition – this condemnation and censure for writing and distributing a book that many UU's have come to appreciate. Implicitly, this condemnation and censure apply not just to Todd and myself but to I daresay thousands of Unitarian Universalists who question current approaches to dismantling racism and other forms of oppression. I'd call this a "code red" situation that indicates that something has gone terribly awry in our association.

I have been advised more than once by sympathetic colleagues that I am going to lose ministerial relationships because of my stand – and that news has shaken me. Yet as I ponder more deeply I realize that if I did not speak out honestly in this matter I would become estranged from myself for not speaking out as my conscience so clearly bids me do.

So out of loyalty to my own conscience, my ministerial calling, to you - the members and friends of this beloved congregation, to the heart of our free faith tradition which affirms our freedom of conscience and expression, and to my good friend Todd – this loyalty and my love for everyone compels me to speak honestly to challenge authoritarian, dogmatic trends in our association.

Notice that I said that I am speaking “honestly” – I did not say “truthfully”. Todd made me aware of the philosophical distinction between honesty and truth. Just because you honestly feel something to be true doesn’t mean that it is true. I do think what I say is true, but it may not be. I could be wrong, but I will be honestly wrong. The fear of being wrong keeps too many people silent. When we are rendered silent we cannot be in true, dialogical covenant.

I have been tempted to follow my usual inclination to avoid conflict – yet I am not choosing this path of retreat – I am choosing the path of conflict – or rather, as one friend puts it – “care-frontation” - because I think honest conflict, if we can stay within the covenant bonds of love (and that’s not going to be easy), is what is needed in our larger association. I am not speaking of a conflict of egos and opinions in which one side wins and the other loses – rather, a healthy and honest, wisely facilitated dialogue which results in deeper understanding for all.

Let me end – finally – with a quote from a wonderful minister, the Rev. Robin Bartlett: "The motto at my church is that we can do hard things. Because we love one another \*because of\* our ideological and theological differences, not in spite of them. Listening to understand each other has brought us closer..."

May it be so.