

## **A Language of Hurt and Healing**

*sermon by Rev. Ken Jones, delivered May 14, 2017*

*This work is shared under a Creative Commons agreement<sup>1</sup>*

(C Travers at dealership)

I want to begin today with these words from Rev. Dr. Rosemary Bray McNatt, President of Starr King School for Ministry, the Unitarian Universalist seminary in Berkeley where I studied some twenty years ago:

*We are all well aware of our dire national situation—we talk about it, and as a minister I have been preaching about it in venues all over the country. People across the political spectrum consider the election a major disruption to all that they know and have experienced. For some of us the recent electoral change has been less disruptive than for others, but all of us feel it. What hasn't been as clear until recently, I think, is the ripple effect—the reality that one major disruptive event might lead to others. I believe we are being called to review—even disrupt—major institutions which, up to now, have connected and supported many of us, even as they have hurt and drained others.*

*That's what's happening in Unitarian Universalism right now. We have been presented with the gulf between what we say we believe and what we actually do, and the dissonance between the two is painful and dislocating. As people of faith, we know that, to some degree, this is part of the human condition. Our varied religious traditions are meant to help us acknowledge and close the gap between what our hearts long for and what they settle for. In these days, however, even our faith traditions disappoint us at the very moment we need them most.*

I'm going to pause in my extended quote from Rosemary to acknowledge that these are strong words – “our faith traditions disappoint us at the very moment we need them most.” Like many of you, after the disappointing election last November, and even more as we saw the reckless actions of the new administration confirm many of our worst fears, one silver lining might have been that we may be finding a new strength and purpose for Unitarian Universalism. People like me exclaimed from this pulpit that now may be the time when our world needs us the most – needs our message of justice, equity, and compassion in all our relations.

Then, over the last several weeks, those who follow the goings on of the larger UU world have witnessed – or taken part in – some of the most difficult conversations we've had as a faith tradition. At least for my thirty years as a part of it. At the end of March the President of our Association abruptly resigned with only three months left in his six-year term, ostensibly over a controversial hiring decision in one of our field staff positions. This decision, many claimed, was indicative of an ongoing and deeply-rooted attachment to the structures of white supremacy in the UUA and in our larger society. I'm not going to go into any of the details of this decision or of its aftermath this morning – for those of you who are interested in knowing more, there is a plethora of information and opinions floating around in the world of blogs and social media; though for the most objective reporting on our affairs I recommend the quasi-independent media of UU journalism, the UU World magazine and website.

Rosemary continues:

*The conversations going on in Unitarian Universalism right now about the power of white supremacy and white privilege to keep us separate from one another are real, painful, even dangerous. In particular, people of color and indigenous people who love our faith are risking their professional futures to speak out about how hard and how damaging it can be to keep faith with a religious tradition that has its roots in white supremacy. That is not an accusation; it is a fact. Our American Unitarian and Universalist past was built by people who believed in the superiority of European Americans to the exclusion of others, and who helped to create structures to support those beliefs.*

So again, strong words. And words that some believe have the power to inflict tremendous damage; others believe they are the only path to healing. I think they are both.

One of the strongest phrases in this passage is “white supremacy.” Particularly as it is applied to our beloved institution of liberal religion, the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations. Many of us wince at these words, especially in this context. How can our liberal religion, which is open to everybody and affirms and promotes the inherent worth and dignity of every human being; whose history is infused with martyrs and saints in the anti-slavery and pro-civil rights movement, be considered “white supremacist?” That is a question I’d like to spend some time on this morning.

One of the main points I intend to make about language like this is it can feel either hurtful or healing – or maybe both at the same time – depending, mostly, on one’s point of view and experiences. But I’d also make a secondary point – which I’m here making first – that the form in

which potentially problematic language is used makes a difference, too. One very painful thing I've seen in the last few weeks are numerous instances in which I feel some of my UU colleagues are treating other UU colleagues with a level of disrespect that I've not seen before in my three decades in Unitarian Universalism. Maybe that's just my experience; maybe I've been blind to so many different forms of micro aggressions for so long that I'm only now seeing what was in plain sight before. While I admit that that may be a part of it, I also believe that the quality of our discourse is one of the "ripple" effects to which Dr. McNatt referred. The ground on which we converse – as a nation – has exploded with the force of an 8.0 magnitude earthquake over the last couple decades. That quake was triggered by the expansion of social media, blogs, and instant electronic communication. This has affected our national politics, to be sure, as Twitter has replaced, for many people, more thoughtful and thorough media for intelligent and respectful conversation. I think this earthquake has affected the Unitarian Universalist world, too, in ways that we don't yet fully understand. There's an old saying that if you put ten different UUs in a room, you'll have at least twenty different opinions on any subject. To that I'd add, if you give each of the ten a smart phone and a twitter account, you'll wind up with a hundred different opinions.

An alternative, of course, to everybody spouting off their latest opinions about what so-and-so said or did at every chance they get – because everyone knows that to keep an audience in any of these media you have to constantly feed them something – is to slow down, listen more deeply, and engage in true, old-fashioned, human to human communicative relationship. That is what we can do in this human-scale religious

community: engage with one another in thoughtful communication that is not aimed primarily at communicating, but more importantly at relationship building. I think this may be one reason why my friend, fellow white male Minister, and the UUA's Pacific Western Region lead staff person, Rev. James Kubal-Komoto, recently announced he is taking a sabbatical from facebook for awhile. I think there's wisdom in that.

The use of the term "white supremacy" in Dr. McNatt's passage is intentional. As I said, I want to unpack that a bit, but in order to do so, I need to hold up for a minute another term that is popular with academic sociologists but hasn't fully entered popular consciousness. That term is "white fragility." This refers to a state of being that many white people live in, in which they don't have to reckon with the realities of racism – either historic or novel – in their daily lives. So they – we – get used to this reality. Then when someone comes along or something happens that confronts us with the reality of racism, we get defensive. Indeed, I have become convinced that one of the worst implications you can make about a white person – especially a well-educated white liberal, like so many who populate UU churches – is that he or she is racist. Now, I don't think most well-educated white liberals are "racists" in the classic definition of that term, which is rooted in the person's intentions. But if a white person is quietly going along within the confines of a system or institution that operates according to the norms of white supremacy, it is quite possible that a person of color may feel as if that white person is part of a racist structure. If the person of color says that, white fragility predicts that the white person will likely react defensively, dismissively, or with righteous indignation as if his or her very integrity is being called into question.

Another clarifying term that is helpful in understanding the sensitivity to the term “white supremacy” is the more benign-sounding “white privilege.” I know I’m not alone as a white person who feels more comfortable with this term than with “white supremacy.” Sure, I can, and often do, admit that I live with an undeserved privilege that comes to me because of the color of my skin and my cultural background. I can accept that term as a part of my experience without taking responsibility for it, for I can be a passive recipient of this privilege. It’s easy that way. The term “white supremacy” implies a more active attitude or collusion on my part, and hearing it named, especially for an institution to which I’m so attached like Unitarian Universalism, touches on my white fragility.

But here’s the thing: white privilege would not exist without white supremacy, would it? It’s not like I wake up every morning and figure out how I’m going to prove the supremacy of my race that day, but as long as I continue to tolerate a system – nay, even *benefit* from a system – that bestows upon me a privilege I don’t deserve, and in turn erects barriers to others as equally or more deserving than me, aren’t I in effect *participating* in a system of white supremacy? Aren’t I, by association and conscious choice, a white supremacist?

Yes, I do admit to being uncomfortable with this term, particularly applied within my beloved religious community. I admit that I had some defensive reactions when I heard it bandied about in the wake of the recent UUA controversy. But I’ve also been challenged by many of my co-religionists of color – and their white allies – to take a more courageous look at this system and my role in it. To wit, the informal collective known as Black Lives of Unitarian Universalism, which formed a few years ago as

a sort of UU extension of the Black Lives Matter movement, put out a call to all UU congregations to conduct a “White Supremacy Teach-in” in late April or early May this year. I don’t feel up to conducting a “teach-in” with you all, but this is why I’ve chosen this topic for my sermon this Mother’s Day Sunday, and I’m hoping it will kindle lots of other conversations. Grappling with this is work that takes a long time.

Like I said, I’ve felt some resistance in me, and I want to be honest about that. Lots of this has taken me back to when I was in seminary twenty-plus years ago – back then, the term we wrestled with was “racism,” and its tangents, “anti-racism,” “anti-oppression,” and “multi-culturalism.” Starr King at that time had just hired two new faculty members of color, amidst some controversy, and was a leading force in Unitarian Universalism in promoting cultural change away from our inherited racist institutions. I was more of a young firebrand back then, though just as white, male, middle-class, straight, etc., so I eagerly jumped onto the “anti-racist, anti-oppression, multi-cultural” bandwagon. I did so noticing and wondering why many of my more seasoned colleagues seemed reluctant to do so. Now, twenty years later, I seem to be on the other side of the fence: the more seasoned – or maybe just older – white male who groans and says “Not this again! We went through all this before!”

Of course it is “this again,” only this time, as each time before, with an opportunity to go a little deeper, and more closely reach the elusive goal of a truly beloved community with peace, liberty, and justice for all. Twenty years ago at Starr King, I learned how the UUA had gone through a similar process some thirty years before that – a conflict that may have been even more troubling than the one we’re in now. Through a series of meetings in

1968 and 1969, the UUA promised then withdrew considerable financial support for a group of black leaders, leading them and their allies to literally walk out of a General Assembly meeting, and prompting many long-time UUs of color to leave our association, most of them for good.

To paraphrase the Buddha, I'll say "pay attention to those who you find yourself in conflict with, for they are your greatest teachers." I believe that if we are smart, and pay attention to our fellow religionists of color who are rocking the boat right now, we may learn something important. To be a white person and be confronted with the reality of white supremacy in my community, my culture, and even my church is a wake-up call; a call to question all I thought I knew and an opportunity to begin to envision a different future. I don't think we are only being called to dismantle the culture of white supremacy – once we tug at one of the cards in this house we find the others: male supremacy, American supremacy, straight supremacy, cis-gendered supremacy, English-speaking supremacy, Christian supremacy, able-bodied supremacy, the list goes on. What we're really being asked to dismantle is the *culture of supremacy* – where those who most closely fit into the mold of the dominating culture assimilate into that culture and its dominance by acquiescence. And Unitarian Universalism, and this church, are deeply immersed in this culture of supremacy.

I ask you to consider what this church – at least its building – may look like to, for example, people living in this neighborhood. This area is populated mostly by people of fairly limited economic means: many immigrants, Spanish-speaking people, agricultural workers with little safety net benefits, people who mostly rent their residences, sometimes packing a



large family into a rather small dwelling. I can imagine that when someone who fits this description walks into this church, with its foreboding front entryway and massive columns, the cavernous sanctuary with the stained-glass windows, and a small crowd of fairly well-educated white people with few visible signs of their own struggles in life, that person may feel as though she or he has stepped into an exposition of supremacy – be it white supremacy or some other kind. Sure, none of us here may have that intention, and we may not even notice it because it seems so “normal” to us – but is it possible that others who don’t fit into the cultural mold defined by white supremacy might see our church differently?

I thought of this too a couple weeks ago when our maintenance guru, Scott, and I, at the request of our staff and Board, put up some plywood barriers under the steps leading up to the northeast corner of this building. This was done, I’m sure you can imagine, because the space under these steps is a place in which homeless people sometimes hang out, and, unfortunately, sometimes leave messes or damage behind. As I worked on this project, I took a minute to study the area under these steps, which is just a closet-sized spot of bare dirt ground, covered on the top and two sides by concrete and old wooden steps. It didn’t look like a very inviting place to me, but then I thought how a place like that could be a life-saving haven for someone less fortunate than me. Then I thought to myself: what gives me the right to erect a barrier to keep others out? Who made it my decision to do this? Why do I – or we, in this case – get to decide where the most vulnerable among us find refuge?

The answer is unsettling: white supremacy. I – and I’d venture to guess, most white males like me – inherit a life in which we have a

significant amount of control over our immediate surroundings. We claim pieces of ground and decide who or what happens there; we habitually behave according to standards that are seldom called into question; we have taken for granted that our integrity and innocence are presumed unless and until we make a grave violation. Others – people of color, women, people outside the mainstream imperialist culture, people with disabilities, people who don't fit the mold – often they are presumed guilty or unworthy unless they can somehow prove otherwise. Our recent national election demonstrated this with precise clarity, and that message was not lost on those on the other side.

This is not just a culture of privilege; this is a culture of supremacy. It is not just presumed that some of us are granted some undeserved benefits because of the color of our skin – though that is true. It is, more accurately, a culture in which some of us are assumed superior to others, and many, many people – even those who've been able to break through some of these prejudices – have to live everyday in a world in which they are regularly reminded they are the lesser ones.

This brings me back to the quote from Dr. McNatt: *We can't change that past; we can only change our future together.*

The starting point of this change, our future together is to listen. Listen with respect and an assumption of integrity. Listen with an open mind, even if what we hear makes us feel uncomfortable. In that discomfort may lie the greatest teaching and healing we've ever been offered. It is a teaching that is likely particularly relevant, as Wendell Berry's poem reminded us, to Anglo-Saxon Protestant Heterosexual Men. But I believe it is relevant to all of us as well. All of us who have become

complacent in a broken society; fearful of change in a world that needs not just gentle reforms, but to be turned upside down.

Yes, what we're seeing in the UU world is a ripple effect of the tremendous – tremendous! – upheaval our nation and world could be going through right now. As Dr. McNatt said, “our faith traditions disappoint us at the very moment we need them most.” That’s a painful realization, and I want you all to know that I share that pain with you. But I also believe we can make the inverse of this statement true – that maybe now is the time that our faith tradition needs us the most; needs us to not retreat in the face of uncomfortable truths or historically unfinished business. Our faith tradition – as well as our world, our nation, and our community – needs us to be ever-diligent in speaking truth to power, and doing so with love and compassion in our hearts. We can do this, people; we can enter the realm of vulnerability and pain, and as a community held together by covenant, walk a healing path.



Sermons by [Rev. Ken Jones](#) are licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License](#).