

Whose “We?”

*sermon by Rev. Ken Jones, delivered September 22, 2019
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In 1995, over twenty years ago, I went to the Unitarian Universalist General Assembly for the second time – the first had been just the year before. I mention 1995 today for two reasons: one, that that year it was held in Spokane, Washington, just as the annual meeting of the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations was this year, and two, that that year, when I was a mere lad of 33, I was recruited to serve on a task force for that was charged with planning special events for a “Young Adult Focus Day.” This was before I went to seminary, when I had little experience in the larger UU world and leading worship events, so it was a big deal (to me, anyway) that I was up on stage on several different occasions, including the opening ceremonies, the first-ever youth to young adult bridging ceremony held at GA, and in a play about the influence of young people in Unitarian and Universalist history. That was quite an exciting experience for a young man as I was, anticipating a new career in professional ministry.

I thought about that experience this past June when I was back at the convention center in Spokane – along with many of you – for the 2019 General Assembly, which, by my count, was number 57 for the UUA. Of course a lot has changed over the past 24 years – including a massive expansion of the Spokane Convention center – and many changes to the way General Assemblies are conducted, the technology used at such events, and the demographics of people who attend them. I’m probably old

enough to qualify for making this a “back in my day” sermon, about my yearning for my youthful experiences with a younger UUA – but I hope what I say doesn’t come across that way. Still, recognizing that my own perspective has changed over the last two decades as much as anything else, I was nevertheless struck by how different this GA felt than the one in 1995.

And of course, I could say the same thing about the difference between this year and even a few years ago, but for today, I’m focusing on the trajectory our Unitarian Universalist Association has gone through since we last met in Spokane. I’ve actually been to about a dozen GAs over the last couple decades, so incremental changes are less noticeable. In that sense, comparing this year’s to 1995’s is helpful.

So yes, to start – my perspective has indeed changed. No longer a young, eager, thirty-something about to embark on a new career in professional ministry, this year I attended as a relatively seasoned older white guy with a graying beard. This was also a working General Assembly for me, but rather than basking in the glow of a Young Adult Focus Day up on stage, I volunteered as part of the GA’s Right Relations Team. The RRT is relatively new, and exists “to listen to and engage with people who have experienced problems of oppression while at General Assembly.” Yes, for all the wonderful things many people say about General Assemblies, it is also true that many people do experience oppression there. I was drawn to this work both to enhance my professional skill-set in pastoral care and conflict restoration, and because I felt like it would give me some new insights to the ways people experience these gatherings,

especially experiences that are outside the main narrative of GA being a wonderful gathering of like-minded people. Not to say that main narrative isn't true, but it isn't the whole truth. Just like what I've learned about every Unitarian Universalist congregation I've been a part of over the past three decades: it isn't always easy or smooth being in community. We do sometimes fall short of our ideals, we do often hurt people.

I don't know if my first reason for volunteering – the professional development piece – was satisfied or not, but I certainly did get some new insights and experiences, which is primarily what I want to share with you today. I know many of you also went to Spokane last June, and some of you may have experienced something closer to that main narrative, and some of you have shared those experiences with others here who didn't get the chance to go, including last week from this pulpit. That's good. The experiences I'm sharing are from my vantage point of being a Right Relations Team member.

I began by relating to you my experience from the 1995 Spokane GA in part to illustrate not only the changes I've experienced since then, but the changes the Association and our international religious movement has been undergoing. I've come to believe that it was no accident that I found myself, twenty four years ago, suddenly cast up on stage as a sort-of spokesperson for a younger generation of Unitarian Universalists – that was a benefit that was bestowed upon me at least in part because I am a cis-gendered, able-bodied, straight white male – and I was not the only such person on our Young Adult Focus Day committee all those years ago. True, there were quite a few women on that committee, and even, as I

remember it, one woman of color. (Enid) But for the most part the committee looked a lot like a stereotypical gathering of Unitarian Universalists of white, middle-class liberals with good intentions. Which also, I might add, matched my idea of what a General Assembly often looks like.

So maybe in some small way, my desire to serve on the Right Relations Team was a result of twenty four years of cumulative white guilt. I say that not to disparage white guilt at all – I think it can be a good, necessary thing to promote growth and help heal generational harm. In any case, serving in 2019 on the RRT was quite enlightening – it was chaired by two young women of color who were, like me in 1995, just embarking on careers in professional ministry, and the committee as a whole was made up of at least half people of color. In fact, I was the only white male in my age range. I went in to this work welcoming the experience of reporting to our committee co-chairs and learning from them and the collective wisdom of the team.

Indeed, I learned one lesson right from the start. During one of our pre-GA conference calls, one person on the team said something in passing about the way that General Assemblies are usually mostly white. An African-American woman on the team at that point noted the difference between demographic and structural norms. Just because, she said, the people who go to GA are mostly white, that doesn't mean that that is or should be the norm – the GA *itself* is not “mostly white.” It was a useful and powerful lesson in how words can be and often are heard differently by people of color or others, such as people with disabilities or transgender

individuals, than they are by the majority. We – all of us on the team – made a commitment then and there to strive to be conscious of our language in that way, to speak up when we hear another using language that may be hurtful, and to pay attention to those speaking from their personal experiences.

I also learned early on – in one of those pre-GA meetings – that historically the RRT most often hears complaints from white people, even though its stated purpose is to hear from those who “experience oppression.” That is evidence of what Beacon Press author Robin D’Angelo calls “white fragility,” and itself is the subject of another sermon. So it was that I listened to an elderly white man in a wheelchair complain that he was asked to leave a wheelchair-dedicated seating spot in the youth section, perhaps assuming that there are no young people in wheelchairs. I listened to another white man express frustration that he made an effort to attend a program listed in the program book as being sponsored by the Black Lives of UU collective in their dedicated space without knowing that their dedicated space was indeed dedicated to be for people of color, so he was not able to attend. And I listened to a white woman who revealed to me in the conversation that she lives with an invisible disability – mental illness – and that she felt threatened by a workshop leader who pressed her in asking if she knew anyone who suffered from mental illness in the context of a conversation about mentally ill people in prisons.

These are all complex situations, and one thing I learned from them is the term “right relationship” can be misleading. It is correct so long as the

emphasis is on relationship – there is such a thing as a right way to be in relationship, but seldom is there only one way to be right.

There's lots more I could share about particular experiences on the RRT, but for now I'd like to ask you to imagine how different these experiences I had at these two GAs might have been like – first one a young hot shot with a bright future standing in the spotlight, the second a more mature and perhaps more cynical elder who, as a straight, white, able-bodied, cis-gendered male might be among those who are feeling pushed out of his religious community or even the mainstream culture of his nation, in a role not as a showcase in the spotlight, but listening to those who feel left out. I want you to try to imagine that with me because I think it might be an accurate portrayal of how many of my white brothers feel these days – though I'm not asking for you to feel sorry for me or anyone else because of it. Our Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations is changing – at least in respect to what transpires every year at our annual gathering, if not in our local congregations – and no matter how we feel about the changes going on, we mustn't forget the eternal truth that change is hard.

If you happened to have attended the 1995 GA and then not another one until this year's, you'd probably be quite confused. You'd probably think that you're attending the meeting of an entirely different religious organization.

This also may be true for those of you who have never been to a General Assembly; if you were to go, you may be surprised at how different

it is from your local congregation – even this one. Yes, it's different in that there are thousands of people with all the latest high-tech media, but also different in focus. Lots of people who attend GA do so regularly, and it becomes in many ways their congregation; they feel a connection to others and the assembled body as their primary spiritual community. With the abilities inherent in social media these days, that is often the case, especially with younger people. I believe it may be more common too for people of color or others who maybe are in a significant minority in their local congregations – GA is a place where they see and can be seen with other UUs that are like them.

But it's not just the people who are different, what I saw especially this year is a different way for the GA to be conducted.

Many of you know that two years ago the UUA went through a hiring controversy, which is still alive today, long after our former President resigned in the middle of it. It had to do with a decision to hire a white male minister in a senior management position rather than a dedicated lay leader and woman of color. That was the trigger, but it soon became apparent to all of us who hadn't been paying attention before that even though the UUA has a relatively high percentage of People Of Color working for them, and even though we've had an African-American and Latinx President, our senior-level management positions are occupied disproportionately by white people, and our entry-level and support staff are disproportionately not white. To a significant and disturbing extent.

Disturbing, that is, if you believe a religion that preaches the inherent worth and dignity of every person, that fought the hard fights to end slavery, establish basic civil rights laws, and to be inclusive in all our affairs should practice what we preach and make sure that people of color are not tokenized into visibility in order to assuage our white guilt without actually empowering people of color to lead. What I noticed this year at General Assembly is we are making progress in this, to let people of color lead, and to lead in ways that they feel called to lead. It was confusing and maybe a bit shocking to many who are so used to what might wrongly be called “standard procedures” to see and experience things being done differently. Even that sacred cow of liberal religion’s process called Robert’s Rules of Order was called into question, and seen as a tool used to maintain white supremacist culture. The organizers had planned on the assembly spending less time in singular business meetings in which a relatively small number of people have the opportunity to speak into a microphone with a thousand listening, and more time engaging in small group conversation about how we might institute some of the changes we need in our association, in our congregation, and in our lives. Unfortunately for them, participants didn’t follow their plan and we wound up spending more time in business meeting and less time in small group conversation than they had scheduled. It was fascinating to watch, and I’m happy to testify that this now aging straight white cis-gendered able-bodied male is happy to step aside and let my siblings in faith take us where they know we need to go. Change is hard, yes; but nothing good, not even this faith that many of us

love so, would exist if it weren't for the willingness of our forebears to embrace change.

I can't talk about the 2019 General Assembly, nor my role on the Right Relations Team, without mentioning one symptom of white fragility that emerged. That symptom came in the form of some damaging pushback from a colleague of mine, another straight white cis-gendered male Minister, who happens to be the Minister of the Spokane congregation. He self-published a book – and distributed it free in the exhibit hall – that is critical of the changes the UUA is trying to implement following that hiring controversy. This was quickly brought to the attention of the Right Relations Team, especially from a whole slew of people of color who felt the book was hurtful and damaging to our movement. The controversy got kicked up to the General Assembly planning committee, who invited the author into some conversation about the harm that his actions were inflicting, but the author refused to participate in that conversation and so was asked to leave GA and to take the remaining copies of the book with him.

I'm not going to go into a critique or analysis of the book here, (letter) but I feel I need to bring it up to remind us of many of the difficulties living in community and living up to the promise of our faith entails. One such difficulty is finding how to balance the right of individuals to express themselves with the needs of the community when there's consensus on mission. Historically, I think it is fair to say that Unitarian Universalism has been skewed to the side of the individual in most cases, and perhaps one of the changes that we need to accept is our moving a little in the other

direction – to recognize the well-being of the community as equally and perhaps sometimes more precious than the right of the individual. That's not easy work to navigate, and I think all those in leadership positions in our association would benefit from our most heartfelt prayers and support.

The stated theme of this year's GA was "The Power of We," which I'm guessing was decided quite some time ago. As it turned out, I thought it was an appropriate theme, maybe not so much as a rallying cry for unity but as a question for careful reflection: what does the "power of we" mean? Whose "we" are we talking about? Who decides who is included – or not – in our "we?" If we don't at least attempt to answer these questions, but instead leap right into proclaiming and wielding the "power of we," we could wind up hurting lots of people.

I told the story about Lewis McGee today in part because it was a story I first heard, and re-told, years ago when I was that hopeful young man being thrust into the limelight at GA and other UU settings. I loved the story then, as I do now, about Rev. McGee's calling to UU ministry. But now I know a bigger truth – that in spite of his desire to minister in our movement in a way that maybe would have help transform us generations ago into a more diverse faith, we, those in power in our association, put roadblocks in his path because of the color of his skin. We need to accept this truth as our own if we want to transform ourselves into a faith that is desperately needed in the twenty-first century.

I've said before that I think the future of Unitarian Universalism lies in our seventh principle – affirming and promoting the interdependent web of

all existence, of which we are a part. My thinking is that that is what the world today so desperately needs: an ethic, a spirituality, a *religion* that upholds the sacred nature of the natural world and our place in it. (Climate strikes) After this GA, I have to admit I'm re-thinking this. For as much as I'd like to see that future, I've come to see that there's some more fundamental work to do, work that maybe more closely matches our first principle about the inherent worth and dignity of every person. This work, at least in the near term, is to fully live up to the promise of our faith by striving, I mean really, really striving, to build and embrace a faith community that is radically inclusive. We UUs often take pride in what we've done well in this regard – we've made tremendous strides in promoting the role of women in leadership, and to be fully inclusive of gay and lesbian people, for example. But we continue to struggle to make our communities fully welcoming for people of color, for transgender or gender non-binary people, and people who are differently abled, for example. We must continue this work, and continue to listen to those who, by result of history, are still left on the margins.

Malcolm X said that the most segregated hour in America is on Sunday morning, and we Unitarian Universalists have been a part of that segregation. Contrary to popular opinion, this segregation was and is no accident. It is the result of many deliberate choices of our ancestors, and continues through our complacency today. (Boat?) We can do better in building a real, diverse human community where all people are seen, heard, respected, and know they belong. It may seem like building a diverse UU community like this will have limited impact on our world, since

we are a relatively small religion. But it is precisely what the world needs now – true human communities that can and actually do dismantle white supremacy and all the other forms of oppression that we’ve inherited and maintain. More importantly, it is precisely what we need now. That is a calling for our time; the world needs us to do this work.

(Nametags)



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