

Justice and Equity – part 2

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Today, I want to continue on our theme of justice and equity and share more of my thoughts with you about moving ourselves and our UU culture to be more reflective of our goal of Beloved Community, where equity, inclusion, diversity, and justice are available to all. A reminder that this is a commitment for the long haul - no system of oppression, power, and harm can be righted, repaired, and restored to wholeness in a few simple steps, a couple of pieces of legislation, or a minimal investment of time and energy. But, the long-term nature of this work doesn't let us off the hook for what we can and must do now to take steps to implement our UU Eighth Principle - to dismantle systems of oppression. We know we have work to do.

Each of us experiences and interprets life from our own experience, location, and I am a cis-gendered, white woman who is educated and lives a middle-class lifestyle in a first world country, in an urban setting. Each of us must define the characteristics of our own world-view, so that we understand how our life circumstances frame and define our personal realities. We need to know what lenses and perspectives we see the world through.

Further, I am speaking primarily to those who, like me, share the perspective of those who are white-identified in our society. While I can develop empathy, while I can become more educated and aware, while I can seek to become an ally and support to those experiencing oppression, injustice, and inequality, I must remain aware of how my life provides a degree of privilege and protection against some existential turmoils as a result of my skin colour.

I am originally from Oregon, on the west coast of the United States. I've been in Canada for almost 14 years now, and am a dual citizen. It is my intent to make Canada my home for the rest of my life. I've known I wanted to be Canadian since my first visit to British Columbia as a child. I felt at home here - it seemed to me there was a different approach to life focused on the well-being of all of the

community instead of emphasizing the individual. Over the years, I learned more and continued to feel a pull toward this nation. As you know, I got the chance to come here as a Unitarian Minister in Hamilton. And, I haven't looked back.

I'm not unaware of Canada's history and challenges. When I got here, I was taken aback one day when someone said to me, "Aren't you glad you're not in the US anymore where they have all those awful race problems? We don't have those issues here." What?! Are you not aware of the history of your First Nations people? Have you never heard of the disproportionate number of people of colour in your prisons? In your courts? Dealing with your police? The statistics on who is economically disadvantaged in Canada?

When systems of privilege and oppression have been in place and practiced as long as white supremacy culture, it can become almost invisible to those it benefits. Actions that are positive for some and disempower others become the norm and we don't question the "rightness" of them anymore. We get lulled into thinking that it must be okay because it's the way we've "always" done it, thought about it, or experienced it.

So, yes, I am glad I'm not in the US anymore. But I'm also aware that we have work to do in Canada to address racial disparity, to redress years of abominable treatment of Indigenous and other people of colour. To create and carry out justice equitably and ensure that every Canadian enjoys a high quality of life.

Back to Oregon, for a moment. During its early years, the Oregon Territory had laws in place forbidding African Americans from settling there. They strove to keep out people of Asian heritage, as well. While these exclusionary provisions were reversed when Oregon became a state, the very "white" appearance of Oregon remained and is still demographically true today. It might interest you to know that Oregon was the western headquarters of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s and 30s, highly visible, politically active, and powerful.

I knew two black kids in my high school. A couple of young folks from a Pakistani family. An Asian kid. And lots of "Mexicans." As an agricultural economy, Oregon relies on farmworkers to harvest crops and most of them are immigrants from

Mexico and Central America - all labeled "Mexicans." Through the years, Oregon has resisted making it easy for these people to put down roots, settle into communities, and stay in the US.

In my twenties, I worked for a program that helped Hispanic youth get their GEDs so that they could break the cycle of migrant work. I got to go to Chicago for a training program, and it was very different from Oregon. On my way from the airport, I turned to look at the people in the cars around me. They were black! I'd never experienced that before.

My life and experience were changing and I came to realize that not everywhere was Oregon. Not everyone shared my experience. Not everyone was white. Awareness is where we start to open our eyes to the possibility of difference, not better or worse, but different. And acknowledging different opens us to the idea that alternatives to our own way of thinking and being isn't necessarily wrong, it's just different. As we learn and experience and consider, we can begin to see how different may actually represent something that is better, more real, more compassionate, more humane, more complex than what we have been led to believe.

I got curious about "other." I looked for opportunities to learn more, to explore other cultures and people and ways of being. The times changed, too, and others became more aware. Employers provided opportunities to learn through diversity training. I put myself in situations where I'd be around people not always like me. My partner for 11 years was from Micronesia, and I learned a lot from him about my "American" blinders. I read different books, by authors not like me. I did less assuming and more listening. I made friends with gay and lesbian and trans folks. I became an advocate for fat acceptance - my own place of learning about the impacts of discrimination, oppression, and body-shaming. I worked harder at gauging my impact instead of merely my intent.

As the years passed, my thinking and my understanding changed and grew. I noticed changes in my choices and my political ideas and how I went about living my life with a greater awareness of the realities of the impacts of white supremacy, patriarchy, and capitalism. I got involved in places where I hoped I

could be helpful and impact change. I became a Unitarian Universalist, and eventually a UU Minister. I realized that I have a responsibility to participate in making reparations for the past and influencing the future to be more just, more equitable, more compassionate, more respectful.

I love the quote from Maya Angelou, where she says "Do the best you can until you know better. Then, when you know better, do better." I try to do better.

Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg, in her book *On Repentance and Repair: Making Amends in an Unapologetic World*, summarizes a five-step process for making reparations. These include:

1. Naming and owning the harm - ideally in a public way, confessing out loud the harm we have done.
2. Starting to Change - making choices in our lives that transform us and prevent us from repeating the harmful behavior again.
3. Restitution and Accepting Consequences - understanding the significance of the harm done and seeking the appropriate redress.
4. Apology - begging forgiveness and making apologies without expectation, until the victim is ready and chooses to offer forgiveness.
5. Making different choices - the natural outcome of the prior steps, when we make better choices due to a transformation within ourselves as a result of learning of the consequences and impacts of previous behaviors.

This model is applicable at many levels, as Rabbi Ruttenberg says that the scale of harm done must align with the scale of reparations made. Be it interpersonal or institutional, the amends will look different, but still be required to make whole the people harmed.

I believe that these steps are now the work we must take on within our congregations, individually and collectively. We must be brave enough to talk about issues and engage in the dialogue. I expect it will be hugely challenging and occasionally painful. We will not follow a linear path to wholeness, but will

stumble and have to forgive ourselves and each other over and over again along the way. That's why LOVE is so important in our UU context. We will have to love each other enough to stick together and try and try again. And we can celebrate when we do something well and experience a transition in our ways of being.

In the words of Beverly Daniel Tatum, to work for a just society requires two tasks: "the abandonment of individual racism, and the recognition of and opposition to institutional and cultural racism."

No one expects you to be perfect - except, maybe, yourself. Make your efforts from good intent and consider the impacts. If it doesn't go the way you hoped, be prepared to say, "I'm sorry. What can I do better?" It takes a good bit of humility to change your mind, your life, and your behavior. Keep up the good work. Be neither careless or a coward with this new adventure.

I've heard it said that there are only two ways to face the future - with love or with fear. Choose love - for many reasons, but mostly because fear is just too great a burden to bear. Make your life a testament to your living faith, to your commitment to change the world one act at a time.

UU is an action-based faith. It isn't enough to believe something - we value deeds, not simply creeds. So what we do not is learn from our history, experience our reactions and feelings, and use our new understandings and commitment to propel ourselves toward creating a more healed world. There are risks. We won't always get it right. We won't always live our values perfectly. But we can make the commitment to make the effort, each and every day.

It's a lot to ask. But the world needs nothing less.

Amen.