

In the shadow of Rome, we turn on each other; it's not good for any of us and it's not good for what we hope for our children. But it *is* good for someone. And that is Pontius Pilate. Rome likes it when we fight.

Rev. Jake Morrill

Not everything that is faced can be changed, *but nothing can be changed until it is faced.*

James Baldwin

Fight Racism! —with Loving Care

Guy Newland, UUFCM September 2019

At this year's General Assembly (GA), our leadership expelled a man—and it wasn't a racist Proud Boy infiltrator. It was: the minister of the host city.

Todd Eklof, UU minister in Spokane, has long sought social justice. He built coalitions with the Black Baptist community, joining with them on issues including gay rights and industrial pollution. At the GA, he presided over a worship service featuring a sermon by his Baptist colleague. And then co-organized a UU demonstration against the construction of a city jail.

UUA leadership directed him to leave the conference. The Diverse Revolutionary Unitarian Universalist Multicultural Ministries (DRUUMM)—an influential organization of people of color—had condemned his book *The Gadfly Papers* for “reintroducing toxic histories and theologies containing transphobia, ableism, sexism.” In a review on Amazon.com, DRUUMM called Eklof a “false prophet” who “weaponizes white supremacy.” During the GA, conference organizers and DRUUMM invited Eklof to discuss his book privately; he reportedly declined. The Vice-president of UUA told the Spokane press that Eklof was excluded so as “to preserve the spirit of the assembly.”

Such a painful situation: UU racial justice activists dissing each other publicly. But internal dissension over language and methods—it's a challenge that liberation movements will always face.

To explore this, we have to talk about racism. I am an upper middle class, white, heterosexual, able-bodied, cisgender male, native-born citizen of the USA, raised Catholic. I absolutely do *not* presume to instruct members of oppressed groups on how to express their pain and fight for liberation. I *will* note how and why two African American anti-racist educators, in seeking the *most effective* techniques for changing minds, prefer and teach alternatives to the prevailing, confrontational “call out culture,” or “cancel culture.”  
[for reading: *PAUSE and SKIP*] *Racism is endemic to and pervasive in the USA*

Racism is intrinsic to the history and identity of our nation; it is our original and fundamental sin. Don't think it was an unfortunate episode that Lincoln and MLK fixed. We cannot understand anything about the USA until we understand how its racist history has given rise to its racist present. Why do other developed nations have national healthcare and we don't? It will never make sense unless we see the connection to American racism. To understand why Reagan and his right-wing friends were *pro-gun* control, you have to recall that in *those days* whites were truly afraid that *Black* people would all start carrying guns . . . To get the problems with our public education system—including Detroit, including CMU—you have to see how its history has been driven at every step by racism. Racism poisons the water in Newark and Flint . . . And religion—well, the most segregated time of every week in America is Sunday morning. White people, including white women, voted for Trump so as to take America “back.” Race and racism are critical in the history of feminism, the history of American music, sports . . . it is probably impossible to find *any* aspect of American life where race isn't at or very near the heart of the matter.

For this reason, for me, the very best thing at the UU General Assembly in Spokane was a presentation by *non-UU* Robin DiAngelo, an anti-racist educator and author of *White Fragility*. DiAngelo referred her large (and overwhelmingly white) audience to the scientific research of Jennifer Eberhart of Stanford University. Eberhart's book, *Biased: Uncovering the Hidden Prejudice that Shapes What we See, Think and Do*, shows the **pervasiveness** of implicit racial bias. Racial bias is not just for rednecks or red states. It's an invisible, unconscious apartheid system that affects everyone in American society.

To make this point DiAngelo shocked the General Assembly crowd, proclaiming: "I am just as racist as Donald Trump." She said American racism is like an ocean in which we are all swimming. Trump, she said, is like a shark—a particularly vicious manifestation of the ocean. But we are all in the water, so it is harmful and deluded to cling to the pretense that racism is about some other people, in some other time or different place. Only if we really see this can we begin to retrain how our minds work at a subconscious level. For example, DiAngelo noted that regular exposure to positive images of people with dark skin improves scores on implicit bias testing.

*[for reading: PAUSE and SKIP] Racism and Anti-Racism in UU*

Unitarians were active in the movement to abolish slavery, but ministers such as Theodore Clapp (in Louisiana) used scripture to defend slavery. After all, he said, if it were so terrible, then why did Jesus not condemn it? After the Civil War, through the segregationist Jim Crow era, racism was not a lively topic among Unitarians or Universalists. Then, in 1965, ten percent of all UU ministers—the largest percentage of any denomination—responded to Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King's call for clergy to join demonstrations in Selma. One of them, James Reeb, was beaten to death by segregationists, while Viola Liuzzo, a Michigan UU, was shot and killed by the KKK.

Following the assassination of Dr. King in 1968, the UUA committed to giving one million dollars (today = 7.5 million) to assist Black communities. But then, perhaps foreshadowing the difficult issues of today, a bitter dispute arose over whether this money should be distributed as originally planned—by an African American committee—or whether it should instead be at the disposal of an alternative, *integrated* committee. As a result, only about ½ the money was disbursed; the rest of UUA's promise to Black communities is unfulfilled. After that, apparently reverting to our earlier quiet complicity, UU churches avoided the divisive topic of racism. White congregations did not see this as "pertinent" to their real lives.

Then, in 1993, there was a Thomas Jefferson themed dance ball at the UU General Assembly (GA) in Charlotte NC. Everyone was invited to attend in "period dress." Jefferson was, of course, a slave owner. This led to an eloquent statement of protest from African American Hope Johnson on the floor of the GA, creating another wake-up opportunity for *some* white liberals. However: the ball was not cancelled.

In 2017, the UUA was charged with giving preferential treatment to white men when filling leadership positions. This led to the resignation of President Peter Morales. In the wake of this, recognizing the pervasiveness of implicit racial bias *within liberal religion*, the UUA began consideration of an 8<sup>th</sup> principle *explicitly* calling for the dismantling of racism and other oppressions. This matter remains undecided.

At the 2019 GA, a central theme was "moving the margin to the center," putting previously marginalized persons into leadership roles. Conference organizers did seem to keep most white males out of *visible* leadership positions—Eklof's worship service was an exception. Many workshops focused on recognizing and dismantling white supremacy culture. Attendance at and enthusiasm for these sessions ran high.

Rev. Eklof argues that such enthusiasm is unsurprising because UUs *agree on these goals*—but that we should *be free* to disagree on the best means to pursue them. He is troubled by situations where UUA leadership has excluded persons from leadership on the basis of identity/social location rather than other qualifications. Along the same lines, he finds it absurd—and self-defeating—that the UUA has abandoned the slogan, “standing on the side of love” because “to stand” is exclusionary language. Following this approach, he says, we will have to expurgate *most* of our hymns for metaphors involving seeing, hearing, marching, and so forth. My own quick check: of the first ten hymns in the hymnal, nine contain at least some language that, *if taken literally*, could be deemed exclusionary *vis a vis* differently-abled and gender non-binary persons.

I *disagree* with much in Eklof’s book. He foresees and advocates a split of UU back into Unitarians and Universalists, which makes no sense to me. Worse, he criticizes Robin DiAngelo for hyperbole and over-generalizing, arguably exemplified by her statement that she is just as racist as Trump. Eklof’s critique misses the power of DiAngelo’s work and exemplifies the white fragility that she exposes.

What are some ways to handle this situation?

*Calling Out and Calling In*

Maybe we don’t, but let’s just assume that we agree: there is pervasive and systemic racism in the USA—including the UUA *and therefore including UUFCM*—and this affects us powerfully and subconsciously. Let’s assume that we think this should be changed.

How?

I like Kevin Daum’s observation, in his spring sermon, “Let’s Talk about Whiteness,” that there are as many ways to do anti-racism work as there are people working against racism. I would add that *all of these ways*—like the people who do that work and the culture in which they move—*are imperfect*. This is important because—as Kevin’s sermon showed—those doing this work can be very hard on themselves and one another, sharply calling out micro-aggressions and apparent instances of white supremacy culture. Why?

Because many progressives feel that it is vital *always* to call out and counter *every* racist act with a counterattack, rebuttal, or denunciation. From this perspective, alternative responses involving listening and empathy are unjustifiable concessions to white fragility. If someone says something racist or transphobic, how can it *possibly* be right NOT to call them out on it? What gives them the privilege to rest comfortably unchallenged?

This is a *correct* point of view; it has moral justice on its side. The wounded *always have the right* to call out those who have wounded them. This is a dangerous and *necessary part* of any liberation struggle—and sometimes also may be the *best* tactic available. If, as a white man, I am *called out*, then, as Carolina explained last Sunday, I am challenged to sit with this discomfort, to listen and learn, rather than be defensive.

But what if I witness a friend, family, colleague, peer, or fellow church member commit a micro-aggression? Norma Bailey relates that the *calling out* of perceived white supremacy within the Michigan Unitarian Universalist Social Justice network was very likely the cause of a resignation. Natural allies can be splintered against one another over the issue of *who is the least racist of them all*. Calling someone out can seem just a cathartic demonstration of wokeness, or maybe a play for recognition as an ally of the oppressed. That is irrelevant as long as *calling out* is the best way to change minds. But maybe it’s not.

So argue two African American anti-racist educators: David Camp, author of *The Compassionate Warrior Bootcamp for White Allies* and Black feminist academic Loretta Ross. Per Camp, years of research on cognition show that when presented facts that contradict strongly held beliefs, both *liberals and conservatives*

tend to *deepen* their commitment to their prior belief. This is the Backfire effect. So Campt advises when trying to persuade someone to change their view, *don't focus on facts or statistics that contradict them*.

That is so counterintuitive. What else can we possibly do?

Campt says: Ask others to explain themselves, and then, asking questions, draw them into telling their story. Listen with empathy to their expressions of pain and grievance. Then, be ready: be *fully* ready to tell a *compelling* version of your own story, how you came to *your* perspective. If we listen to their stories well, there is a very high probability that they will mirror this and listen to ours.

Similarly, Dr. Loretta Ross confesses her disillusionment with the shaming aspect of call-out culture; she suggests that speaking up with love rather than condemnation can be called *calling in*. She gives us examples of how this happened in her own work.

Working with incarcerated rapists in the 1970s, I told the story of my own sexual assaults. It opened the floodgates for theirs. They were candid about having raped women, admitted having done it to men or revealed being raped themselves. As part of our work together, they formed Prisoners Against Rape, the country's first anti-sexual assault program led by men.

Applying this to race, she writes:

A group of women whose partners were in the KKK asked me to provide anti-racist training to help keep their children out of the group. All day they called me a “well-spoken colored girl” and asked that I sing Negro spirituals. I was hurt, but wouldn't let those feelings sabotage my agenda. I listened to how they had joined the white supremacist movement.

Then: she told *them* how she felt when she was 8 and her best friend called her the N-word, which was the first time she had heard that word. This was transformative—having been treated with empathy and care, the KKK wives responded to Dr. Ross's story of childhood pain, perhaps thinking of their own children being so wounded.

Dr. Ross argues that call-outs can make almost *anyone* fearful of being targeted and publicly shamed, thereby inhibiting transformative conversation. Again, she uses herself as an example: In a college classroom, she accidentally misgendered a student during a lecture. She froze in shame, expecting to be blasted. Instead, her student said, “That's all right; I misgender myself sometimes.” She argues we need more of this kind of grace.

According to Ross, instead of calling out, we might be able to speak to someone privately, and even in public we can choose to speak with care and respect. Some may disagree, but Ross claims this is *not* covering up abuse or protecting white fragility. It just turns out that one of the best ways to bring about a more loving society is to act in a loving manner—to be the change we want to see. Whatever you call this, it's not different from what Martin Luther King taught; it's not different from what Mohandas Gandhi taught.

Meanwhile, while Eklof and his critics quarrel, *avowed white supremacists* have seized the White House, spreading poisonous propaganda, caging Black men and Brown children. They *massacre* people with machine guns in synagogues, churches, schools and stores. If I personally am not afraid, that is an enormous privilege. Black and Brown people, Jews and Muslims, are terrified—because campaigns of terror are being waged against them.

I don't want Todd Eklof out of the UUA. If avoidable, we don't want people resigning from social justice movements over micro-aggressions. And the Diverse Revolutionary Unitarian Universalist Multicultural Ministry may agree. After all, at the GA they first asked to meet with Eklof privately. In

August, they *deleted their* critique of Eklof from the Amazon website. And just this month, DRUUMM joined other UU groups in a public statement, “Invitation to Conversations for Liberation.” Restating a commitment to centering the voices of the marginalized, it concludes:

“We reaffirm that we must lead from the *covenant of care* that binds us. We must hold each other in love and kindness, including when we do not agree. We have to take responsibility for the impacts of our voices . . . *No one is disposable.*”

#### Sources

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deep thanks to Norma Bailey, Carol Rard, Brigitte Bechtold, Gabriel Newland, Rebecca J.S. Newland, and Carolina Gutierrez-Rivas for direct and indirect contributions to the thoughts expressed here. **The opinions are my own;** I am solely to blame for any error.