

Becoming Anti-Oppressive
Unitarian Universalist Church in Cherry Hill
Sunday, January 14, 2024
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Reflection
Susan Druckenbrod

Good MLK morning! I'm humbled to be speaking today on this very important Sunday and weekend commemorating Dr. King's birth and life, working and struggling for racial justice. My journey to this podium began when I was a new parent trying to figure out many things, one of which was how to be in a world where my religious views are often seen as heretical. Being here in this church community also set me on a social justice journey and I'm going to share some of that journey today.

In 2014, when Mike Brown, a young black man, was killed by police in Ferguson, MO, our church held a march on Kings Highway. We chanted *Hands Up Don't Shoot*. That rally helped to wake me up to the racial disparities in our country. In our state. In our towns. In our church. I started to wake up to my own white privilege and frankly to this church's white privilege.

The Committee on Racial and Economic Equity formed here and began work on the 8th principle which encourages us to build a diverse Beloved Community and work to dismantle racism in ourselves and our institutions.

CREE worked hard to educate all of us about race and equity. Through this work, I met a Black woman who described Black families who experience generational poverty, and compared that to white families who experience generational wealth. Personally, I am the white example of generational wealth. I'm the product of poor, starving Irish immigrants who were colonized and dying, who left Ireland, worked in the Pennsylvania coal mines, assimilated and did better with each generation, high school education, college, masters, doctorates, property owners: each generation mostly doing better, getting wealthier.

I joined CREE as a committee chair when our congregation adopted the 8th principle in June 2020 - we were the 29th UU congregation to adopt it. Now our UUA faith movement is incorporating the 8th principle into our core values, with the proposed amendment to the statement of purpose, called Article 2, in our UUA by-laws. I support the progress that has been made to state our core values, widen the circles of belonging, moving away from the oppressions of privilege and toward true inclusion.

Last month, Rosemary White and I took our social justice confidence and knowledge on the road to the Cherry Hill monthly town council meeting, putting our UU values into practice and going local. UU minister at UU Faith Action New Jersey, Rev. Charles Loughlin, has called social justice a spiritual practice, which is just an awesome UU perspective! Rosemary and I had learned that the Cherry Hill police department had sent and paid for at least one officer to a disturbing "training" held in Atlantic City in 2021, called Street Cop. It advocated for unconstitutional policing tactics, glorified violence and denigrated women and minorities. The New Jersey AG's office is now investigating this training and the police departments that sent officers to it.

I spoke at town council, imploring our elected officials to regulate the police, ensure that police trainings are constitutional, to not kill Black people, to do better. The mayor-elect thanked us for coming and said he felt we were on the same page. Cherry Hill is now doing its own investigation and we will keep an eye on the situation and hold them accountable.

There is much work to do locally and in New Jersey to ensure that all people are treated fairly and equitably. I'm proud to be part of a faith movement where racial justice IS a spiritual practice where we are encouraged to use our privilege, our voices and our actions, to show up to make the world and our important corner of it, a fairer and more equitable place for all.

Becoming Anti-Oppressive Rev. Margret

Today we celebrate the legacy of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr, an inspirational leader, a courageous advocate for justice for all people, all social classes, all racial identities. Dr. King's life was an expression of love in all its forms, as he is widely quoted as saying, "Power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love." And as we say here every week, "Love is the spirit of this church," as we gather our power to the service of love and challenge ourselves to meet the demands of justice.

When I teach Unitarian Universalist history, I mention that the Unitarians were firmly committed to rational thought, espousing the unity of God rather than the mysticism of the Trinity, while the Universalists firmly believed in universal salvation, proclaiming the loving nature of a God who has ordered the world so that everyone goes to Heaven. As UUs, we accept both those premises – the importance of rational scientific thought and the primacy of Love as the cohering force in the universe. And so when the UUA's Article 2 Study Commission designed the new statement of UU principles and values as a woven pattern of our key value commitments with Love at the center, that just seemed perfectly right to me.



This new model has evolved from a rational list of first, second, third and fourth principles ranked in order, into the new image of our core commitments as an interconnected non-hierarchical pattern of values. The proposed introduction that frames our core purposes as a faith movement states: *We draw from our heritages of freedom and reason, hope and courage, building on the foundation of love. Love inspires and powers the passion with which we embody our values. Inseparable from one another, these shared values are Interdependence, Pluralism, Justice, Transformation, Generosity, and Equity.* And so we proclaim our core values based in freedom, reason, hope and courage, each embracing and informing the other, connected and united in the core element of Love at the center. Power as love implementing the demands of justice. Yes.

As Susan said, this church in June 2020 affirmed the addition of an 8th Principle to the 7 Principles which have articulated the core of UU faith since 1985. The 8th principle is a bold commitment to "accountably dismantle racism and other oppressions in ourselves and our institutions." The Commission that was appointed to create a new articulation of our faith made it a priority to fully incorporate the concepts and commitments of the 8th principle into their proposal, and I quote from their website: "...more than the language of the 8th Principle itself, we are moved by the ongoing conversations about what it means to be accountable to each other, and how we must—through our actions—take on the work of anti-racism and anti-oppression as an inextricable part of our Unitarian Universalist faith.... we understand these ideals to be at the very heart of our work and very much part of the direction we are journeying. Whatever flowers grow from the process of engaging UUs in this reimagining, the seeds sown by the 8th Principle project will surely bloom brightly."

And so today we hear the words of some of the UUCCH members who have centered their efforts on living into the commitments to accountably dismantle systems of racism and oppression, working to become an actively anti-oppressive power of love in the world. We begin with words from Rohn Hein, which I will present, since Rohn is laid low with the flu this week. In Rohn's words:

Advocating for Justice
Rohn Hein

When I became a member of the Unitarian Universalist Church in Cherry Hill, I had a vague notion of the Seven Principles. They were the guideposts I needed, the shorthand version describing what UUs believed and practiced. With the introduction of the 8th Principle that calls for the dismantling of racism and building a diverse multicultural community, the sum of these guiding lights motivated me to engage more in social justice. I must admit that when I heard of the efforts to streamline these ideas, I reacted as most humans do when confronted with change - with fear and trepidation that my path had now become less clear. As I step back and fully understand the process that the UUA is taking, I see the clarity for this restructuring of the language, even though our mission has not changed. In fact, the principles, which stated very specific ideas, have been replaced with values that are more expansive and inclusive.

I was a UU long before I knew what those initials meant. Before graduating from college, I was on the front lines of social justice organizing to place an environmentalist on the board of directors of a major public utility and planning for buses to be sent to Washington DC for the latest protest the war in Viet Nam. Love of peace and of our earth was the center of my convictions. The issues of yesterday become the issues of today because we strive to make fundamental change in a world that is too often driven by greed and selfish self-interest. In fifty years, my focus remains the same and the problems have changed little, while my determination and resolve has not been sacrificed.

Optimism blossoms every morning as the sun comes up. A new day brings the possibility that a privileged, white banker will wake up to the injustice that faces a young black man who will be subjected to racism for no other reason than his genes are different than mine. It is possible that a young middle-class mother will awaken to the thought that a poor Hispanic family needs the ability to become a US citizen and enjoy the wealth of our country as much as her. It is possible that a working-class man will realize that a woman should have the right to make her own medical decisions about her body. I have witnessed these transformations during many years of working with non-profit organizations whose goal, even though they don't realize it, is to implement the principles of Unitarian Universalism.

The information revolution with the internet and a social media leviathan has overwhelmed society today, but the cost of misinformation has undermined the confidence and trust that individuals have in institutions. We cannot put this genie back in the bottle, but our problems are not that much different than before. Racism remains rampant and institutionalized. Sexism pervades our society. The wealth gap grows wider. Our environment needs to be protected.

Our tools remain the same: we have the values of UUism to guide us, we form coalitions with like-minded groups, we speak truth to power, and we live with the knowledge, as spoke by Dr. Martin Luther King, that the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice. Let us remain strong in the conviction that the work we do is not in vain but will lead to a better life - with love and compassion as the engine of our commitment.

Rev. Margret

We thank Rohn for his commitment, and for his powerful words – and wish him well as he journeys back into health. And now Amélie Harris-McGeehan shares her learning, and our congregational learning, about the heritage of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the work we must do to understand and reverse the ongoing effects of slavery and its impact on our society to this day.

Amélie Harris-McGeehan “A Story of Bones”

Imagine you are hired as Chief Environmental Officer to oversee the development of an airport to bolster tourism on a remote island. This project requires technical, financial, and environmental approvals. You might be wondering what this could have to do with Justice and Equity.

In 2012, Chief Environmental Officer Annina van Neel from Namibia, was working on the plans for such a project- an airport for a remote island... Saint Helena Island, a British overseas Territory, to help bolster tourism.



As work on the island’s airport development proceeded, airport contractors discovered an African mass burial ground of nearly 10,000 formerly enslaved African men, women, and children on that site. As documentarian Holly Bootman says: “It’s estimated that 3,415,500 slaves were transported across the Atlantic Ocean. When the abolitionist movement began in 1807, The Slave Trade Act outlawed the slave trade in the British Empire. Slave ships were diverted to the island of Saint Helena.”

Over the past two years, our Reparations Task Force has been researching and educating our congregation and community about the horrors of the Transatlantic slave trade. From a National Geographic article: “An estimated 12 million African people were kidnapped from their homes, forced onto ships to become enslaved. This was a gruesome event in global history commonly referred to as the Transatlantic Slave Trade. African men, women, and children became the labor force under the rule of colonial powers.”

Many were chained, packed tightly together in unsanitary conditions, endured extreme temperatures, were subjected to heinous cruelty, robbed of their dignity & freedom during these 5,000 or more miles on the Atlantic Ocean. Many did not survive these voyages. There were 36,000 such gruesome voyages from Africa to the New World, that began in 1525 until 1875. After Britain outlawed the slave trade in 1807, its navy intercepted slave ships and sent an estimated 24,000 Africans to Saint Helena Island. Due to unimaginable appalling conditions on the ships, followed by being housed in squalid conditions on the island, diseases and poor health, nearly 10,000 Africans died and were put into mass burial grounds.



Annina VanNeel learned that the British government had a long-standing awareness of the mass burial grounds, and this wasn’t the first project on the island that disturbed these bones. Annina became laser focused on pursuing justice and dignity, for a proper memorialization of their legacy for the 10,000 forgotten enslaved Africans and those disenfranchised islanders-- many who are descendants of the formerly enslaved.

Last summer I watched a documentary film on PBS, called “A Story Of Bones.” Quoting again from Holly Bootman, the film “is an exposé of historical injustice, a lesson on the gravity of remembering, and a chronicle of the power and potential for community action to ignite change.

This film is about Annina van Neel’s powerful and haunting journey of discovery of one of the most significant traces of the transatlantic slave trade and her fight to reclaim the neglected history of Saint Helena Island.” I was so moved by this powerful documentary film. I was determined to contact Annina van Neel to find out if this film could be shown here, in our sanctuary, for us to watch together. Her answer was Yes! That she would find a way to make it work.

So save the date of Saturday February 24th, when we will present the film “A Story Of Bones” in our Sanctuary, with an opportunity to be in conversation with some of the people who have been involved in leading the project. Details will be published in the Newsgram, and I hope you will plan to attend. As we continue to learn unvarnished truths of our world history, I hope for a widening of our hearts for Justice and Equity for all people.

Rev. Margret

Thank you, Amélie. Understanding the reality of slavery and the horror of the slave trade is an important part of our learning to dismantle systems of racism and oppression, as a foundation for our commitments and actions to mobilize the power of love. Rosemary White, who has worked for many years to bring the commitments of the 8th Principle into reality, shares her reflection on the Article 2 process in our movement.

Rosemary White

Article 2: We Are Building Unitarian Universalism

We are building a new way. We are working to be free.
Hate and greed and jealousy. We are working to be free.
Start with love, that is the seed. We can feed our every need.
Peace and freedom is our cry, Without these this world will die.
Peace and freedom is our cry.

Good morning, my name is Rosemary White, I am a cis gender white woman in my 60’s wearing a UUCCH t-shirt. I am here today to reflect on changes in Article 2 of the Unitarian Universalist Association Bylaws. Article 2 is crucial for our commitment to expanding belonging, dismantling oppression, and promoting justice. In its fourth year, this collective dedication emphasizes Unitarian Universalism as a force for spiritual growth, healing, and justice amid social and environmental challenges.

Article II outlines the primary purposes of the UUA: assisting congregations, supporting leaders, and fostering faith formation. It serves as a resource to develop skills, repair historic injustices, and advance UU Values. Framed as a covenant with love as the binding power, it defines shared values like Interdependence, Pluralism, Justice, Transformation, Generosity, and Equity, symbolized by a chalice.



Of these values, Justice and Equity are particularly relevant.

JUSTICE. We work to be diverse multicultural Beloved Communities where all thrive. We covenant to dismantle racism and all forms of systemic oppression. We support the use of inclusive democratic processes to make decisions within our congregations, our Association, and society at large.

EQUITY. We declare that every person has the right to flourish with inherent dignity and worthiness. We covenant to use our time, wisdom, attention, and money to build and sustain fully accessible and inclusive communities

At UUCCH, we've actively embraced this work, along with examining biases to dismantle the American caste system, as described in detail by Isabel Wilkerson. By challenging disparities, in our culture we can foster greater equity in areas including economic power, generational wealth, and access to opportunities.

Article II invites us to "Build a New Way" and promote freedom from hate, greed, and jealousy, starting with love as the seed. As UUs, we can make "Peace and Freedom our Cry," joining networks and partners in vital work to promote inclusion and empower voices.

I urge each of us to attend the February 1st Social Justice initiative at UUCCH, look at the work of UU Faith Action NJ, and actively engage in transforming the world through liberating love. Article II has the potential to enhance the Beacon for Liberal Religion in South Jersey, aligning with the UUCCH mission and addressing critical needs in 2024. Article II calls us to create a world where love, justice, and equity flourish, building a community where every voice is heard and valued. Pick up a copy in the commons today.

Rev. Margret

Thank you, Rosemary – And Susan, Rohn, and Amélie, for your words and actions of power and commitment, mobilizing Love in this congregation to create a world of greater Interdependence, Pluralism, Justice, Transformation, Generosity, and Equity for all. There are many opportunities next month to learn and organize for our commitments, and I encourage us all to be part of this work. So may it be.

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