

**The Face of Racism**  
**Rev. Carly Gaylor**  
**Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Durham**  
**January 31, 2021**

**Meditation in Words and Music**

I want to acknowledge as part of today's service that we are a predominantly white congregation. We are speaking today from that perspective and are asking those of us who are white to consider our actions and perceptions. This is work we've been asked to do by People of Colour within and beyond our Unitarian communities. If you are not white, we welcome you and your experiences and thank you for your presence as we work on anti-racism as a spiritual practice, so that we might be better allies.

I also want to acknowledge that this topic can lead to defensiveness and guilt. That is quite natural, all things considered. But I'd like to invite a different spirit today: one that sees this as an opportunity for learning and curiosity, for honesty and humility and authentic engagement, for inviting new understanding and new truths to shape our thoughts and actions. May we remember that our inherent worth and dignity is not tied to being and doing right; that our Universalist heritage calls us to work for good even as we know that we are saved by grace and love beyond our imperfect attempts to live that love on earth.

Place hands on lap, palms down...

Take a breath...

... what do you want to / need to let go of to be present today?

With every breath in bring something to mind,

And every breath out, let it go

As Dan plays, place hands face up...

Take a breath...

... what do you want to invite / be open to to be present today?

With every breath welcome those things that you would like to cultivate

**Reflection** (Carly)

Several weeks ago Donovan Hayden invited us to make anti-racism work a spiritual practice, including several specific suggestions that we can do as individuals and as a congregation. Here are some of them (slide 2), but I'll also make sure the full list is linked in the next weekly update.

Today I'm going to speak more directly to our recent history and commitment to racial justice as Unitarian Universalists and as Canadians. Part of doing this work is taking honest inventory of where we are at as individuals, in our local community and country, and as a faith tradition. I'm inviting you to join me in that honest inventory today. [SEPISEPI] We are used to thinking of ourselves as good people. It's a fairly natural human trait, to see ourselves as on the good side of issues and of history. Perhaps especially those of us who identify with progressive politics and religion. By focusing on values and principles rather than beliefs about God, we regularly place being good above believing right. We value thoughtfulness, diversity, acceptance of one another, and social justice. In our opening song, we sang "we are a just-seeking people and we are singing, singing for our lives." Many of our songs resound with our commitment to peace, love, and justice.

It is much harder to find songs in our hymnal about forgiveness and humbleness. There are a few, but not many. It is far more comfortable to view ourselves in a positive light than to look at areas where we fall short — sometimes very short — of our values. And even more uncomfortable to face those situations where we are part of cycles and systems of harm.

Many of us are finding this to be true in learning about Truth, Healing and Reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples. And many of us are finding it true in looking more honestly at issues of racism in our country and communities, and in ourselves.

A growing call for racial justice within Unitarian Universalism has arisen over the last several years, primarily in the United States but with reverberations here in Canada. A proposed 8th Principle, written by African-American Paula Cole Jones and endorsed by the Black Lives of Unitarian Universalism (BLUU) and Diverse Revolutionary UU Ministries (DRUUMM), which have both American and Canadian membership, reads (slide 3):

We covenant to affirm and promote "Journeying toward spiritual wholeness by working to build a diverse multicultural Beloved Community by our actions that accountably dismantle racism and other oppressions in ourselves and our institutions."

As you may well remember, a proposal to adopt the 8th principle as Canadian Unitarians came to congregations for discussion in January 2019, two years ago now. The response across the country was so resoundingly negative, including in this congregation, that the proposers took it off the table and instead submitted a

new proposal for a “dismantling racism study group.” For many, this was a welcome outcome; for others, a bitter disappointment.


I did a sermon at that time where I explored the evolution of my own thinking on the 8th principle, informed by conversations with a number of Canadian UUs of colour about their experiences within our congregations. If you would like to read that sermon, you can reach out to me directly, or read it soon along with other sermons on the UUCD website which Anna is working diligently to update. Around the same time, a well-attended UUCD pub night conversation facilitated by Kelly Hayes re-affirmed the consensus that the 8th principle is inappropriate or unnecessary, though people did want to engage in more learning and racial justice initiatives.

The “Dismanting Racism Study Group” went on to survey Canadian UUs about their experience of racism and anti-racism work in our congregations, and they released some of their preliminary findings last fall (slide 4).

831 people responded to the survey, which represents approximately 20 percent of our official membership.

(Slide 5) As you can see, most of the respondents - almost 90 percent - were white, with a small percentage of people who identified as Black, Indigenous, Asian, other, or skipped the question.

I want to highlight two questions from the survey in particular: First, (Slide 6) respondents were asked to rate their congregations’ visible and lived commitment to racial justice on a 1-5 scale, with 5 being “top priority” and 1 being “no evidence of commitment.” As you can see, the majority of respondents placed their congregation somewhere in the middle.

The second question focused on experiences or witnesses of racism in our congregations (slide 7). Here, the study group separated responses by White people and People of Colour. Here are the responses from White respondents (slide 8) - the 50 percent line is at the top for each racist behaviour.  And here are the responses from people of colour (slide 9) - as you can see, they were more likely in every category to have experienced or witnessed each type of racist behaviour in their congregations than their white counterparts - often close to twice as many responded ‘yes’.

It was this graph that struck me the most in the preliminary results. If people of colour are a small minority in our congregations, which is true across the country, to varying degrees, but experience or witness racism much more often in our congregations than white people do, it stands to reason that there is more racism in our congregations than most white people recognize.

This is often when the explanations, the defensiveness, the avoidance of the

reality of racism sets in (slide 10).

It can look like many things, including questions like “why are we only talking about black people, when there are other people of colour, too?” Rather than ask this question, why not invite more reading and listening to other people of colour? It can look like willingness to learn about issues with Indigenous People but not other people of colour. It can be the tired refrain of “at least we’re better than the U.S.” Even if true (and I know at least two Black men who have lived in both countries who find it easier in the U.S.), it is hardly admirable to refuse to look at our own injustices by arguing it is worse elsewhere. It can look like affirming that “all lives matter” in response to *Black Lives Matter*. It can be our talk of love and justice and peace without taking action in meaningful ways, making our talk sound hollow and meaningless. It can be saying “we are all one” or “I don’t see colour” or “we are all equal” without acknowledging the ways that erases people of colour’s experiences.

Racism, and anti-black racism specifically, are very real here, as they are around the world. Rev. Dr. Mark Morrison-Reed once led a group of Canadian UU ministers in an exercise where we had to line up from darkest to lightest skin. Most of us struggled to know where we fit - how to gauge tones in terms of darkness. He assured us that every person of colour in our society would know exactly where they fit on the spectrum immediately upon entering the room. Education, employment, healthcare, and policing outcomes vary significantly along racial lines in Canada. For example, a recently published article by Nan DasGupta, Vinay Shandal, Daniel Shadd, Andrew Segal, and in conjunction with CivicAction, shared the following graphics (slides 11-15).

These statistics are sobering. Where any surprising to you?

I recently read Jodi Picoult’s “Small Great Things” - book about a Black nurse tried for the murder of a baby born to white supremacist parents. Her lawyer is a liberal white woman who thinks she is a good anti-racist person, and not part of the problem; over the course of the novel, she slowly unlearns what she thought she knew to be true about herself and race. In a pivotal moment, she comes to recognize the small and large acts of racism that Ruth, the defendant and protagonist of the book, lives with daily. It was a good book, but I was disheartened read, in an interview with the author included in the printing, her comment that she knew other countries outside the U.S. also had race issues, too - for example, she said, she heard from Canadians that we have injustices in our relationships with Indigenous People. Is it not strange that we have come as a country to look at one form of racial injustice, but not others? This book was published in 2016 - displaying our continued denial of anti-black racism in this country.

Desmond Cole, author of *The Skin We’re In: A year of Black Resistance and Power*, grew up in Oshawa and lives in Toronto. He writes of the very real anti-black racism he experienced as a child growing up and then, even more

intensively, as he grew into adulthood as a young Black man. He writes: “I have been stopped, if not always carded, at least 50 times by the police in Toronto, Kingston and across southern Ontario. By now, I expect it could happen in any neighbourhood, day or night, whether I am alone or with friends. These interactions don’t scare me anymore. They make me angry. Because of that unwanted scrutiny, that discriminatory surveillance, I’m a prisoner in my own city.” One of the times he was stopped he was simply walking a female (white) friend home from a university party in Kingston; police wanted to make sure she was okay.

How many times have you been stopped by police while going about your business, excluding times you were actually speeding or going through a RIDE program or otherwise breaking the law? I can tell you, I never have, not once.

One of the most basic anti-racist spiritual practices is believing people of colour when they share their experiences of racism. A Black friend visited us not too long ago and found a tire flat on the way home. Their mechanic found a nail, seemingly strategically placed. Curtis and I had a choice: to believe or excuse, affirm or deny. It was one small act of solidarity to acknowledge that what we want to be true, what we hope to be true, what we think to be true of our neighbours, may well not be, and to say “we believe you.”

Donovan’s sermon on January 3rd re-opened the conversation about anti-racism work in this congregation. Events of the last year, and attention on those events, have brought new awareness of the issues and lives at stake. But while our attention may be new or renewed, the issues are not. Racism is not new, far from it. The need for action, for allyship, is not new. The events that make the news are not different than the many times black and Indigenous experiences of oppression and injustice have and may never make it to our ears or our hearts.

While I am glad that we can have these conversations now, I ask that we remember how recent it was when we thought we didn’t need to have them, or when they took significantly less prominence. If we, people of good will and attention, people who call ourselves justice-seeking, have missed so much, what else have we missed, are we missing now, and will we miss in the future? About racism. About oppression. About injustices of all kinds? <sup>[[L]]</sup><sub>[[S]]</sub> Racism and anti-racism as spiritual practice is far too large an issue to cover in one service. Over the next several months, I will be returning to this topic regularly as part of an ongoing series on what we can do to accountably dismantle racism in ourselves and in our institutions, including in our congregation. We will learn about the Black Empowerment Controversy in Unitarian Universalism, where Black UUs asked for recognition, funding, and power; many left over the following years of conflict and struggle with the (mostly-White) Unitarian Universalist Association. We will learn about the Unitarian-led Residential School for Indigenous students. We will highlight Unitarian Universalist voices calling for change and naming the injustices they experience not just out in the world, but in our midst. And we will

also reflect on dissenting voices within anti-racism work, people of colour who propose alternatives to the current prevalent understandings of how best to counteract racism in ourselves, our communities, and our institutions. [L] [SEP]

To complement this service series (slide 16), I'll be hosting monthly gatherings on the third Thursday of each month. This was an idea from our post-service conversation after Donovan spoke with us. Each time we gather, there will be an experiential exercise, discussion topic, or presentation, and then a time of sharing and taking concrete action together. I remember someone at Don Heights Unitarian Congregation asking me once to send in a letter on an issue I cared about. She had everything ready - pens, paper, info sheets, and stamped and addressed envelopes. I said I would take it home and send it, thinking I should mingle in coffee hour. She said, 'oh no, sit down right now.' I did, knowing she was right that a done letter is much better than a best-intentions-but-never-sent one. And so I invite you to come and practice anti-racism as a spiritual practice together - to take small, consistent actions for change.

One of the most insidious things about privilege is the ability to turn on and off when we think about injustice. People of Colour and others who experience "isms" of different kinds on a daily basis do not have that privilege - simply living keeps it at the forefront. [L] [L] [L] [L] [SEP] [SEP] Given that there is more injustice than we may recognize,

And that we strive to be justice-seeking people,  
We have much learning and unlearning to do.  
May we find ways to be aware and present,  
To grow in our understanding and compassion,  
To tune in rather than out when we are confronted with painful realities,  
To find courage and strength and spiritual grounding when we are overwhelmed,  
And to become allies, and ever-better allies, rather than bystanders or deniers or perpetrators of injustice, oppression, and exclusion.

May it be so.

May we make it so. [L] [L] [L] [L] [SEP] [SEP] Amen.