

Spiritual Wholeness through Beloved Community

By Reverend Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU Ellicott City, MD February 21, 2021

I remember one of the most distinctive communities I have ever encountered – a community where folks of all sorts of backgrounds joined together for a common cause – to heal. This community resided within cinder block walls painted white, faded carpets and a wide array of mismatched chairs, couches, and tables. I served as a chaplain at a Residential Treatment Center in Minnesota – a treatment center for youth struggling from the intersecting illnesses of mental illness and addiction – a treatment center comprised of youth who had been brought together from all corners of the state – kids of all sorts of races and ethnicities and physical abilities and genders and socioeconomic backgrounds – brought together to heal. They did not always get along and yet they were beloved in that they were close to each other – they were together – and their time together focused heavily on hearing each other's stories. Even if they did not necessarily like each other they loved each other in what they found common in their experiences. They understood each other at a level that superseded the distinct backgrounds they each arrived from. Yes, each of these youth carried with them implicit bias, stereotypes, and prejudices, but they also carried love, understanding, and a desire to hear each other's stories and grow from each other's experiences.

As a people, we are working towards building Beloved Community – a place where anyone can be accepted – any race, ethnicity, education, class, gender, sexual orientation, any physical ability, any state of mental wellbeing, sober or not sober, any background or identity. We are working to construct this within our own sacred community that is Channing Memorial Church, and we are working to do this as Unitarian Universalists, within our denomination. And one tangible way we are doing this is through the process of considering adopting the proposed Eighth Principle of Unitarian Universalism. The Eighth Principle states, “We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote: journeying toward spiritual wholeness by working to build a diverse multicultural

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Beloved Community by our actions that accountably dismantle racism and other oppressions in ourselves and our institutions.”¹ Let us join together on this journey – lets us develop within each one of ourselves that spiritual wholeness that comes when accountability and love intersect. This proposed Principle highlights love. Wholeness. Diversity. It highlights accountability – those actions we need all take to dismantle racism within our predominantly white, predominantly middle and upper-class faith. We are called as a people to decenter whiteness so that all stories are heard, so that all identities can be held as a norm, so that there is not a hierarchy of privilege, so that we do not succumb to the tragedies of “othering.” We are called to decenter whiteness – to replace the central narrative of white story and white experience with stories and experiences of those who identify as black, indigenous, or as a person of color.

We heard earlier the words of Kristen Harper, the second woman of African descent to be called to serve a Unitarian Universalist church through the Unitarian Universalist Association settlement process. We heard this esteemed black woman proclaim, “I too am beautiful,” a statement that is profound in that it should not need to be articulated. Surrounded by whiteness, where she spent her life watching white people, learning about white people, changing herself to accommodate white people, waiting her turn “to share, to explain, to lead,” she proclaims her own black beauty! Her hair, her darkness, her walk, her pain, declaring her humanity by proclaiming “I am human, I have tears and fears, I have laughter and joy... I too am beautiful.”² Through the laments of a black woman we hear the realities of a society where whiteness is centered. Where the stories of white people are told in our history books. The reality we live in today – where white folks are seen on tv and in commercials, are prominent in children’s books, in leadership positions – where “flesh colored” band aids and coverup and crayons means “white flesh.” Whiteness is the norm; whiteness is what is expected. In order to

¹ The 8th Principle of Unitarian Universalism (8thprincipleuu.org)

² “I Too Am Beautiful” by Kristen Harper

venture towards spiritual wholeness, in order to create Beloved Community, in order for everyone to be accepted in our faith, we need to intentionally highlight and tell the stories of other ethnicities and races.

Natalie McCabe Zwerger writes that we live in a world that centers middle to upper class, white, heteronormative English-speaking standards. She writes that anyone outside of this norm becomes “othered.” And she writes specifically to white folks, stating that it is “easy for white folks to think they hold no responsibility for this system of privilege,” and thus feel they have no responsibility to dismantle it.³ But white folks, myself included, actively maintain this system each and every day! White folks benefit from this system whether consciously aware of it or not. This might make white folks feel uncomfortable – and in order to do this work we need to lean into that discomfort. Whiteness is the norm. All other races and ethnicities easily become “other.” So what can we do? We can get proximate – intentionally seeking out relationships with folks we don’t often encounter. We can hear stories. We can seek out justice initiatives begun by folks who identify as black, indigenous, or as a person of color. We can donate to organizations run by folks who identify as black, indigenous, or as a person of color. Those of us who identify as white need to hold ourselves accountable.

Robin Morgan writes, “Hate generalizes, love specifies.” This white-centered society generalizes folks who are not white – those deemed “other” – into stereotypes and false narratives that can only seek to dehumanize. But love? Love comes with proximity – love comes when we actually get to know people – love comes when we seek out stories and relationships and intentionally put ourselves in positions to be with folks we may not regularly encounter – just like those youth did in their treatment center. This love leads to specificity because love makes a person and their reality a known entity, a realized person with a real, tangible experience. In order to dismantle this system – we need to love. And when we love, we

³ [Natalie McCabe Zwerger she/her/ella | Everyday Race Blog](#)

are forced to hold ourselves accountable, for otherwise we see those we love suffer. In this way, love and accountability are tied together with unbreakable bonds. That is Beloved Community.

And as we engage with this needed reality of Beloved Community, some folks ask, “why race?” Why are we focused on race? It is a painful reality that non-whites face unique discrimination and prejudice because of our country’s history. Indigenous folks faced genocide as soon as European colonization began. People of color face a myriad of discrimination dependent on their unique race or ethnicity. Many black people in this county come from a history of chattel slavery, which serves as the foundation for structural racism still prevalent in our society today. In our country – the founding of our country – those brought over from Africa were uniquely treated as “property that could be inherited” solely because of their skin color. This tragic history set in motion the distinct and prevalent injustices still alive and well today. Michelle Alexander writes, in her groundbreaking book *The New Jim Crow*, “Today there are more African-American adults under correctional control – in prisons or jail, on probation or parole, than were enslaved in 1850, a decade before the Civil War began.”⁴ Systemic racism is as prevalent as ever – and as people constructing Beloved Community we need to actively work against this – on an individual level and on an institutional level.

The proposed Eighth Principle responds to needs within our denomination. Paula Cole Jones, who has played an active role in the Unitarian Universalist denomination for over 15 years, realized that many well-intentioned, white liberal folks believed they could be a “good Unitarian Universalist” without ever “thinking about or dealing with racism and other oppressions at the systemic level.” As we grow to realize this, and as we grow to love all of those within this Beloved Community we are working to build, we need to hold ourselves accountable to dismantling racism and other oppressions. White people – middle and upper class people – can ignore these issues and that keeps the system alive and well. That

⁴ *The New Jim Crow* Michelle Alexander

is why it is the work of white folks – privileged folks – to “decenter whiteness and other dominant cultures in Unitarian Universalism”⁵.

I dictate my life and my ministry around the First Principle of Unitarian Universalism – the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Each and every person we encounter has inherent worth. And yet, I have to acknowledge that this Principle in itself – that all of our current Seven Principles – while lifting up and celebrating the distinct ways we covenant to be together – they are missing one crucial element – and that element is accountability. Our existing principles imply what is written into the Eighth, but they do not hold us accountable. While our first Seven Principles are general, this one is specific. It calls us to renew our commitment to justice work. Our seven Principles are ripe with potential – and the Eighth serves to realize this potential – to do the work to create Beloved Community – a place where folks of any background and identity are welcome and held in loving embrace. In order to truly realize the inherent worth and dignity of each person – we need to fully see and accept and welcome each and every person for just who they are – and in a white centered society this means we must actively work to dismantle racism and other oppressions.

Rev. Peter Morales was the first Latinx president of the Unitarian Universalist Association. He spoke of a tragedy within our faith – our beautiful, unique, life sustaining faith. And this tragedy is that there are tens of thousands of folks who identify as black or Latinx or Asian American or Native or mixed racial and ethnic backgrounds who would thrive in our faith and embrace all that we covenant to be and yet they simply do not know it because we have not welcomed them into our midst. They need what we have to offer and we need them! We need these folks who do not know who we are in order to live into a beautiful, diverse mosaic of a faith enriched by those of so many cultures and identities. He laments that we simply do not invite them to our church. He calls on folks to do this hard work – knowing that it

⁵ The 8th Principle of Unitarian Universalism (8thprincipleuu.org)

is indeed hard work! This anti-racism, anti-oppression, multicultural work we each need to do – especially those of us who identify as white. This is decentering whiteness; this is what we are called to do by our very faith – Morales spoke of this as the most “rigorous... spiritual discipline we will encounter,” for it is a spiritual discipline. And “our journey towards wholeness has just begun.”⁶

Carl Gregg writes, “Limiting ourselves to a Eurocentric Unitarian Universalism undercuts the very ideals of Unitarian Universalism of radical interdependence, the beauty of diversity, and the centrality of justice for all people.”⁷ We hold each other in our own sacred interdependent web, held together by the stands of our faith, our ideals, and our covenant to one another as Unitarian Universalists. Until this thread ties together a beautiful mosaic – a tapestry of diverse identities – we are not living into our full potential, we are not sharing all that beauty we have to offer the world, and we are not receiving that wealth of gifts held by people of identities that stretch beyond our white, middle-class normative.

I’m thinking of those youth at the treatment center where I served as a chaplain – forced into proximity by the very nature of being mandated to go to a treatment center, obligated to hear each other’s stories while they sat in group together all day every day. Those youth did not want to be there and outside those walls may not have been friends – some were not friends within those walls. But together they formed a tapestry of identities made real to each other as they heard each other’s narratives, and an understanding of similar shared identities – this created a unique opportunity for Beloved Community. They loved each other in a very special way. Now, we are not forced to live within the confines of our faith – we chose to be together based on how we covenant to live in the world. But by intentionally getting proximate to folks who have a whole wealth of identities, and by seeking out their stories with

⁶ [Patheos.com/blogs/carlgregg](https://patheos.com/blogs/carlgregg)

⁷ *ibid*

true interest and sincere curiosity, we, too, can live in a world filled with this unique love – of finding common ground amidst a wealth of differences – sharing our faith with the world.

If we love – if we truly love – we are called to hold ourselves accountable to dismantling racism and other oppressions – for if we love will not let others suffer. We are called to actively do this work. Those who identify as white need to live into the inevitable discomfort this entails – to decenter the stories and experiences of whiteness. Only then can we be spiritually whole. Beloved Community by its very nature “brings our commitment to love higher in our consciousness”⁸. Let us embrace and invite into our midst the patchwork of identities surrounding us. For, as the ancient Chinese philosopher Mo-Tse wrote, “when all the people in the world love, then the strong will not overpower the weak. The many will not oppress the few.”⁹ Let us each, one at a time, love, until the idealized world of the ancient philosopher becomes a reality – until we live each of our days held in the sacred tapestry of Beloved Community.

May it be so, and amen.

⁸ The 8th Principle of Unitarian Universalism (8thprincipleuu.org)

⁹ Mo-Tse from *Singing the Living Tradition*