

Becoming

A sermon by Dan Lillie

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“No one’s faith journey begins at birth. It starts eons back with the mothers and fathers of our great-grandmothers and great-grandfathers, and before...It comes to us bound up with caste and class, with color and gender, with language and cuisine. We all meet ourselves, as Soren Kierkegaard once put it, ‘on a ship already launched, a journey already underway.’”

This observation by theologian Harvey Cox serves as a reminder that we begin our lives in the middle of a story: the great ever-unfolding story of the universe. And just as that cosmic story continues to unfold, so does each of our own individual stories. We are the authors of our own lives, and each of us is writing our own chapter, recording the now of our lives in eternity.

And as long as we are alive, our story continues to unfold. We have each spent our whole lives becoming who we are right now; and yet, we are not done. To be alive means we are always on a path of growth and transformation. We are constantly in the process of becoming something we are not yet.

Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs

Psychologist Abraham Maslow had something to say about this, this process of becoming. In his famous article *A Theory of Human Motivation*, Maslow identifies a hierarchy of needs that we as humans must meet, first for survival, then for well-being, and finally to thrive.

Briefly, and in order from the most basic to the most complex, these are:

Physiological Needs, such as breathing, eating, drinking, and sleeping- when they are not fulfilled, people become preoccupied with filling these needs above all else.

Next comes the Need for Safety: and not just physical safety, but economic, social, vocational, and psychological security and stability.

After this comes the Need for Love and Belonging: family, friendships, community. Interaction, connection, relationships.

The next level is Esteem needs: recognition and respect; to be embraced and accepted by our families and communities; to have our unique gifts and talents be recognized and appreciated; This is to have the esteem of others. And often, with this comes *self*-esteem, confidence, and, to quote Maslow directly, “the psychological freedom to be creative and grow, as well as to be more generous to others.”

I’d like to pause here just long enough to point out that many of the needs mentioned up to this point can be fulfilled in a beloved church community such as this one. As I have gotten to know many of you and heard your stories about what brought you here, I know what this church means to you, and how it has helped you meet the increasingly complex needs that Maslow describes.

And this brings us to the final level in Maslow’s theory, Self-Actualization, of which he writes, “What a [hu]man can be, [a human] must be. This need we may call self-actualization...It refers to the desire for self-fulfillment... the desire to become... everything that one is capable of becoming.”

Now, in the process of becoming, it is important to realize that we are always becoming *something* other than what we currently are. Transformation is not a choice. But whether we engage the transformational process with awareness and intentionality is absolutely a choice.

We are being swept down-river either way: but if I have a paddle, at least I have some say in how I get there.

So, what I like about Maslow’s idea of Self-Actualization is that he doesn’t expect me to become more than I am capable of becoming; he just expects me not to become anything less. I like this idea, each of us using our own individual potential as our measuring stick. So rather than trying to be the best minister of all the ministers, I should try to be the best minister that I am capable of becoming.

Moving towards Self-Actualization is challenging work, because it requires living into our most authentic selves. We must do the deep spiritual work of self-

reflection to know ourselves; for the better we understand ourselves, the better we are at using the paddle to steer the canoe.

And here's another truth: we can't do it alone. We need community. We cannot know ourselves unless we are in relationship with others. Looking at the hierarchy of needs, once we get our most basic physiological needs met, fulfilling all of the other levels of need requires other people: we cannot have economic and social stability without others; we cannot find acceptance and love in a community of one.

In fact, we can only understand love as a concept when we acknowledge the value of something beyond ourselves. In other words, others must exist for Love to exist.

I'd like to share with you excerpts from a poem by Gerald G. May called *Living in Love*:

"There is a desire within each of us,
in the deep center of ourselves...

It is the Human desire for Love...

Our true identity, our reason for being
is to be found in this desire.

Love is the "why" of life,
why we are functioning at all.

I am convinced

it is the fundamental energy
of the human spirit.

the fuel on which we run,
the wellspring of our vitality...

Love should come first,
it should be the beginning of,
and the reason for everything."

I agree with the poem; Love *should* be the “why” of life, the reason for everything. But we are imperfect beings. We repeatedly fail ourselves and each other. So what do we do when this happens? And how are we supposed to respond, not just when we fail one another individually, but when the communities that we trust to fulfill our needs fail us?

I’d like to share with you something that is happening at the national level of our denomination. Some of you may be following this story, and others may know nothing about it, so I will briefly try to summarize what I know so we all have some of the basics to frame the situation.

A few weeks ago, a hiring decision was made in which a white male minister was given a high-level leadership position in the Unitarian Universalist Association, or the UUA. It was a position for which a Woman of Color applicant had also applied, and was interviewed. According to her, she was told that she did not get the job because she was not “the right fit for the team.”

Now whether or not she was the “right fit for the team”, this hiring decision brought attention to the racial make-up of the staff positions in the UUA, the highest levels of which are disproportionately white.

When directly asked why all five regional leaders of the UUA are white, UUA President Peter Morales responded that there are not enough qualified People of Color in the national pool of applicants for high level positions in the UUA.

As you can imagine, this response was not well received, and Rev. Morales chose to resign as President, citing that he had lost the trust of too many in our denomination to lead us through this difficult situation.

Soon after his resignation, two other high-level members of the UUA staff also resigned.

In light of all of this, an organizing collective called Black Lives of Unitarian Universalism has articulated some responses to the current situation:

The first thing they have asked for is an examination of the hiring practices at the UUA to determine if they align with our expressed values of diversity and inclusion.

A second proposal they have made is that an 8th Principle be officially adopted, which would read, “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 Beloved Community by our actions that accountably dismantle racism and other oppressions in ourselves and our institutions.”

And a third proposed response is a direct ask that congregations across the country participate in a White Supremacy Teach-In. Black Lives of UU issued a statement that said, “we cannot effectively respond to ‘looming threats’ of white supremacy beyond us until we tackle the white supremacy within us.”

Now, I recognize that the term white supremacy may make some of us uncomfortable. I know I felt uncomfortable and defensive when I first heard it used in this context. I’m not a white supremacist!

True. But an important distinction must be made between white supremacists and white supremacy. As Black Lives of Unitarian Universalism explains it, “**White supremacy**’ is a provocative phrase, as it conjures up images of hoods and mobs. Yet in 2017, **actual ‘white supremacists’ are not required in order to uphold white supremacist culture**. Building a faith full of people who understand that key distinction is essential as we work toward a more just society in difficult political times... It has become clear that, in order for us to be more effective at tackling the white supremacy beyond our walls, we must also identify ways in which systems of supremacy and inequality live within our faith and our lives.”

Ok, I’m going to ask that you bear with me, because, as uncomfortable as it might make us, I’m going to continue to use the term white supremacy for a couple of reasons: first, because People of Color within our faith tradition have identified it as such, and I believe they are more qualified to identify white supremacy than I am. And second, I think it is accurate in describing the situation we are talking about here.

Through reading a number of articles and books, and through personal conversations with people of color, I’d like to share a few things I’ve come to understand about white supremacy:

First, white supremacy is designed so white people don't have to see it. According to Michael Eric Dyson, a sociology professor at Georgetown University, "White supremacy is the conscious or unconscious belief or the investment in the superiority of some, while others are believed to be innately inferior." We may not consciously hold such beliefs, but how might we be unconsciously investing in the superiority of some over others? White supremacy gets its power from being allowed to go unnamed, and so it is important to call attention to it when we see it. In the case of the UUA, is it possible that, perhaps subconsciously, being a "good fit" means being white like most of the high-level leadership?

Second, white supremacy is systemic, and doesn't require the participation of white supremacist bigots to function. Again quoting Michael Eric Dyson, white supremacy is, "a machine operating in perpetuity, because it doesn't demand that somebody be in place driving." And because it is systemic, white people are not the only ones who can participate in a culture of white supremacy. Going back to the example of the UUA, Rev. Morales, who ultimately decided to resign over the controversial hiring decision, identifies as a person of color. My friend Rev. Masando Hiraoka reminds me that, "We don't have to create human enemies; the enemy is the system itself."

Because we belong to a society in which the culture rewards whiteness through white privilege, we are all complicit (to some degree) in white supremacy. This is not meant to make people feel guilty. It is simply calling it out so that we can be aware of it, and hopefully take steps towards dismantling it.

To effectively fight white supremacy, we must confront it on three levels: the Individual (or Internal) level, the Interpersonal level, and the Institutional level.

The Individual Level

I'd like to share an uncomfortable personal moment from my own experience of confronting white supremacy at the Internal level. Before I met my wife Emily, I briefly dated a girl who was attending none-other-than the Iliff School of Theology, where I would eventually go for my seminary education. Over dinner at an Italian restaurant, we began to discuss her Master's Thesis, about the conditions of poverty in her Southern hometown, and how those conditions disproportionately affected people of color. This information was her contribution to the conversation.

My contribution to the conversation was that her thesis was incorrect: anyone willing to work hard and save money could climb the ladder in our now-colorblind society, where capitalism is the way of the land and a worker's contribution is worth what it fetches in the free market. If someone is not getting paid enough, or is dealing with poor working conditions, then nothing is forcing that individual to continue their employment with that business. And the system is designed in such a way that, surely businesses with such unfair conditions, low wages and unethical practices would most certainly not be able to keep their doors open. Yes, our system rewards loyalty and good, honest hard work, and anyone (regardless of skin color) could make it in America if they tried hard enough.

To which she responded, "Fudge!" Only she didn't say fudge. The waiter came over and informed us that this was a family establishment, and that we should keep our voices down and our language appropriate. In frustration, my date walked out of the restaurant.

How embarrassing!

And I don't mean the scene at the restaurant. I mean the ignorance that my privilege allowed me to enjoy and benefit from, unaware, until my mid-twenties. How embarrassing that I was able to grow up in a system of privilege and oppression, and remain completely blind to the ways in which the system gave me advantages at the expense of others. But that is one of the telltale signs of privilege.

In her essay *Confessions of a Christian Supremacist*, Professor Julie Todd says, "That it had never crossed my mind, not even once, that my identity as a Christian in this country was a privileged social location was an obvious signal that it was."

And so it was for me, not with Christianity, but with race. And biological sex. And sexual orientation. And gender identity. And socio-economic status. It had never crossed my mind, not even once, that my identity consists of intersecting social locations of privilege; and the fact that I did not have to see it, I would eventually learn, is a sign of its presence.

It wasn't until nearly a year after the scene at the Italian restaurant that I took a multicultural awareness class at Metropolitan State University of Denver, where my eyes began to open to the realities of the world in which we live.

It is a difficult and uncomfortable process, to say the least. I got mad. A lot. I got sad and frustrated. I felt skeptical. I felt guilty. I still do sometimes. But I have come to realize that my guilt does nothing to change the system of oppression and marginalization of which we are all a part. That my good intentions do not make me exempt from the role I play. And so, rather than get frustrated and retreat back to a place of denial (which is only an option for a person of privilege), I must question, every day, how my actions are either contributing to or resisting the unjust system, in which white supremacy is alive and well.

The Interpersonal Level

I think the next level, the interpersonal level, is the most obvious place to challenge white supremacy. It's true that bigots, and racially-biased individuals exist. Calling out bigoted and prejudiced language and actions when you see them is one way to challenge white supremacy on this level.

The Institutional Level

This is an uncomfortable thing we are being asked to face, and I don't just mean as individuals, but as an entire faith community called Unitarian Universalism. As much as we don't want the term white supremacy to apply to us, we are being called to look honestly at the ways in which our systems, within our own religious community, uphold a culture of white supremacy, giving advantage to some at the expense of others.

Now, this is not the first time we have faced racial tension within our denomination. In the late 60's, a movement for Black Empowerment in the broader culture was taking place. A black caucus of UUs formed, and asked for formal recognition in the UUA's power structure through the formation and funding of a Black Affairs Council, the BAC. However, a group who felt the methods used by the black caucus were too demanding formed an opposition

group comprised of white people and people of color called the Black and White Alternative, or BAWA, and they also wanted formal recognition and funding.

The formation of these conflicting groups divided UUs. The tension came to a peak at the General Assembly of 1969 in Boston. Factions were formed, all-or-nothing demands were made, microphones were seized to control the meetings; one minister reported that a colleague spat in his face. The situation was not handled well. In the tension of the moment, we lost sight of our values. People on all sides of the controversy recall the hurt and pain that surrounded this era in our history.

And now, it appears that we are at another pivotal point: The question of how well we as a faith tradition are actually living into our values has been brought to the forefront of our attention, and again around the issue of race.

Who are we becoming as a religious community? As a denomination? Are we living into our values? Are we becoming with intentionality something we want to be? Do we have our paddles firmly in hand?

Just as individuals who are striving for self-actualization are called to do the deep work of self-reflection, if we as Unitarian Universalists, writ large, are to become a self-actualized faith; that is to say, if we are ever going to become the truly deep, life-affirming, diverse, and inclusive faith that we are capable of becoming, then we have to respond to the issue of white supremacy that continues to rear its ugly head.

This is surely a challenging moment for our denomination. And while tensions are high, I have hope. The three high-level vacancies in staff positions at the UUA present a real opportunity for us to live into our values of inclusivity and diversity by hiring qualified people of color. It is an opportunity to strike a huge blow to white supremacy by responding to the requests of people of color in our denomination who have called it out. May this service be the beginning of the white supremacy teach-in, in which we dare to keep the conversation going and look for ways as a community to dismantle white supremacy.

I love Unitarian Universalism dearly. It deserves much of the credit in my own personal formation process. But I must be willing to look critically at it, so that it can self-actualize into all that it is capable of becoming.