

First Unitarian Church

October 1, 2017

This summer while I was on study leave, I watched a webinar called Decentering Whiteness in Worship. Decentering Whiteness in Worship.

What do you think of that?

It's a provocative title.

"Decentering" sounds like taking something out of the center. Like picking up a monument and relocating it somewhere on the side. It was in the middle, and now it's decentered, and you can walk in without running straight into it.

But what does it mean to suggest that whiteness may be at the center of worship? Sounds like worshipping whiteness. And we are not about that. Our mission is the opposite of that. We believe in the equality, inherent worth, and dignity of all people. We strive to put that belief into *action* in our lives, in the world, and definitely, *definitely* in our church.

That's why this webinar caught my attention.

If you have taken one of the workshops on multiculturalism we've hosted over the last few years,

or if you attended Dr. Milton Brown's lecture in the social hall last February,

if you attended the group that studied Reverend Dr. Thandeka's book *Learning to Be White*,

or you had some other learning experience,

or if you have personal experience as an observer of white culture from outside that culture,

then you know that whiteness *has* a culture. It's a mindset, Dr. Brown says, even more than it's a skin color.

Now, there is definitely more than one culture among white people. I grew up in a mostly white trailer park in a small town. When I arrived at Harvard on a scholarship, holy cow, I stepped into a different part of white culture—the one working class whites are supposed to aspire to.

I was aware of white cultural difference before then, too, like when I was a kid and got called "white trash" by other white kids. But this is all really an example of the fact that there is a dominant white culture. It sets the norms, and gives them names

like decorum, respectability, and polite manners. It dominates people outside of it. And even working class whites internalize many of its norms without realizing it.

So regardless of social class, white people who haven't intentionally learned about white culture almost always find it hard to see the whole of it, because "fish in water." How does a fish learn to see the water it's swimming in?

There's that old saying that "you don't know what you don't know." It means that there are some areas in life in which we have some learning to do, but we aren't even aware of needing to do that learning. We don't know that there is something we don't know.

The Greek philosopher Socrates is often quoted as saying that true wisdom is in realizing the extent to which you know nothing.

And the twentieth century preacher Ralph Sockman put it beautifully when he said, "The bigger the island of knowledge, the longer the shoreline of wonder."

Each of us, every person here, has things to learn of which we are not aware. That unknowing manifests in our assumptions about other people or about the way things should be. Assumptions are things we think we know, but we don't.

So I was very curious about this webinar.

It was about learning to see how the norms and values of our country's dominant culture—which is associated with whiteness—might be showing up in the way Unitarian Universalists do church.

It was set up as a conversation among three UU leaders: Julica Hermann de la Fuente, Erika Hewitt, and Glen Thomas Rideout. Julica identifies as Latin American, Erika as white, and Glen Thomas as African American. Three people. Big topic. They did not claim to have The Answers. But they offered interesting food for thought.¹

They spoke of how in UU congregations, people's bodies are typically very still. Even during energetic singing, it can seem as though people are holding back. That's something you see more in predominantly white congregations than in multicultural, Latin American, or African American churches, because it is a norm within white culture to be somewhat restrained and unemotional.

Ok, I think we can agree that we know what they're talking about, right?

They noted that UU congregations worship *experts*. Rather than drawing primarily from stories of lived experience or ancestral tradition, and trusting that there is truth in that, there is a tendency to quote highly educated people who have been published.

¹ You can see it for yourself right here. Watch "Part I:"
<http://www.uua.org/worship/words/decentering-whiteness-worship-webinar>

Hmm.

Finally, Julica and Glen Thomas observed that UU congregations tend to be very concerned about time. The length of each part of the service is precisely designed. The sermon. The leadership moment. Even the music. Even when there is lots of energy around a song and it could keep going a bit longer, UUs tend to end it promptly, so we can move onto the next thing.

This observation reminded me of the time I visited Glide Memorial Church in San Francisco. That's a very diverse, multicultural church, and it definitely flowed. There was a lot of clapping, talkback, and some of the music had an organic, spontaneous feel. One person got up and shared their personal testimonial. The service went on for quite a while.

Of course, there are generalizations, and then there are individual people and congregations. When I mentioned these things to an African American preacher friend, he said, "Does this mean we have to throw away our clock?!"

There is not one right way to do things. We UUs are all about that with our big embrace of multiple paths to God or truth.

But isn't it all interesting? I have observed the things they were talking about in the webinar, too. I just hadn't thought of them as cultural.

None of the things they described are inherent to our faith. There is no UU commandment that says Thou Shalt Not Dance or Waive Thy Arms in the Air in Church. We can—and in sermons I do—weave lived stories and ancestral sources with experts. And we are capable of presence and flow.

When markers of the dominant culture are invisible to most UUs, it can lead us to become monocultural. Monocultural means looking at other cultures/differences as outside the norm, exotic, or strange.

And that in turn may prevent new people with different cultural perspectives from feeling welcome, included, and at home, even if everything else about our faith—its open mindedness, compassion, embrace of reason and doubt, and love of justice—is a perfect fit.

So what does it mean to be truly welcoming? Do we have to change everything? No. But true welcoming, radical hospitality, is more than a warm greeting. It's more than hello. It is receiving people with openness, and with awareness about our assumptions.

Of course, assumptions aren't always based in race or ethnicity.

A while back I heard a story about someone who was in a conversation with other UUs, when the group started referencing a certain work of literature. They referenced it casually, without explaining it, which conveyed to her that they

assumed everyone had read it. Well this person had not had a lot of formal education. She didn't know the book. She was embarrassed, and felt she did not fit in.

When you meet someone, what assumptions are you prone to making, without even realizing it? Do you assume literacy? Education? Car ownership? Have you ever been in a group that made plans to go out to eat in a restaurant, assuming that everyone had enough discretionary income to do so? Assuming that no one with a seemingly good job is actually saddled with crippling debt? Do we try to get to know people by saying "What do you do?" as though we knew for certain they are employed?

Or maybe you are prone to assume another person is looking down on you. I've certainly done that before. If you get to know the person, you may find that you are each thinking the same thing.

How about cultural literacy? I was surprised once to realize that my husband did not know the same stories I did from childhood—like the one called the Three Little Pigs. But why would he? He grew up in another country with different childhood fables. When we make references to things without explanation, we make assumptions, too.

I have surprised him sometimes, as well, in particular when it comes to the differences between our families not just in culture, but in class. He was raised in an upper middle class family. My husband never used to say curse words, before he fell in love with me.

Have you experienced others assuming things about you?

Here's another kind of assumption that UUs may be prone to: assuming that people already know they are welcome to join us for Sunday services, and that it would be pushy of us to actually invite them.

Actually, there are many people who might wonder whether they'd be welcome here. Yesterday in this sanctuary I led a memorial service in which there were many tough looking guys with face and neck tattoos, grieving the loss of someone they loved.

Are they welcome here? You bet your socks they are. Did they know that? Maybe they weren't sure at first.

A heartfelt invitation bridges the distance between people. Meanwhile, the conspicuous absence of an invitation can send an unintended message that someone is not welcome.

To be truly welcoming, to show radical hospitality, we are each called to pay attention to our assumptions.

And to practice holy curiosity. What do I mean by holy curiosity... I don't mean interrogating another person, or asking questions just for the heck of it. Holy curiosity is curiosity in service to connecting. It is in service to building or

deepening relationships. It is setting assumptions aside to listen with openness. Holy curiosity is more listening than talking. It is “What did you think of today’s service?” or “Tell me what you’re passionate about,” or “What kinds of things do you like to do?” rather than “What do you do?”

We’ve got to check our assumptions, practice holy curiosity, and in a truly welcoming congregation we also embrace a willingness to be changed by one another.

In the ancient scriptures, it is written that people are made in the image of God. Look at how diverse people are! Not only in culture and outward appearance, but in ability, age, sexual preference, gender identity, and educational level.

I think the wisdom of this ancient idea must be that in order to know God, we must know one another.

If we do not know one another, if we greet each other with assumptions and unknowing, then we do not know God.

In more humanist terms, we can say that the foundation of our existence is interdependence. We are tied into what Martin Luther King Jr called a “single garment of destiny,” and “the inescapable network of mutuality.” We are threads woven together. How can we know who and what we are, and what our lives really mean, if we do not know and support one another? It is an existential imperative. We connect to live.

So I invite you to join me in looking for what I’m going to call RAD moments: RAD, R-A-D, Radical Awareness of Diversity. Moments when we can help ourselves and others set assumptions aside, and practice holy curiosity and self-awareness.

The advanced level of RAD is Richly Adapting for Diversity. Taking those monuments that say “The Way We Always Do Things” and—not throwing them away—but setting them a little off center to make room for richness.

In this way, we are not only allies, but accomplices in celebrating diversity, inclusivity, and radical welcome. Amen?

Amen.

This mission, our deep calling, is especially important in these times we are living in right now. Now more than ever, right?

Now more than ever.