

First Unitarian Church

May 6, 2018

Last year, there was a big uproar when a student group at UNM invited Milo Yiannopoulos to speak. Do you remember that?

Yiannopoulos was famous for being offensive. He entertained politically conservative audiences by saying outrageous things. Things like “birth control was a mistake and women are happier in the kitchen.” Things that most of his audience doesn’t actually believe, but which they get a kick out of hearing someone say because it’s so unacceptable to say it. Yiannopoulos also said gay people should get back in the closet, even though he himself is gay and out in a predictably bold way.

So, a lot of the time he was obviously on a mission to be provocative. But he also encouraged his audience to *do* things, like personally report people they suspected were undocumented in the US. Things that, if his advice were followed, would cause some American children to lose their foreign-born parents, and families to be thrust into punishing poverty. Things that would cause a number of young adults raised as Americans who have no memory of another country to be dropped into one, alone, to fend for themselves, sometimes in the midst of gang violence.

So Yiannopoulos was also more than an ironic entertainer, and for this he had become a darling of the alt-right, where racism and sexism are explicit and the tone is violent.

His visit was scheduled for just one week after the presidential inauguration, as the alt-right was publicly celebrating the presidency of Donald Trump, who has himself entertained crowds with racist and sexist comments. Hate crimes were on the rise, along with an increase in public hate speech.

And so, of course, it was concerning to those of us who believe in values of equality and dismantling racism. Students met with UNM’s acting president at the time, President Abdullah, and asked him to prevent Yiannopoulos from speaking on campus. Surely such a person, who is not an academic or a researcher or even an elected leader, did not belong in a university setting dedicated to the honest exchange of ideas.

But with an introspective tone, President Abdullah declined to stop the event. He cited UNM’s mission, which says that the university “will provide students the values, habits of mind, knowledge, and skills that they need to be enlightened citizens.” And he described UNM as “a public square for the competition between truth and lies.” He said,

We must protect that role of the university *especially* at a time such as this, when truth and lies compete for public attention. Universities are precious institutions, and cannot best fulfill their role in society by the administration declaring some speech as true and banning other speech; that risks becoming

another flavor of the authoritarianism that is always the bane of democracy. We must *beware* of that kind of urge in ourselves, in others, and in acting university presidents.ⁱ

So, the speech was allowed. And, as is the case in most places on Yiannopoulos's national tour, there was a protest to go along with it.

His visit raised the question of whether there is any line at all that cannot be crossed in academia. On the one hand, there was a lot of concern over providing a platform for hate speech. On the other, there was concern over squelching free speech.

There is no 'hate speech' exception to the First Amendment of the Constitution. Unless it is clearly meant to incite lawlessness, unless it is specific, has clear illegal intent, and has a sense of imminence, hateful speech is legal. But being legal does not make it right. And protesting is protected speech, too. The first amendment does not guarantee the right to speak without criticism. Actually, it guarantees the right to criticize.

Interestingly, before long, even Yiannopoulos's supporters were discovering their own limits for discomfort. When videos surfaced of Yiannopoulos seeming to promote child sexual abuse, his fans dropped him faster than you can say, "What's that now?"

Again his speech was legal, but this time it offended the people who thought it was fun to offend people. He lost a book deal, and as far as I can tell, he has dropped from the public eye.

I do wonder whether UNM would allow him to speak now, or whether the university also does have a moral line beyond the legal one.

The question remains: should students of color, and Muslim students, and immigrant students, and female students of all identities really have to deal with hateful speech against them on a university campus? Isn't it enough that hate speech is already in the streets, and online, and in the news? Shouldn't universities be *safe* spaces for learning?

There is a larger debate taking place about just that. There are stories of professors being afraid of saying anything controversial, for fear their students will get them fired. In contrast, the University of Chicago sent out a letter to its 2020 freshman class that said, in part,

... we do not support so-called "trigger warnings," we do not cancel invited speakers because their topics might prove controversial, and we do not condone the creation of intellectual "safe spaces" where individuals can retreat from ideas and perspectives at odds with their own."

It went on to say that this is meant to support diversity. The letter was blunt, to say the least.

Why has this issue arisen now? Is it, as critics contend, a case of identity politics run amok?

Well, one thing we know is that in the past, safe space has meant two different things at universities.

One kind of safe space is the kind found in student affinity groups. Groups for women, LGBTQ students, black or Hispanic students, or Muslims, become places where students can simply be themselves, inhabiting a major part of their identities, without having to explain or defend it. The others there, who share that identity, *get* it.

When a transgender student in a trans student group shares an experience of being asked by a peer whether they've "had surgery yet," the others in the group are not going to wonder what the big deal is. They *get* that that's really invasive and based on incorrect assumptions, and they understand the cost of being seen as a curiosity and not as a whole person and a classmate.

Affinity groups provide spaces for students to process their experiences and to form bonds with friends who share an important thing in common.

Up until now, another kind of safe space universities have created is safe classroom or learning space, and this one has different ends. It's a space in which ideas are freely shared, including ignorant ones, so that they can be discussed and learning can happen.

Safe classroom space, in this sense, is what the Harvard neuro-researcher Mahzarin Banaji describes as a "room in which we can say anything, and we will deal with it."

Space to debate ideas and address ignorance is a core element of the a classical university learning model and, Banaji points out, it is also "at the heart of social change." She shares an example from her classroom, in which they were discussing bias. Banaji specializes in the role of the brain in implicit bias. Biases that we have but of which we may be unaware.

She gave the class the example of AirBnB, an internet platform where people rent rooms or apartments from other people for less than the cost of a hotel. On Air BnB, black people are turned down as renters more often than whites. In some cases, the property owners are no doubt intentionally racist. But in many cases, statistics suggest they probably consider themselves egalitarian and not racist. And yet the pattern reveals a deeper truth. An implicit bias.

When Banaji said that AirBnB faces criticism over this and is trying to address it, a white male student replied, "Well, why should it be Airbnb's job to change society? If people don't want to have people who are black in their homes, that's their God-given right."

Banaji replied, "You're right. That is currently a right." She noticed that this young man was kind of beefy and bald. So she said, "I can look at your face and say, 'I don't like your face. And I certainly do not like men without hair on their head, so I don't want to hire you.'" His expression completely changed. He slumped down in his chair and kind of "became small." So she added, "Sit up. You're not a short, bald man. You're just bald."

Meanwhile, minority students in the room just looked at her with their jaws dropping. They couldn't believe she would talk to a student like that. She had touched on things about him that there is also negative messaging about outside of the classroom.

Ouch, right? But it demonstrates the point that people are very open to the idea of speaking freely until the freedom is about them. And safety inside the classroom is not equal for all, because some students arrive having already had a lot of painful experiences with the things others toss around like "no big deal."

Banaji finds free and open discourse so important to learning, that she says she worries when she hears students say, "I feel unsafe." But, she acknowledges, no value is absolute. "I can have a deep, deep, deep value on freedom of expression, but the world didn't start yesterday with everybody equal. It started a long time ago." And students don't all arrive on campus with the same experiences of safety. Ignoring that reality doesn't promote diversity any more than censoring speech does.

A good education is not just about abstract issues. It has to involve understanding ourselves and the people around us.

Though it is nothing new, this truth has become evident to more people, and is more viscerally felt in the last couple of years.

The Zen priest and teacher angel Kyodo Williams believes this is a time ripe for healing and learning, and that it may prove to be an important moment in our evolution as human beings. "We're digesting the material of the misalignment," she says,

We're digesting the material of how intolerable it is to be so intolerant. We're digesting the material of 400, 500 years of historical context that we have decided to leave behind our heads, and we are choosing to turn over our shoulders and say: I must face this, because it is intolerable to live in any other way than a way that allows me to be in contact with my full, loving, human self.ⁱⁱ

This tension around safety, speech, learning, and the public square is important. It is itself a teacher.

And here we are, a congregation right in the middle of it.

What kind of space is our church? What kind of safe space is possible here? Unitarian Universalist churches are not university classrooms. And they are not affinity groups. The spirit of this place is not “say anything and we will deal with it,” nor can we expect each other to be automatically on the same wavelength.

We are a spiritual community. In this place, that means we endeavor to be part of the open-eyed, open-hearted “facing” of truths, what we refer to in our principles as “the free and responsible search for truth and meaning.”

Our mission is to nurture spiritual growth. To promote equality and inherent worth and dignity. To be a force for good in the world. And to minister to each other in an atmosphere of welcome, acceptance, and caring. In other words, love.

But we weren’t born knowing how to do all these things. And society has spent a goodly effort training us to do the opposite.

So learning has to be a big part of it, but it’s learning in a relational, covenantal context. That means when we speak, we should do so with genuine care for the other person. We should be kind, and choose our words thoughtfully.

Hate speech is not okay in this space. Nor is being unwelcoming or discriminatory. Love asks more of us than the Constitution of the United States.

When we observe someone being unwelcoming, we are each responsible for gently intervening. For modeling a more welcoming response.

Now, it doesn’t happen very often, but this is a big place with lots of people coming and going, and once in a while a person comes along who actually is not on board with the goals of this spiritual community, and who stirs up trouble or even makes a habit of sabotaging this community with inappropriate behavior. In that case, I really do hope you’ll let a minister, Board Member, or Healthy Community Committee member know so we can address the situation.

We also practice care when by listening as much or more than we speak. And by taking responsibility for some personal work. We can attune our ears to different voices, in podcasts and writing and film, intentionally seeking out perspectives that are unfamiliar to us.

We can seek to understand the context we are in right now—this particular time and place in history, our neighbors’ stories, and our place in the all of it. We each have many kinds of identities- relating to gender, economic status, upbringing, culture, ethnicity, race, sexual preference, profession, history of trauma, and so on.

We cannot guess each other’s stories just by looking. But we can be receptive to the diversity of each other’s stories, beginning by acknowledging and accepting our own and seeking out diverse perspectives from those who are sharing in the public square.

In this way, we will not feel the need to make the first person with an unfamiliar identity into our teacher. Many people in minority identities report that others often expect them to be like a walking 101 class for those identities, and it not only makes them feel like continuous outsiders, it is also tedious.

Likewise, if you have a question that can be easily Googled, plan to Google it, and instead ask your new friend what brings them joy. That will be a much more interesting conversation anyway. I'm giving you some practical tips now, for practicing hospitality.

To create a spiritual community of love and compassion, we must also become very curious about implicit bias. Because we all have it.

Mahzarin Banaji shares a riddle she uses in her classes.ⁱⁱⁱ Some of you may have heard it before. It goes like this: A father and son are in a car accident. The father dies at the scene. The boy, badly injured, is rushed to the local hospital. But at the hospital, the operating surgeon looks at the boy and says, "I can't operate on this boy. He's my son." How can this be if the father just died?

Take a moment to think about it.

Ok, who knows the answer?

The surgeon is the boy's mother.

Once Banaji told this riddle to a class, and upon hearing the answer, one woman banged her head on her desk in such frustration, it left a mark. Banaji was like, whoa, you shouldn't be so hard on yourself! To which the woman replied, "Of course I should, my mother is a surgeon."

Banaji says she has shared the riddle in hospitals where 80% of the entering class of surgeons are women, and they don't get the answer either.

Sometimes people guess that the boy is from a two-father household, an answer that challenges our assumption that the boy's father was heterosexual. A decent answer. But it still leaves gender bias intact.

"There is something odd about the mind," Banaji says.

I think that's a real understatement. And when we relate to each other from a place of bias, it is damaging. So we need to be actively curious about those minds of ours. Banaji has created a website where you can take free, anonymous tests to uncover biases you may not know you have. I tried it out. It's a pretty interesting experience. It's at implicit.harvard.edu.

And, here are the three most challenging things about all this:

The first is that we have to be committed to compassion when we have misstep-ed. When someone tells you they are hurt or offended by something you said or did, it is

easy to get offended right back. Instead, try kindness. Breathe. Ask for more information. Let them know you care. Relationships matter in church and in life.

The second, is that when someone offends us or lets us down, we have to practice compassion toward that person, remembering that we do not know their story. Speaking our truth. Looking for genuine connection.

And the third, and sometimes hardest, thing is that these interactions demand the most from us when we are already tired and frustrated. When the atmosphere outside the church is filled with tension. When we wish relationships could just be easy. When we have already had multiple interactions of the same kind.

We are called to be together spiritually in our wholeness. As humans who love, and serve, but also who are unskillful sometimes. There is just no other way to do it.

Bell hooks writes, “Love allows us to enter paradise. Still, many of us wait outside the gates, unable to cross the threshold, unable to leave behind all the stuff we have accumulated that gets in the way of love.”^{iv} It takes courage to show up, to be authentic, to have a soft front and a strong back.

We grow as humans through connection and through dialogue, through calling each other in from a space of unknowing to a space of understanding. From a place of loneliness to warm and meaningful community. By creating safety not from perfection, but from love.

ⁱ Peters, Joey. “Citing Right to Free Speech UNM President Rejects Calls to Bar Provocateur.” The NM Political Report. 24 Jan 2017. Accessed online May 1, 2018.

<http://nmpoliticalreport.com/146766/citing-right-to-free-speech-unm-president-rejects-calls-to-bar-provocateur/>

ⁱⁱ williams, angel Kyodo. “The World Is Our Field of Practice.” Interview with Krista Tippet. *The On Being Project*, 19 Apr. 2018, onbeing.org/programs/the-world-is-our-field-of-practice-apr2018/.

ⁱⁱⁱ “Mahzarin Banaji - The Mind Is a Difference-Seeking Machine.” Interview by Krista Tippet. 9 June 2016. *The On Being Project*, onbeing.org/programs/mahzarin-banaji-the-mind-is-a-difference-seeking-machine/

^{iv} hooks, bell. *All About Love: new visions*. Harper Perennial: 2000. (147)