

**Inclusive Excellence:
Toward a Multiracial/Multicultural Future
April 19, 2009**

Two weeks ago, I traveled with Wildflower members Bobbie Erb, Barbara Carrington, Jan Austin, and Kathy Murphy to Tulsa, Oklahoma, for a three-day conference entitled, *Leading Congregations into a Multiracial, Multicultural Future: Now Is the Time!* The conference was a program of Congregational Services at the Unitarian Universalist Association, and was led, in part, by Unitarian Universalist Association staff members specializing in identity-based ministries.

Approximately fifty people were in attendance for the conference, and came from as far as Virginia, Massachusetts, and California, and from as nearby as Tulsa itself. Of those in attendance, the people were fairly evenly divided between people who identify as white, and those who identify as people of color. Ages ranged from young adults to elders.

The weekend was intense, hopeful, eye-opening, uncomfortable, joyous, awe-inspiring, and spiritually challenging. I think that all of us Wildflowers came back with a deepened appreciation of the notion and the necessity of staying at the table. Barbara, Jan, and Kathy will soon share their own thoughts.

For now, I would like to ask you, once more, to stay at the table, as I share with you some thoughts about race. I ask you to stay at the table because some of you may be feeling, “There she goes again: justice, justice, justice.” But hear me out. Stay at the table. There’s a very strong connection between our spirits which need to be nurtured, and our outer worlds we live in and maintain every day.

First, let me share with you something I heard a Unitarian Universalist minister once say. This minister, who is a person of color, very frankly summarized what he saw can

happen in a typical Unitarian Universalist church around racial inclusiveness. The phrase he spoke I believe may have originally been coined in reference to, of all things, pit bulls. That phrase is “Pet or threat?” The minister noted that too often, “pet or threat” is an underlying question white people in Unitarian Universalist congregations (and probably in others) find themselves asking in regard to people of color coming to their churches. (We might do it with gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people as well, but that’s another story.) Think about it. One, two, three or four people of color show up? Great! Cute! Fabulous! Welcome!! That’s the pet part. Seven, eight, nine, ten, fifteen, twenty? Wait a minute. They’re not going to start making demands of us are they? Change the music. Mention Jesus. Quote the Bible. Clap more. Speak Spanish. Dress up. Talk even *more* about race and racial justice. Eeek. These people are taking over. I don’t like this

church anymore!... That's the threat part. And a lot of churches never get to that part because, guess what? Consciously or not, we make sure we never reach that potential tipping point.

Instead, rather than going deep into spirit and asking ourselves what we might have to *give up* in order to become more inclusive, live our principles, follow the liberal religious values that we proclaim, and the mission we have created together, we shrug our shoulders, sigh, and go about our business. Because, guess what again? We have the privilege to do so. And yet it's our very privilege—specifically *white* privilege—that creates the obstacle to truly living into being a “deliberately inclusive, open-minded religious community in the Unitarian Universalist tradition.”

What do I mean by white privilege? In her essay, “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack,” Peggy McIntosh

writes, “I have come to see white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing in each day, but which I was ‘meant’ to remain oblivious.” Later in the essay, she lists several of those privileges, some of which I quote here:

- I can if I wish be in the company of people of my race most of the time.
- I can turn on the television or open to the front page of the paper and see people of my race widely represented.
- Whether I use checks, credit cards or cash, I can count on my skin color not to work against the appearance of financial reliability.
- I do not have to educate my children to be aware of systemic racism for their own daily physical protection.
- I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race.

- I can be late to a meeting without having the lateness reflect on my race....

At the end of the list, McIntosh notes, “I repeatedly forgot each of the realizations on this list until I wrote it down. For me white privilege has turned out to be an elusive and fugitive subject. The pressure to avoid it is great, for in facing it I must give up the myth of meritocracy.” She continues, “If these things are true, this is not such a free country; one’s life is not what one makes it; many doors open for certain people through no virtues of their own.”

In light of McIntosh’s observation, I ask, what doors will we open through the virtues we *do* own? I invite you to reflect on that question, and as a means of reflection, I offer you this spiritual practice for the coming week, or month, or life or so. As you go about your daily lives, in the grocery store, at work,

while driving or on the bus, wherever you may find yourself, observe the thoughts you have about people of races other than your own. And then see if you can recognize and *interrupt* those thoughts when they are prejudicial or even oppressive. With new awareness, see where your thoughts will take you.

Another spiritual practice I invite you into is to join me for the long haul work of Wildflower Church doing some deep reflection, as we did in becoming a welcoming congregation to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people, on how we can walk toward a multiracial, multicultural future, and achieve, indeed, inclusive excellence. A leader at the Tulsa conference noted that for us to succeed in such work, we will need one third of the congregation to be engaged in the work. Will you be part of that work? If yes, I will say...

Amen.