

UUism, Racism, & the 8th Principle: Past, Present, and Future

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Good Morning, UUs of Mt. Airy! I'd like to thank Cathy for suggesting we do this service today, Leslie and Mary for joining us, and Steve Workman and Mike Foy for helping with the script and tech details. Thank you all for being here, whether in person or online, whether now or via the recording later!

As most of you know, my name is Bruce Pollack-Johnson, and I'm the Moderator of this congregation. My pronouns are he, him, and his. My home in Philadelphia, and our congregation's building and grounds, sit on the unceded land of the Lenni Lenape nation. I am a cis-gender, straight, mentally and *mostly*-physically able-bodied, tall, thin, older, educated, middle class European American man who has been racialized as White by our society. Virtually all of these identities give me more privilege and access to power than those with marginalized identities that do not *yet* have the same access to that power and privilege. I have tried to leverage my power and privilege to dismantle and redesign the systemic structures that have created these inequalities of resources, opportunities, and power. For example, Linda and I decided to *hyphenate* our last names when we got married, symbolizing the connection of two equal individuals, and we gave our kids the last name of Polson ("Pol" from her family, "Pollack", and "son" from my family, "Johnson"), using the genetic metaphor of each parent contributing a *piece* of who their children are, to encourage systems that are non-sexist and sustainable.

I'd like to start my remarks today with a simple metaphor. Suppose you were invited to a dinner, and as everyone sat down to their assigned seats, you saw the nice dinners set out for each person, with shrimp and chocolate-dipped strawberries. Suddenly, someone walks in, and starts taking individual shrimp and strawberries from the people of color at the table, and gives them to the European Americans. Surely you would immediately speak up and stop this blatant unfairness and racism. Now imagine a second scenario. The situation is the same, but this time the redistribution has occurred before everyone arrived. Would you notice? Would you say or do anything?

Systemic racism, like other oppressions, carries power largely because it is *invisible* to those who benefit from it, like in my second scenario. Part of my goal today is to metaphorically show you a video of the redistribution that occurred before we arrived.

Unitarianism and Universalism as we know them were largely formed in the late 1700s, right around the same time as the United States of America, and so the racism of our Constitution and society was baked into each of them. Unitarianism had origins in Transylvania, Poland, and England, and focused on components like believing Jesus was a human being, the importance of freedom of conscience and reason, and rejection of the ideas of original sin and the infallibility of the Bible. Universalists, on the other hand, did not believe that people could end up in Hell, and believed in an immortal soul, Universal Love, and working toward building the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth. I like the following simplified comparison: that *Unitarians* believed that *Man* [yes; typically expressed in that sexist manner], that *Man* was too good to *go* to Hell, and Universalists believed that *God* was too good to *send* Man to Hell [yes; *also* usually expressed in a sexist form]. I think of the Unitarians as elite, well-educated thinkers and *individualists*, and the Universalists as more working class or rural, spiritual folks with good hearts and

more of a *community* orientation. Part of the brilliance of Unitarian Universalism, the merger of these two faiths, is recognizing the importance of *balance* of *both* the head and the heart in this life.

When Europeans first came to this continent, *slavery* existed in many forms – in this country usually as *indentured servitude*, which generally meant servitude for a certain period of time or until a debt was paid off, but it originally had no connection to the color of a person’s skin. In the 1600s, there were a number of uprisings, especially Bacon’s Rebellion, where indentured servants of European and African descent worked together against bad working conditions imposed by the elites they served. The elites saw how this endangered their own power, and so they devised a brilliant scheme to divide and conquer these two groups. They invented the concept of *whiteness*, related to the color of one’s skin, and gave the poor folks defined to be *White* power to control those defined to *not* be White, for example as overseers, or enforcers. They pushed the idea that those with darker skin were not equal human beings to Whites (or not human beings at all), and therefore cruelty was justified and encouraged. Even though their conditions may have even been *worse* for these poor Whites compared to *before* this racialization, they received the *psychological* benefit of *feeling* superior, and that was enough to keep them from cooperating with those they actually had *more* in common with. By the late 1600s, servitude was defined by one’s *race* (this social construction based on skin color) in the form of *chattel slavery*. Those who were enslaved were the *property* of their enslavers forever, and so were their children. Laws were passed that any White person could injure, rape, or kill any so-called “Negro”, and could not be prosecuted or punished in any way for it. Because enslavement was inherited, the slave *trade* could be ended in the US in 1808, without ending the *institution* of slavery (since an enslaver could rape an enslaved woman, and the resulting children would also be enslaved).

This system of enslavement and forced labor built the wealth of these elites, as well as farmers and businesses in the North and elsewhere, and built the wealth of our country to eventually surpass that of all others. Thomas Jefferson, who many of us claim as a UU, had great ideas about equality (mostly limited to wealthy white men with land of course), but he did not consider Africans to be equal humans to Europeans (although he wasn’t *sure* whether Native American Indians were or not), and despite *saying* he would like to free his *own* slaves, he never *did* free them, and many would say that his siring of children with Sally Hemings could not be described as anything but rape. Even worse, when Lafayette *donated* his compensation for service in the Revolutionary War *to* Jefferson for the express *purpose* of freeing those enslaved by Jefferson, Jefferson *still* did not free them!

Some Unitarians and Universalists supported the Abolition of slavery (although not necessarily believing in racial equality), but others were on the wrong side of history. For example Millard Filmore was Unitarian and as President signed the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850. After Emancipation, chattel slavery was ended, and some progress was made during Reconstruction, but this was soon replaced by the Jim Crow system, whose effect was very similar to enslavement, and strengthened the idea and culture of White Supremacy. Even the New Deal, Social Security, and the GI Bill, while helping millions of Americans, did not provide anywhere *near* the same benefits to people of color that it did to white families; systemic racism was built into all of them. Unitarians and Universalists did not welcome African Americans as ministers or even members in many places well into the 20th century, and people in both denominations were active in and supportive of the Eugenics movement, which contributed to Hitler’s atrocities and was used to justify systemic racism. However, moving into the Civil Rights Era, things began to change, and many UUs were moved to build relationships with civil rights organizations and then headed the call to come to Selma after Bloody Sunday. UUs James Reeb and Viola Liuzzo

were among the martyrs of the Civil Rights Movement. Around this time, many African Americans joined UU congregations when they saw UUs “walking the talk”, including our congregation, where minister Rudy Gelsey was a leader in Mt. Airy to end blockbusting by realtors trying to scare white families to flee to the suburbs, helping make Mt. Airy the diverse place it is today.

Later in the 1960s, however, many Black Americans shifted their focus away from the explicit nonviolence of Martin Luther King, especially after his assassination, toward the Black Power movement, heavily influenced by Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture), and the Black Panthers. Some UUs were supportive of this shift, and a group called the Black Affairs Council (BAC) was created to fund Black-initiated projects in Black neighborhoods, organized by the Black UU Caucus (BUUC), and supported by a group of white allies called FULLBAC (including our minister at the time, Rudy Gelsey). The story is complicated. The quick summary is that the General Assembly (or GA for short, the national annual meeting of the Unitarian Universalist Association, or UUA) voted in 1968 to fund BAC at \$250,000 per year for 4 years (seen as a form of Reparations), but after one year of funding, a financial crisis was discovered in the UUA and no more funding was given after that first year. I call this the Black Empowerment Betrayal, and after it, many hundreds of black UUs left the denomination.

This crisis was so contentious that there was little racial justice work for a couple of decades in the UUA. Meanwhile, the Jim Crow system that was toppled by the Civil Rights Movement, after some years of good racial justice progress, morphed into the War on Drugs, the system of Mass Incarceration, and the School to Prison Pipeline (what Michelle Alexander has called The New Jim Crow). After the video of the beating of Rodney King, however, in the 1990s a new movement for racial justice started to build, ending in a number of GA resolutions to become an Anti-Racist Anti-Oppression Multi-Cultural organization. The Journey Toward Wholeness program was created, which included developing the Jubilee antiracism workshops with Crossroads, providing a common analysis and understanding of systemic racism for thousands of UUs. GAs and other meetings included process observations and Right Relations teams to hold ourselves accountable and deal with racist comments and actions, we had our first African American President, and a lot of progress ensued.

Sadly, a few years into the new millennium, the commitment to antiracism waned. Funding for Jubilee workshops ended, and there was a shift in the direction of a much watered-down “multicultural competence” approach. In 2013, Paula Cole Jones, an African American racial justice consultant and staff person for the UUA, shared an observation with me. She said she had noticed that, in her work with UU congregations, there were two categories of congregations – what she characterized as “7 Principles” congregations, and “Beloved Community” congregations. The problem in her mind was that many UUs felt that they were living by the 7 Principles, but they were totally oblivious to systemic racism. She said “maybe what we need is another Principle”. Now, I’m the kind of person that responds immediately to a challenge like that, so I stayed up late that night and wrote out an early draft of the 8th Principle. I shared it with her, we revised it together, then worked out final revisions with a Post-Jubilee support group we were co-leading at the time.

The result was the 8th Principle as we know it today: “journeying toward spiritual wholeness by building a diverse multicultural Beloved Community by our actions that accountably dismantle racism and other oppressions in ourselves and our institutions”. I immediately proposed that our congregation here adopt it as a Principle, but at that point we decided to instead add the language to our existing Congregational

Covenant, in 2014. Later that year in August, in response to the uprising in Ferguson, our congregation started our weekly Black Lives Matter Vigil, that continues to this day, and hung up a Black Lives Matter banner. Participants in the Vigil spend half an hour with signs on the street, then light candles and share readings, songs, and racial justice concerns and history.

As some of you know, in 2017 the President of the UUA voluntarily resigned in response to charges of systemic racial bias and insensitivity (even though he himself was Latino) related to hiring practices in the UUA. This crisis led to the formation of the Commission on Institutional Change (CIC) by our three interim African American co-Presidents and our co-Moderator Team that included Trans folk and people of color. Congregations around the country, including us, held White Supremacy Teach-Ins. Our congregation responded by adopting the 8th Principle overwhelmingly. We were the first to adopt it, and formed an 8th Principle Team to implement it. Black Lives of UUism (BLUU) immediately endorsed it, and Honolulu and All Souls DC adopted it soon after. That summer at GA, Paula and I introduced the 8th Principle as a Responsive Resolution, and it passed overwhelmingly. This should have led to the formation of an Article II Commission to consider the 8th Principle and other possible changes to the Principles, Purposes, and Sources immediately, but I think the UUA Board decided to let the CIC finish its work before creating the Article II Commission.

The CIC released its report in 2020 called “Widening the Circle of Concern” after deeply studying systemic racism in the UUA and making recommendations about how to dismantle it, both in congregations and at the national UUA level. That summer the Article II Commission was formed, and they are hard at work now, aiming to bring a proposal to GA in 2023, as we discussed last week. In the meantime, the number of congregations adopting the 8th Principle was around 117 about a year ago, and now has jumped to over 220 (out of about 1000 congregations in the US), including a few UU groups like UU Ministry for the Earth.

Why is the 8th Principle so important to so many UUs? In the middle of the 20th century, UUism tended to focus on individual freedom and reason. The 7th Principle (adopted in 1985) about the interdependent web of life of which we are a part brought more focus on the importance of relationships, gender, and the environment, reflecting a higher level of consciousness in those areas. In a similar way, the 8th Principle recognizes the development of a higher level of consciousness related to systemic racism and other oppressions since the 1990s. The resolutions that were passed at that time were not enough to sustain our commitment. Adding it as a *Principle* is the way to make it ever-present in the minds of all UUs, to show our true commitment, to walk the talk, and to hold ourselves and each other accountable to that commitment.

Once a month, Paula and I hold gatherings on Zoom of what we call the 8th Principle Learning Community. For over a year, there have been a couple of hundred UUs on each call, learning from each other, sharing experiences and lessons learned. We have seen how adopting the 8th Principle is so meaningful to people of color in a congregation and to young folks who otherwise would be inclined to not bother getting involved in a spiritual community. It is a way of helping us free our movement from its narrow Eurocentric and Christian roots to something much more powerful and universal that is appealing to so many people.

There is a very good chance that all of the components of the 8th Principle will be included in the proposal by the Article II Commission, and that it will be adopted. Last year at GA we proposed a

second Responsive Resolution to affirm that the essential concepts of the 8th Principle be included in the new proposed *Principles* (as opposed to the Purposes or Sources), which again passed overwhelmingly. But some of the most meaningful work comes from each congregation looking at itself and thinking deeply about how White Supremacy culture has inevitably penetrated the way we do things, and making a commitment to doing the work needed to dismantle that embedded systemic racism. My personal goal is to have a *majority* of our congregations adopt the 8th Principle *before* the GA votes. Then the national vote will have deep meaning, and we will have truly transformed ourselves.

Theologically, there has been a movement in UUism from *individual* freedom to *collective* liberation. Many of us talk about Beloved Community as our vision for where we want to go. We talk about the importance of love, but that word is not yet contained in our Principles. Spiritually, racism and other oppressions damage the souls of *all* of us, *both* the oppressed and the oppressor. For those of us who are white, knowing we have benefitted from something we do not deserve is painful and damages our soul. If we want to become whole spiritually, we need to do this work to *repair* that injustice. Because systemic racism has been in place since *before* all of us were born, we could say that we are *not* whole *after* we are born, and that this work is therefore about *restoring* wholeness, if we believe that we have a kind of wholeness at the moment of birth. I recently realized that that is probably a major reason why our old name, Restoration, resonated with most of our members of color and with many others of us.

The 8th Principle singles out racism because that has been the source of our two major crises as a faith movement. Theologian James Cone has called racism America's original sin. We UUs don't believe in original sin for individual *people*, but we can understand his point for our *country*. At the same time, similar dynamics can affect LGBTQIA+ folx, people with disabilities, women, and many other groups. We want to work toward Beloved Community where *every* person feels at home, accepted and loved for who they are at their core. Our music, habits, and cultural awareness can have a huge effect. The 8th Principle is a beacon helping us see the path toward this goal. The Widening the Circle report is an initial roadmap of ways to get there. Our 8th Principle Team is leading our congregation in seeing how we might follow its recommendations, starting with explorations of inclusive decision-making and radical hospitality. We will be connecting with our local neighborhood with a Flea Market this September for the first time in years, largely thanks to Deb Gausmann, and we are in a partnership of accountability with the Philly chapter of N'COBRA, the National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations in America, to support their work on Reparations in the city. At the same time, a number of us are interested in researching our own congregation's history with an eye to Reparations – whether we have been consistently on the side of racial justice, or whether there might be some times when we made some poor choices, and to then think of things we might be able to do to remedy them.

Now that I have shown you the video of the redistribution that occurred before we got to the dinner table, I trust that you will be moved to do something about that injustice. Don't get stuck in guilt – guilt is simply awareness without action. The remedy is simple: take action! We *all* have been tainted by decades of socialization in a racist society. It's time to do something about it. We hope you will join in doing this work. Whether it is attending a Jubilee 3 training, helping with the Flea Market, exploring the Widening the Circle recommendations, voter registration and engagement work, or working on Reparations, we look forward to working together to build Beloved Community right here at home.

Ashe! May it be so!