

Reflection offered at “The Water We Swim In” worship service, August 20, 2017,
North Parish of North Andover, MA, by Gail Forsyth-Vail

I have been part of the religious education and faith development staff at Unitarian Universalist headquarters in Boston for the last 9 years. Questions about race and about white privilege have been a regular part of my work life for all that time. But, this spring, a series of events invited me to go deeper, and to really explore the notion of white supremacy, and how it relates to both my personal and professional life.

It began with a social media post. A friend and colleague, a religious educator who is a person of color, posed a question: “Why did the UUA just hire another white male minister for a leadership position?” That simple question took off like a fire in a dry field. Much conversation ensued. The questions became bigger: “Why is the senior leadership of the UUA largely white male ministers? Why are people of color in demand for significant volunteer leadership positions, but not for paid positions? What does a leader look like to Unitarian Universalists?”

After a tense couple of weeks, UUA president Peter Morales resigned, three months ahead of the end of his term. There followed three other resignations of senior staff. Ten days later, the Board appointed three extraordinary Black leaders as interim co-presidents to lead us for the 11 weeks until the UUA election. With the appointment, the board delivered an unprecedented charge. In addition to handling the usual business of the UUA, the three were charged with beginning a process of institutional self-examination. They were asked to lead the UUA staff in beginning to name and dismantle the ways in which white supremacy culture was present in the Unitarian Universalist Association organization, its processes and procedures, the resources we develop and offer to congregations, and how leaders are chosen and supported. At the same time, Unitarian Universalist congregations were challenged to take part in a white supremacy teach-in and to begin a process of self-examination. Thus began an extraordinary time in our faith tradition.

White supremacy? Really? Unitarian Universalists? We are justice people, good people. We are not the KKK. There was much consternation – and many Facebook

and Twitter conversations- as to whether that term, “white supremacy” was too much for white UUs to handle. UU staff of color formed their own support system.

And our co-presidents asked us, the staff, to be open to the teaching and the leadership of people of color. They asked us to try on the idea of “white supremacy culture” and explore what it might mean. They asked us to imagine dismantling that culture at the UUA and in Unitarian Universalism. They asked us to hold on for a rocky ride.

And it got rockier. Our beloved moderator, an elected volunteer who had held the staff and guided the Board during the rough time after Morales resignation, resigned suddenly and died 3 weeks later from an aggressive cancer. The executive director of the UU Ministers Association sent a letter attacking the Board and its leadership- and eventually resigned. There were revelations about “business as usual” at the UUA that made it look as though past management was guided more by business models and values than by our religious values. And, at General Assembly in New Orleans, two UUA staffers were beaten and robbed by four black men in their late teens; their families and UUA leadership needed to

speak for mercy for the perpetrators while at the same time holding James and Tim close and praying for their recovery. It was all too much.

But still the staff was invited to hold on, to stay faithful, to stay open to what we had to learn. We were asked to explore the difference between “white supremacy,” which is a system of dominance and oppression, and “white supremacists” like the KKK and neo-Nazis. We tried on this definition of white supremacy:

White supremacy is an historically based, institutionally perpetuated system of exploitation and oppression of continents, nations and peoples of color by white peoples and nations of the European continent; for the purpose of maintaining and defending a system of wealth, power and privilege.

(Repeat this definition).

We- and I- needed to operate in ambiguity and uncertainty, being willing to examine long-held assumptions. We needed to learn to listen, but also to dare to speak about our lives, our experiences, and our struggles. It is the work of a lifetime. It is also the urgent work of *right now*.

I've had both time with the staff and time on sabbatical to consider this. It's not my habit to share from the pulpit what I have not already digested, but I've decided to take a plunge and invite you to reflect with me. Here are some things I have learned and continue to explore.

1. White supremacy culture is hierarchical and individualistic. Some people succeed, and some don't. Some voices are heard and attended to, and some aren't. Some jobs are well-compensated, and others not so much. People stuck in white supremacy culture are well aware of those above them in the pecking order and feel superior to (or qualified to help) those below.
2. "Mattering" to people of color is often about bodies, physical bodies. When white people are concerned about whether they "matter," it is often about hopes, aspirations, acceptance, and recognition. Black Lives Matter is about demanding that Black and Brown bodies NOT be killed or imprisoned or exploited or deported.
3. Police forces historically were set up to enforce white dominance. The law itself was set up to enforce white dominance. Slave patrols, lynchings, Jim

Crow laws, the US Cavalry, Indian agents, and the border patrol were and are all agents of enforcement for a white dominant society. There is a tremendous historical burden which makes people of color distrust police. While white children are taught that police are your friend, children of color, for their own survival, need to learn otherwise. This is not about individual officers, but about a system of dominance.

4. Our religious ancestors were *more than* complicit in white supremacy culture. Many were shapers of the culture and provided its intellectual and philosophical grounding. At times, they were also voices of resistance to that culture. We need to identify and learn from both. And we need to be able to embrace the complexity of the ways in which our forebears were shapers of white supremacy culture, and the ways in which they resisted it.
5. Whose voice is heard matters. How we define leadership matters.
6. History matters. How we narrate history matters. Who we honor matters. And who and what we forget or overlook matters.
7. White supremacy culture is upheld by the twin notions of “innocence” (I am not personally responsible; I am not a racist) and “ignorance” (I don’t know anything about the past or why things are the way they are).

That's my list for now- and it will keep growing. But I want to leave you with a couple of stories- and an invitation to lots of further conversation.

First story:

On Friday night, Aug 11, a group of religious leaders from many faiths gathered in Charlottesville, Virginia, for a worship service to fortify them to resist a planned "Unite the Right" March. As the service ended, the church was surrounded by a crowd of white supremacists, neo-Nazis, and KKK carrying torches and shouting "You will not replace us," "Jews will not replace us," and "Blood and Soil."

Worship service attendees were asked to remain in the church until it safe to leave. The following day, a group of clergy, including several UUs, locked arms in an act of civil disobedience, risking arrest as they tried to prevent white supremacists from entering Emancipation Park.

Things quickly devolved when a large crowd of supremacists arrived with automatic weapons, Nazi flags, clubs, and shields, and violence erupted. The clergy people moved to safety; nonviolent civil disobedience was the plan, not street fighting. By day's end, three people were dead, and 19 injured. Facing down this kind of overt white supremacy- and in your face white supremacists- is an important part of our justice witness. But it is only part of our work.

Second story:

In late May, I visited a city in the South as part of a sabbatical trip. The first night I was there, I walked to a park in the center of the historic downtown. It was prom night, and parents were taking photos of teens in their finery, using a lovely small park as a background.

On Sunday morning, I went to the UU church and then to lunch with a number of leaders in the congregation, all of whom were white. We talked about their Universalist heritage and about the wonderful work they are doing in the community. They have been active in supporting gay men stationed at the military base nearby and active in reproductive justice work. This was a congregation with a strong history of justice work of which they were justifiably proud.

At one point, I asked my UU hosts about Black communities in the city. There was some silence, then one of them told me that once upon a time there had been a

black business district, but it was gone now. There was some violence. Everyone was unsure about the story.

Later, it took me a very short time and an internet search to discover that indeed there had been a thriving Black business district at the turn of the 20th century. In 1908, a black man was accused of murdering a white woman, and was dragged from the jail, beaten, and hanged right in the park where I had seen prom pics taken two nights before. His body was shot about 2000 times. 1000 people had participated in the lynching. For years afterward, white men in the community shot and killed Black men walking down the street in the Black business district and buried them on the outskirts of town. It's not hard to figure out how white people acquired the land downtown, and why the thriving Black business district disappeared. But none of the justice-oriented UU leaders told me this story- and there was no plaque at park, no mention in the guidebooks. Hidden history. In white supremacy culture, ignorance and innocence obliterate the history- and allow good justice-seeking people to wonder why their community is not more diverse.

I want to be really clear that I am not picking on this city at all. We are them and they are us. There is hidden history here as well, things we would rather not name.

Two stories- and there are many more. Stories of fighting overt white supremacy with marches and phone calls and person to person conversations. And stories of that help us uncover- and dismantle- the white supremacy culture that hides just below the surface in our lives and our communities. There is work to be done. And it cannot wait.