

THE WATER WE SWIM IN
The Rev. Julie Stoneberg
Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough
October 15, 2017

OPENING WORDS *More Love: A Call to Worship (abridged) ~ Nancy McDonald Ladd*

We gather in community every Sunday in a state of conflict for our very souls – a state both expansively hopeful and restrictively confined.
We are hopeful that we might rise to meet a new day...hopeful that each and every one of us might encounter the sacred within, among, and beyond every human soul, and hopeful that such an encounter might work through us to topple the idolatries of our age.
And yet, we also gather as a people who are not yet free – a people confined and contained...because in this culture of division built upon the pain of people at the margins, we hold our love too tightly.
Putting our love in boxes with qualifications: I will love you if – I will see you if – I will bear the truth of my soul alongside you if – and only if... you agree with me, you look like me, you act like me, you sing like me, you wear your gender on your sleeve and produce it upon demand.
I will love you and will meet you in the sanctuary of our hearts – If and only if...
You give me evidence of your good liberal virtues. If and only if...
We are imprisoned by these ifs and these only-ifs. We are confined by the smallness of our loving.
And so today, as we intersect in honest work, let our hopefulness intersect with our conviction.
Let our willingness to love beyond our expectations or experience break down our long-held barriers.
Let our willingness to be honest about the hardest questions open us to new truths.
May there truly be more love, with no labels, and no binary, and no preface, and no qualification, and no arithmetic, and no limit.
May there be more love to liberate us all, and may we keep on, today and every day, until we find it, and share it, inch by precious inch, with one another and the world.
Come, let us gather in worship, always seeking more love.

STORY FOR ALL AGES *The Smallest Girl in the Smallest Grade* ~ Justin Roberts
(Sally McCabe is so small she's almost invisible, but she is paying extra special attention to everything around her. One day, she puts up her hand and says "Stop!")

READING *Change My Heart* ~ Gretchen Haley¹

My first year in seminary, I interned as a chaplain at the Denver Women's Prison, where on Friday nights we'd gather for worship. Which, I quickly learned, meant gathering around a CD player blasting what some call "Jesus-is-my-boyfriend" music.
The music would fill the room, and the women would sing along with all their hearts, raising their arms, filled with passion, swaying together, singing *Jesus, Jesus...*

¹ From a new collection of meditations on justice and resilience called *To Wake, To Rise*.

As for me - well, I stood in the back, my arms firmly crossed, hoping to demonstrate to all who might look my way, this was not my thing.

More than just feeling personally uncomfortable, I felt embarrassed for the women, and for all this cheesy superficial theology they had somehow embraced. And from this distanced and defended place, I watched.

So often we resist with our rational brains the experiences our hearts most crave. We talk ourselves out of the love that stand so close we could almost eat it up if we would just...stop. Let go. Love.

To receive love like *that* would mean an ongoing willingness to be *vulnerable*, an ongoing journey of transformation, breaking open and changing, being born and reborn again.

My stance in the back of the worship space was like my own little force field that had me *thinking* much about "systems of oppression, economic injustice, generational poverty," etc., etc., and engagement with the *life* in the room.

But then, between each worship service, the women would come and talk with me. As I started to get to know them, arms unfolded. I heard their stories - of greater loss than I could even fathom, more struggle than you'd think a single person could survive.

Then, Friday night would come again, and they'd sing. And they'd cry, and laugh together, and release from their bodies just a few of the stories I know lived there.

One Friday night, I was standing there, and this song was playing, "Change my heart, O God. Make it ever true. Change my heart, O God, may I be like you." Suddenly, it just hit me.

I mean it hit me who should *really* be embarrassed in the room - and in case it's not clear, it wasn't the women singing and swaying. In that moment, it hit me, the words, they didn't matter. The theology - Jesus-as-my-boyfriend and Father-God-centered as it was - didn't matter. Because the room was filled with *life*, and there was just one person in the room who had failed to experience that life, embodied there in the fellowship of women singing about the possibility of healing and goodness and forgiveness and transformation.

And so, I started singing, "Change my heart, O God." I stepped in closer, and I started singing louder. "Make it ever true."

Okay, yes, I was still totally uncomfortable, but I was leaning into my discomfort, learning from letting it just *be*. Actually, it wasn't just uncomfortable, it was terrifying to let down my defenses like that, to invite these words into my mouth without clarifying what I did or did not *actually* believe, to sing with a full voice about Jesus, and how I believe in him and his love for me, how it saves me.

It was terrifying to give in to the experience, knowing I, too, had experienced pain and shame, beyond what I was willing or able to name. It was terrifying to just be present, in the midst of all that love. Terrifying, and transforming. After that night, I could receive more people more fully, be with more people more fully, love the world more fully, and receive love more fully.

Uncross your arms, lean all the way in. Love is everywhere.

MESSAGE

Last spring, on May 7th, we held a “White Supremacy Teach-In” during our morning service. The idea of a teach-in, in the language of the ‘60’s, is to upset the status quo in order to increase awareness about controversial issues and then to encourage people to act. A teach-in abandons ‘business as usual’ in the interest of educated empowerment.

We’re not abandoning business as usual this morning, but neither are we abandoning our commitment to increasing our awareness. Again, this week and next, hundreds of UU congregations are intentionally engaging in continuing this work.

Way back in 2010, African American UU minister Rosemary Bray McNatt, now the president of Starr King School for the Ministry, wrote this in an article for the UUWorld Magazine:²

“...we forget at our peril that even topics as innocuous as what color to paint the bathroom walls continue to fall victim to the realities of our congregation systems, to our habits of being... We also underestimate the reality of resistance in our congregation, a resistance rooted not so much in racism as in matters of class and culture. We forget when we talk about cultural competence in ministry...that it is not just those other people who have a culture. Unitarian Universalist congregations have a culture.

Consider who many of us are, and who we are pretty proud about being, no matter what our race or ethnicity. [Some] of us listen to [podcasts and just about anything else on the CBC]...Many of us are unapologetic nature lovers...[We] eat locally and we shop at farmer’s markets, and we would never be caught in Wal-Mart, unless it was a dire emergency. Many of us look ahead in our hymnal to see whether we agree with the words, and forget that the person sitting next to us may need exactly the words we are refusing to sing.”

She goes on to ask hard questions...questions that we are asking again today. What about those whose experience of church is different, or whose experience of the holy is different, or who find the truth of their lives in reality TV, who never listen to podcasts or never go hiking and camping... can they feel welcome among us? How do they experience our culture?

And beyond this identity type of culture, how do we make room for the experiences of people who don’t share our privilege...whose names we can’t even pronounce? Who have grown up swimming elsewhere? Who have been oppressed by our white supremacy, or white colonialist, culture? How do we develop a desire to see and challenge our own resistance?

So, I was listening to a podcast³ the other day... really, I was...a conversation with a physicist about the Higgs boson particle, sometimes called the god particle. There was something in it that seemed perfectly apropos to today’s message. (And just that fact is a highly suspicious indication of our culture.) I don’t understand the physics of it, but apparently it is now commonly held that the universe is filled with an invisible substance called the Higgs Field. What is visible to us moves through this invisible environment, and in doing so experiences a kind of resistance. Apparently, it is that very resistance which creates mass. In other words, it is from interacting with something that’s invisible that particles come into being.

² <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/uu-must-change>

³ <https://onbeing.org/programs/brian-greene-reimagining-the-cosmos-jun2017/>

This hasn't been completely proven, but scientists believe that this invisible field exists. They know this because a big machine called a hadron collider, slams protons together at near the speed of light, thereby jiggling the field. If the field gets jostled just the right way, a little speck flicks off, providing some evidence that the Higgs boson particle does exist.

Now, finding the invisible is really difficult...apparently that little particle is jiggled off about once in every trillion proton collisions.

Doing this work of recognizing the water that we swim in...the water which has created who we are...the water that gives us both form and substance...is incredibly hard.

Just think of fish in the ocean, or in a fish tank. Swimming. They're not aware that there is an 'anywhere else' that is not filled with water. In fact, water is so familiar to them that it is invisible, unnoticeable. And this is how culture operates...we're living, working, connecting, interacting within an environment that most of the time is invisible to us. It is the water in which we swim.

Some of us had an experience yesterday...in this room, and sharing a meal downstairs...of being with people we've never met before who see the world in different ways. It was a wonderful celebration, which continues this afternoon, yet it does make one wonder why it is we don't do this more often, and more easily. What keeps us so separate?

Just like in our story today⁴, the challenge is to develop awareness...to begin to see the water...to begin to understand that others thrive in, and are most comfortable in, a different environment. And then to create in ourselves a desire to know those other cultures and waters, and to release the hold on our own. It probably even require us to develop new gills, new receptors, new appreciators, new eyes.

A first step is to begin to name what our culture looks like, and how it operates. In "Dismantling Racism: A Workbook for Social Change Groups"⁵, Kenneth Jones and Tema Okun list thirteen characteristics of white supremacy culture. They say that these characteristics are used as norms and standards that self-perpetuate while operating to exclude others. I'm not going to list them all; but I've seen a few of them show up in this congregation, and honestly, in myself.

To describe these characteristics, I'll use much of the language that Jones and Okun use. It is very 'white' of me to offer a disclaimer, but here it is: their language is quite hyperbolic, or at least appears to be, exaggerated. So, it might feel extreme to you...that it doesn't allow for nuance. That may be true, but I think we need to hear it in its strongest form. Direct. Honest. Hard. Sort of like blasting protons at one another in order to jostle the field. So, we're just going to jostle the field of our invisible white culture a little.

I'm going to use "we" a lot...and talk about "our culture" and "our water" and some of you are probably going to resist that...and feel defensive. Maybe feel excluded. And that's okay. Pay attention to that.

⁴ The Smallest Girl in the Smallest Class, by Justin Roberts...about a little girl who notices things that others don't.

⁵ http://www.cswsworkshop.org/PARC_site_B/dr-culture.html

Maybe this is like one of those moments when Annie Dillard says we should all be wearing crash helmets in church...that ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares, and lash us to our pews. Because you never know when some other protons are going to come blasting toward you at the speed of light.

Never fear. Simply open your ears and your minds. And your hearts.

The first characteristic. Worship of the Written Word. This plays out in many ways, and I think especially within Unitarian Universalism. In general, it means that those with strong writing skills and vocabulary are more highly valued. Education, and particularly academic degrees, are status symbols. It means that there is an assumption that there is a right way to do things and that there's something wrong with those who don't do it that way. And, that our ideas about what makes a good life are considered better than what others might choose.

Does any of that ring true? Can you think of examples in this congregation? Whose voices are most valued? What kind of writing on what kinds of topics is held in highest regard? Who has authority on matters related to the decisions we make as a congregation? What would it feel like, or look like, to seek wisdom from and value in those don't speak eloquently, or write creatively, or think systematically? Could it be that this hierarchy of language is simply the water we happen to swim in and not a universal value?

Two. A sense of urgency. And three. Progress defined as bigger and more.

White culture has an undercurrent of urgency, telling us that getting things done fast and efficiently, all the while expending the least amount of resources possible, is better than taking time to be inclusive, or to think in the long term, or to invest in relationships and partnerships that slow us down or are too difficult to maneuver as we climb. We expect a lot to be done with the smallest amount of effort and commitment possible, and measure progress by things that expand, grow, and serve more people. And in the process of growing, white culture puts little value on asking questions about who is being exploited, or excluded, as we rush by to produce more.

Where have you seen this here? In myself, I know I am motivated by to-do lists...getting things done so that we can move onto the next thing. Everything feels important, and important to get done by a deadline. I'm not saying that this is bad, necessarily, but noticing this makes me wonder what I might be overlooking or missing because I'm moving too fast and not taking time to notice who's in the room, or who's not in the room. Maybe we set our sight on more attendance, or a bigger canvass drive, or more kids in RE, or...and we fail to notice all the good that's happening right now. Right here.

Remember our conversation at last May's Annual Meeting? We tossed around the idea of choosing ambassadors who would take responsibility for lifting up the voices of what we say matters to us...the children, our ecological footprint, right relations. To call us to stop and notice. And to value those voices. And to listen. That would be a step outside of white culture.

I'm reminded of a quote from Thoreau (a dead white guy prevalent in our culture): "Why should we be in such desperate haste to succeed and in such desperate enterprises? If a man..." Except maybe we need to revise his next lines to say something like... "If a person does not keep pace with the dominant culture, perhaps it is because they are hearing the

drums of different ways and perspectives. Let all of us hear that music, however measured or far away.”

Four. Fear of open conflict. In this manifestation of white culture, people, particularly those in power, avoid, ignore or run from conflict. There’s an over-emphasis on being polite, and it’s seen as impolite to raise difficult issues or ask tough, direct questions.

Okay. I feel a bit impolite even asking this, but you do recognize this one, right? I sure recognize it in myself. Those who have been swimming in something other than white culture can be confused by us. They don’t get the meaning behind our implications or insinuations. They get mis-cues all the time. They might interpret our politeness for insincerity, which, let’s face it, sometimes it is.

One of the ways I see this here...again, if you’ll pardon my directness...is that when things get tough, people walk away rather than face it. We have the luxury, the privilege, of doing that. We can simply move to where we’re more comfortable.

I heard someone say recently that when we do this, we are really saying, ‘who you are, and what you want isn’t important to me. I don’t need you.’ So, engaging in conflict might actually be a way of expressing our deepest connection to one another. But it does require us to be uncomfortable in unfamiliar waters.

Which leads to Five. A right to comfort. It’s the belief that we, those with power, have a right to emotional and psychological comfort. Sometimes this is expressed as white fragility, which is our inability to withstand much criticism or challenge. This need for comfort and attention fuels our defensiveness, and our need to show that we too have somehow been oppressed. You know, “I grew up in a rough neighbourhood too” or “I was bullied in school” or “My people were also persecuted.” A friend calls this the ‘Oppression Olympics.’ Like we need to be on top...even on a list of hardships!

Our need for comfort can also show up as a desire to keep things the way they are...to resist change. We don’t want to rock the boat, so no one will GET defensive and create conflict. We feel entitled to being comfortable. It’s our right. Right?

And that’s just five of thirteen characteristics.

The good news is that Jones and Okun offer a list of antidotes, but...I’m not going to offer them to you. Today, I simply want to disquiet you. To get you to imagine this water. To see if you can feel the resistance that others might feel when they come to swim with us. To name things. To question the status quo. To simply wonder what it would be like for someone who is used to breathing air to enter our water.

I want to be little Sally McCabe and put up my hand and say ‘stop’. Let’s notice who we are, and the water we’ve inherited, and the culture that we’re perpetuating. What can we do to jostle things a bit, to shake ourselves loose?

Robin DiAngelo⁶, who has written extensively about white culture, and who was a main presenter at June’s General Assembly, says we...that is white people...have to build our racial stamina if we are to find ways to interrupt White Supremacy and racism. We have to be

⁶ <https://notesfromanaspiringhumanitarian.com/white-people-increase-your-racial-stamina-take-the-pledge/>

willing to hear criticism and to change. If we are white people who sincerely say we're concerned about racial justice, it's up to us to dismantle white supremacy culture.

At this moment, I don't know how to do it. But I'm willing to open my ears to difficult feedback, and open my heart to uncomfortable understanding...to put up my hand and say "Stop. Let's stop hurting one another." Let's live into the reality of our interconnectedness.

May we capable of making it so.

READING *Connecting*⁷ ~ Trish Knoll

I'm white space
between black dots.
I grew up catching tigers
by the toe. School books
came with unbroken backs.

No one ever called my people X.
Families on TV looked like mine.
I burn in the sun. I believed
money could get me where I wanted to go.

I own the land I live on.
I was never a melting anything –
fondue, chocolate, molten pot,
hot lava lamp, or zombie brain.

A bubble surrounds me,
shimmer-soap surprise
I thought would never pop
until it did.

CLOSING WORDS *I Pray this Day for the Courage to Be...* (adapted) ~ Maureen Killoran

We pray this day for the courage to be...
The courage to be humble in the face of inequity and pain,
to know that the power has been given to us to make a difference,
although not to end all suffering or to save all the whales that populate our days.

We pray for the courage of endurance,
to keep acting in the midst of despair, to keep trying in the aftermath of failure,
to keep hoping in the emptiness that follows loss or change.

May courage give us patience
And may we ever know Love's healing presence at the heart and center of our days.

So may it be.

Amen.

⁷ From a new collection of meditations on justice and resilience called *To Wake, To Rise*.