

## Living into Different Ways of Being

Readings: 'Messy and Imperfect Beloved Community' by Laila Ibrahim  
'For When I Really Don't Want to Learn This' by Elizabeth Nguyen

"Help me to learn it. Please.  
And then help me to live what I have learned.  
And do right by the gift of being taught."

As I worked with the members of the anti-racism, anti-oppression, multiculturalism committee to put together this service, we decided, today, not to provide you with intellectual analysis of systemic racism. This analysis is worthy and important and if you want to grow in this way, talk to me or committee members and we can help you with this. Instead, we decided to show you an attempt to do the work, an effort to be more anti-racist in real and tangible ways. Here is that attempt to show you what we are learning, and doing right about the gift of being taught.

This morning is an example of a more anti-racism worship experience. Engaging our bodies is part of that. The expectation that worship is a time to be still and quiet is primarily a white expectation, primarily an upper middle class expectation. Many Unitarian Universalists of color have said that this expectation is deeply alienating for them, that it doesn't fit their cultural expectations of what worship is. Many of them have shared stories of coming to Unitarian Universalism because our values and teachings stir their souls... and then they are let down by what actually happens here. The quiet and stillness is only part of that. What does it look like to hold up a mirror to ourselves, see that, and try a new way of being? Today is one example of that.

But there are other learnings we are trying to show this morning. Over the past year or so, I have been doing a lot of learning and thinking about what we do together when we gather at 10:45 on Sunday mornings, about how we might do this with more awareness and integrity. There have been some experiments, some more successful than others. It is challenging and I am learning a lot. When I first saw DeReau Farrar's testimony a few weeks ago, I thought to myself, "well, even with all this work, I messed up." See last month, our water service was built around the hymn 'I've Got Peace Like a River.' Many of you were there and sang the verses with me. You heard me encourage people to use the silly hand gestures that some of us learned at summer camp. I didn't know the history of the song last month. Part of my regret is that the service would have been richer had I incorporated the story that we just heard. I have always wondered what peace like a river meant, as I have not known many peaceful rivers.

As Unitarian Universalists, we affirm that truth comes in many forms, from many communities. We lift up all the world's wisdom traditions, the teachings of science, the words and deeds of prophetic people, and personal experience as sources of our faith. Your worship leaders, Savannah, me, and so many volunteers, try to incorporate a wide variety of sources every week. One of my New Year's resolutions last year was to incorporate something from a community or person of color every Sunday. This has included our hymns and other music, readings, stories we tell our children, and stories that I tell in the sermon. Every week we lift up at least one non-white voice and say, "this has meaning." "This is worth listening to and learning from." That is a powerful practice in our life together. We have done that every time I have led worship for the past 10 months. I haven't mentioned to most of you that that's what we're doing. Part of me wanted to see if we could do it before we started talking about it.

It is powerful – and it is complicated. As we heard from DeReau Farrar, it's complicated for him as a black man to lead a predominantly white choir in a predominantly white church in singing songs rooted in the black experience of slavery in this country. In conversations with other religious leaders, especially religious leaders of color in our faith, I've heard this again and again. Sometimes, it feels a powerful act of solidarity and welcome when predominantly white churches sing songs and tell stories from communities of color or lift up the voices of people of color in other ways – and sometimes it feels deeply alienating. Some of the difference comes with giving the context, which we've been experimenting with this fall. It is important to know that our introit is a Buddhist meditation today and other songs are rooted in the experience of slavery. Sometimes, we've included a little information about who composed the day's music in the order of service. Sometimes, we've given introductions before we sing, or before we read something. It's all an experiment. How do we use diverse sources with integrity? I don't have the answers and I hope you'll join me in learning and trying new ways of being.

Much of today has been focused on how we worship together, examining our unvoiced expectations, and trying new ways of being. We offer this to you as an example, as something to try in your life, both here at People's Church and in other areas. "But what does that look like for me?" you might wonder. "I don't plan services or pick hymns and readings in my day-to-day life."

I have some examples of what this could look like in your day-to-day life. Most of these are from Fernando Ospina and Aliisa Lahti, members of our community who work as anti-racism trainers. Most of these are designed for white people, though anyone can try them. Here are the experiments: When you are describing a person, try always including that person's race in the description. Most white people only mention someone's race when that someone isn't white, which can unintentionally communicate that white is the 'default setting.' Talking about race more helps change that unintentional communication.

Those of you who are readers: be mindful about the race of the authors you read. What if for every book by a white person you read, you read one by a person of color? What if you decided for the next month or six months, or year to only read books written by people of color? If you are actively parenting in your life right now, maybe you and your children only read books by people of color for a season. This could also be done with any other media: music, movies, television.

When you are in a mixed-race group, pay attention to how much room you are taking up, physically and verbally. Is it your fair share? What percentage of the time white people are talking and what percentage of the time is taken up by people of color. If you notice a persistent pattern over time in a group, and feel able to speak, perhaps you could mention what you notice to the whole group.

When you have those moments when you realize something you did wasn't the best, like I did when hearing from DeReau Farrar, don't hide from it. Lean into it and learn from it. Talk about it with someone, preferably not the someone who helped you realize it, as they have their own things to process. I can be your conversation partner for this, if you want.

Notice when you are universalizing your own experience. In my first draft of this sermon, I said something like "we all learned the hand motions to 'Peace like a River' at summer camp." In the editing, I realized I was assuming everyone had a childhood like mine, a childhood with summer camp, a summer camp that sang the same songs that mine did. I had to pause to remind myself that isn't true. I hear this all the time, 'everyone knows this song...' 'Everyone remembers this...' and on and on. This is an easy pattern to fall into unthinkingly, but we know that our experiences are not universal experience.

I invite you all to try some of these experiments and see what happens.

None of these experiments will, in themselves, dismantle institutional racism and systematic white supremacy. We know that, but each of them helps us recognize the unvoiced expectations that are part of how institutional racism and white supremacy culture operate. We hope, by experimenting in small ways in worship today, we might encourage you to experiment in your life, both in the congregation and beyond, in small and big ways. It sometimes is uncomfortable, but it is worth the effort.

The task ahead is big, the work is important, and we've all got to start somewhere.

So let us be about our work.

May it be so. May we make it so. Amen.