

Widening the Circle of Concern: Theology

“We are on a journey toward redemption. We have lived a year filled with lamentation... with the strength of generations, the failures of the everyday, and the deep-down gritty messiness that is the promise of our salvation. There is inherent goodness that exists between and among us. I want to honor the weary, ragged miracle that is our living tradition.”

—Rev. Dr. Sofia Betancourt, *Service of the Living Tradition*, 2018

“Such ambiguity and a concomitant tentativeness in articulating what we are about religiously is presently perhaps our greatest liability and the greatest obstacle to Unitarian Universalism achieving the fulfillment of its potential as an empowering and liberating faith for the twenty-first century. The fear that any such articulation somehow threatens the integrity or right of conscience of any individual is institutionally disabling and must be overcome by mutual trust and a sense of common purpose, the belief that we are joined together in religious association for more than merely instrumental reasons.”

—Rev. Earl Holt, Commission on Appraisal presentation to the 2005 General Assembly

“The faith of free persons must tangibly make them free in a community of human dignity and equal justice.”

—James Luther Adams, *A Faith for the Free*

“Liberation theology speaks to the ‘underside of history’ and offers perspectives on issues, such as poverty and oppression, that we might otherwise miss. This is especially important as we respond to social problems. To be in solidarity with those who are oppressed requires empathy and imagination.”

—Rev. Dr. Paul Rasor, *Faith Without Certainty*

The Joy in the Spiritual Work, by Mary Byron

Commission on Institutional Change Guiding Principle: To keep Unitarian Universalism alive, we must privilege the voices that have been silenced or drowned out and dismantle elitist and exclusionary white privilege, which inhibits connection and creativity.

My UU faith has been an important part of the spiritual journey of my life. I believe in our Principles and our way of expressing them publicly, advocating for the world of justice, equity, and compassion we know is possible. And we know this world is not yet here, which calls us into doing the work that is needed to create it.

This is one part of why I do antiracism work. It may be a simple statement to say my faith calls me into action, and it is sometimes not so easy to live. As a white person, I have needed to do a lot of deep spiritual work on myself. Unlearning the ideas of supremacy that I have absorbed from our culture is so much harder than learning about injustice, yet I know we won’t move away from our comfort in white supremacy until we unlearn and dismantle it in our lives. Arundhati Roy said,

The trouble is that once you see it, you can’t unsee it. And once you’ve seen it, keeping quiet, saying nothing, becomes as political an act as speaking out. There’s no innocence. Either way, you’re accountable.

When I moved past claiming my innocence in building these systems and denying their racist intent to see them, really see how they operate, I couldn't unsee their injustice. It is in the news every day, everywhere.

Keeping quiet, doing nothing, isn't an option for me in a faith that proclaims that we respect the inherent worth and dignity of all people. There is no dignity in economic, housing, justice, immigration, environmental, and education systems that create such inequitable outcomes. White people built these and white people are required to dismantle these unjust, inequitable, and cruel systems, to completely transform them. I knew I couldn't do this transformational work unless I was willing to get uncomfortable, to start by acknowledging my role in our systems and the ways I participate in upholding our dominant white culture—conflict avoidance, assuming that good intentions are enough, denial, tokenism, white savior behavior.... It is hard to see these things in myself, but I need to see it and change it in order to live into the Principles I believe. This is a part of my spiritual practice. I practice humility and forgiveness for myself and my community as a spiritual work when we engage in dismantling white supremacist systems. I recognize I am going to make mistakes and I also know how I will acknowledge them and try to repair the harms. I try not to let the fear stop me and to stay curious about when and where my discomfort arises. Every time I make a new discovery about my thinking that releases limiting thoughts and behavior, I feel more free, and that is also spiritual work.

I also do this work because I find such joy in the community of people engaged here. The guiding principle above speaks to how white supremacy culture inhibits connection and creativity. Breaking down my personal barriers and connecting with people is liberation for my heart. Superiority feeds our egos and it shrinks our hearts, and I don't want to live in a small-hearted world. My joy comes from belonging in a community with big-hearted, creative, welcoming people. Working with people of imagination and with a willingness to come together to build a more just and generous faith community is life-affirming. Learning from the variety of lived experiences and perspectives of people in different communities and congregations enlarges my dreams of what is possible and grounds them in what is necessary.

Lastly, I do this work because I am so curious about what we might yet build together. My fellow commissioner, Reverend Dr. Natalie Fenimore, speaks of dreaming of a Unitarian Universalism that does not yet exist. None of us knows what transforming our congregations into truly multicultural expressions of our faith will be. I relish the opportunity to create something new and this is what keeps me in this work with you.

Background and Trends

Unitarian Universalism is a living faith tradition. From its origins in Unitarian and Universalist forms of Christianity,* we have to expand our foundations into an expansive faith community tied together not by dogma but by covenantal relations. Today, Unitarian Universalism lives in our diversity in thought, belief, and practice. We hold the “many/and” of a vast range of practices, beliefs, and theological understandings. It can be said that contemporary Unitarian Universalism as lived, and as a living tradition, has two commitments: freedom of belief and its orientation toward inclusion, interdependence,

and justice. These two commitments have shaped our faith tradition in positive ways and also led to some problematic dynamics.

We have a deep and rich history, with religious ancestors who literally gave of their life energies and life forces to allow us the privileges we enjoy today, freedom of belief, the task to search for truth and meaning, and the work to bring more justice into the world. Both Unitarians and Universalists were considered heretics by the Christian mainstreams of their times. The word heretic means able to choose and, if our traditions have anything in common, it is exercising choice in the search for deeper understanding and faithfulness. Yet the choice is the means, and the tenets of Universalism and Unitarianism the legacy to be held close.

Freedom of belief promotes diversity of thought in our communities and fuels the responsible search for truth and meaning that leads toward beloved community. This freedom encourages exploration and experimentation, lending creativity and innovation to our communities. Yet over the decades since the consolidation of Unitarians and Universalists, an overemphasis on individual exploration and experience as the primary, if not sole center of religious experience developed. This centering of the individual decenters the communal as a locus of theological exploration. One of the unintended consequences has been the atomized individualism of the search for truth and meaning without accountability to its impact in communities. This has a correlation with the ways in which justice priorities and practices are lived in congregations. Justice-seeking practices of Unitarian Universalists are often not grounded on spiritual or ritual principles; instead justice-seeking takes the place of ritual and religious life. Justice practices cannot be used as surrogates for deepening our spiritual lives.

Nevertheless, amidst the diversity of the theologies represented in our congregations, justice work has been a proxy for what we believe in some congregations, while in other congregations, engagement with the intellect, debate, and social ties have been the substitute. Our justice work without theological resources and spiritual practices leads us down the path of burn out. Many of us have come to this faith seeking an alternative faith home and drawn by its actions in the world. Yet we don't often work to heal from our religious past. Those most harmed by the divisive and stressful times we live in are in need of faith tenets that can hold us fast in confusing times and help us make ethical and values-based choices about how to engage. The status quo within our world today reinforces a system in which some are treated as "greater than" and others as "less than." This status quo is also reflected in our congregations and denominational lives. To counter this takes more than good intent; it takes a faithful commitment to a different way of being, accountability to our broader community and the world we seek to engage.

Among the original Universalist "heresies" were the ideas that Universalists should work to establish the Kingdom of God in this life and that a loving God would not condemn a portion of humanity to eternal damnation. That mandate, in the context of an increasingly divided world, calls upon us to address issues of equity, inclusion, and diversity.

In the Unitarian tradition, we have the tradition of discerning truth based on facts, reasoning, and investigation. Our religious ancestors believed not only in the ability of each of us to discover our own truth but also in the ability to find real truth in the contexts of our lives as well as in sacred texts and scriptures. This is the basis for our commitment

to non-creedalism and aversion to dogma. It is also what calls on us to look at the issues of this time. The word religion comes from the same base as the word *ligament*, something that binds together. To be religious is to be clear about what you are bound to in the way that a ligament holds muscle to the bone. The needed ties in our time involve our ability to see ourselves as truly interdependent.

The Fellowship movement within Unitarian Universalism birthed many new communities—and also obscured our religious inheritance. Consider these words from Holley Ulbrich, author of *The Fellowship Movement: A Growth Strategy and Its Legacy*:

The positive view maintains that the congregations planted as lay-led fellowships between 1948 and 1967 saved Unitarianism from near extinction and converted a regional religious movement into a truly national one. Along with growing the denomination, fellowships brought innovation, vitality, and lay leadership into a religious community greatly in need of fresh air.... At the other end of the spectrum is the view that the fellowship movement spawned small, introverted, even hostile groups that did not want to grow or welcome newcomers, did not identify with the larger denomination, and represented Unitarian Universalism in ways that did not reflect the larger movement's self-understanding. [5]

This has led many to believe that the only theological value we have is freedom to “believe anything we want,” and thus reject any engagement within community that challenges preconceptions. This flies in the face of our theological history and those spiritual ancestors who sacrificed much to leave us a tradition that values both freedom and commitment.

The original Humanist Manifesto, a foundational document for humanism, also supports this inquiry. The fourth point of this manifesto states, “Humanism recognizes that man's religious culture and civilization, as clearly depicted by anthropology and history, are the product of a gradual development due to his interaction with his natural environment and with his social heritage. The individual born into a particular culture is largely molded by that culture.” The tenth point reads, “In the place of the old attitudes involved in worship and prayer the humanist finds his religious emotions expressed in a heightened sense of personal life and in a cooperative effort to promote social well-being.” The fifteenth and last point states,

We assert that humanism will: (a) affirm life rather than deny it; (b) seek to elicit the possibilities of life, not flee from them; and (c) endeavor to establish the conditions of a satisfactory life for all, not merely for the few. By this positive morale and intention humanism will be guided, and from this perspective and alignment the techniques and efforts of humanism will flow. [6]

In *Articulating Your UU Faith*, Barbara Wells ten Hove and Jaco ten Hove identify the first and seventh Principles of Unitarian Universalism as the “pillar Principles.” [7] The first and seventh Principles affirm to covenant and promote “the inherent worth and dignity of all” and the fact that we all live in an “interdependent web of existence.” Many of the people of color and other marginalized people with whom we were in dialogue mentioned these two Principles as the ground for their belief that work for equity, diversity, and inclusion is religious work for us as Unitarian Universalists. As one white

antiracist advocate put it, “When we’re dehumanizing someone else or making someone else ‘less than,’ we are making ourselves ‘less than’ as well, dehumanizing ourselves.”

We rarely seek to return to the literal Unitarianism or Universalism of the seventeenth century except in the broadest sense. That is because the influx of other voices, including the early women ministers, Transcendentalists, humanists, feminists, and people from earth-centered and other traditions have enhanced our faith. In the same way, embracing diversity, equity, and inclusion and the spiritual disciplines they require will further enrich us.

Continued learning and evolution should be the goal of all of us as Unitarian Universalists. In 2019, in understanding our ordained ministry as “learning” not “learned,” we moved from “final” to “full” fellowship, a positive change that acknowledges the oft-ignored truism that we all must evolve or die.

We are a faith that has not been investing enough in theology, theological schools, or theologians, at a time when many who would bring new life and vitality to our communities are looking for guiding principles.

In an age when so many struggle to find meaning, a community formed through a set of commonly held beliefs can form a stronger bond than one formed through antipathy toward rejected beliefs.

Because we have not updated our theology, the history we know privileges the dominant culture and those voices that were preserved in our history and written record. We now have a chance to embrace a more inclusive and accurate history.

We have theologians—and historians—among us whose work could give us a different frame. However, without investment in theology, theological resources to support these times are not available.

We need to recognize, in the words of Rev. Dr. Sofia Betancourt:

We are the theological inheritors of teachings on universal salvation. There is no winnowing out of the supposedly unworthy that can be named sacred among us. It is our very Universalism that is at stake when we turn away from the impact that our institutions have on the same communities and groups that society encourages us to dehumanize and make small. [8]

Many who have engaged in this work have found it to be spiritually deepening and liberating. As one white accomplice put it, “A Unitarian Universalism rooted in its theological traditions has no choice but to engage in practices of inclusion, diversity, and equity. A renewed focus on our theological history and its actors, including the actions and teachings of the leaders of color whose voices have been largely erased can help make this clear. This clarity and the ability to see the liberatory charge of our heritage should be the basis of activities.”

Centering Theology: A Conversation about Faith, Race, and Liberation, Part 1, by Rev. Dr. Sofia Betancourt

The following is excerpted from a workshop presentation at the 2018 General Assembly

I am aware that we have recently been gifted with deep reflections on the lived experiences of UUs of color, both lay and religious professionals, that we can engage as rich source material for theological exploration in the work of liberation. I am talking about *Centering: Navigating Race, Authenticity, and Power in Ministry*, which was one of our Common Read books this year, as well as *Unitarian Universalists of Color: Stories of Struggle, Courage, Love and Faith*. These two collections of writings on the lives of UUs of color offer important themes on the work of becoming more whole in our communities of faith. I hope we will take [James] Cone's liberatory method seriously and begin re-engaging our living tradition with new voices at the center as we move forward.

But as my example, I am going to engage another sacred text. This is from a sermon by Paloma Callo, one of our fierce youth who participated in the UUA's Summer Seminary program in 2016. I had the privilege of hearing her and other youth preach at the First Unitarian Church of Oakland that summer, and her words still resonate with me today because they speak to the kind of method that Cone asks of us, with the lived experience of a youth of color moving into her own leadership and authority in our beloved communities. Paloma's sermon describes us as a whole, healing, and broken people... also as a whole, healing, and broken faith, and as a whole, healing, and broken world. And she asks, "How do I inherit this broken world with grace?" As she talks about the work of finding place in our religious communities and in our structures of leadership, she also asks us to call into the center of voices of authority those who are already here among us but whose youth voices, queer voices, trans, and gender-nonconforming voices, or voices of color are not given room to tell their full stories. I would add lived experiences of disability and various class identities to this list, among others.

Paloma calls us to be sanctuaries where telling our full stories, and engaging one another's healing and one another's pain can guide us into a new way of being. She insists that "only when we come to bear witness to the cracked and shattered pieces can we begin to help heal what has been broken." Drawing on Paloma's voice leads me to say that our first Principle calls us to learn a language of resilience and liberation in response to the pain of this world we have inherited, so that we might find wholeness and grace in our brokenness. A Universalist theology of liberation in the present day centers our capacity to be sanctuaries of radical truth telling and abundant compassion so that the all-embracing love at the center of our tradition can serve to make all of us more whole.

I wonder what symbols, messages, Principles, or experiences are most central to your deep understanding of Unitarian Universalism? During World War II, the flaming chalice promised protection on the journey toward freedom. What does this symbol offer to the liberation of those most driven to the margins of Unitarian Universalism today?

Centering Theology: A Conversation About Faith, Race, and Liberation, Part 4, by Dr. Elías Ortega

The following is excerpted from a theological presentation at the 2018 General Assembly

If we believe in collective salvation, we must also believe in collective sacrifice. It is powerful that our faith community is working to reclaim this sacred practice... and claiming what is meant to be sacred in personal sacrifice without the power of we is the very thing that desecrates the practice.

That belief in collective salvation means there cannot be small groups of UUs whose personal sacrifice we depend on every time to move us forward as a collective whole. That kind of hierarchical membership undermines the very inherent worth and dignity that we lift in our first Principle. Living into the Power of We [the theme of the 2019 General Assembly] holds us accountable to repairing the legacy of theological harm we have perpetrated against some in our community.... Even in the face of oppression, suffering, and the legacy of white supremacy culture in the world, we believe that there is a way forward. We aspire to transform and be transformed by love and justice, and to take a cue from disability justice activist Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, who details how often we draw resources for resistance from systemic oppression. To affirm the Power of We as a faith community, we need to strengthen ways for our people to draw nourishment and strength from this faith. We must fashion ourselves into a faithful people who draw wisdom from our inherited tradition. This is not an individual task but a collective practice.

Recommendation

Re-engaging with our theological legacy and its use today will both ground our efforts to welcome all who are drawn to our faith and provide resources for resilience for Unitarian Universalists in these difficult times.

The idea that “you can believe anything you want and be a Unitarian Universalist” is not valid. We have a theological container within which one can hold a wide range of beliefs about God, about how to practice one’s faith, and about how to live. Because we live at the intersection of multiple traditions, defining this container is essential. Because much of the preserved theological work is from white theologians and scholars, we also need to re-engage that work through contemporary lenses.

- **Action:** Center the theological work of Black scholars, Indigenous scholars, and scholars of color, both professional and lay, whose knowledge is resonant for our times.
- **Action:** Provide more resources for lay leaders who wish to engage in theological conversation.
- **Action:** Equip our theological schools to engage in the work of continued education.
- **Action:** Form collaboration between our theological schools, Association of congregations, and professional associations to develop resources for professionally applicable theological training.

Recommendation

Reinterpretation of our theological legacies in these times should be liberatory and articulate our commitment to affirming and welcoming those who have been marginalized in our larger society and within our communities and organizations.

As we stated in our blog post of September 18, 2019, our analysis suggests we need to articulate a theology of liberation, experimentation, and innovation grounded in our Unitarian Universalist Principles and Sources of inspiration. Developing a shared theology that centers on helping to unearth, manifest, and point the way toward liberation along with experimentation that strives for our collective flourishing. This theology will also call us to be accountable to the legacies of our past deeds and to work for an equitable future. This will lay the groundwork for our work around truth, transformation, and reparations. [9]

Author, scholar, and teacher Sharon Welch notes that from an ethical perspective, we are called to liberate ourselves from bias, stating that a theology of liberation frees us from not seeing bias or privileged systems and allows us to see the threats of white violence.

Attendance and participation at the 2019 Harper-Jordan Symposium sponsored by Black Lives of UU (BLUU) Collaborative speaks to the hunger for these kinds of opportunities. Registration for this event surpassed BLUU's expectations, with religious professionals and lay people alike in attendance. A liberatory interpretation of our theology, such as that articulated at the BLUU symposium, will yield joyous, exuberant, and emotion-affirming worship and faith development.

We must also acknowledge the gradual disinvestment in our future as our two remaining theological schools face waning financial resources. Reestablishing such funding would acknowledge the importance of theological development within a Unitarian Universalist context; funding should be directed toward those scholars doing work in these fields, especially with a liberatory lens and is important because of the financial struggles of our remaining Unitarian Universalist schools. Such revitalized schools could also aid in continuing education. With new technologies, webinars, short courses, and seminars will be a source of revenue for theological schools and a joint venture between those with the greatest degree of Unitarian Universalist scholarship should be explored.

- **Action:** Resource multigenerational efforts within Black/Indigenous/people of color communities to develop rituals of healing and other worship materials to be used in congregations, regions, and national gatherings.
- **Action:** Direct resources toward UU theological schools and scholars engaged in theological exploration focused on an understanding of the need for the affirmation and protection of all.
- **Action:** Provide ministers, religious educators, and other religious professionals with access to continuing education that helps them take in and teach new theological concepts.

Recommendation

Acknowledgment of anti-oppression work as a theological mandate is essential. We need to resurrect, research, document, and teach the words of Black people, Indigenous people, people of color, LGBTQ individuals, women, and others who have been largely lost though their presence has been with us throughout history. These constitute a valuable tool for our times.

With the growing number of children of color and multiracial children in our nation, this becomes more critical since observing one's own identity mirrored in community leadership is essential to keeping people involved.

We call on individual white Unitarian Universalists to engage in deep spiritual discernment, including engagement with our need to examine the dominant white-centered culture of our congregations.

- **Action:** Further incorporate and reclaim accounts of Universalist, Unitarian, and Unitarian Universalist leaders of color and Indigenous descent in Tapestry of Faith resources to serve a more diverse children and youth population.
- **Action:** Encourage collaboration between the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association, Association for Unitarian Universalist Music Ministries, and Liberal Religious Educators Association on a virtual library of resources for liberatory worship anchored in cross-cultural competency.
- **Action:** Develop standards for ethical cross-cultural uses of worship materials from other traditions, and those previously developed by the Council for Cross-Cultural Engagement should be updated and discussed by religious professional associations.

Recommendation

Education about the covenantal nature of our faith will allow communities to support and nurture one another as the overall US climate becomes more hostile to and disinterested in a life of faith.

Returning to the practice of honoring covenant is essential in the world in which we find ourselves. The divisions between generations, between economic levels, and between people of different races, ethnicities, abilities, sexual orientations, and gender identities are unprecedented. If we remember that we are a covenantal faith, we have a better chance of surviving the changing perceptions and attitudes about religion and faith in our nation.

- **Action:** Provide support from regions to prioritize developing congregational covenants tied to mission and goals and including aspirations for equity, inclusion, and diversity.
- **Action:** Spread promising practices around addressing disruptive people and microaggressions as a barrier to covenantal community.
- **Action:** Develop resources for training on engagement with, rather than avoidance of, conflict as a part of change and transformation.

Take-aways

- Our faith traditions as Unitarians and Universalists require us to address equity, inclusion, and diversity issues.
- *Faith* and *covenant* are not dirty words.
- If freedom and individualism are our most important values, we have little to offer in these times.

- These times require a liberatory faith that invites us each into the spiritual work of empathy and healing.
- Justice making is not a substitute for a coherent theology, and faithful justice making requires a liberatory theology.
- An articulation of what is commonly believed among us need not result in a creedal test for membership or involvement in our communities.
- Too many Unitarian Universalists do not know what saving and liberatory truths can be found within their faith tradition.
- We need to put greater emphasis on what it means to be bound to one another in an interdependent web and in keeping with our covenantal tradition.
- A greater emphasis on the theological basis for our work for diversity, equity, and inclusion will help us to make decisions about the forms of this work most appropriate for our individual and shared faith lives.

* It is important to recognize that faith traditions are rarely singular. Multiple sources inspire, give shape, and help spur innovation through the people who practice them.