

## **De-centering White Supremacy Culture:**

### **Deeper than the Headlines and Longer than a Lifetime**

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Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

#### **Personal Reflection—Celia Buckley**

(printed after the sermon)

#### **Image for All Ages—Roger Jones**

[MacArthur's](#)

#### **Universal Corrective Map of the World**

Have you seen this before? This is a map of the world, but it doesn't look like the ones we see most of the time.

Here in North America, we think of ourselves as up and the rest of the world as down.

That's the way many globes look to us. But here you see other perspectives—not the world upside down, but the way it feels to those who live in the opposite hemisphere of the globe. There is South America up there. There is Africa.

In the sermon today we will consider looking at familiar things from perspectives other than the ones many of us are used to.

A map is not a natural feature; it is a human interpretation of the world. It reflects a particular perspective.

The person who made this map was from Australia—here. That is what led to THIS map, this perspective. It was made in 1979. It wasn't made by a radical geographer or map maker.

It was created by a 15-year-old boy. Stuart MacArthur was from Australia—up here. As a young exchange student in Japan, down there in the Northern Hemisphere, Stuart grew frustrated at being teased that he lived at the bottom of the planet, that he was from down under.

Australia didn't feel under *anything*. Stuart's map is not the first map in history to de-center our northern ideas of who's up, but it has

gotten a lot of attention, so far having sold 350,000 copies. Getting new perspectives can be the starting place for changing the world.

Now, for the kids and youth going to ArtWorks, our pop-up Sunday School today, I'm happy to tell you that Patty Taylor and Kirsten Sanders will invite you to consider new perspectives and create them, through art. Now we'll sing you out.

#### **Sermon—Roger Jones**

I'd like to invite you to spend half a minute with me in the spiritual practice of not doing anything, just silence. [pause] Thank you.

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be useful, helpful, and honest. Amen.

A little over a year ago, in the locker room at the gym, my buddy whispered: "Psst. Hey, Roger, I heard a story about your religious denomination on NPR. Something about white supremacists?" He was confused. He didn't know if we'd been attacked, infiltrated, or what. "No," I said, "just us. Just our culture."

I didn't go into the story for him, but here's a summary for you. In the spring of 2017, a major hiring decision at our UUA headquarters had brought a lot of criticism and controversy. UU ministers, religious educators and lay leaders of color complained. They pointed out that with rare exceptions the Unitarian Universalist Association has always hired white executives and white managers. The elected UUA president was defensive in handling the criticism, making matters worse. As a result, he resigned as president only three months before the end of his term. Soon this was followed by resignations of the vice president and the department manager who had made the hiring decision.

To serve in the presidential role until the election in June, the UUA Board appointed an

interim co-presidency of three respected UU leaders—all people of color. To the many hurting staff members left behind at the Unitarian Universalist Association, these three provided a listening presence. They also recommended several steps for study, reflection and institutional change.<sup>i</sup>

The UUA Board created a volunteer commission of leaders to learn, review and recommend institutional changes. Since her election as the new UUA President a year ago, the Reverend Susan Frederick-Gray has provided clear, steady and brave leadership toward those changes.<sup>ii</sup> She says that as Unitarian Universalists, all of us have been charged, not only to meet the world's need for love and justice, but also to examine the entrenched assumptions, habits and structures by which our institutions operate. We must bring more love and justice to our own house.

The UUA is a historically white institution and tradition. Hence, our cultural habits and attitudes have neglected, ignored or disregarded the perspectives of people of color and others on the margins of American society. The culture in which our congregations were established was a culture of white supremacy. How you react to this description may depend on the experiences you've had and whether you identify as white or not.

Since that UUA crisis of a year and a half ago, many Unitarian Universalist leaders of color have said, "Yes, that's what it feels like—white supremacy culture! That's what some of us have been trying to tell you." I must confess, I had heard them, but I didn't always listen. I didn't get it. My perspective was that of a white person, and a white male. This has been the favored and centered perspective of the UUA and the dominant American culture in which our congregations exist. I didn't see whose experiences were kept out of the center of consideration, didn't realize whose critiques, needs and longings were discounted. It's humbling to realize that now.

Black Lives of Unitarian Universalism is an organizing collective of UU lay leaders, religious educators and ministers of color. Known as BLUU for short, it has provided materials for a white-supremacy teach-in at UU congregations. It starts out by explaining the term.

Yes, white supremacy can conjure up images of armed angry mobs and men in white hoods. In this case, white supremacy culture means "a set of institutional assumptions and practices. [Often] operating unconsciously, [these practices] tend to benefit white people and exclude people of color."<sup>iii</sup> The presence of hateful white supremacists is not necessary to uphold and perpetuate a culture of supremacy. In this difficult political moment, BLUU says, this is a key distinction for our faith community to remember as we "work toward a more just society."

The Reverend William J. Barber II, an African American progressive Christian, has lamented this nation's inability to see racism as systemic. He said: "America has never wanted to talk about race except [with regard to] interpersonal relationships."<sup>iv</sup> Furthermore, so much discussion of racism has been defined by ideas of individual bigotry and ugly images of hatred. Recoiling from such images can make well-meaning white folks worry about being racist or being thought of as such. Perhaps defensively we have the urge to say: "I'm not racist." Or pre-emptively we have the urge to confess: "Yes, I am a racist." Yet systemic racism is bigger than any one of us.

Our society and economy have been racialized from the first contacts between Europeans conquerors and natives, and between colonizers and enslaved Africans. We are all caught up in systemic racism. Yet it falls most directly on people of color, falls most painfully on black and brown bodies.

Government policies have led to mass incarceration of tens of millions of Americans, with a disproportionate percentage of them people of color.<sup>v</sup> Inadequate public schooling and a punitive culture in schools generate a school-to-prison pipeline--and most of the kids pushed through it are black. In overall numbers, to be sure, there are more poor white people in this country than poor people of color. Yet poverty rates and infant mortality rates are several times higher for African Americans than for European Americans.

In his novels, essays and interviews, the late James Baldwin pointed out the systemic degradation and suppression of African Americans. To white America, he said, "If I love you I have to

make you conscious of the things that you don't see."

Two months ago, at this year's General Assembly of the UUA, Brittany Packnett gave the annual Ware lecture to us. This 33-year-old woman of color is a writer, educator and activist. She challenged us with eloquence rivalling that of Baldwin, and with love. Packnett said: "Supremacy is so normative, so engrained in our culture, that you may not be aware of it."<sup>vi</sup>

Here's an example of how a culture of white supremacy in our Unitarian heritage worked for the benefit of our congregation in Sacramento. In a sermon last summer, Rev. Lucy recounted stories of ministers of color in the early 1900s who had been inspired by Unitarianism. They wanted to be Unitarian ministers—in New York City, the Caribbean, and elsewhere. In Boston, the white leaders of the American Unitarian Association discouraged them. No church would be likely to hire them, they were advised. People of color would not be interested in our faith, they were told. Yet these black men persisted. They started their own churches, reaching out to communities of color and promoting our free and open faith. The Unitarian headquarters in Boston provided only a little funding to start them out. After a while it called those efforts a failure and cut off support. Yet at the very same time, the denomination was giving subsidies to white congregations—including this one. For six decades, we got money from Boston—money for outreach in Sacramento, money to get ministers, money to keep us going in the hard times. It was not until the 1950s that our congregation ceased relying on subsidies from the denomination.<sup>vii</sup>

In her lecture, Brittany Packnett said: "You do not have to be a white supremacist to benefit from a white supremacy culture, any more than you have to be a misogynist to benefit from patriarchy."<sup>viii</sup> She charged us—especially those of us who are white—to become aware of the workings of supremacy. She urged us to stretch ourselves and ally ourselves with people who are vulnerable, to see and hear people who experience the exclusion of this culture.

We can't avoid living in supremacy culture, but we can practice becoming aware of how it

works. In our culture, whiteness is seen as neutral, as the norm—even if it's *not seen*. For example, as white professor of English Robert Dale Parker says, whiteness has been present in the works of white writers, even if not acknowledged. He writes:

Wherever race may *seem absent*—perhaps in novels by Jane Austen and Henry James, in poems by Alexander Pope and Emily Dickinson, in films by Alfred Hitchcock and stories by Edgar Allan Poe—[whiteness] is nevertheless always there. [We] may not recognize race when it comes masked in the false neutrality of invisible whiteness

but it's there and central.<sup>ix</sup> In a culture where whiteness is the norm, people of color may see it and feel its effects. When the centrality of whiteness is pointed out to many white folks, we sometimes react with defensiveness.

In June of 1993, our denomination's General Assembly took place in Charlotte, North Carolina. The big social event of our yearly gathering is a dance on Saturday night. In 1993, the GA planning committee gave it a theme: the Thomas Jefferson Ball, to mark the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of that famous Unitarian President and champion of religious liberty. Advance publicity for the ball said, "Dress in period costumes!" Ball gowns and top hats! With white allies protesting at their side, Black Unitarian Universalists raised the question: "Do you want us to dress in rags as our period costumes? Shall we wear chains?" I don't recall how the dance ended up, but I do recall the conversations the complaints generated.

For many UUs of color, this time of pain surely raised the question: will our faith movement ever feel spiritually safe? For some white Unitarian Universalists, this time of pain was a learning experience--learning how whiteness is at the center of our assumptions, and how our habits can keep the experience of UUs of color out of the center of consideration.

To be sure, those event organizers were not violent white nationalists; nor were the Unitarian leaders who gave subsidies to white middle-class congregations for decades while discouraging black UU ministers. Yet we can be well-meaning and still cause harm. This is how supremacy culture works.<sup>x</sup>

Stories like this make me ask: what are we missing now? Can we analyze the habits and attitudes in the systems in which we live, work, play and worship? Those on the receiving end of hurt probably see the systems all too well. For those of us who don't see—we can practice curiosity. We can listen. We can question the centrality of the lens through which we have been interpreting the world. This is hard, and it can be embarrassing. It calls for humility.

I'm embarrassed to say this, but I've had ministerial friends of color for two decades but only recently heard of the push-back some of them get when they stray from the norms of the dominant culture of a congregation. One successful colleague has told me that one key to their success in our culture was this: "I learned how to be white." To consider the toll it takes on gifted colleagues to live out their commitment to this faith tradition is humbling. I admire the resilience of their souls and the depth of their calling. I admire their patience. I'm grateful for their faith in *this* faith.

To de-center a harmful set of habits and assumptions will not be a quick fix. Changing a culture is work that lasts a lifetime and it's work that changes over time. Yet it is work. In approving our five-year strategic plan, this congregation did commit to deepen our understanding of our role in perpetuating racist inequities, habits and assumptions, toward living out our commitment to justice, equity and compassion. If you are moved to do this work or even curious about it, feel free to contact Reverend Lucy or me, or the Strategic Planning team.

But let me be clear about the work: it is not about attracting people of color to our churches so we feel better about our churches. It's not about diversity for its own sake. Diversity is not a bad outcome, and it is growing in any case. Yet the work for us right now is to learn how cultures of social oppression work, to see how some of us benefit unconsciously from those cultures, and how others must learn consciously how to survive them. This work could last longer than our five-year plan, longer than a lifetime.

Hence, as a faith community, we should be careful to avoid behaviors that reflect the culture of supremacy that we want to de-center and move

away from. A few of the traits of supremacy culture are perfectionism, defensiveness, and urgency. In an online article, the activist and writer Tema Okun says that for individuals, perfectionism means failing to appreciate your own good work; too often you let your inner critic focus "on inadequacies and mistakes."<sup>x</sup> In organizations, perfectionism is a tendency to point out what is wrong or what is not good enough. It sees mistakes as personal failures rather than simply, as what they are -- mistakes.

So many times, I've done sermons about our struggles with perfectionism, and the response of church members has been strong, and heartfelt. No wonder—perfectionism is a reflection of the dominant culture of this country. So, what are the antidotes to perfectionism? Okun recommends the spiritual discipline of patience, the reminder of our basic humanity, and the practice of gratitude and appreciation.

Another habit of supremacy culture is defensiveness—responding to new or different ideas without exploring them, and reacting to challenging but respectful feedback with hurt, anger, justification or shaming. Defensiveness can keep us from looking at how racism or other forms of oppression could be operating in a system or culture. I'll admit that I can identify with both defensiveness and perfectionism—of course I do! I learned them in my dominant-culture institutions, starting with the institution known as a family. In the face of conflict or critiques, what are some antidotes to defensiveness? Okun recommends we approach our challenges by practicing humility and curiosity, and by staying present through feelings of discomfort.<sup>xii</sup>

Another trait of supremacy culture is a "continued sense of urgency," in Okun's words. While justice issues are important, an urgency toward wanting to fix things quickly is pressure toward making our discomfort go away. Continued urgency only makes it harder "to take time to be inclusive, to be reflective, and to encourage and include the participation of others in decision-making." What are the antidotes to urgency? They include more patience and more humility. They include keeping a sense of balance and equanimity in spite of the nature of the crisis. And, keeping a long-term vision.<sup>xiii</sup>

These antidotes are how we can engage in uprooting racism not as a project but as a *spiritual practice*. Instead of perfectionism, a practice of appreciation and gratitude. Instead of defensiveness, a practice of humility and curiosity. Instead of the push of urgency, a practice of patience, equanimity, and keeping a longer and wider view.

I'd like to finish by quoting a UU minister of color's words from the UUA book entitled *Centering*. The Rev. Dr. Natalie Fenimore is an African American minister in the New York area. She says this: "I'm in love with the Unitarian Universalism that does not yet exist. But I have to hold both the love for that thing/ and the love for the reality. It does not yet exist. It will probably not exist in my lifetime...but I can't deny my love for it."<sup>xiv</sup>

Now please join me for a few moments in the spiritual practice of silence. ... Amen.

### **Racism Reflection--Celia Buckley**

We only moved twice during my childhood. The 1<sup>st</sup> move was from Concord, California to a rental house in Sacramento for just a year. We subsequently moved to nearby Arden Park where my parents continued to live until Dad's retirement. Growing up, I only went to school with white kids.

My family was an upwardly mobile, white, middle class family who taught me that all people were the same no matter the color of the skin. At 16, I started volunteering at the Eaglet Theater as a backstage technician. I met "Willie", who was the senior class president from another school. He invited me to his senior prom and when I excitedly informed my parents, they told me I couldn't go because he was black!

I was astonished! Their reasoning? They couldn't risk having racially mixed grandchildren! Oh my god, it was a dance!!

Their prejudice went against everything they had taught me. They calmly informed me I could have as many black girlfriends as I liked, but I couldn't date black boys! Such hypocrisy! It fueled my teenage anger and despise. The most ironic and tragic part of the story was that Willie drowned in the river a few months later and I never attended a school dance.

Graduating high school in 1969 with only marginal academic grades I was still *expected* to go to college. Unlike my scholarly sister who went directly to Cal in Berkeley, my parents said I should go to American River Junior College. I rejected that school as being "too white" and moved out. I subsequently chose Sacramento City College due to its diversity.

My education and awareness of social issues was nurtured by those early college years. I got involved in gay liberation, women's liberation and explored emerging ideas of examining class and privilege. I finally graduated from college 10 years after high school, with a Bachelor of Science degree and a minor's degree in women's studies. I intellectually understood that we carry internalized homophobia and racism. I joined in my other white sisters by decrying the lack of diversity in our coffee shops, women's support groups and lesbian social events. I was concerned by my overly white circle of friends but didn't know what to do.

I started going to the Unitarian Universalist Community Church in 1991. Finding a group that included kind, caring and compassionate men was like a balm for my cultivated early anger towards the white patriarchy. Last year I signed up for the UUA Beloved Conversations on race reconciliation through UUSS. My eyes were opened to historical social, emotional and spiritual practices based on race that have wounded each of us.

My fears that "make America great again" really means "make America white again" is truer than I knew. I learned how our country engaged in systematic racism which lifted up white people up to "follow the American dream" but often shut out our kindred people of color. White privilege gave my parents unique opportunities they passed on to me. Where I grew up and where I went to school was directly related to white privilege.

Millions of soldiers came home after World War II and started families. My Dad left the army in 1948. My then poor, working class parents were able to buy their 1<sup>st</sup> home in Concord, California in 1951 due to the GI bill. The GI bill made low-interest home loans with no down payment, readily available to white soldiers, but much less to black soldiers! Why? Although the loans were guaranteed by the VA, they were funded by local banks who often refused to grant loans to soldiers who were not white.

After the great depression the Federal Housing Authority subsidized builders to mass produce urban subdivisions. Returning soldiers needed housing and these new urban areas were earmarked for white people! Concerned that integrated housing would decrease the property values of whites, areas were redlined with “whites only” language. “No person other than one of the Caucasian race shall be permitted to occupy any portion of any lot in said plat or any building thereon except a domestic servant actually employed by a Caucasian occupant of said lot or building,” Although outlawed by the Fair Housing Act of 1968, this language continues to exist on deeds in

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<sup>i</sup> See Elaine McArdle, “Interim Co-presidents See ‘Opportunity to Re-center Ourselves,’” *UU World*, April 21, 2017. <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/interim-copresidents-describe-roles>

<sup>ii</sup> See Susan Frederick-Gray, “Becoming the Religious People We Want to Be,” *UU World*, June 4, 2018. <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/president-summer-2018>

<sup>iii</sup> “UU White Supremacy Teach-in Resources,” Black Lives of Unitarian Universalism. Accessed July 27, 2018. <http://www.blacklivesuu.com/teach-in-resources/>

<sup>iv</sup> William J. Barber II, public lecture, Moon Lecture Series, St. Mark’s United Methodist Church, Sacramento, November 3, 2017.

<sup>v</sup> See “The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration and Institutional Racism.” <https://www.uua.org/multiculturalism/ga/new-jim-crow>

<sup>vi</sup> Brittany Packnett, Ware Lecture, UUA General Assembly, Kansas City, MO, 23, 2018. Read a *UU World* article about it or watch the video at <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/watch-ware-lecture-2018>

<sup>vii</sup> Based on my review of UUSS archives for my 2017 Doctor of Ministry thesis and *In Good Times and Bad: A History of*

California and presumably all the other states. My growing up in white only neighborhoods and attending all white schools did not just happen. It was orchestrated. Our government programs and institutions involving the GI bill and the Federal Housing Authority created segregation and upward mobility of white families while denying similar opportunities to black families. Outrageous!

I am so grateful to the Unitarian Universalist denomination which challenges me to examine racism in this country and the role I play. It challenges me to examine my roots and culture with new awareness. My own personal ignorance and racism can give way to action and reconciliation. This work is just beginning.

*Sacramento’s Unitarians*, 2008. Find links to both at the bottom of this webpage: <http://www.uuss.org/who-are-we/uuss-history/>  
<sup>viii</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>ix</sup> Robert Dale Parker, *How to Interpret Literature*, third edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 320.

<sup>x</sup> This description is from personal recollection as a delegate. For a recent reflection by a UU of color, see Rebekah Savage, “The Promise and the Practice: The Healing Is Not Done.” <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/homily/promise-and-practice-healing-not-done-reflection>

<sup>xi</sup> Tema Okun, “White Supremacy Culture,” online resource from dRworks, [www.dismantlingracism.org](http://www.dismantlingracism.org). Resource accessed July 27, 2018. [https://collectiveliberation.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/White\\_Supremacy\\_Culture\\_Okun.pdf](https://collectiveliberation.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/White_Supremacy_Culture_Okun.pdf)

<sup>xii</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>xiii</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>xiv</sup> Natalie Fenimore, in *Centering*, Mitra Rahnema, ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 2017), 77.