



Ploughshare

A Cultural Activist Piece of Mike's Mind...

by Rev. Mike Morran

By request, my column this month is a portion of the sermon from July 12 on white supremacy culture.

"...When we say white supremacy culture, we are referring to the common cultural assumptions, cultural expectations, cultural associations..., the hundreds of unspoken, unwritten, but intimately familiar ways that culturally exclude, punish, ignore, silence, or otherwise disenfranchise non-white human beings.

Please see *Mind* on page 2

Inside This Issue

- 1 A Cultural Activist Piece of Mike's Mind...
- 1 When Did You Last Laugh?
- 4 It's Not Really "Good-Bye"
- 5 The Board Beat
- 7 A Wall of Unitarians
- 8 Soulful Men
- 9 Whole Souul Living

When Did You Last Laugh?

by Erin Kenworthy, DRE

Beloveds, several years ago I was in a book club. Not one about racial justice, or anti-oppression, just regular old fiction and nonfiction as selected by the group members. I was introduced to many books I would not have chosen on my own, which I valued immensely. Also of high value were the friendships I fostered with the women in the group, some of whom were nearly double my age at the time. The multigenerational learning and wisdom shared in that group was mutually beneficial. Our varied experiences and perspectives enriched the discussion and certainly informed my own outlook as I moved through my late twenties, living on the opposite side of the nation without easy access to my own familial elders.

Please see *Laugh* on page 4

Mind from page 1

To go with the iceberg analogy that Erin shared earlier, we are talking about deep-seated habits, ways of seeing, or of not seeing, of speaking or not speaking, of denying or not denying, pretending or not pretending... so internalized that it is done even without the realization that it's being done. Habits that are so culturally normative, that even bringing it up often makes white people uncomfortable, and sometimes, very, very angry. As if civilization itself were somehow being called into question. (Which of course is a false dichotomy.)

Turns out there is lots of wonderful literature out there about how to recognize white supremacy culture, and I'll share just a few common, often unspoken characteristics.

White supremacy culture tends to focus on **results** over and above relationships. I've done that a thousand times. And so has this church. And we often get results. But it leaves people out. The focus on results over relationships pragmatically and culturally, leaves people out.

Defensiveness is a characteristic of white supremacy culture. White people tend to get defensive, seeing any critique or correction as a personal attack instead of an invitation to a more honest relationship, but that's only the beginning. Whole organizations, committees, cliques, families, and social systems get set up to protect and defend "the way we've always done it." Which almost always means, the way some white man set it up to work, which, big surprise, almost always favors white men. Defensiveness has the effect of making it difficult or socially costly to raise different ideas, again having the effect of leaving people and their ideas out.

Defensiveness is related to **power hoarding**, a cultural assumption that power is a limited resource. People who have power don't tend to see the value in sharing it, feel threatened by suggestions for changing it, and take suggestions for organizational change as a personal attack on their leadership. I suspect I've done that a time or two as well, without even being aware of it.

Paternalism is a characteristic of white supremacy culture. Where decision-making is clear to those who have power, and utterly unclear to those who don't. Where those with power just assume they are capable of making decisions for those without power, assuming it unimportant and even unnecessary to understand the viewpoint or experience of those affected. Paternalism often happens to women in white supremacy culture, and I'd bet every woman listening to this could give dozens of examples from their own experience.

Individualism, another assumption of white supremacy culture, which is great for those who have power and privilege, who look, sound and act something like the white, cultural ideal, but also functions as a very effective cop-out for not addressing the systemic, procedural, cultural structures that prevent millions from included, empowered, or even accepted.

Please see *Mind* on next page

Mind from previous page

I could go on and on. We are only scratching the surface. But I'll specifically name just one more. White supremacy culture assumes a **right to social comfort**, and as many modern writers have noticed, white people in general have a very low tolerance for social discomfort. This is often referred to as white fragility. There's a wonderful, popular book with exactly that title by educator Robin DiAngelo. White fragility is demonstrated when white people get defensive, or assume the privilege of avoiding or just checking-out of any real talk or relationships that challenge any of the norms, habits, or assumptions I've been talking about.

We're talking about moral courage. We're talking about doing the right thing. Even when it feels risky. Even when it's inconvenient. Even when it makes us uncomfortable. I am suggesting, my dear friends, is that there's a reason our congregation has remained so stubbornly and overwhelmingly white for all 149 years of our existence, and it has a lot to do with white supremacy culture.

Dr. Nita Moseby Tyler, a nationally known educator and consultant on racial matters educated me a couple months ago over at Shorter AME church when she asked me if our congregation valued diversity. "Of course," I said. "It's written right into our Vision statement." She said, "*Uh huh. You don't really value diversity. And I know because diversity is the wrong word. It's a false flag. A tower without foundation.*

The world is already diverse. Diversity is the order of things. Diversity is a given. If you really want to be a more diverse community, stop talking about diversity and start talking about inclusion. Stop talking about diversity and start talking about equity. Start asking, what systems and social conditions are in place that perpetually maintain certain groups in the majority and perpetually leave other groups out?

Start asking, who's not sitting at the table when you make decisions? Whose voices are quietly ignored or passed over? Who looks around your space and doesn't see themselves represented? How many people of color are out there who are starving for community, dying to be accepted, included, and loved for who they are, but they're just too tired to fight through the defensiveness, the paternalism, the either/or thinking, the power hoarding, or the individualism that's built into emotional system of your church?"

I'm paraphrasing Dr. Moseby-Tyler here, but that's what she was getting at. And she's right. And that's why we're having this conversation. And that's why our covenant needs to be aspirational, a little challenging, and ruthlessly honest.

I'm **not** trying to beat us up! I love us. I love you. I love what we stand for. I'm bringing this up **because** I love us, and it's important to tell the truth to the people we love. I want us to have the moral courage to learn about and engage white supremacy culture. Because not everything faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.

Laugh from page 1

One of the authors I brought to the group was Garrison Keillor. Yes, he is both a prominent and problematic figure these days, what with his dry sense of humor that often includes mention of idiosyncratic Unitarian Universalists amid a sea of Middle American Protestantism, his observations of the absurdity of human behavior, and his history of sexual harassment accusations. I encouraged our book club to read both of his works, *Liberty* and *Pontoon*, mostly because we needed a laugh. We needed levity amongst the seriousness of our developing concern for the world in which we found ourselves (looking back, it's easy to say "If we only knew what was ahead...") I do believe that laughter is a great medicine (though not always the best.) So my question to you is, when did you last laugh?

Laughter decreases the production of cortisol, a stress hormone, while it increases the production of endorphins and dopamine, chemicals that contribute to a feeling of happiness. Please, in your repertoire of self-care, include laughter. Go and seek out a good laugh (might I suggest NOT a political snark laugh, but one that is found in the belly of your own strange experience of being a human.) Laugh at yourself. Laugh with others over a shared experience wrought of your shared humanity. You might have to go search out a good laugh, one not at the expense of another (which is easy to find in these days of divisive politics) but in the celebration of life and connection. It's a pretty specific ask, or maybe even a challenge. So, yeah, I challenge you to find a healthy and connective laugh. If you can, share it with someone who needs it.

Back to that book club from more than a decade ago... multigenerational community has value in a culture that seeks to divide and compartmentalize us by race, age, biological sex, gender identity, romantic affinity, level of education, income, zip code, and spiritual path. Rev. Mike has said it before, and I'll say it again here, Re-Ligion is meant to re-bind us to one another. Religion presents the opportunity to resist the divisions visited upon us by both external and internal forces. And so, good friends and fellow religiously minded folk, this fall our Religious Exploration program will seek to build multigenerational connection even as we socially distance from one another until it is safe for all of us to gather together. We will offer three multigenerational online classes, meant to inform your Unitarian Universalist faith across age divisions. We will use three curriculums created by our continental association, but converted for use online. In September, we will spend 8 weeks exploring the concept of stewardship at both the personal and community levels, in a curriculum about water resources entitled "Gather the Spirit". This winter, we will intentionally spend the month of January working for justice together. Beginning in February we will connect with the web of life in an 8-week course entitled "Circle of Trees." We will conclude the workshop series in the spring by spending 8 weeks exploring our own agency and access to "Miracles" through the practice of awe and wonder at our physical universe. No learning occurs without significant relationships, and this year in RE we plan to foster both of those in abundance, along with some healthy laughter to secure the bonds. In peace and love, may the month of August bring you decreased cortisol and increased happiness. Erin

The Board Beat

by Mary Sullivan, President, First Unitarian Board of Trustees

It was not difficult for me to choose a topic for this month's Ploughshare article. We are hearing a lot these days about "White Supremacy Culture" (WSC) both within our "virtual" walls and everywhere we look around our community, state, country and world.

I will be talking specifically about the placement of this phrase (WSC) within our proposed new Congregational Covenant, which reads as:

I will listen to you. I will make space for you. I will include you.

Together we will be a community of love, respect, and justice.

Together we will learn about white supremacy culture to create an equitable congregation.

Together we will protect the vulnerable.

When we fall out of covenant, we will call each other back in.

We have heard much from our pulpit on this and closely related topics in the last few weeks from our own minister and our guest speakers. Mike gave a sermon on July 12th entitled "The Heart's Convictions" in which he referenced this language specifically as it resides in this Covenant. He shared that the wording had been the result of many months of work by the Congregational Covenant Task Force: an exhaustive collection of input from the congregation, groups, committees, staff, etc; data organization and analysis; composition; re-write and re-write again. He also shared that there was much discussion within the task force concerning if the phrase "White Supremacy Culture" contained the right words to use and if the Covenant was the right place to use them. I have to fess up right here and right now that I was THAT PERSON; not the only person, but one of the more vocal ones expressing my skepticism.

My hesitancy did not stem from any lack of support for opposing WSC. Rather I believed it to have a uni-dimensional character centering primarily on race issues and believed the concept was already reflected in our Mission and Vision statements. I felt there were various other issues that held places of equal importance with members of our congregation that would not be represented. My understanding (or lack thereof) about WSC feels more than a little embarrassing to me now as I reflect back on my participation in some of those meetings.

Please see *Board* on the next page

Board from previous page

Since then, what I have come to understand and see more clearly is that WSC surrounds me like the air I breathe. Just like the atmosphere, I have been ingesting it my entire life. It is a part of me and has helped to create how I see myself, those around me and the world as a whole. It not only resides in my being, but in all the circles that surround me; my home, marriage, family, friendships, neighborhood, church, schools, retail shops, entertainment venues, museums, government entities and more. Many of us at FUSD have gleaned the benefits of WSC for a life time. We are also among those in the forefront of the fight to oppose it. Let's not forget to look inside our own beloved community.

I have learned it is the root and over-arching umbrella that makes most oppressions possible, including the ones that have affected me personally; such as paternalism, ageism, classism, gender, religion, climate, political, to name a few. I have also learned that because of WSC, I have been the very fortunate and unearned recipient of White Privilege. I have enjoyed countless advantages that I was either previously unaware of or convinced I had earned.

I suspect that most or all of you are way farther down this path of enlightenment than I am. It is a life long journey for sure. So why do I feel such a pressing need to talk about it now, when it is being addressed every time we turn around? Because "White Supremacy Culture" is a concept included in the new Congregational Covenant that we will be asked as a congregation to adopt this fall. I have come to embrace this covenantal language and all it conveys. I hope you will also.

There is another over-arching reason why I am talking about it here and now.

White Supremacy Culture is still alive and well and living with all of us.

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Wall of Unitarians

by Stu Ferguson, Co-Chair, Faith in Action Council

What does a wall of Unitarians look like? Putting a faith-based organization behind a protest effort gives mainstream support for Black Lives Matter and the current issue of police brutality. It may encourage other liberal religious groups to join the movement.

In last week's FUSD coffee klatch zoom call, a group of us discussed what it might look like for our church to join the protests. I think the "Wall of Moms" and "Wall of Vets" have shown us a model we might follow. Although I am over 65 and at high risk of complications from CoVid 19, I am moved to find a way to safely join the protests. Not necessarily as an ally to Black Lives Matter but representing my own desire to tear down White Privilege and stop the senseless subjugation of our black brothers and sisters. White Privilege is a white problem and it is up to white people to change our culture. In addition to marching, I plan to return to my state legislators to lobby for raising the minimum wage and starting a discussion about reparations. I plan to continue my support of the FUSD reparations group. I am hoping the leadership of the church might find a way to help organize those interested. And organizing a "Wall of Unitarians". We might want to broaden the appeal and march with other faith-based groups, maybe a "Wall of CHUMS?" (Capital Hill United Ministries)- maybe not.

As John Lewis' life illustrated, the success of the 1960's protest marches depended on the nonviolent teachings of Martin Luther King and other black leaders. Unitarians participated in those marches including James Reeb, a Unitarian minister, who died from head injuries at the hands of white segregationists while in Selma accompanying Martin Luther King Jr. In the past First Unitarian has had training in how to protest using the non-violent principles Martin Luther King, Jr. laid out:

SIX PRINCIPLES OF NONVIOLENCE

1. Nonviolence is a way of life for courageous people. It is active nonviolent resistance to evil.
2. Nonviolence seeks to win friendship and understanding. The end result of nonviolence is redemption and reconciliation.
3. Nonviolence seeks to defeat injustice, not people. Nonviolence recognizes that evildoers are also victims.
4. Nonviolence holds that suffering can educate and transform. Nonviolence willingly accepts the consequences to its acts.
5. Nonviolence chooses love instead of hate. Nonviolence resists violence to the spirit as well as the body. Nonviolent love is active, not passive. Nonviolent love does not sink to the level of the hater. Love restores community and resists injustice. Nonviolence recognizes the fact that all life is interrelated.
6. Nonviolence believes that the universe is on the side of justice. The nonviolent resister has deep faith that justice will eventually win.

Wall from previous page

Kate Raabe adds that trampling on the bill of rights by militias is another reason to push back and take to the streets.

John Vivian adds: Civil disobedience and violence are two different things. America has a long history of government agents infiltrating protests and advocating violence as a pretext for aggression and arrests. We need to be prepared for a violent response despite our nonviolent protest. Community organizing teaches that our approach must be uniform and united in our values and goals. Then we can deliver a message without saying a word. There is room to be involved in leadership roles both in direct action and in other support. I am hopeful this starts a discussion in our congregation and that we can seize this moment to make lasting change in our American society.

Soulful Men at First Unitarian

With Rev. Mike

Facilitated by Rev. Mike, Soulful Men will explore a mature, liberal religious masculinity: male-positive, pro-feminist, gay-affirming, culturally and racially inclusive, open to all who identify primarily as male. Our primary objective will be to support personal and spiritual growth. Discussions will include relationships, spiritual growth, toxic vs. healthy masculinity, and current challenges such as health, employment, and family matters, but any subject of concern is appropriate.

We will meet on three consecutive Tuesday evenings in August, then monthly through the remainder of 2020 at a time to be mutually determined. Interested Souls should send an email to Rev. Mike at revmorran@gmail.com.

Whole Souul Living

Hospitality is our Whole Souul Living Theme for August. Hospitality is an ancient value. Legend has it the Hebrew prophet Elijah would wander about disguised as a beggar to test whether people would be hospitable or hostile. On one occasion, a rabbi turned him away, only to learn later that it was Elijah in disguise. The moral in the Hebrew tradition is that you should treat all strangers as though you are greeting the prophet.

At First Unitarian, our Vision begins with; Community is Inspired, Diversity is Celebrated... We recognize that true hospitality is a rare and precious thing in this world, and an essential part of who we aspire to be.

- Reflect on a time when you felt truly welcomed by a person, group, family, or church.
- Reflect on a time when you felt excluded, ignored, or unwelcomed by a person, group, family, or church.
- Reflect on the feelings you associate with these two experiences.

The contrast highlights the centrality of practicing true hospitality. This month, we are holding up hospitality as a spiritual/religious practice, and you are invited to notice how well we do, how well you do, and how all of us could do better.



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