

A Reframed Piece of Mike's Mind... by Rev. Mike Morran

Starting in October, our Racial Justice Project at First Unitarian Denver is going to be initiating a conversation among our congregation about racism and reparations. My column this month provides a little of my own thinking about the background for this conversation.

Ta-Nehisi Coates recently wrote:

Basically, Americans talk about "race" but not "racism," and in doing that they turn a series of "actions" into a "state." This is basically true of all our conversations of this sort, left and right. You can see this in all our terminology—racial justice, racial quotas, racial discrimination, etc. But this language is ahistorical, and it obscures the current conflict. Affirmative action, for instance, is not intended to remedy plunder (action) but to aid "women and people of color" (state) or produce "diversity" (another state). And the benefits of affirmative action are not people who have been plundered, but "the black race."

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Embracing Possibilities by Erin Kenworthy, DRE

This will be an uncertain year. I am certain about that much. Our ritual ingathering service this Sunday marks the beginning of our second year to begin again in times of Covid. Throughout the difficulties presented by virtual church, I've been aware of the tension between grief and hope day to day, and how our community continues to show up in new ways, with love.

This year, the RE program will experi-learn. We'll try some new things. We've decided to use materials from Soul Matters, a monthly curated theme based ministry source lovingly provided by UU professionals. This year, the themes have been chosen to help us navigate the uncertain journey of re-emerging into our new world as the presence of Covid lingers. In September, the theme is Embracing Possibilities. This thread will be found in our youth ministry, and in our family support and outreach efforts.

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But American notions of race are the product of racism, not the other way around. ...It is important to remember that American racism is a thing that was done..., and we should never forget that this world was "made." Whiteness and blackness are not a fact of providence, but of policy—of slave codes, black codes, Jim Crow, redlining, GI Bills, housing covenants, New Deals, and mass incarcerations.

If you caught that, Coates is saying that the very way we frame our discussions, as being about race, or racial disparity, or racial reconciliation, or racial whatever, **instead of racism**; that framing itself is a manifestation of white culture, white denial, whitewashing of the real issue. I readily admit that this kind of blew my mind. I have been in dozens, maybe a hundred meetings where I and everyone else in the room, white and black, have unwittingly adopted that very frame.

But when you move beyond the unproductive, abstract frame of race (racial this or racial that) and focus specifically on racism - historical, systematic, merciless racism - then you smack into a much more deeply human problem. When there has been a hurt... so deep, so violent, so crushing to body and soul, a hurt beyond any meaningful way to measure it, with insult added to the injury, what is to be done?

When a crime against humanity has gone on for ten, twenty, or more generations of people... When the system that willfully initiated those crimes is still ongoing but in a somewhat different and shallowly disguised form... When virtually every white person, alive or dead has benefited from these crimes.... When so much time has passed, so many lies have been told, and so much denial permeates the world, how are we even supposed to imagine making that right again?

What does it even mean for white people to be in right relationship to that history, the current reality, this truth?

There is nothing easy about this subject.

To be clear about my own point of view, I am not presupposing or predicting any particular outcome of this discussion at First Unitarian Denver, but I am very invested that we have the conversation. In my humble opinion, we've read enough books, heard enough sermons, hired enough consultants, attended enough marches, learned enough history, and considered the gross disparities in health, wealth, incarceration, opportunities, and education. It's time to take the conversation to a deeper place, beyond consideration, and into what can actually be done by a community like ours to address this gaping wound in our nation.

In faith,

Mike

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What is possible for you today, that was not possible a year ago? What could be possible, if we were willing to make one small adjustment or change? This is an expansive concept to take on this month, in this year of uncertain gains and losses. When our access to one another became physically limited, we imagined the possibility of online church. As a community, we have embraced the possibility of online streaming services to multiple platforms, including now, limited capacity in-person worship.

I learned this year how it was possible to be in two places at once. And, sometimes I wonder, even if it is possible to do something, does that mean we should do the thing? Just because it's possible?

Our resources for families will include table conversation questions to use at meal time. A bedtime story about possibility with wondering statements to spark imagining together. Introduction to anti-racism resources in our larger community. A guided scavenger hunt to use in your own neighborhood that encourages discovering new possibilities around you. And finally, parent reflection discussion questions for embracing parenting possibilities after a tough and challenging pandemic existence. To connect with these resources, please check out our First Unitarian Families facebook page, and be sure to fill out an RE registration form online. Or, send me an email at erin@fusden.org.

It is possible to bring church into our houses and homes. We've done it virtually. And, the goal of Religious Exploration has always been to encourage our children, youth, and families to incorporate our values, principles and sources into our lived experience every day of the year. We are excited by the possibilities of trying something new, the opportunities available as we rediscover how our faith community weaves back together in love within and after the pandemic. We are, each of us, full of possibility in this time, in this moment, and again tomorrow.

*Making Space by Joe Verrengia,
President, First Unitarian Board of Trustees*

Often, I use this column to tell you what I'm reading. This month I am reading about the Delta variant to COVID-19. It's not nearly as much fun as a novel, or as enlightening. But it is necessary.

The FUSD staff and Board of Trustees are collaborating to revise our pandemic policy considering this more contagious variant. As it spreads, Denver has returned to the high-risk level for COVID-19 transmission.

The good news is that two-thirds of Denver's eligible adults and teens are fully vaccinated. However, the rate of vaccination has slowed.

Meanwhile, travel has resumed, school is back in session and venues are open.

So, we are taking another hard look at our policy even though we just resumed in-person services a few weeks ago. We want to do our best to limit risks to our congregation while giving staff as much guidance as possible.

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At the same time, it's clear that COVID-19 is becoming a fact of daily life.

To borrow a line from our covenant, we are going to have to make space for it.

Currently, FUSD follows local, state, and federal guidelines, as well as recommendations by the UUA and other sources, including the nonprofit Covid Act Now and other NGOs. Please remember that published COVID data and guidelines often lag our local experience by weeks. Guidelines are inconsistent between agencies and organizations.

While we are not "on our own," there is no single authority on this topic. When in doubt, we tend to follow the more careful option. In some ways, our current requirements are more cautious than what authorities recommend.

Currently we limit the Sunday service to 75 people (by reservation) and we require masks. We encourage only vaccinated congregants and visitors, but we rely on the honor system. We have suspended the indoor coffee hour. If you want to hug someone, please ask permission. Anyone feeling ill should stay home and enjoy the service via our new streaming technology.

Currently, singers are masked and distanced (or pre-recorded, in some cases.) Our musicians have been avoiding wind instruments because they disperse aerosols more widely than normal conversation.

(Speaking of reading, if you want to geek out on a COVID topic, read this University of Colorado study on COVID and wind instruments, <https://pubs.acs.org/doi/10.1021/acsenvironau.1c00007?goto=supporting-info>.)

Who knew that you could reduce aerosols 50% by requiring your clarinet to wear a mask? It sounds silly, but when you dig into a topic to develop a policy, you wind up learning a lot of details that you never – and I mean EVER – considered. Suddenly, they matter.

And, in case you are wondering, the keyholes of a wind instrument do not emit aerosols to any concerning degree. It's the bell of the trumpet or saxophone that you need to worry about.

And don't even THINK about bringing a vuvuzela to worship; they are the worst offenders and we do not conduct ourselves like soccer fans... although now that I think about it, that might be fun.)

Ok, that was a long digression.

What I want you to know is that we are considering extra steps as the Delta variant spreads. Universities, some businesses and even Red Rocks concerts are requiring proof of vaccination. Others are once again requiring masks indoors and regulating meetings.

How much is enough? Or too much?

It's important for us to remember that FUSD is more than the Sunday service. We are a congregation of core circles, committees, task forces and other groups that gather and rehearse away from 1400 Lafayette St. To what extent should our COVID policy apply to off-site activities?

We are working on all of this now. We will revisit this topic monthly - or more often if necessary.

You always can email me at jverrengia@gmail.com if you want to ask a question or offer an opinion.

Balance is a beautiful thing. Balance is also our Whole Souul Living Theme for September. In a technical sense, balance is an equal distribution of weight that enables steadiness. Balance is also about correct proportions: of power, justice, prosperity, Love... ideals seldom achieved but deeply worthy. In these busy and troubled times, all of us could benefit from some gentle attention to balance: between work and play, sadness and joy, time alone and time with others, the demands of the body and those of the spirit.

Some questions for individual and communal reflection:

- At this point in your life, where are you out of balance?
- Where have you achieved balance? And, what did you have to do or give up to get to that point?
- What do you do for fun? Who do you share that with?
- When have you felt peaceful equilibrium in your body and soul? Tell someone that story.
- “Everything in moderation,” is a famous old adage. Reflect on this in your own life.
- Are there times when even moderation should be moderated? Perhaps with something more extreme? Share a story about that from your own experience.



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