

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York
“Communal Aspirations”

Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore October 3, 2021

Reading

These are words from Shannon Lang in an email from Braver/Wiser at the UUA forwarded to our Inclusivity Discussion List by Jacqui Williams:

I love my congregation, but as a Black Woman, before I enter the doors of my church or a committee meeting, I often feel like I must put on my armor. Chances are, someone's going to say something hurtful. They're not going to mean it, but it's going to happen and I've got to gird myself up for **the unintended pain** that will come. I know my siblings in faith love me—and I love them, too—but it has happened time and time again.

I'm not alone in this; it's a common experience for Black and other UUs of color. I identify with the findings of a 2018 survey that BLUU (Black Lives of Unitarian Universalism) conducted of Black UUs. Most Black UUs feel a deep sense of isolation and rely heavily on social media to connect with other Black UUs. Black people tend to become a part of UU congregations because of the theology, not because of the community. White dominant culture gets in the way of their communal experience and serves as an exclusionary force in church life. Simply put: Black people, when they show up in ways that are culturally divergent from white, middle- and upper-class culture, do not feel welcomed.

The impact of these experiences, regardless of intention, is clear: the lack of Black and Brown faces in our spaces speaks volumes.

In contrast, when I attend BLUU worship services, which are Black-only sacred spaces, I feel like I am home. I am comforted. I am nourished. I don't have to explain myself, I don't have to address microaggressions, I don't have to say "I am sorry, but you really can't say that, and here's why." Instead of having to enter the space girded with armor for protection, I can enter the space with an open mind, heart, and soul.

My hope is that every member of each UU congregation pledges to do their individual anti-racism and anti-oppression work; that every member searches honestly within themselves, and analyzes their individual part in creating an atmosphere that has been historically unwelcoming to Black and Brown siblings of color.

To be a truly welcoming community, the systems of power and privilege that exist in our spaces need to be actively dismantled. Together, we can become radically welcoming—**but only** if we're willing, as individuals and as a movement, to do the hard work that comes along with it.

Our Vision

Albany UU will be an inclusive, welcoming congregation. Our sacred work is to lift hearts, broaden minds and do justice in the world, in service of building beloved community.

Our Mission

We welcome everyone. Our Unitarian Universalist community seeks truth and deeper meaning, pursues justice through inspired action, and cultivates compassion and love for all connected by the web of life.

Albany UU's Congregational Covenant

As a congregation with respect for our past and commitment to the future, we draw from the depth and power of our hearts and minds, guided by our Unitarian Universalist principles, to serve our mission and vision.

We celebrate the diversity of our identities and experiences, and foster a culture of appreciation, inspiration, and kindness.

We honor both the strength of the collective and uniqueness of the individual, willing to support and challenge each other with love and compassion.

We entrust ourselves to each other in beloved community, to embolden personal and congregational growth and transformation.

Sermon

Imagine a white identified family coming to visit our congregation. The heteronormative couple's names are Bob and Karen. They have two elementary school age children named Missy and Junior. Bob and Karen have moved here from a Boston suburb where they were nominally Catholic. Catholic sex scandals and the couple's science-based ivy league college education made it difficult for them to remain faithful members.

They are delighted with their first Sunday, (this is pre-COVID) walking in the front door, seeing people who look like them, dress like them, and have children about the same age as their children. The Sunday service is stimulating and thought provoking. The music is familiar and the words to the songs aren't Trinitarian. But what makes them feel most at home is attending coffee hour. They meet folks with shared social connections. Karen is a League of Women Voters member and is active in women's reproductive rights. Bob is very concerned about climate change and is pleased to discover he can get involved through our congregation in our Green Sanctuary Committee. Missy and Junior easily make friends with the other children who share their culture. Bob and Karen sign up for a Circle Dinner and the Walker Book Club as they love book groups. The congregation immediately feels comfortable to them. The culture is familiar and like the suburban Boston culture they left behind. It feels to them like they are in a home away from home. Even the architecture of the Sanctuary looks like a Boston church!

Now contrast their experience with Shannon Lang's. Can you imagine Karen and Bob feeling like they must put on their armor to go to church? Let's not think that Shannon's experience is just the experience of Black members of UU congregations. If you hail from Central or South America, Shannon's experience could feel familiar. Anyone not at home in European American culture is likely to share Shannon's experience. But it doesn't end there. Those with physical and mental

disabilities can also share Shannon's experience of social defensiveness. Those who are non-heteronormative, or gender variant can also experience that social defensiveness.

I want to highlight first that Shannon loves her congregation and is a committed member of her congregation. Listen again to how she puts her analysis of the problem:

Black people tend to become a part of UU congregations because of the theology, **not** because of the community. White dominant culture gets in the way of their communal experience and serves as an exclusionary force in church life. Simply put: Black people, when they show up in ways that are culturally divergent from white, middle- and upper-class culture, do not feel welcomed.

Please let those words sink in. This is the ***opposite message*** most white identified folks in our congregation say on all the surveys we do about what is important to them about our congregation and why they come. They emphatically say they ***come for the community***.

This is a problem. This is a big problem.

One bridge over this divide is what do that moves beyond white culture. Our Sunday Services focused on UU Theology using diverse images, metaphors, music and visual art can emphasize our common values and inspire our growth and development. Our religious education for children and youth, our adult classes, the community outreach efforts, the experience of singing in our choir, are all paths that can transcend cultural limitations with careful planning and attention.

Yet the social dimensions of our congregational life are critical too. They support the experience of belonging that is very meaningful, especially for our children and youth. The networking that happens in our congregation integrates us into this community and the larger community. It can mean better jobs and access to life enhancing opportunities.

I know Shannon would love to have the social ease in her Evanston congregation she experiences when connecting through the Black Lives of UU organization in exclusively Black worship services. I imagine many people in the Evanston congregation ***would want that for her too***. The theological and the social ***are both*** vitally important experiences of religious community.

What stands in the way is the pervasiveness of white supremacy culture.

This isn't a new problem. It has been a problem from before Unitarian Universalists stepped up to be involved in the 1960's Civil Rights struggle. In each decade since then, many of our congregations have struggled to find ways to address and remove barriers to welcoming Black and Brown people. These barriers primarily come from being a religious tradition developed and populated by people of predominantly European ancestry. The challenge for those who come from that background is to value the parts of that heritage that affirm our values and theology while leaving behind the supremacy culture ... of which there is a lot in our history to acknowledge.

One approach to this transformational work has been to focus on vision and mission. Let's imagine who we want to be and develop a mission that articulates our values and prioritizes our efforts. Focus on a common purpose. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s vision of Beloved Community expresses in two words moving beyond white supremacy culture and creating a welcoming community. That language is in our vision.

Vision and mission focus has been helpful to a point but hasn't changed our culture enough to prevent Shannon needing to put her armor on to come to church.

In the last 30 or so years, another approach has been identified to assist with culture change. Covenants. When I was training for ministry in the 1980's, we didn't talk much about covenants. Many of us don't identify with the Hebrew Scriptures understanding of a vertical Covenant with God to gain God's favor by doing God's will as expressed in the Ten Commandments. The covenants New England churches use were historical artifacts from the 1600's. The few UU congregations had horizontal covenants between members they repeated on Sunday morning, but they were broad brush commitments in archaic language.

What our lay leaders, religious professionals and ministers recognized, in having a horizontal covenant, was a method to build community, set boundaries on disruptive behavior and offer emotional safety and greater inclusion for marginalized individuals and groups. While vision and mission guided *the institution*, today, horizontal covenants are recognized as a guide and a growth path for *the individual*. Setting intentions and expectations, articulating aspirations and limitations can all be part of a covenant. Congregations are appreciating covenants' value as a useful tool in the process of building Beloved Community and working to dismantle white supremacy within our congregations.

A covenant is a powerful way for each of us to make promises to each other about the way we aspire to cultivate relationship together. Rather than conforming to a fixed set of rules, a covenant speaks our intentions and value commitments. For example, I can't guarantee I'll never get angry and yell at someone. I can promise to use non-harming speech. I may fail to live up to that commitment. If so, I acknowledge the broken promise, express my regret through apology, make amends, and recommit myself to that promise.

We passed our congregational covenant almost a year ago. Let's consider how it might fulfill the goal of helping our congregation build a more welcoming community and relieve Shannon of her need to come here with her armor on. (Chris, could you show us that Covenant slide again)

The first part of our Covenant is the preamble:

As a congregation with respect for our past and commitment to the future, we draw from the depth and power of our hearts and minds, guided by our Unitarian Universalist principles, to serve our mission and vision.

It commits us to our mission and vision. All well and good.

The next sentence is:

We celebrate the diversity of our identities and experiences, and foster a culture of appreciation, inspiration, and kindness.

Another way to say that might be: we promise to celebrate diversity and foster a positive culture that appreciates each other, encourages us to be kind to each other and sustain us with inspiration.

The next promise is honor both the community, and the individual. We are saying both are valuable. But we know that in any democracy there often arises tension between the individual and

the collective. There will be conflict between individuals. Our commitment, our promise is to **both** support **and** challenge each other in the spirit of love and compassion. Again, here are the words:

We honor both the strength of the collective and uniqueness of the individual, willing to support and challenge each other with love and compassion.

Finally, a promise to entrust ourselves to each other, a promise to be in relationship within the ideal of beloved community. We make that promise and take that risk for the purpose of both personal and congregational growth and transformation. Finally stated in these words:

We entrust ourselves to each other in beloved community, to embolden personal and congregational growth and transformation.

This covenant asks us to promise to celebrate diversity; foster a positive culture; recognize the value of both the community and the individual; offer each other both support and challenge with the intention of love and support; entrust ourselves to each other in the context of beloved community; and commit to personal and congregational growth and transformation.

These are lofty aspirations, and we need them. My concern, however, is translating this beautiful language into concrete and specific promises; promises we can make to each other to dismantle white supremacy, promises to remove barriers, and promises to strive to change our culture so Shannon doesn't feel the need to put her armor on before coming to church.

At the congregational meeting where our Covenant was passed a strong objection was raised during the debate. The objector pointed out there wasn't an explicit anti-racism promise in it specifically to dismantle white supremacy.

On the other side, I heard objections while we were putting this covenant together that it might be forcing people to make personal promises they didn't want to make. We are a free church tradition where we do not have a test of belief for membership. Some were concerned that any covenant we might create could be "weaponized." It could be used to accuse people that they were "out of covenant" and needed to conform, fall-in-line ... or leave. Unitarian Universalists have tilted far toward revering individual freedom ... but the price of that tilt is limiting our ability to drive culture change that would be more welcoming of Shannon in our congregation.

You can't have it both ways.

One way through this thicket is encouraging individuals to make more specific personal promises to each other and to our community about the way they want to be together. Without a doubt we have a very strong commitment to welcoming people in our congregation as central to our mission. Are we willing to recognize that that commitment comes with a personal freedom limitation? The Shannons in our congregation will tell you about what some of those limitations might be. Welcoming and inclusion are very challenging in any social group. White supremacy culture makes it even harder.

We are not alone in striving to make these promises and working on culture change. Many UU congregations are working on this too. Our congregation's foot is in the door, as is true of Shannon's congregation in Evanston, a leading congregation on these issues, but there is much more work to do. And this isn't work that the Inclusivity Committee can do by itself. It takes most of us.

Think about the energy we put into dismantling heterosexism in the 1990's. Think about the struggles in our congregations with women's liberation in the 60's, 70's and 80's. Those changes didn't happen without a lot of attention by individual congregational members to changing their habits and patterns. It wasn't easy. Anti-white supremacy work is **ten times harder**.

We are not alone in striving to make these changes. Starting with the Black Lives Matter movement and activated by George Floyd's murder, more attention and resources continue to flow toward this work. Recently our Religious Education Council has done an anti-racism audit of our education program. The findings are relevant to the whole congregation and will be/if it isn't already/ on our Albany UU website. There are many ways for all of us to plug in and make a positive difference.

I close this morning encouraging you to reflect on what kind of promises are you willing to make to this work. I'm asking for a free commitment not a compelled one. If you are not ready to make a commitment, are you willing to explore the barriers that prevent you from doing so? Are you willing to be challenged and encouraged to grow and develop ... with love and compassion?

What will it take for you to entrust yourself to each other in beloved community, to embolden personal and congregational growth and transformation? Shannon is asking this question and wants to hear your answer.

Thank you for your willingness to hold these questions and respond to them. I hope we all want Shannon, her husband Bobby, and their daughters Marlowe and Francesca to feel as at home and welcome here as Karen, Bob, Missy and Junior ***already do***.

So be it.