

Reading SLIDE ONE

Beloved, all of what I have said should lead you to empathy. It sounds simple, but its benefits are profound. Whiteness must shed its posture of confidence, its will to omniscience, its belief in the goodness and purity, and then walk a mile or two in the boots of blackness. The siege of hate will not end until white folk imagine themselves as black folk--vulnerable despite our virtues. If enough of you, one by one, exercise your civic imagination and put yourself in the shoes of your black brothers and sisters, you might develop a democratic impatience for injustice, for the cruel disregard of black life, for the careless indifference to our plight.

Empathy must be cultivated. The practice of empathy means taking a moment to imagine how you might behave if you were in our position. Do not tell us how we should act if we were you. Imagine how you would act if you were us. Imagine living in a society where your white skin marks you for disgust, hate and fear. Imagine that for many moments. Only when you see black folk as we are, and imagine yourselves as we have to live our lives, only then will the suffering stop, the hurt cease, the pain go away.

SLIDE 2

Spiritual Emergency/Spiritual Emergence

Vero Beach February 2020

I want to thank Scott for the invitation to be with all of you today. I couldn't be more pleased. As he mentioned, he and I have been friends for over 40 years. I recall the first few times I met him and observed his remarkable reserve of exuberance and energy. I thought to myself, "Well, the passage of time will take care of that! He'll settle down in due course." But, here we are, 40 years later, and I can report to you, it never happened. He has as much energy today as he did back in the day. And you, and our world are all the better for it! Thank you for your life-changing ministry, Scott.

And thank you to a newer friend, The Rev. Crystal Bujol. Crystal I met over the phone a few months ago to plan the workshop on racial identity that we offered yesterday. Yesterday's event could not have happened without you, Rev. Crystal. As your new friend, I look forward to retuning in 40 years when I can say that you, to have as much exuberance and energy as when we first met!

And speaking of yesterday's workshop, I am very much aware that with ____ people in attendance, it still is only one of the many ways this congregation is working dilligently to address the many issues. Social change theorists suggest that between 15 and 20 percent of the members of an organization is a tipping point in creating cultural change in that organization. When that percentage advocates and embodies the change they want to see, they are well on their way. As far as I can tell, with you 1619 project and your roster of justice-making projects, you are well on your way to reshaping your Fellowship and America itself into authentically just and inclusive places. You are to be contemplated. You are a hope for our society where its institutions have been created, many times unintentionally, in the practices and traditions of the dominant white culture. You are taking your turn at deconstructing that. As I said, you are a hope for our world.

Today, I want to pay attention to the one facet of that work you are doing so well. I want to bring it down to that which is most personal. I want to talk about race and the spiritual life.

Let me tell you a little bit about myself. I was raised in a mostly German Catholic town of about 20,000 in central Minnesota. In my high school of 3,000 students there were two pairs of siblings who were from

traditionally marginalized races and ethnicities. One Asian brother and sister, the Wongs, and two Jewish brothers, Klienbaums. My exposure to difference was shall we say, limited. But it as the 1960's, I was a Unitarian Universalist kid, it was the height of the civil rights movement and I was all about racial equality. My minister went to Selma and I along with the rest of the congregation, was enormously proud of that and felt personally connected to the civil rights struggle by his presence there.

But it wasn't until I moved to the south side of Chicago to attend graduate school **SLIDE 3**

—there I go and there I arrive—that it became apparent to me just how limited my personal experience was. Life on the south side, the heart of the city's large African American population, showed me how just how little I knew about little I knew about the cultures and practices and histories of the people for whose rights I cared about so dearly. I didn't have the worlds for it then, but I felt bereft, incomplete, lost, spiritually incomplete. Even though I preached about it in very first sermon as a seminarian, I did not have words for the how's or why's of my feelings, but after some years of study, I think I do now. I was beginning to understand and adopt a relational approach to theology. Let me explain.

Over the past couple of decades there been a shift in the way Unitarian Universalist ministers, scholars and lay persons engage theologically. Indeed, it's a shift that is occurring throughout religious traditions. People are shedding the traditional, systematic way of articulating their belief by which they described their responses to categorical questions: What do I believe about God? What do I believe about an afterlife? What is my understanding of good and evil, of salvation, etc? As I say, it was a systematic approach to religious understanding. These days Unitarian Universalists are drawn to a more relational approach to theology. **SLIDE 4**

We believe that there is something about being in relationship- whether it is with other people, with God, with the spirit, with the natural world, with Jesus, with the tradition, with the written word, with science- you name it for yourself—there is something about being in relationship that leads to human wholeness and deep purpose.

That's why I was feeling spiritually lost back then, that's why I was bereft. Because I had moved in an isolate world, I was out of relationship with people who were not of my own race and that meant I was out of relationship with the fullness of humanity. And I was spiritually incomplete.

Not too many years later, after graduating from seminary, I was visiting the Museum of Contemporary Art in Boston. The exhibits were mostly the type of thing you would expect to see in such a place. You know, chicken coop wire and twisted aluminum with an attached pair of swimming goggles. But there was one painting that struck me more than any of the other installations. **SLIDE 5**

It was titled Spiritual Emergency/Spiritual Emergence by the artist Stephen Grachowski. I'd show you a picture of it, but this was before cell phones and there is nothing to be found online, so you will have to leave it to me to describe it. **SLIDE 6**

This is a picture of the artist. Spiritual Emergency/Spiritual Emergence was a self-portrait that consisted of eleven panels, eleven images of the artist which moved from one to the next, gradually gaining a deeper dimension and a more vibrant color until they became fully three dimensional and lifelike. The paintings were accompanied by a narrative in which Grochowski told the story of how he crossed the country on a spiritual quest. During his months of travel, he experimented with a number of spiritual disciplines and practices—trying on one and another... ashrams and sweat lodges, churches and self-help retreats. You name it and he tried it, but none of them led him to spiritual wholeness. His unfilled quest led to what he called a "spiritual emergency." A spiritual emergency, he wrote, "takes place when old beliefs and values and assumptions are suddenly shattered. In short, (when) all hell breaks loose." He came to realize that this spiritual path had a serious flaw, that had tried to discover his life by dropping out of his life. If he were to find understanding and wholeness, if he were to experience spiritual emergence, he would need to reengage in the life that was his—

as a man, as a partner, as an artist. And taking up that life again marked the beginning of his spiritual emergence, his life that finally was depicted by the fullness of color and dimension.

As for us, back here in this sanctuary, for those of us who are caught up in the circles of our daily life, circles that typically isolate us from being in relationship with those who are racially different from ourselves, we can't possibly understand what we are missing. That is not unusual for churches. You have come to realize though your own congregational work on race that the practices and traditions and rituals of Unitarian Universalist churches, and the churches of many other traditions I might add, are geared primarily toward white culture. Ours are normally churches where persons of color are welcomed with the implicit message that they are and always will be outsiders, where even the governance of how we do the business of church is shaped by a white, European assumptions about how things get done.

That reality alone means that churches can be hard places for people of different races and cultures to be in full, authentic relationship with each another. That hard truth is seen in a myriad of interactions that take place. I've been listening to Unitarian Universalists lately. Here are some of the painful things they told me: *A minister of color told me that his predominately white congregation gave him the feedback that he was too obsessed with the topic of race in his sermons. He had preached on the topic exactly three times in 18 months. *A lifelong UU, a Latina layperson, who was the founder of her UU Spanish speaking congregation on the Mexican border told me that she is routinely greeted by newer Euro members of that church who tell her she will be very comfortable there because sometimes they have a mariachi band. *A Chinese American woman says that in her church on the west coast people routinely speak to her slowly and deliberately--- assuming that she does not know English. *African American members of a ministerial search committee said they felt a need to orchestrate where members of the committee sat when visiting a neutral pulpit for a candidating weekend. They knew that how and where they sat in a mostly white church would create perceptions about they were perceived as UUs of Color. *And an elderly and wealthy white business man expressed to me his new realization that so many doors of business were opened to him would never have been open to others who had the same qualifications—he had privilege that they did not. And, he could see that the same dynamic is embedded in his church when it comes to its leadership.

These are stories of spiritual emergencies and not just for the people who expressed them, but for every one of us. They represent our collective, our community- wide, challenge to be in authentic relationship. And with relational theology in mind, well, I have no problem calling it a spiritual emergency.

But the good news is, according to our artist, Stephen Grochowski and our author Michael Eric Dyson, that we can emerge from our spiritual emergency.

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Grochowski tells us that it will be gradual, but that it can happen if we don't run away from life and engage in it fully. And Dyson tells us a way to engage in it fully---for those of us who identify as white, at least, it is to cultivate empathy for persons of color.

SLIDE 8

I like that phrase, "cultivate empathy." We don't just decide to be empathic one day and then start to be so. We have to be intentional about it. We have to work at it. We have to cultivate it.

And the way to cultivate empathy is to be sure to put our bodies in the places, in the communities, where diversity truly exists. If that place is not YET, they church, (notice I said YET) then we have to search elsewhere to find it, to the diverse communities where authentic relationships have the possibility to be forged, to the places where spiritual emergence just might take place.

SLIDE 9

Dietra Wise Baker was the pastor of the Liberation Christian Church in St. Louis , Missouri when Michael Brown was murdered in Ferguson five years ago. She emerged as one of the community leaders in the protests there. In her book, *Ferguson & Faith*, Leah Gunning Francis, quotes Pastor Baker as she reflected on urging her ministerial colleagues black and white, to participate , “I know that there are some pastors who kind of stepped aside from their congregation to at least be in conversation with those of us who are active, so that they could engage a little bit. But I kept challenging when things were really, really hot. I said, “Just get on the streets. Come be on the streets. Come at least once. Get on the streets. I’m telling you you’re going to meet Jesus there. Jesus on the street and you’re going to be transformed if you come to the street. You can’t be transformed in the safety of the pew and at the church. And I know that you’re afraid, and I know you’re wondering what people are going to say, think. You’re wondering what’s going to happen when you get out there. I get it. On some level, I’ve experienced that, but come to the street and then you will see what we mean, and you’ll be transformed.”

Now I have not yet come to the end of my sermon, but I have come to the end of the words that I have written. Look, I have no conclusion. **SLIDE 10**