

“The Empowerment Controversy”

Rev. Mary Gear

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First reading: “The Invisibility of Whiteness” by John A. Powell.

John is an internationally recognized expert in the areas of civil rights, civil liberties, structural racialization, racial identity, fair housing, poverty, and democracy. He serves as the Director of the Othering & Belonging Institute, a UC Berkeley research institute that brings together scholars, organizers, communicators, and policymakers to identify and eliminate the barriers to an inclusive, just, and sustainable society and to create transformative change toward a more equitable nation. These are his words.

The invisibility of whiteness means that one doesn't have to notice that one is white. So there are people, and then there are Black people. There are people and there are Latino people. And people—just people, just folks—turn out to be white, but we don't notice it.

White people have the luxury of not having to think about race. That is a benefit of being white, of being part of the dominant group. Just like men don't have to think about gender. The system works for you, and you don't have to think about it.

So they live in white space and then they don't have to think about it. First of all, they think about race as something that belongs to somebody else. The Blacks have race; maybe Latinos have race; maybe Asians have race. But they're just white. They're just people. That's part of being white.

Second reading: “The Unitarian Universalism That Does Not Yet Exist” by UU minister Natalie Fenimore, from the book *Centering: Navigating Race, Authenticity, and Power in Ministry*.

Shirley Chisholm was asked why she, a Black woman, was running for president: “You don't have a chance. Why are you doing that?” And she said, “Because I am in love with the America that does not yet exist,” and that's how Unitarian Universalism is also. 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. I don't think it will in that of my children, but I can't deny my love for it. You know, wanting to be there in that struggle. That's why I'm fighting.

Sermon/Homily: The Empowerment Controversy

Many of us know the civil rights history of the marches from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama in the mid-1960's. For Unitarian Universalists, the story of the March 9, 1965 journey across the Edmund Pettus bridge lives in our collective memory as the epitome of UU racial justice work. When The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King called the president of the Unitarian Universalist Association and asked UUs to join him in Selma, two-thirds of UU ministers went, along with many others. March 9, 1965 was also the day that two UUs were killed, Rev. James Reeb and Viola Liuzzo. Murdered because of their work for racial justice, some call them Unitarian Universalist martyrs.

We tell this story over and over; we tell it to our children and to each other as a call to action.

The story of what came next in the UUA is not as often told. It is a story of division, conflict, high emotion, betrayal, and pain. This story has been told by the Rev. Dr. Mark Morrison-Reed in his book, *Darkening the Doorways: Black Trailblazers and Missed Opportunities in Unitarian Universalism*. In 2003, the UUA created an oral history titled "Wilderness Journey: The Struggle for Black Empowerment and Racial Justice within the UUA 1967-1970," capturing some of the voices of those who were part of this history. Others refused to participate; the pain was still too great.

We'll put links to these resources in the chat and in The Spark this Thursday.

<https://www.uuworld.org/articles/empowerment-tragedy>

[Wilderness Journey: The Struggle for Black Empowerment and Racial Justice within the UUA 1967-1970](#)

What came after Selma is often called the Black Empowerment Controversy. Morrison-Reed has called it "The Empowerment Saga" and "The Empowerment Tragedy."

Briefly, here's what happened.

In the summer of 1967, Newark, Detroit and other cities exploded in violence as black communities demanded an end to racism. The country was on fire as it became clear that civil rights legislation was not enough to address African American poverty, oppression or frustration. The Unitarian Universalist Commission on Religion and Race convened an emergency conference at the Biltmore Hotel in New York on "the Unitarian Universalist Response to the Black Rebellion."

Morrison-Reed writes that "Thirty-seven of the 150 attendees in New York were African

Americans. They made up 25 percent of a gathering in a denomination of which they comprised only 1 percent, hailing from the urban churches in a faith community that was becoming more and more suburban.”

Shortly after the conference started, 33 of the 37 African Americans withdrew to hold their own meeting. Many white participants didn't understand why they were not allowed to be part of the black caucus discussion and planning. In that caucus those 33 African Americans formed the Black Unitarian Universalist Caucus (BUUC) to set their own priorities and goals. At the end of the conference, BUUC made non-negotiable demands of the UUA Board that included funding for black programs, continued opportunities for black caucus, and more black representation in UUA leadership and in the ministry. The next month, the UUA Board denied BUUC's demands.

In 1968, the Black UU Caucus formed the Black Affairs Council (BAC), a formal committee seeking association with the UUA intending to serve as a coordinating agency for UU efforts toward race relations and black empowerment.

At the same time, some Unitarian Universalists felt that the direction of the Black Affairs Council was too separatist, so they formed Black and White Action (BAWA) for the efforts of some seeking to achieve racial justice through what they saw as more integrated means.

The stage was set for the 1968 General Assembly in Cleveland. UUs gather each year at General Assembly, GA, to learn together, worship together and do the business of the association. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King was assassinated just a few months prior to the June 1968 GA. In a very emotional business session that included shouting and shoving, voices in favor of full funding, voices concerned about appropriate use of funds, the GA voted to fund the Black Affairs Council, but not Black and White Action. In early 1969, the UUA Board voted to fund BAWA anyway.

The next year, at the 1969 General Assembly in Boston, the UUA board proposed that the GA delegates reconsider the BAC and BAWA funding, after learning that the UUA discretionary funds were gone--the UUA was broke. The GA planners put this funding decision at the end of a very long business agenda. When BAC leaders learned of this, they demanded that the agenda be changed; they felt they were being put at the back of the bus.

After a heated debate that included shouting, shoving and spitting, the GA delegates voted, and while a majority were in favor, they didn't have the required two-thirds to change the agenda, so the Black Affairs Caucus request failed. Angry and frustrated, most of the black UUs walked out of the meeting in response. The mostly white Liberal Religious Youth group followed. The remaining mostly white UUs were surprised,

shocked and hurt. After some time and mediation, all delegates returned to the assembly, and BAC funding was granted for another year. But relationships were strained, and trust was broken.

In January 1970, the UUA Board voted to stop funding both the Black Caucus and BAWA, citing financial concerns. Membership by people of all races in UU churches was declining and financial support was shrinking. BAC members boycotted the 1970 General Assembly, and the resolution to continue funding BAC was defeated in a vote of the delegates. And so, the black empowerment controversy ended, with many black UUs leaving their churches. But the racial tensions continued. As Morrison-Reed writes, this was a tragedy because “no one who was involved felt understood or appreciated, much less honored.”

In 1968, the UUA was still quite young; the Universalist Church of America and the American Unitarian Association had just consolidated into the UUA in 1961. Neither the Unitarians nor the Universalists had a strong history of racial justice work. Sure, some worked for the end of slavery and against Jim Crow; some worked for civil rights. But Unitarians and Universalists were not leaders in a movement calling for racial justice.

The history of our denomination is that neither the Universalists nor the Unitarians ever gave much backing to African American congregations or supported African American ministers who might have formed congregations. Morrison-Reed notes that, prior to 1969, only two African Americans held significant positions of power within the denomination. And UUs never developed forms of worship, liturgy, writings, music, or theology that reflected the black experience. As Morrison-Reed puts it, “Black folks came to UU congregations, not the other way around.” UUs didn’t come to African Americans.

Since the Empowerment Controversy, there have been several attempts to address racial justice in our denomination: Journey Toward Wholeness, Beloved Conversations, the Black Lives Matter worship collective, Black Lives UU. And more recently the proposed 8th principle, seeking to add to the current 7 principles of the UUA to affirm and promote “*journeying toward spiritual wholeness by working to build a diverse multicultural Beloved Community by our actions that accountably dismantle racism and other oppressions in ourselves and our institutions.*”

What I notice is the echoes of the 1969 tensions present in our nation and denomination today. The pandemic has laid bare all the ways that communities of color are disproportionately affected by any calamity, in addition to the everyday challenges. In 2018 racial tensions in the UUA exploded when a white male minister was given a powerful position that a female religious educator of color was seeking. That resulted in a reckoning that continues today. The UUA leadership has aggressively moved to

recruit and place black, indigenous and people of color (BIPOC) in positions of power. If you attend any UU gathering, including GA, you will see BIPOC UUs leading worship, leading workshops, leading the way. We are now seeing funding for BIPOC programs and groups, continued opportunities for BIPOC caucus, and more BIPOC representation in UUA leadership and in the ministry. White UUs are learning to share power.

And the tensions present in 1969 are still here, too. There are some that say the voices calling for racial justice are too separatist, too radical, anti-white. When we speak of defunding the police or reparations, there are some who say that the movement for racial justice must be more reasonable and take place within our current institutions and structures. There are some who say that racial tensions are just not what they come to church for.

This is an example of the complexity of empowerment. When we share our power, or when we demand our power, it can cause conflict, tension and pain. One of the leaders in the Black UU Caucus, Joseph B. Samples says in “The Wilderness Journey” documentary, “You can’t empower people, they have to empower themselves. What people are afraid of is what happens after people empower themselves.”

Yes, indeed. Just notice what we call this chapter in our UU history. Rev. Bill Sinkford, the first black UUA president, writes,

Why, for example, do we use the term "Black Empowerment Controversy"? It seems to make the anguish of that period the fault of the relatively small group of African American Unitarian Universalists, rather than the result of the white Unitarian Universalist encounter with race and racism. The term "White Power Controversy" would be more accurate in many ways and would direct attention to the broad Unitarian Universalist movement, and its need for healing and transformation, rather than to the small, marginalized group of "black" people and their allies.

What if empowerment means that we have to face our own power, our own need for healing and transformation? What if we have to face what is painful and change?

Empowerment is also complex because it can put our principles and values in conflict. One of the tensions in this controversy is between the desire for justice and using the democratic process, which can be slow and can even be used unjustly.

Morrison-Reed writes that “The Rev. John Wolf, white minister of All Souls Unitarian Church of Tulsa [in 1968] told his church: “I am forced to choose between two rights . . . democratic procedure . . . [or] the redress of grievances of an oppressed minority.”

Morrison-Reed asks: “How does one decide whether to support black demands for empowerment and justice, or to respect the democratic process with its vagaries and delays?”

What if empowerment challenges what we hold dear and makes us choose?

I’ve shared before that I believe our most pressing theological question is how we will be together. We are a denomination dominated by whites in a country where there will soon be a non-white majority. That’s why I believe racial justice is our most pressing issue as a community, a denomination and as a nation. It is present in every other justice concern: climate, economic, threats to democracy, reproductive justice, and every other kind of justice we humans seek. It asks us to acknowledge our power and the power of others, to face our fears of not enough, to wrestle with our values and beliefs, and to be open to transformation. This is the spiritual work of justice, and that work is best done in a covenantal faith community.

OUUC’s mission is to empower, so, here are some questions that we might ask ourselves as we embrace our mission:

What are the ways that OUUC operates that might be barriers to participation and limit our inclusion?

How can we share our power?

What is OUUC’s role in racial justice in Olympia? In the UUA? In the nation?

Some other UU congregations have adopted the 8th principle themselves, focusing on racial justice. Should OUUC adopt the 8th principle? What would be asked of us if we did?

We know that there will be some proposal to modify the 7 principles next year. How will OUUC respond when the GA adopts the 8th principle or something like it that declares a commitment to racial justice?

Rev. Natalie Fenimore reminds us that there is a Unitarian Universalism that does not yet exist. We can love the world and love the world we dream of, the dream of beloved community. As long as we are here in this world, in this life, may we work for that dream.

By our actions, may we make it so.