



November 6, 2022

On Accountability

We explore the spiritual theme of accountability.
What does it mean and what could it mean if we focus on calling in instead of calling out?

Olympia Unitarian Universalist Congregation - Rev. Mary Gear

Reading

Our first readings are from activists and authors Mia Birdsong and Adrienne Marie Brown.

Birdsong writes:

We often think of [accountability] as a system of punishment that's meant to keep us from messing up. And if we mess up, we feel ashamed and feel like apologizing. It's a responsibility to others.

Brown adds:

If the only thing keeping us accountable is the external call-out, if the only way we choose to be accountable is when we are caught, then we necessarily have to police each other, constantly watching one another for the latest transgression.Especially in the public sphere, what we are up to is not solidarity, but mass policing.

Reflection on Accountability: Part I

Whether or not we realize it, America is having a national conversation about accountability. In the media, we're told that since the January 6, 2021 insurrection at the nation's capitol, more than 900 people from every one of our 50 states have been charged with crimes. More than 350 people have pled guilty and over 200 sentenced. In August, one participant in the attack was given a sentence of just over 7 years in prison, the longest sentence so far. The Select Committee to Investigate the January 6 Attack on the US Capitol continues its work by issuing a subpoena to a former president, requesting documents and testimony scheduled to begin soon.

When I read the news, I notice my response: feelings of anger, sadness, worry, a desire for punishment for the damage to people and to democracy. Underneath all those feelings is fear. Fear for our future as a nation and the fragility of our democracy.

All of this brings to my awareness that our cultural concept of accountability is punishment. In America, we hold others accountable for their actions with punishment / with the expectation that the punishment will motivate others not to do the same. We look for someone to blame and shame. The blame, shame and punishment come from anger and fear. This way of being / is especially apparent on social media where shaming and blaming others is easy and

fast.

I notice that I have internalized that cultural concept of accountability as punishment, just as I imagine some of you have.

What comes to mind for you when I say “accountability?” How does that land in your body? My shoulders tense, my stomach clenches, my mouth tightens and frowns. I get ready for bad news.

The simplest concept of accountability I’ve found is from the Northwest Network: Accountability is being responsible for your choices and the consequences of your choices.

The full name of this organization is the Northwest Network of Bisexual, Trans, Lesbian, and Gay Survivors of Abuse, formed in 1987 in Seattle by lesbian survivors of intimate partner violence. This is an organization that knows about violence and its impact, and how our current systems of accountability have not worked. They represent a different conversation about accountability happening in communities of color and other communities historically on the margins.

They join activists like Birdsong and Brown, authors of our reading, who represent the voices of young, queer, black communities calling for something different, proclaiming that fear and anger, punishment and retribution have not worked, never worked, won’t ever work. Accountability that punishes and shames does the opposite of what we intend; it provides little incentive to be accountable for anything. They are calling for accountability when no one is watching. They want a response to violence and hurt that doesn’t cause more violence and hurt. They are calling for restoration of relationships and inviting transformation.

Birdsong describes accountability this way:

Accountability, as I mean it, is more about ourselves in the context of the collective. It’s seeing the ways we cause hurt or harm / as actions that indicate we are not living in alignment with values / that recognize our own humanity or the humanity of others. It’s about recognizing when our behavior is out of alignment with our best selves.

Brown adds that we must hone our internal sense of accountability. Not “Let me be careful not to offend” or “Let me do this messed up thing and hope I don’t get caught,” but “Let me act in alignment with my values.”

In this context, accountability means being responsible to ourselves but also responsible for the consequences of our choices to those who are around us.

There’s an assumption that being anti-punishment means not being pro-accountability when the opposite is true. Being anti-punishment means wanting true accountability.

What if accountability wasn’t punishment? What might that be like?

Mia Mingus is a transformative justice and disability justice advocate. Mingus says that we can’t hold another person accountable--we hold ourselves accountable, but we can support someone’s accountability.

Mingus talks about accountability having four parts: self-reflection, apology, repair, and changed behavior.

Self-reflection is noticing our response to what happened, what are we feeling in our bodies and in our hearts? This

self-reflection includes asking why we did what we did: what was the root cause of our action that hurt someone else? Fear? Old wounds? Assumptions? Biases or beliefs? We work through the shame and self-hatred that might arise.

Then we seek to understand the impact of what we did on ourselves and on others, including on our community. As educator Loretta J Ross says, this means shifting our moral compass from hate to love, when we have been hurt and when we have hurt others.

I want to acknowledge that self-reflection for accountability is hard. It requires being with the discomfort of knowing that we hurt someone and facing the reality that we didn't live up to our values. The goal is to not get stuck in guilt, shame, or blame. Shame blocks accountability; it puts up walls for defense, closing our minds and hearts. Shame causes us to shut down and not acknowledge the power we do have. To move past guilt and shame into accountability, we must be able to feel our sense of agency and control. We are the only ones who can change us.

Next in the process of accountability comes apology and repair. This step means asking: What are the actions I can take to make this as right as possible? What is the inner transformation that I need to make? What are the actions I need to take to repair and return to right relationship if possible? We discern what is needed to restore our relationship to our best self. And we ask what is needed to restore relationship with others. Then it's taking those actions, making change within ourselves and reaching out.

And the last step is changing our behavior. What needs to be in place for this to not happen again? What do I need to learn? What will I do if I am in this kind of situation again? And then we practice. We know we will hurt others—it's part of being human. It's what we do in response that matters.

That's what accountability looks like for an individual. As a culture and a community, we can help create support and structures for each of us to hold ourselves accountable. That is the purpose of a faith community: to be in relationship in ways that invite us to explore, grow and transform.

Reading

Our final reading is from Mariame Kaba, an organizer and educator.

When we talk about accountability, we're saying accountability is not just important and necessary, but a gift. It's something that we should embrace. We're not perfect; we're going to make mistakes, and we're going to hurt people. But we should embrace the fact that we have the ability to be more accountable today than we were yesterday.

Reflection on Accountability: Part II

This past month we've been exploring the spiritual theme of covenant. We've learned that Unitarian Universalism is a faith united by covenant not creed. We make agreements about how we will be together in community and we call those covenants. We've started the work of revisiting our congregational covenant on our way to creating a Healthy Congregations Team to help us live into our covenants.

It's not by chance that our November spiritual theme is accountability; covenant and accountability go together. We create covenants as aspirations and intentions of how we want to be, knowing that we are not perfect. The best covenants have a way to return to right relationship, to repair and renew when covenants are broken.

Covenants are a way that we make transparent our expectations of ourselves and each other. There is no secret knowledge or unwritten expectations. How we want to be together is known, shared, and supported. Covenants also help us have a shared idea of what accountability means, setting expectations and intentions about what happens when we mess up, as individuals and as a community.

I believe that, at its best, a faith community helps us identify our values and how we want to live those values in the world. A faith community offers a place where we can practice how we want to live and practice what to do when we mess up. We can experiment with ways to support each other as we hold ourselves accountable. It's how we practice integrity and learn to trust ourselves and each other. Here we can create a culture of covenant, integrity and accountability, because putting our faith in action isn't just out there, it's in here, too. What we create here is what we take out there. How we do our work together is just as important as what we do.

What conditions can we create to help us each hold ourselves accountable?

We can build healthy relationships based in covenant. None of us can do this alone. Because we are connected, none of us should do this work alone. And we can make our expectations and agreements clear and transparent.

We can speak directly and listen deeply.

We can give and receive loving and constructive feedback.

We can give and receive heartfelt apology.

We can set, hear and honor boundaries, our own and those of others.

Last, we can recognize the dignity and humanity of everyone, including ourselves, while recognizing that we are human, and we hurt each other.

Those sound like a covenant to me.

I have the honor of crafting and offering worship with a skilled and thoughtful group of people, my colleagues on staff and volunteers that include the Worship Arts Team. Last month at the Worship Arts Team meeting, I asked them to brainstorm and reflect on the theme of accountability. The sharing was deep and profound, covering ideas of who we are accountable to, how we agree on the standards that we use to hold ourselves accountable, and how we use our gifts to create meaning in the world. I was heartened to hear that no one mentioned punishment except me. Clearly, I have some work to do in this area. I left the meeting filled with hope for our OUUC community and for our world.

All of this may seem a bit abstract, so let me offer an example. In last Sunday's worship service, I served as the celebrant for a service offered by Rev. Summer Albayati and Rev. Carol McKinley on the topic of covenant. When I was introducing Rev. Summer at the start of the service, I made an off-handed comment about the length and complexity of her job title. As I did so, I noticed a twinge. I have learned to pay attention to those twinges, and so later spent some time asking myself what that twinge was about. Then I spoke with a friend about what I discovered and asked if I was making too much of it or off base. I needed some help with perspective.

What I thought about my off-handed comment was that it could be heard as a diminishment of Rev. Summer's talents and contributions. It's all about context. I am a white minister and Rev. Summer is a minister of color in a denomination that has historically marginalized ministers of color. I have inherited power and privilege.

I am a white woman and Rev. Summer is a woman of color. We live and work in a country where white women have historically marginalized women of color in justice work, from demanding the right to vote, to equal pay and recognition of women's contributions. I hold the power of history that Rev. Summer has been denied.

I felt that twinge because I did not live up to my value of acting in ways that are anti-racist. I went through the process of reflection, apology, learning and making changes so that I won't do that again. I have no doubt I will act in ways against my values again—I'm human. I think that is the work of accountability and I am grateful for that gift.

The antidote to shame, blame and punishment is unconditional love. That sounds a lot like universalism to me: no one is outside the circle of love, and everyone is worthy of salvation.

Adrienne Marie Brown reminds us that "Being accountable is how we can come to truly love ourselves and give and receive love from others."

Just as our nation is doing, we're going to have some conversations about accountability, this month and in the months to come. These are not one-time things. My hope and prayer is that we can open our minds and hearts to new ways of being accountable to ourselves, unlearning the ways that are harmful, and re-learning ways that are life-giving and community building. This is the loving, just and healthy world we envision. May we help make it so.