

“Integrating and Integrity”

A talk by Rev. Jim Foti, Assistant Minister
First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis
Sunday, April 14, 2019

<https://firstunitarian.org/assembly-april-14-integrating-and-integrity/>

*The reading was excerpts from [“White People Must Save Themselves from Whiteness,”](#) by Venita Blackburn, published on the website of *The Paris Review*.*

The time had come for Marie to sell her house. Money was tight, and things were just not working out. She was convinced that her new stove was leaking natural gas, but the company that sold it to her refused to help, even after she took them to court. The court case left her with a pile of fines and fees. Her neighbors turned against her during her troubles, and even publicly accused her of using drugs, which she strongly denied. Marie’s house was in a Minneapolis neighborhood close to parks and the Chain of Lakes. But it was not feeling like much of a home. It was time to go.

Marie was ready to sell her house, as she put it, to “the first person willing to take it.” That person turned out to be the Rev. William Malone. Rev. Malone felt a ministerial call to do outreach in a struggling part of downtown Minneapolis. He would have an easy commute from Marie’s house in Linden Hills on the new streetcar line, which had begun service just a few years before. By selling her home, Marie could close a chapter of her life, and Rev. Malone could begin a new one.

But as much as the neighbors didn’t like Marie, they were orders of magnitude less welcoming to Rev. Malone. Marie and her neighbors were white; Rev. Malone was African-American. After hearing about the potential sale, a hundred neighbors held what was called an “indignation meeting.” There were threats to burn down the house. This was 1909, and newspaper headlines placed blame everywhere except on white people: “House sold to a Negro Preacher Is Cause of Race Controversy” and “Rev. W.S. Malone Starts Racial Conflict by Securing Home.” Even some of the black leaders in town, disapproving of Malone’s focus on the poor, sided with the white residents. [Another black minister in the city told his church this:](#) “There is no necessity of our thrusting ourselves where we are obnoxious to others and can never feel at home.” Be “respectable,” stay away, make do – that minister saw these as the best ways for his people to survive. Everything about this story reminds us that racism is the most complex, pervasive, and persistent poison humanity has ever invented.

In the end, Marie couldn’t pay her court fines, and instead of selling her house, she lost it to a sheriff’s foreclosure. The neighbors swooped in to buy it and keep it in white

hands. The neighbors then turned their attention to a black family living just a block away. That family held on for a while, but through harassments and deed restrictions, by 1940, Linden Hills was 100 percent white. [These stories](#) and many more are being collected by the [Mapping Prejudice](#) project based at the University of Minnesota. There's also an excellent new documentary on Twin Cities Public Television called "[Jim Crow of the North](#)," about the history of racism in local housing.

I thought twice before I chose to share a story from the seemingly distant past, because I know it can be easier to minimize white supremacy if we can put it in a box and think of it as taking place either long ago or far away. But I think there's a growing understanding that white supremacy, as a persistent poison, is not something that is just part of the past, nor has it ever been limited to places that are conveniently far way. There's a direct line from the past to the present. Most of the Minneapolis neighborhoods that banned blacks in the first half of the 20th century are still overwhelmingly white today.

Our theme this month here at the First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis is "Wholeness: The practice of repairing what is broken and knowing we are enough." As we heard in our [reading by Professor Venita Blackburn](#), our country has been racially broken since the beginning, "born in cardiac arrest."

Racism and white supremacy have for centuries been extremely useful tools for practicing greed – for taking land from indigenous people or for enslaving human beings, or for helping white homeowners build generational wealth by denying access to others. The illusion of white superiority, of a racial hierarchy, is essential to the success of authoritarianism, which as we've seen in just the past few days is continuing its dangerous march here and abroad. The poison is everywhere, and it keeps the human family from being whole. It keeps each one of us from being fully connected to others. There are yearnings for wholeness across racial divides, divides that are both brutally real and entirely fabricated. And I regularly hear such yearnings from you, the people I serve.

So I want to talk today about what that kind of human wholeness might look like, how we can catch glimpses of it and work toward it. I want to talk about the importance of decentering whiteness on the path toward wholeness – making sure that white people's desires and feelings and perspectives are not at the top of any racial hierarchy. The best thing would be for there to be no hierarchy at all; if wholeness has a shape, it's a circle. And I want to look at how we as a humanist congregational community can learn and move forward and take care of each other in this kind of work, knowing that it will go on well beyond all of our lifetimes.

Before I continue, I want to say a couple of things I've said this from this podium before. I try not to repeat myself, lest I bore my loyal listeners. But we have some folks today who are not usually with us, both in person and online. And some things just bear repeating, because the goings-on of the world sometimes makes us forget what we already know.

One thing I want to say is that guilt is not a reason for white people to focus on racism. The point of learning about Marie and her neighbors is not to stir up feelings of guilt on the part of white people currently living in white neighborhoods. Guilt is backward-looking and highly individualized. Guilt takes the focus off of the marginalized and puts it on those with more power. Guilt is a very poor motivator, and it's no way to build relationships. As a reason-based, fact-based organization, we do embrace that human beings have emotions, and emotions are real and valuable. But feelings of guilt don't really move the world forward. As Professor Blackburn said, "Remember that whiteness is not personal; a white person is not whiteness itself; whiteness is institutional."

I also want to remind us that racism has the power not only to warp human minds, but also to bend the definition of words. In our broken country, the words "integrate" and "integration" might bring to mind images of school buses and white flight. But the Latin roots of "integrate" don't mean "to mix together"; they mean "to make whole." The original antonym of integration is not segregation, but disintegration. Professor Blackburn and many others, myself included, think our country is at serious risk of disintegrating because of the poison of racism.

Jonathan Metzl is the author of ["Dying of Whiteness: How the Politics of Racial Resentment is Killing America's Heartland."](#) This new book describes how racism is so deeply toxic that millions of white voters oppose a health care law that benefits them, a law that in many cases saves their lives. That's because the law was promoted by a black president and because politicians tell them that it helps too many people of color. Racism is such a strong poison that it shortens the lives of even white Americans.

Human beings can be heartbreakingly and even fatally disappointing, which may be one reason that [African-Americans have the highest rate of certainty of a belief in God](#); people have proven too fallible. But religious movements, congregations, and denominations, whether they offer an all-powerful, all-loving God or no god at all, are hardly immune to the problems of white supremacy. Our ancestors here include the Unitarian minister [Theodore Parker](#), who was an ardent, radical, risk-taking abolitionist and who at the very same time believed in the inferiority of African-Americans and [Mexicans](#). And our own [John Dietrich](#), founder of congregational humanism right here at FUS, was progressive for his time on the issue of race but also, like the leaders of

most mainline denominations, was in favor of eugenics. Racism is a pervasive, persistent poison.

[Andre Henry](#) knows this well. Andre is young African-American activist and theologian who lives in Los Angeles. Just last Sunday he published a blog post called "[How White People Ruined Church for Me.](#)" Now, I think a number of you in this room could actually write a blog post with that title. But obviously it's a very different and much more difficult dynamic when it crosses racial lines.

"I was a much better Christian before 2016," Andre writes. He was a theology student, a preacher, and an avid churchgoer. His rude awakening came, he said, after "the lynching of [Philando Castile](#)," which took place thousands of miles away, right here in the Twin Cities. After the killing, Andre spoke online every day to describe his experiences of racism and to call on his fellow Christians to oppose white supremacy. The responses he got shook his faith.

One minister looked him in the eye and said that "racism is not a priority to God." Another told him that the Bible does not offer liberty on this side of eternity, only in heaven. Andre interviewed for a job at a big congregation, and the staff wanted to make sure that he wouldn't talk about racism while he was at work. "We're a large church," one staff member told him, "and the way we stay large is by avoiding conversations that make people uncomfortable."

Andre had dozens of experiences like these, and his response was this: "If your God is apathetic about violence against human bodies, and cares not for the groanings of the poor, if your God is dead to the cries of the needy and oppressed, then I do not know your God, and I'd like to keep it that way." Andre didn't stop being a Christian, but he stopped attending predominantly white churches on Sunday, opting for brunch instead.

My own theological stance is quite different from Andre's, but I admire his sense of purpose and his calls for change. On his website, he's pictured wearing a T-shirt that says "It doesn't have to be this way." As Rev. David and Rev. Kelli can tell you, this is a sentiment I have been known to express. "It doesn't have to be this way." And a core tenet of humanism is that human actions matter.

So imagine this: Imagine that Andre's theological wrestling leads him to stop believing in God altogether, and imagine that he shows up here. He shows up in search of community in our predominantly white, perhaps overwhelmingly white congregation. We of course have people of color among our membership, but we've never reached a

double-digit percentage, even though we're in a city that's nearly 40 percent non-white. The racial separation that began centuries ago far outside these walls still has an impact inside.

Now, I want to pause here and say to the people of color who are listening that this next little part isn't going to be anything you don't already know. You are of course welcome to listen in, but I totally understand if you want to read something on your phone while I talk to the white people. My question for the majority here today is: How ready are you to integrate with integrity? How ready do you think you are to make space and change for wholeness? I offer some questions and points to consider.

First, here's a thought from Sincere Kirabo, an African-American humanist activist who has spoken here at FUS and who left his position at the American Humanist Association last year amid frustration with the racism and slow change he encountered. [Sincere says this](#): "Within the humanist community, diversity seeks to incorporate humanists of 'diverse' [backgrounds] in a way that doesn't disturb the status quo."

This leads to an important question for a white majority to consider: Why is there a yearning for diversity? Is it to assuage the guilt we were talking about earlier? Is it to try to make up for the segregation and separation that are experienced in the rest of daily life? (That's a lot to ask of a congregation, by the way, to make up for what's wrong with the rest of the world.) Or it because there's a genuine interest in different ways of being, in our case ways in different ways of being a humanist?

I can't speak for people of color, but I can tell you that I've never had a visiting person of color come into my office and say, "I'm looking for a congregation where I can help make white people feel better." Unitarian Universalism is rife with stories of people of color getting burned out in majority-white congregations because of the expectation that they will help with the hard work of examining white supremacy and carry the burden of creating true diversity.

Some people of color do welcome such work within the movement; others just want to come to a Sunday service, maybe sing in the choir or attend a potluck, and go on with the rest of life, where there's already plenty of racism to deal with. If we are going to be made whole, it's important to pay attention to what marginalized people really want, and in general, it's a good idea for white people to step back and listen to people of color.

Another step that white people can take is to get educated about microaggressions, something I myself didn't know about until after I started seminary and something I

have certainly stepped in in my life and in my conversations. Some of you have already learned about microaggressions, here or elsewhere, and we're having a workshop today at noon about them. I'll give just a couple of examples: Asking a Latinx person "Where are you from?" Asking someone who's Hmong "So, what do Asians think about this issue?" Touching or commenting on the hair of an African-American. Speaking simplistically and/or paternalistically to a person with a disability. There's an endless list and many web pages about microaggressions, which can be avoided with some human awareness, but they still manage to happen countless times a day.

Another thing to look at, another question to ask (and one I've asked in various settings here): Are you ready to share culture and share power? Because the number of people of color, or even the number of young adults, who will love FUS exactly as it is and stick around is pretty small. Even white young adults I've talked to have an expectation of multiculturalism almost everywhere in their lives, and they don't immediately see that when they walk in the door here.

Here's what Sincere Kirabo has to say about [the idea of inclusion vs. preservation of the status quo](#): "If we are to talk about inclusion, it shouldn't be in a way that conceptualizes inclusivity as obtaining a 'fair share of the pie.' This implies the pie is worth savoring. The purpose of inclusion ought to be to bake a new pie with the inclusion of new ingredients." What he's saying is that wholeness and integration require updates to the recipe, and to the systems that resist inclusion and change.

I want to close by offering you a picture of a hopeful and inspiring scene, from a place that we don't normally associate with hope and inspiration: Washington, D.C. A few weeks ago, I had the privilege of representing FUS at a gathering called the [Humanist Clergy and Organizer Collaboratory](#). I can tell you that spellcheck and auto-correct do not approve of the word "collaboratory." But it truly is the right word -- this was both a collaboration and a laboratory.

This two-day national gathering included ministers from humanist-leaning Unitarian Universalist congregations, and rabbis from nontheistic Jewish congregations, and leaders from the [Ethical Culture](#) movement and from secular organizations like the American Humanist Association and [Camp Quest](#). And from the beginning, whiteness was decentered. Five out of the seven organizers were people of color, as were nine of the approximately 40 attendees. If you have been around FUS for a while, you would have recognized some of the women of color from their speaking engagements here -- [Mandisa Thomas of Black Nonbelievers](#), activist [Diane Burkholder](#) from Kansas City, and [Vanessa Gomez Brake](#) from USC, who spoke at David's installation. Regardless of

background or where we were from, we all were ready to share power and share culture – to create a culture together.

Everything at the collaboratory took place in a circle – large-group learning and sharing, small-group conversations, caucuses, and meals. In these circles, knowledge came from every direction, and from every kind of person. Discussions were simultaneously meaningful and relaxed. As a group, we acknowledged and acted on the importance of women sometimes having their own space, of people of color sometimes having their own space, and so on, and we acknowledged the responsibility of those with more privilege to step back and share the air. We occasionally made mistakes, talked them through, and kept moving forward. We examined the challenges of language, and reflected on how the history of humanism is often told, as if its ideas began solely with educated white men at the turn of the last century.



We made art together out of pipe cleaners and construction paper, and we laughed a lot. There was even talk of writing a fourth [Humanist Manifesto](#), one that would be decolonized, anti-oppressive, and oriented toward action, bringing a new level of wholeness.

White supremacy is a powerful, hard-to-overcome poison, but this gathering was a reminder of how much there is to be gained in the tapestry of a diverse and egalitarian community. It was a glimpse of what might be possible, in humanism and beyond. There is much that is broken in this world, but we are enough.