

Solidarity—*A Compelling Quandary*

By Jaco B. ten Hove, co-minister — Paint Branch UU Church, Adelphi, MD — May 20, 2007

HYMN #379 Ours be the poems of all tongues,
All things of loveliness and worth.
All arts, all ages, and all songs,
One life, one beauty on this earth.

—*Kenneth L. Patton*

RESPONSIVE READING #464:

And then all that has divided us will merge
 And then compassion will be wedded to power
And then softness will come to a world that is harsh and unkind
 And then both men and women will be gentle
And then both women and men will be strong
 And then no person will be subject to another's will
And then all will be rich and free and varied
 And then the greed of some will give way to the needs of many
And then all will share equally in the Earth's abundance
 And then all will care for the sick and the weak and the old
And then all will nourish the young
 And then will cherish life's creatures
And then all will live in harmony with one another and the Earth
 And then everywhere will be called Eden once again.

—*Judy Chicago*

SERMON

I recently attended a very stimulating workshop designed to explore racial justice and spiritual growth. It was for regional ministers and religious educators, and one exercise involved calling out words and phrases that named connections between different groups of people in our American history and culture. The connections were recorded in concentric rings, moving outward, noting inequities first and then larger commonalities. That part of the exercise is a little fuzzy in my memory, but how it ended has stayed with me indelibly.

Finally, as we approached the most inclusive of associations, our facilitator [Paula Cole Jones] asked us to offer descriptions of a world *without* racism or oppression. And here we

had very few meaningful contributions; some vague platitudes and lots of uncomfortable silence. Her profound point—made whenever she leads this exercise, evidently—was that we just do not have much of what she called “a language of solidarity.”

And then I remembered artist and author Judy Chicago’s powerful rendering of a future utopia, which we just read together [above]. This is a concise and relatively specific listing of visionary ideals that are pretty darn inspiring, even if we might feel discouraged by the distance most of those goals seem to be from our present condition. “Compassion wedded to power”—ah, if only...

This list resounds for us, I think, because it begins to offer a language of solidarity. It cuts to the chase, line after line: “No person will be subjected to another’s will”; “the greed of some will give way to the needs of many”; “all will nourish the young.”

Note a word that appears often in this passage: “ALL”—meaning everyone, everywhere—a comprehensive inclusion that would be a significant element to solidarity, I think. Certainly there are momentary solidarities, when disparate issue-oriented groups find common cause and unite, often in a struggle against a specific injustice. But writ large, especially religiously, solidarity points to a universal posture held by and toward everyone, everywhere. It would be the active embodiment of our fundamental unity.

I realized that I *don’t* hear the word “solidarity” very often, and there *isn’t* much of a language that supports this idea, yet it seems like a natural complement to other words we Unitarian Universalists bandy around all the time, echoing the quality of ALL—words like oneness, interdependence, unity, connectedness, balance, equity, universalism, etc.

“Solidarity,” however, seems to imply a level of commitment beyond abstraction or mere concept. One definition I found for the word is “unity or agreement of feeling or action, especially among individuals with a common interest.” *Feeling* and *action* are not just head-trips or lip service; they demand *embodiment*. And perhaps the most universal “common interest” is the cherished—and temporary—breath of life, shared by ALL creatures.

In this sermon I will endeavor to underscore some of the implications of a religious solidarity, at least some that I am humbly beginning to distinguish. I certainly admit that I am on a path here, maybe no farther along than most of you toward the ideal, so I may stumble. I will take some risks and raise aspects of this subject that are not usually part of social conversation, but perhaps should be, if we are to advance our values of oneness and interconnectedness in the woefully materialistic context called America.

So, then: am I in solidarity with all creatures, as my UU values might suggest? Or, to focus on the human sphere, do I accept the truth of Martin Luther King Jr.’s pointed assertion that “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere” and do I live accordingly?

In a word, no. It's one thing to espouse interdependence and solidarity, and quite another to behave as if they were, in fact, part of one's functional reality. I might agree, intellectually and religiously, that all life is interconnected, but then do little to change my cultural attitudes and personal actions to accurately reflect this truth. And that might explain some of the existential tension in my heart of hearts: I do not really live out what I profess to believe. If I and others did, we probably *would* have a language of solidarity.

Well, as my spouse and co-minister Barbara has described [in an sermon earlier this year], what we *do* have is our vibrant imperfection. We are unfinished creatures, always striving toward improvement. Another phrase, liturgically repeated in Judy Chicago's passage is "AND THEN"—meaning *not yet*, still to be accomplished. We are, indeed, a long way from enacting the vision of universal solidarity. Such a pursuit will very likely occupy those of us who wish to embody it for the rest of our lives. And so be it.

But what makes it both doubly hard and equally important is that too many others too easily lump such poetic encouragement together with other statements like the more pragmatic Universal Declaration of Human Rights and dismiss them all as idealistic wishful thinking. That noble document has also endeavored to pioneer a language of solidarity, for almost 60 years ago now, and how far has *it* gotten us, alas?

How often do you find yourselves speaking anything like a language of solidarity? And what happens when you do suggest that, say, compassion should be wedded to power? Or that all should share equally in the Earth's abundance? Or that (as named in Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights) "everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being" of themselves and their family?

If you should happen to give voice to such ambitions, chances are that some nearby so-called "realist" will jump up and shut you down, often derisively, so that you might shy away from ever daring to suggest such unrealistic things again. And gradually, whatever language of solidarity might emerge toward the vision of a universal Common Good instead shrivels up from disuse and we become immobilized in our passive, disconnected materialism.

Alternatively, as suggested by an acronym from the workshop mentioned earlier [via facilitator Paula Cole Jones], we might **STAND** up for

Solidarity, which
Takes
Accountability,
Negating privilege and
Delivering results.

These are words and concepts that may require of us some soul-searching analysis, but they also provide more ways to talk about solidarity and move it off our collective back burner.

Solidarity may not be a priority in our world because while it sounds righteous enough, it quickly becomes so demanding a pursuit that we shrink away from the challenge. “Whoa! I didn’t mean I was willing to actually give up any of my privilege to be in solidarity with others!” And back it goes, to the back burner, where it simmers.

I suspect that a large deterrent to achieving greater solidarity is the existence of privilege, of all sorts, so let’s look at that idea for a few moments. Privilege is usually defined as unearned and often unconscious advantage that can lead to a sense of entitlement. An insidious element in our human community, privilege is difficult to even talk about, let alone address directly. I invite you to follow me in one small attempt here, and then notice how willing you are to discuss it with others afterwards.

Some groups benefit from unearned advantages in our cultural system, meaning that their members acquire what’s been called “an invisible package of assets” [P. McIntosh] without doing anything, per se, to deserve it. These groups might include those with male privilege, white privilege, heterosexual privilege, wealth or class privilege, Christian privilege, able-bodied privilege, etc.

Privilege prevents solidarity, but, as author and educator Peggy McIntosh suggests [in “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack”], there are really two kinds of privilege.

...(W)e need a more finely differentiated taxonomy of privilege, for some varieties are only what one would want for everyone in a just society, and others give license to be ignorant, oblivious, arrogant, and destructive.

One type of privilege would eventually cease to be so when everyone has its benefits, such as the ability to walk into a store and be treated courteously, or at least not suspiciously—an experience I certainly take for granted, even though it often happens mostly just because I have white skin. People of color cannot count on being received this way, even though it is something that everyone should be able to do. It’s generally a white privilege, but one we would want extended to all people.

A second kind of unearned advantage might be called “oblivious privilege,” whereby one participates in damaging inequity without knowing, or without *wanting* to know. An example of this might be how in America white people can usually avoid any personal penalty or stigma when they casually ignore the cultures of people of color who are the planet’s majority. This kind of acceptable myopia is a white privilege *not* to extend to everyone; it is a deficiency that *damages* everyone, even if indirectly or subtly.

One can quibble, of course, with these and other examples. But I think a commitment to solidarity would essentially mean acting to increase the odds for the former (an end to privilege because everyone has it) while minimizing the latter (oblivious privilege).

My own awareness of privilege—white privilege, in particular—took a giant leap when I read the above two examples as part of a much longer list in a famous and very influential article from which the above quote is taken. As a feminist, Peggy McIntosh was scrutinizing male privilege back in the 1980s when she also came to see a parallel mechanism in racial dynamics.

Her widely circulated piece, called “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” is four potent pages that include a fair, if piercing exploration of her own white privilege. Along the way, she explains the power of this aspect of our world in ways that hit home. In fact, privilege is often all about power: who has it and how it is used. For example, McIntosh notes that societal systems can “over empower certain groups,” by conferring dominance simply on the basis of race or sex.

“Conferred dominance” means that those in one group get institutional support to feel and act as if they have more power than others, whether or not they deserve it. The results are that the entire cultural system adjusts accordingly, with some people believing they are entitled to wield power over others, while damaging inequities take root, usually beyond their view. And those wielding the power are frequently quite reluctant to examine their role in systemic injustice, let alone change their behavior, so the whole thing just rolls on forward in time, often rolling over people with the least power, whether or not *they* deserve it.

I have been and still am a part of that machine; I was raised to be a part of it, even among my good (and entirely white) suburban UU congregation. I was like a fish unaware of the water in which it swims. I just inhaled the messages and stepped on the red carpet laid out before me as a tall, white, heterosexual male. I was counter-culture enough to avoid much of the mainstream path, I suppose, but I still relied on advantages I didn’t earn. And I had no concern at all that my advantages might be at the expense of those in other sectors of the culture. I was able to put them “out of sight, out of mind.”

Another way my privilege appeared was to be able to move about the country freely as a young adult, which I did to an extreme. Even before I had a college degree (which I finally got 13 years after high school), I could always pick up some sort of job wherever I wanted to stay. But somehow the places where I lingered were never in very racially diverse areas, hmmm. And I could always fall back on the comfortable suburban family home, as needed. Almost all my friends were just like me, economically and in skin color, so I was accountable to no one from another class or race. And I had no idea what I was missing.

It wasn’t until I was well into my role as parish minister, in my 40s, that I started to personally encounter and examine more deeply the issue of racial justice and my own journey in relation to it. I did this largely through materials and workshops offered by various levels of our Unitarian Universalist sub-culture.

Gradually, I started opening up to another world, as if I were suddenly able to glimpse a different dimension that was intimately near, yet obscured; obviously real, but hard to grasp. With growing awareness I discovered something of a balance point where I could admit my own narrow background and complicities with a racist system without becoming overly defensive or shut down about it. I found I wanted to contribute more to the solution than the problem.

I know I've got a lot still to learn and unlearn. But my religious values now urge me to cultivate enough inner strength to be able to engage productively with people who have different perspectives *without* trying to control the conversation or bolting for the door when it gets uncomfortable for me.

It has been, and still is slow going, but looking back, I think I was buoyed by the important, if rude awakening I got some years earlier, when UU feminists helped me see the ill effects of male privilege. That was both a kick in the head and a foot in the door of my consciousness—and *then* later I could pry it open a bit farther to also glimpse the compelling vision of racial justice.

It is a call to us all, I think. Every one of our seven UU principles can be read to imply our accountability to diversity. And although I was raised UU, accountability to people of color is not a posture I've been taught to value, or even understand. In fact, my predominantly white experience has generally pushed me in the opposite direction. I was taught how to use my privilege to avoid or control situations, without any accountability to diversity.

So I accept that this is an awkward muddle for me, a quandary, an uphill struggle, but one driven by my expanding religious awareness.

I have to agree with those [such as UU colleague and scholar Bill Jones] who portray the present era as a binary situation: there are only two choices for white people and our behavior. Either we intentionally act to change racism or we contribute to its continuation. As much as I might wish to avoid this dilemma, and even have the option of avoiding it, there is no helpful place for neutrality.

For too long, powerful forces in our culture have used a “divide and conquer” strategy to prevent any organizing for change. We are rewarded for inaction, because the more we are immobilized, the better the status quo likes it.

Many white people may be convinced that our best interests lie in protection from what we perceive as threatening aspects of diversity, but not me, especially after eight years of living in very diverse Prince Georges County, which I appreciate. Every location has its pluses and minuses, but now I see how living isolated from human diversity impoverished me.

Very believable demographics point to a relatively near future moment when whites will be in the minority in this country, as we are now in Prince Georges County. Where will our society be by that time? Even more fractured and hopelessly mired in mistrust on the margins? Or actively helping to intentionally pioneer a progressive prosperity for all?

Yes, unlearning racism *is* an uphill trek for people who look like me, but it is also some of our most important evolutionary development, I think. Can we actually learn to live together fairly in unity *and* diversity, or will tribalism rip us apart on an increasingly crowded planet? Will our behavior and consciousness improve the odds for solidarity or separation?

As many of us were reminded recently from viewing that fascinating documentary called “Race: the Power of an Illusion,” we can’t always depend on the assumptions that have guided us to this point. So I believe we are called to rally our best selves to a larger self-interest, especially those of us who are well enough off to not have the wolf at the door. We are called to engage in and benefit from opportunities that help illuminate our deeper awareness, our broader connections, our higher aspirations.

We white people must do this work for our own benefit as well as for the good of the whole, as our UU principles urge. We can unlearn our conditioned responses and contribute to a fair future of innovation and stirring relationships across all manner of diversities. This *is* do-able—not easy, I suppose, but we are adaptable creatures, able to make adjustments when we are motivated. *Are* we motivated?

Are *you* motivated enough to participate in a local strategy to move toward a goal of living out our values of racial justice? Here at Paint Branch, in Adelphi, Prince Georges County, Washington DC metro area, we certainly have a conducive setting, and you may not realize it, but there is an increasing array of resources and methods available to us if we agree to walk further down the path toward racial justice.

Any such journey depends on the white people among us, for we are the ones who, as it has been said [at least by Paula Cole Jones], are called to “repudiate privilege for the sake of community.” I believe we must learn from those ahead of us on this curve. We must find authentic ways to speak a language of solidarity, so that we might be better able to be in significant community with the people of color among us and yet to be among us.

Paint Branch has a reasonable heritage of already addressing this issue, although not recently, but it is one we can build on to create a fertile seedbed of potential change, as a model for our entire culture. There is a palpable growth of energy in this direction among UUs in our metro area, and I sense that we can be part of something larger and rather monumental. The time is ripe.

The next step will be to assemble a strategy team to look over the many intriguing resources that we might employ to forge a path ahead here. On the agenda for our June 3rd Annual Congregational Meeting is the reforming of a Paint Branch Racial Justice Task Force, and if you are interested in serving on this team, please let a trustee know.

The Adult Religious Education team is already considering for next year another round of two recent discussion groups that have been so important to the few who participated: a second showing of that stirring video series, “Race: the Power of an Illusion” and a second group to read and talk about the very formative and stimulating UU book, *Soul Work: Anti-Racist Theologies in Dialogue*.

We urge your prioritization of whatever activities emerge in this direction. As you plan ahead for the fall, save the last Saturday in October, when our regional district of UUs will come together for a large Racial Justice conference in nearby Fairfax, VA. More immediately, those of you who can link to the internet will find helpful inspiration on the site of the UU Allies for Racial Equity (<www.uuallies.org>).

The time is well nigh for a strong effort to strengthen our personal and congregational identities as progressive actors in the historic effort to eliminate racism and pioneer a posture of unity amid diversity, whatever that is going to look like. A language of solidarity awaits. Unitarian Universalism is, I believe, poised to again be on the leading edge of institutional change for the better, and Paint Branchers can be on board in a big way. Please keep your antennae up for opportunities or even help lead us into this Promised Land.

STANDing up for **Solidarity Takes Accountability, Negating privilege and Delivering** results. And much of this is best accomplished in small groups of honest, patient, forthright, loving souls who commit to walk together into an undefined but exciting future that needs our momentum toward wholeness and equity in this time of undue divisiveness.

Ours be the poems of all tongues, so let us speak the value of one life, one beauty on the earth.

And then all that has divided us will merge, and we will fully appreciate the spectrum of splendor in our world.

And then all will live in harmony with each other and the Earth—which is idealistic, to be sure, but show me a better vision to hold in front of us, as we unlearn the ways of separation and learn together how to give life the shape of justice.

Go forth in peace, my friends. BE peace. Let the Spirit of Life guide us onward...