

# Knowing Our Power: Stories of Self, Us, and Now

*A sermon preached for the Second Candidating Week Service  
Paint Branch Unitarian Universalist Church, Adelphi MD*

*By the Reverend Diane Teichert  
May 3, 2009*



As you may have heard me say, this past week in our gatherings, I was drawn to Paint Branch Unitarian Universalist Church because I resonate with your energy around increasing your racial and theological diversity to reflect the surrounding community.

This was articulated in the congregational record posted for ministers in search of a new congregation and also in your search packet, that thick binder of colorful and descriptive materials prepared by the ministerial search

Committee. It was clear in the descriptions of the activities of your DIV (Determined to Inspire Vitality) team and DARTT (Diversity Anti-Racism Transformation Team) (every UU congregation seems to love its acronyms!). But it also was mentioned in the inviting letter written by the Chair of your Board of Trustees, and echoed in the congregational survey results.

I wondered, how far back does this commitment go, how deep are your roots in this work? A brochure included in the packet called "Important Moments in the First 50 Years" showed me that your commitment to racial justice is truly historic for you. In March 1965 you sent a delegation of eleven, your minister and ten lay people, to join the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. on the Freedom March from Selma to Montgomery AL. And you put your money where your mouth and feet were, investing \$10,000 of your building fund in Black Affairs Council bonds.

I wondered, how deep is your commitment now? I read that DARTT had offered six week small group ministry-type opportunities for inter-racial conversation, and during my pre-candidating weekend, I learned enough to feel that at least those who were participating were engaging on a deep level. Also, over more than a year, many congregants have attended DARTT film showings and other events, read their excellent newsletter articles, and in these ways must surely have been deeply touched by this effort.

I also wondered, how broad is your commitment now? Does the congregation endorse the vision of becoming more racially and theologically diverse, or is it just a few people? Knowing that congregations in search must early on in the process participate in a Beyond Categorical Thinking workshop, to increase their open-ness to gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender ministers, ministers of color, and so on, I contacted the UUA staff person who facilitated that workshop, who I know, and I asked him about his experience with you.

First of all, he told me that in all the years he's done that workshop, he had never seen such a large turn-out for it, even with much larger congregations! And, he was impressed by the

mix of people, the level of conversation and the energy. He encouraged me to go for it. And, I did.

As you can tell, I did my best to check out your story.

I'd like to tell you a bit of mine.

I lived my early years in Queens, NY and then grew up in mostly white, mostly middle class suburbs on Long Island. One set of grandparents were German immigrants who arrived in the first decade of the twentieth century; the other were first generation Americans. When I was in third or fourth grade, an elementary school in another part of town was to be re-built. During the year of construction, its students were distributed among the town's other schools.

Among the students who attended my school, were two who made lasting impressions on me. One was Moira. She was white, she had long blond braids, wrapped around her head I recall. I'd not ever seen a peer so overweight. I remember inviting her to my house for lunch because she lived too far away to go home for lunch. I felt strange to be walking home with someone so different from anyone I'd known. The other impressive student was a boy who was dark-skinned and very agile. His name was Hymie. I like to think if he'd been a girl, I would have invited him to my house for lunch, too. But who knows.

I learned that year that different didn't have to be scary.

When I was in sixth grade, so this would be 1963, a black family joined our Presbyterian church. It was a big deal, a first. The father was a teacher at the high school and my parents took an immediate liking to him and his wife and their children, they seemed "like us." We moved away that summer, though. My fourth sibling had been born, we needed more room, and moving was more economical than adding on to our house.

After we moved, to a suburb much like Adelphi in fact, the black family in our former church was the object of a racial hate crime, a cross was burned on their lawn. My mother was just so upset that this had happened to such nice people, who she had even known. Not long thereafter, she went, and took me along, to a demonstration on behalf of open housing in our new community. I felt that day, and never forgot, how good it is to be in solidarity with other people taking public action on behalf of our ideals.

My first anti-racism training was in 1971. I was a sophomore in college, an open-to-experience age. It was led by a white man and a black woman, both black and white students participated, though a majority were white. I'm sure we talked about the way racial stereotypes and prejudice, white privilege and institutionalized racism were/are so engrained in American society, and shared our own experiences.

But the part I remember clearly is a chart they showed us. It had two columns and two rows, so it was a square divided into four cells. At the top of the square, one column was headed Racist and the other Anti-racist. Along the side, one row was labeled Passive and the other Active. The trainer asked us, Do you think a person can be a Passive Anti-racist? Given the personal experiences of prejudice and racism we'd been sharing, knowing its embeddedness in our culture, of course we said "NO" So a big fat X was put in that box. So, then we were asked, "Where are you in your life? Where do you place yourself? There are only

three choices left: Active Racist, Passive Racist, or Active Anti-racist." Obviously, we could see, if you don't want to be racist, you have to be *actively* anti-racist!

Many years and many life choices later, I still believe that passivity is not an option, that change is possible, and hope is for real—"yes, we can!"

This belief led me to turn down my first post-college job offer, to work in a campus counseling center, in favor of community organizing in Baltimore City. It led me from that to organizing office workers, building successfully bi-racial (black and white) chapters of 9to5, the National Association of Working Women in Baltimore and then in Atlanta; and from there to organizing a coalition in a Latino community with high rates of teen pregnancy; and from there to volunteering with black parents in my racially-mixed neighborhood in a close-in suburb of Boston, after race-based violence in the high school, to get the school department to hire faculty of color, in which we succeeded; and to live, for most of my adult life, in racially mixed communities. This belief (among others) led me into ministry, and... it led me to you, here at Paint Branch Unitarian Universalist.

I am looking for a new congregation to love.

This week, I found one!

I saw so much to love here this week. I could easily love your elders, they're so bright-eyed and warm and committed. I loved talking with one about humanism and the after life, and touring the glen with a couple others. I loved the rigor and momentum of DARTT and DIV team, and the enthusiasm of the choir. I loved the reasons you are drawn here—the trees, the people, the music, the people, the people!

I loved the welcome extended by the RE folks—I love that many of you who do not have children in the program teach. I love the art on the walls here, and the warmth of the interior of wood.

I loved talking with people at the potluck yesterday about the neighborhoods you live in, and with one board member on Friday night who wanted to know where I was going to live and if I planned to be a member. Seriously, I even loved your treasurer's reports on the canvass and pledge income year to date. I was honored that a few of you trusted me with your tears.

And I especially loved the small child who took my hand for the scavenger hunt on Friday night, even though he didn't know me, and how we rolled over so many logs and never found a worm! Another young UU looked up at me, as Festive Friday wound down, and said "I hope they vote for you." And then he added, "My father said he would!"

You as a congregation have a rich story, and so do I. In this week, I've been listening to your individual stories and you've been hearing mine and about how I would be as your minister.

The great first century rabbi Hillel asked three questions about our stories. "If I am not for myself, who am I? When I am (only) for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?"

You may have heard on NPR reference to these same three questions, when Bill Moyers interviewed Parker Palmer, the Quaker author and spiritual leader, about the Obama

Campaign's "Camp Obama," in which volunteers learned to be neighborhood organizers. The people were invited to tell three stories. Palmer said,

"I want to call attention to this because I think movements always begin in this very interior place in the human heart where people are asked to look at and share something of their own lives, their own experience.

"And so at Camp Obama, in small groups and over a period of a couple of days, people were invited, first of all, to tell *the story of self*. What are the hurts and hopes that bring you to this occasion, to the possibility that this long-shot candidate might represent your interests and might actually get elected? The story of self.

"The second story, very important, *the story of us*. How do you see your own story relating to the stories of other people you know and to the larger American story that's going on right now? The 'Who am I?' question is important. But the 'Whose am I?' question is equally important. What do you mean when you say 'we'? In this way the story of self doesn't end up in narcissism, but gets connected to the larger fabric of the larger community.

"And then finally they were asked to tell *the story of now* from their point of view. What do you see going on in this moment that makes you think we have a chance to heal some of the hurts and pursue some of the hopes that you've named in those earlier stories?

"Well, there's a lot to be said about that process which then rippled out through concentric circles to gather more and more people in as these folks went back home and asked other people to tell the same stories."

Imagine what could happen if our Unitarian Universalist movement asks these same questions! We can do it right here. You and I, here at Paint Branch, can tell the stories that will help us know who we are, what we want to be together, and how to get there.

We've already begun in fact. I asked you, those who were able to come to the gatherings this week, three questions:

What draws you back to Paint Branch Unitarian Universalist?  
How is your involvement here helping you to become the person you are called to be?  
What is one longing you have for Paint Branch Unitarian Universalist Church?

I asked these questions because, by listening to your answers, you would know that I want to know who you are; and by answering your questions, I would become known to you. This is the beginning of trust. So much is possible if we trust one another.

How do you think Rabbi Hillel would apply his three questions to congregational life?

First I think he would ask: if the congregation is not sufficiently *for* itself, who is it? If we are generous as financial contributors, and maintain and responsibly develop our leadership, organizational structure, property, the quality of our relationships, and our collective spiritual health, the congregation *will* flourish!

Second, he would ask, if a congregation is *only* for itself, who is it? If it reaches out to serve the surrounding community, to share its gifts with others, and to advocate for our UU principles in the wider world, leading the change we want to see, then it has a right to call itself Unitarian Universalist!

Third, Rabbi Hillel asks, if we do not act now, then when? I've heard some of your longings this past week. And, they've resonated with me and I want to move with you in those directions! Together we can take the next steps toward what you are called to become!

This week, one longing I heard is a desire to increasingly reflect the surrounding community which is more racially and economically mixed than your current membership. As I said earlier, I share your longing!

I will do my part, by introducing myself to community and interfaith leaders and speaking out on public issues, including but not limited to equal marriage.

And, I would like to try some old-fashioned door-knocking, partnered with an African-American congregant, in the little neighborhood that adjoins church property, bounded by Cherry Hill and Powder Mill Roads and the highway, for the purpose of telling the residents there about Unitarian Universalism and inviting our neighbors to come to our services. What a joy, in these sprawling suburbs, to be able to walk to worship!

Also, this is a truly great choir. Could we think of the choir as one of our ministries? And look for opportunities for it to perform as a gift to others? As I mentioned to David, where I am serving as minister now, twice a year the choirs and ministers provide an evening of entertainment (music and stories) for disabled veterans living permanently at the nearby VA Hospital. Is there is an institution near here whose residents long to be remembered and would appreciate the universal language of music?

Another longing I heard many times is for more congregants to step forward to help with the administration and maintenance of both the organization and its property. I can help with this. We can do this!

I believe church work should be either fun or spiritual, or both! Let's make every volunteer activity, committee meeting, Buildings and Grounds project, RE teaching, office crew effort, canvass, fundraiser or whatever as much fun as the choir's rehearsals (!) grounded in our UU values, helping to build a sense of community.

We will help the elders pass on their extensive knowledge and the baby-boomers will be ready to receive it, ready to take on the responsibility, bringing in the next generation behind them. We can hire people to do what congregants cannot do because our generous pledges will make that possible.

"The pitcher cries for water to carry, and a person for work that is real." Congregational life provides such rich opportunities for work that is real. It is work that helps us become the people we are called to be. It's work that makes this place what we long for it to be, for our children and their children. It's work that transforms the world around us, brings love and hope to people who are weary or ill, and organizes for justice and the future of the earth.

In this week, I've been listening to your individual stories and you've been hearing more of mine. I sense that there is an aligning of the stars here, a coming together of my story with your web of stories and the story of Paint Branch UU itself so that together we might bring Unitarian Universalism's powerful, historically-rooted message—of reason, tolerance and freedom from our Unitarian side and Universalism's transforming power of love and affirmation of the inherent worth and dignity of every person—out into the broader community in new ways, even as we build a stronger organizational structure and expanded premises, so that we can welcome the people who respond to our great message.

Our—yours and mine—shared vision for this "church mid the clustering trees," as the choir earlier sang, in Walt Whitman's words, is both inviting and liberating. Here in this leafy grove, between the fast-moving highways, we will offer a place of refuge in which the stories of self, of us, and of now may be discovered, told, and—most importantly—heard, evolving over time, shaping anew the next steps forward.

Here in this "church mid the clustering trees" the stories of self, of us and of now, *will* move us forward in a common rhythm, with a shape that satisfies, clean and evident.

Amen. So may it be.

—Rev. Diane Teichert