

We Have Come This Far by Faith
A Talk for Ministry Days
Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association
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When I arrived at Meadville/Lombard Theological School in the fall of 1995, I was not prepared for the racism I would experience from my fellow classmates. I was not prepared for the blatant hostility and mistrust of me by a group of people who were training to lead our faith and would eventually be colleagues. I was told by people in their third- or sixth-year journey into Unitarian Universalism, that I didn't belong in this faith that had been a part of my family for generations. I was called a quota filler—a nigger. I had classmates that would get up and move when I sat down next to them in chapel. I was told that it would be easier if I weren't there. I was maced by a white student who saw me walking behind her as threatening. It is no surprise to me that we have come to this point in our association's History.

At the end of my first year when the students of color attempted to bring in outside help from colleagues, we were told to stop whining—we were “pioneers,” “sacrifices” for the next generation. I don't believe in sacrificial theology, so I almost didn't finish seminary but with the help of Danielle Gladd—one of our amazing cradle Black UUs—and Rev. Abhi and Lalitha Janamanchi, I did graduate. Others were not so lucky.

We have not reached the “promised land,” but there is hope. I think some of you are seeing some of us for the very first time. We aren't all invisible anymore. I'm witnessing some of you listen to the pain and the rage and not turn away, you're not saying we are “misunderstanding” or that we are “overreacting” or even more common, we are “lying (at least not most of you).” Some of you are beginning to acknowledge our stories as part of the larger UU narrative.

Alice Walker wrote, “We are a people. A people don't throw their geniuses away. If they do, it is our duty as witnesses for the future to collect them again for the sake of our children. If necessary, bone by bone.” There are other stories that belong in our narratives. In 1981 The Rev. Dr. Yvonne K. Seon became the first Black woman to receive fellowship and ordination with the Unitarian Universalist Association. When I graduated in 1999, eighteen years later, only seven Black women had followed her. In 2000 there were only 26 Black UU ministers. Today

there are over 110 ministers of color (2017 Minns Lecture, The Rev. Dr. Mark Morrison-Reed).

I must acknowledge that Black women were not the first women of color to be fellowshipped and ordained UU. Rev. Diane Arakawa, the senior minister of the Niantic Community Church, a UCC church in CT, was fellowshipped and ordained in 1978 & 1979. Theirs are stories we should know. We should be able to rattle off their names—as easily as we do Olympia Brown and Cecilia Burleigh, as easily as we do Egbert Ethelred Brown and Joseph Jordon, as easily as we do John Murray, Hosea Ballou, William Ellery Channing, and Ralph Waldo Emerson. We owe a debt of gratitude for these ancestors who taught and continue to teach all of us about resilience, forgiveness, and the hope for transformation.

When I decided to enter the ministry, a well-meaning, now, colleague told me that “Our congregations are not ready for you.” I believe he was speaking the truth as he saw it and what he saw was that no Black woman had ever been called through the regular settlement process to a UU congregation as a senior or sole minister.

In 1999 two of us, Rev. Adele Smith-Penniman and I entered search and were called to congregations as sole ministers. That was 18 years ago and since that time only a little over a dozen women of color and Indigenous women ministers have entered search and been called to UU congregations as senior or sole ministers. Twice that many UU women ministers of color have been called to work with our Theological Schools, our Association, as chaplains, executive directors, and in other community ministry settings. And for the past three months the Rev. Sophia Betancourt has served as our first female president of the UUA.

I was speaking with Rev. Abhi Janamanchi recently about the irony of where some of us ministers and religious professionals of color stand today. We were once the “radical, loud, in-your-face, champions” for racial justice. We organized and protested and pushed for funding. We spoke “truth to power” and were “stars” for the year—until we were no longer willing to be used or no longer usable. In the end we did sacrifice—our physical and emotional health, our sense of belonging, and, in some instances, our faith. And while, I do hope that by our dedication and love, we helped move the Association a little bit closer to the beloved community—I do not want anyone else to pay the same price we did.

And yet, I feel out of place in this conversation about White Supremacy. It’s not that I don’t understand what it means in academia, but I also know what it means to many in the congregation I serve. I know what it means to the outside world. I know what it means to the White Supremacists—the ones who kill people because of their race, their ability, their religion, their gender identity, their sexual orientation. And I feel afraid that saying this will mean I will never belong or worse I will be forced to leave the faith I have stood by my whole life.

I've served two churches since receiving fellowship, one for three years and one for 15 years. I've learned some important things about this work. People will not change without relationship building. Calling your colleagues names, yelling at them, belittling them, which some of us have been doing, will not change any hearts or create greater understanding. We are letting the fear, frustration and anger in our world work its way through us and create more barriers. How do you center what is marginalized without marginalizing that which has been centered? That might not be the right question, but I care about the answer. Our faith calls us to be better than we are being. To meet people where they are; to walk forward with them and stand present when they step back. We are the faith that as Rev. Dr. Mark Morrison-Reed says, "will drag the last unrepentant sinner kicking and screaming into heaven."

The second thing I've learned is that people cannot change without a process of forgiveness. The racism I experience hurts—because I care. I care about how I am treated. I care about belonging. I care about you. Our Universalist Heritage calls on us to be forgiving and expand the understanding of God's grace and redemption to everyone. And yet we show each other none.

And finally, we will not go forward with only one path. I feel that we are being too dogmatic—too orthodox; if you are not using our language, our process, then you are perpetuating White Supremacy or suffering from internalized oppression. I believe there are multiple paths to God, to salvation, to wholeness. However, if I'm wrong and it takes me longer to get to the promised land, I hope you will be there waiting patiently with open arms to welcome me when I arrive. As I will be for you.

Thank you for listening!