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Unitarian Universalist Church of Spokane

Meditation

For our meditation this morning, I want to start by grounding us in our bodies. I will be using words adapted from *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies*, by Resmaa Menakem.

Feel free to squirm around a bit as you settle yourself comfortably into your chair. Close your eyes and take a few deep breaths. [PAUSE]

Imagine you are floating out in space, comfortably held in orbit around the earth. Below you, the planet Earth slowly turns. Watch it for a few seconds.

Now, slowly descend so that you are over North America. Drop down further until you know you are over Eastern Washington, until the Inland Northwest fills your field of vision. Stay directly above it, so that it doesn't move beneath you. (If you are joining us from somewhere else, please adapt this to wherever you are.) [PAUSE]

Keep descending until you're looking down on Spokane. Notice Mount Spokane to the North, the river running through the city. [PAUSE]

Now, continue your descent until you're looking down at the top of the church.

Keep dropping slowly and steadily, through the roof of the church, until you can see your body in detail, as if you're about ten feet above it. Observe your body's posture, any movements it makes, the clothing it's wearing. [PAUSE]

Now, slowly and smoothly, descend the rest of the way, and slip inside your body.

For a few breaths, simply be aware of being in your body. Relax and let the chair support you. [PAUSE]

Notice the sensation of the chair against your back, against your legs and thighs. Spend about a minute feeling yourself back into your body. Notice where there is pain or discomfort, where there is constriction, and where there is relaxation or expansiveness. Pause and be present with each sensation.

[MINUTE]

Open your eyes. Orient yourself by looking around you, including behind you. Return to the here and now. Throughout my sermon I invite you to return to the experience and sensations of your body.

[GONG]

Reading (read by David)

Democracy, by Langston Hughes

Democracy will not come
Today, this year
Nor ever
Through compromise and fear.

I have as much right
As the other fellow has
To stand
On my two feet
And own the land.

I tire so of hearing people say,
Let things take their course.
Tomorrow is another day.
I do not need my freedom when I'm dead.
I cannot live on tomorrow's bread.

Freedom
Is a strong seed
Planted
In a great need.

I live here, too.
I want freedom
Just as you.

Sermon

Last year, one of my friends, a dark-skinned, gender non-conforming, African-American ministry student, attended General Assembly -- our denomination's annual meeting, which will be held in Spokane this year. It was their first time at General Assembly, and they showed up one morning with their credential badge buried in their backpack. In front of the Kansas City convention center, they were stopped by a police officer who asked to see their credentials. As they were on their knees in front of law enforcement, rifling through their bag to find their badge, many UUs walked by but not a single person came to their side to support them.

I start with this story for a few reasons. I'm about to dive into our Unitarian Universalist history, specifically a period in the late 1960s/early 1970s known as the Black Empowerment Controversy. We've come a long way as a denomination since then, but my friend's story reminds us that we're not done yet. I'm not done yet either.

While I was *not* a bystander in that particular incident last year, I'm reminded of a recent experience I had on Amtrak, when Border Control came on board and was giving an African immigrant in my car, who didn't have all his identification on him, a hard time. I was paying attention and consciously bearing witness, but when Border Control disembarked, I didn't connect with the man across the aisle. I didn't let him know that somebody cared, and wanted him here. I didn't offer him any comfort after a traumatic experience, although I easily could have. And so, I put myself in the same boat as everyone who walked past my friend outside of General Assembly last year. Let us keep this recent history in mind as we look back a few decades.

The Unitarian Universalist Association, as we know it today, was formed through a marriage of the American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church of America in 1961. The Empowerment Controversy arose relatively early in the life of the institution, as it was still very much figuring out who and how it was to be in the world. I'm offering you here a very very abridged version of those complicated events. It begins, more or less, in New York City in October, 1967. That summer had seen race riots across the country, and Unitarian Universalist leaders, many of whom had marched with Martin Luther King Jr. in Selma, were struggling to figure out how to respond. The Director of the UUA Department of Social Responsibility organized the Emergency Conference on Unitarian Universalist Response to the Black Rebellion.

Black Unitarian Universalists at the conference broke away from the main group and formed a black caucus that met separately at various points. The initial creation of this caucus left many white UUs at the event shocked, and a number of black UUs torn. Yet most black attendees ended up joining the caucus, where according to UU minister and historian Mark Morrison-Reed, "people began to see themselves as black people in relation to other black people. Examining their relationship to one another, rather than fixating on white people was new to most of them...as they talked, with unusual openness, they tapped into raw emotion hidden behind middle-class reasonableness. Theirs was a search for an authentic identity in place of the futile attempt to be 'carbon copies of white people.'"[1]

The Black Caucus offered its leadership to the Emergency Conference in the form of recommendations, especially to support the development of black organizations within and beyond Unitarian Universalism, in particular through the formal creation and funding of a Black Affairs Council (BAC). The recommendations were somewhat contentious, but most controversial was that the Black Caucus demanded that the recommendations receive an up-or-down vote to be submitted to the UUA Board of Trustees, with no input or amendment from the white conferees. This tactic, it's worth noting, came straight from the playbook of 1967 Ware lecturer and [white] community

[1] Mark Morrison-Reed, *Revisiting the Empowerment Controversy: Black Power and Unitarian Universalism* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2018), 49.

organizer, Saul Alinsky. Alinsky was the founder of the Industrial Areas Foundation, with which the Spokane Alliance is affiliated.

The Black Caucus's recommendations passed, but the UUA Board of Trustees rejected the proposal for BAC funding at their meeting the next month. So the Black UU Caucus brought their funding request to the 1968 General Assembly. They found both allies and opponents along the way, and interestingly some of their strongest resistance came from the patriarchal leadership of one of our most integrated churches - an important and nuanced element of the controversy that unfortunately we don't have time to go into today. Despite resistance, the request for BAC funding passed the 1968 General Assembly, to much celebration, and the Black Affairs Council became the only black-controlled funder in the nation. However, the UUA was in the midst of a financial crisis that most people were totally unaware of, and reduced the amount of funding it had awarded BAC. Additionally, although the General Assembly had approved funding for four years, that was not guaranteed, and so the issue was brought up again at the 1969 General Assembly.

The 1969 GA was also a presidential election for the Association, which would determine our second president. Despite requests from the Black UU Caucus and their white allies that the question of BAC funding be at the front of the agenda, it was placed at the back. Once the General Assembly began, BAC advocates made a motion to change the agenda. Then, in an act of protest, the Black UU Caucus and the Liberal Religious Youth seized control of all the floor mics, enraging many.

Despite the upset this caused, the motion received a majority of votes, yet not the ⅔ needed to pass a change of agenda. The meeting was then adjourned, and the matter reconsidered the next morning, until the delegates voted to move on to the presidential candidate forum. At that point, Black UU Caucus members calmly walked out. [PAUSE]

Rattled by their departure, one white ally minister addressed the Assembly and invited all those who wanted to stand in solidarity to join him in walking out of GA and into a nearby church. About 300, who came to call themselves the "Moral Caucus," joined him in this emotional rending. Eventually the outgoing UUA president and a small delegation were sent to invite first the Moral Caucus, and then the Black UU Caucus members, to return to the Assembly, which they did.

Interestingly, for all the critique from white folks about the Black UU Caucus's tactics, the Caucus's decision to walk-out was pre-planned, calculated, and strategic. They had decided that if they weren't going to be treated with respect, if their concerns weren't prioritized, if Unitarian Universalism didn't offer a community where they could feel seen and whole, then their future wasn't with the UUA. Hard as it was to consider parting with their religious community, if that relationship wasn't going to meet their needs, help them grow and address the problems facing black America, then they

couldn't stay. The white reaction, both from those who walked out and those who stayed, was much more charged and volatile. Many were crying, while others were saying "Good riddance." There were powerful feelings of anger, hate, and despair, along with confusion and shame, in a group of people unprepared to process them, and instead acting out. A few people report shoving in the lines for the microphones; one minister tells the story of a colleague spitting in his face.

In the end, the 1969 General Assembly voted to fund BAC at their requested level, though without the same enthusiasm and mandate of the previous year. A new UUA president was elected, who had to spend his presidency rescuing the association from the financial brink that the previous president had led it to. One aspect of this recovery was again trying to reduce the funding for BAC. Because of tension over funding, BAC sought investments directly from churches and other UU organizations. They also disaffiliated from the UUA and boycotted the 1970 General Assembly, which not surprisingly resulted in an unsuccessful attempt to restore funding. In 1972 BAC was restored to associate status with the UUA, but experienced an internal split in 1973 and by 1979 was no more. Numerous African Americans ended up leaving the denomination, temporarily or permanently, as a result of the trauma they experienced at this time. [PAUSE]

It wasn't all a traumatic loss. BAC provided valuable funding to the wider African American community for a brief time, and thanks to a slate of candidates nominated by BAC in 1969, a record number of African Americans were elected to UUA committees that year, making a considerable and important change to the demographics of representation on the denominational level. The Black Caucus also offered an example for women and the LGBT community to assert their needs for resourcing.

But what might we make of the tragedy? The crises and conflicts of our time are different, but also explosive. How might we allow this history to guide us towards healing and growth, rather than further trauma?

I'm guided here by the writings of Resmaa Menakem, who wrote the meditation we did earlier. He is an African American social worker and somatic therapist who has done a lot of work around how the body experiences trauma and how that plays out in racialized and romantic conflicts. Menakem talks about two kinds of pain: clean pain, and dirty pain. Clean pain he defines as "pain that mends and can build your capacity for growth."[2] It still hurts, but on the other side of that hurt there is healing and growth. Dirty pain he defines as "the pain of avoidance, blame, and denial," which occurs when people respond from their deepest wounds.[3] Menakem argues that white supremacy is continually perpetuated because people are unwilling or unable to accept clean pain

[2] Resmaa Menakem, *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies* (Las Vegas: Central Recovery Press, 2017), 19.
[3] Menakem, *My Grandmother's Hands*, 20.

and instead prolong the pain by avoiding or silencing the issue. As a result, we remain in what he calls the "commonplace cruelty cycle," rather than moving into the "growth cycle." Growth, he says, requires "regulating your emotions and your behavior so that you are firm and clear, but not threatening or violent or hysterical."[4] Menakem offers bodily practices, like the one we did earlier, to help settle our nervous systems in the face of conflict, especially racialized conflict, so that we might better grow through it.

In relationships, Menakem speaks of critical mass, "the place where the pressures and stress are so great that something has to give."[5] This is a scary and uncomfortable yet crucial point where something finally shifts. One person (or group) makes a leap to a place of personal integrity and stands their ground. Sometimes the other partner joins them, and they build a stronger relationship as they grow, together. Sometimes the other partner won't take the leap and leaves, but will eventually face the same kind of problems. And, Menakem warns, "Sometimes they find a way to coax the partner who leaped to come back to the old, unsatisfactory arrangement—one involving great pain but also the comfort of familiarity. If the partner does let themselves get coaxed back, the partnership will have less trust, intimacy, and respect than before—and more anger and anxiety."[6] This, I feel, is what happened in the UUA in 1969.

Conflict, as Menakem emphasizes, is how we get to growth. As the confrontation grew within the denomination, Jeffrey Campbell, a black Universalist minister, recognized the opportunity for growth that it offered. He observed: "A magnificent alchemy is at work here. The quality of confrontation is great. It can be a rebirth of this denomination if rooted in the experience of BAC….Churches do not mature until they face the opportunity before them."[7] Similarly, white UU theologian James Luther Adams said in support of BAC that it "has sensitized this denomination so it can march into a new period of American history."[8] By making demands on the UUA, the Black UU Caucus was rocking the boat, trying to grow into authentic identity as black Unitarian Universalists, and in so doing giving Unitarian Universalism, more broadly speaking, an opportunity to grow up as a denomination. Sadly, we by and large failed to rise to the occasion. I ask, what might we have done differently?, not to reimagine history but to train ourselves for conflicts current and yet to come. How do we, in the words o the hymn the choir sang earlier, "open the window, let the dove fly in?" How do we open our hearts to ourselves and each other, and find a path not just to peace and love but to growth and maturity?

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[4] Resmaa Menakem, *Rock the Boat: How to Use Conflict to Heal and Deepen Your Relationship* (Center City, MN: Hazelden Publishing, 2015), 31.
[5] Menakem, *Rock the Boat*, 7
[6] Menakem, *Rock the Boat*, 8
[7] Quoted in Morrison-Reed, 113.
[8] Quoted in Morrison-Reed, 114.

I imagine myself in that hot and crowded assembly hall in Boston in June 1969. I'm also assuming here that I've done sufficient inner work before this point, that I've really examined how racism flares up in my mind and especially in my body, that I've healed a lot of the ancestral trauma I have inherited as a white person. As tension and hatred rise around me — Mark Morrison-Reed writes that "In that hall it would have been impossible to distinguish racism, classism, and hatred from frustration, shock, and anger"[9] — I first breathe. I take a few slow deep breaths as I ground myself in my body. I bring my awareness to the sensations I am feeling in my body, and try to notice the difference between what is coming from within me and how my body is responding to the energy around me. And then, if I am able to settle my own body, I start to hum.

We're all pretty calm here this morning, I think, but let's try this. Breathe with me. Inhale. Exhale. Inhale. Exhale. Now find a note, any note, and let's all hum.

Hmmmmmmm
Change your note, let's play around here
How do we feel now?

In his discussion of racialized trauma, Resmaa Menakem devotes a fair amount of time to *collective* healing. He discusses techniques for not just settling one's own body but also for harmonizing with the bodies around you. The meditation we did earlier was one way of settling our individual bodies. Humming together is one way of harmonizing with the bodies around us, as is the singing we do together. A settled body encourages the bodies around it to settle; an unsettled body does the opposite. Menakem writes: "When, over time, enough bodies heal from historical, intergenerational, and personal trauma and learn to harmonize, that harmony can turn into a culture of resilience and flow."[10]

As one person calmly humming amidst a crowd of 1500, could I have possibly made a difference? Maybe not. But what if it wasn't just me who started humming in the hall? What if I came from a congregation that was deeply engaged in doing personal and collective healing work around racism? What if our white delegates were trained in de-escalation around white fragility, in recognizing and settling their own nervous system responses when confronted about power and privileges and racism, and in helping other white folks settle too? What if the white members of my congregation felt safe enough in our community to do the vulnerable work of recognizing how our bodies respond when our authority is threatened, or when we are around a lot of unfamiliar black people, especially those who seem to have an agenda different from our own? What if we white folks recognized the symptoms of white fragility and guilt not as

[9] Morrison-Reed, 163.
[10] Menakem, *My Grandmother's Hands*, 182.

evidence of something inherently wrong with us but as a trauma response - in particular to the moral injury of how we have supported systems that have harmed our African American siblings - and we worked collectively to identify and heal that trauma? What if we were willing to actually feel the clean pain, stop the cycle of cruelty, and grow?

This isn't a cognitive process, but a physical and emotional one. And it's not even all about race, per se. African American UU minister and theologian Rev. Dr. Thandeka has observed that racist acts *initially* don't come from racist motivation; they are usually motivated by feelings of emotional defeat rather than racial superiority.[11] Thus, focusing only on racial issues is to stay only skin deep on the soul wounds that need to be healed - but racial issues can also point us to those soul wounds. As one white UU activist in early 1969 realized: "Black people have in many ways pointed up our spiritual emptiness, and we've begun to see this inward abyss. That white adults can't live vicariously from black souls any more than from youth spirit, so we'd better find our own. That our chief job, then, is to get back in touch with what may prove real and moving in us."[12]

This isn't easy work. It's hard and it hurts. It's scary and overwhelming at times. As a white person it means taking on the clean pain of my ancestral karma and my present life, accepting the difficult and painful conversations and confrontations rather than avoiding them. The truth is, I could probably still avoid most of this if I tried, passing the responsibility on to future generations. But among the many reasons I am committed to this work is the friend I mentioned earlier. I have learned so much from this individual in classes and conversations, and I am excited to see where their ministry goes. I hope and pray that they can continue to find a home in Unitarian Universalism. And I know that, as a white woman raised in this tradition, I have a role to play in creating a space where my colleagues of color feel welcome and don't have to fight for their place at the table.

I offer my words today as a challenge, to myself and to all of you. May the confrontation over white supremacy allow us, whatever our race, to face ourselves, stand in our integrity, settle our nervous systems, and heal present and ancestral wounds. May it allow us to become more fully ourselves, as we acknowledge our trauma and seek to liberate our souls. May Unitarian Universalism today continue towards growth, allowing the space for all who are drawn to our theology to show up in the fullness of their humanity.

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[11] Thandeka, "Got Race? The Most Successful Ad Campaign in America," Lecture, First Parish UU, Portland, ME, October 26, 2018.

[12] Kim Beach, quoted in Morrison-Reed, 145.