

More Joy, Less Shame

A sermon offered by Rev. Kathleen Rolenz

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Unity Church-Unitarian

The shame spiral started with the tearing down of the Black Lives Matter banner. I was serving as an interim minister at the time, at the height of the time when Unitarian Universalist Churches were putting up banners and promptly getting them torn down. Such was the case with this congregation. I think by the time I arrived they had already replaced six banners. I suggested that we put up a rudimentary security camera to catch the possible perpetrators and sure enough, one Friday night, our camera caught a group of young, white men, hanging around the BLM sign. One of them, seemingly on a dare, tore the sign down. We discovered that this young white man was a senior at the high school located just next door to the church. We now had his name and his family's contact information. It was time for a reckoning.

I'm going to finish this story later in the sermon, but there's some things I need to say first about the context of this sermon on this particular Sunday. To begin with, I want to acknowledge that today's sermon will, inevitably, be heard differently by the people of color in this room than the white people. Because I'm white, I can't address the topic of shame and Unitarian Universalists anti-racist and anti-oppressive work without talking primarily about white guilt and shame. On the one hand, it is problematic to center white people's guilt and shame about anti racism work, because guilt and shame has been used as a convenient excuse not to do the work. At the same time, it's real and it exists both within and among our anti-racism commitments and goes beyond into an existential feeling that we – as human beings – are never good enough. It taints our ability to live fully into our humanness and to fully embody and embrace joy. So, for the people of color in this room and listening online, know that I hear you

and see you and hope that you will find inspiration in this sermon even though I am aware it is being offered within a context of a white-centered conversation.

There's something else that's been on my mind as I prepared this sermon. Beginning Wednesday this week, our denomination will enter four days of what's called "General Assembly" or GA for short. It's a time when thousands of Unitarian Universalists from all over the country – and in some cases, the world – gather in person and on-line for collective deliberation about important issues affecting our faith, our congregations, and our world. It is an important place for our small denomination to feel strength in our collective numbers, to be reminded of our highest values, to democratically elect leaders and to consider the issues that have been raised from within congregations. It's a joyful gathering! And, regularly GA has been a time when we collectively look at our own efforts to be the anti-racist, anti-oppressive denomination we strive to be. In that sense, it has often become a cauldron of conflict, in which we call each other out on our language, on our blind spots, and on the places at which we fail to live up to our own aspirations. Various General Assemblies have been important milestones in which the predominant white community within our denomination has realized that we have missed the mark. We have unthinkingly used ableist language; we have had white members assume that black youth were convention staff, we have had debates on the floor of General Assembly which revealed a deep culture of white supremacy. And often, amidst the joy of connecting with old friends and making new ones, there has been a cloud that has descended over the Assembly, a cloud of shame and blame that is as present and as toxic as the smoke that settled in over the Twin Cities most recently.

When General Assembly comes around, I often remember some of the years when we've had those conflicts, and I wonder what might be the trigger – or maybe I should say – the

opportunity – to engage in some new understandings about what is required of us if we are to become the beloved community we say we want to become. At the same time as I have those memories of struggle, I am filled with a different feeling – a feeling based on relationships built, of new insights reached, of coalitions formed, of new possibilities engaged. And what I feel then as I look ahead to General Assembly is joy at what we can do together as Unitarian Universalists. In one of our hymns, we sing William Blake’s words about joy and woe being woven fine – but I when I look back at all we’ve been through in seeking to fulfill our anti-racist anti-oppression commitments over all the years I have been a minister, I’d have to say that joy and shame are woven fine too.

So let’s talk about shame for a while, especially as it relates to white anti-racist engagement. What happens when we feel shame? Probably the most articulate, persuasive and powerful writer about shame is sociologist Dr. Brene Brown. Her work on shame has struck a chord, particularly with white women. Brown has described the amount of shame which people were carrying as “an epidemic.” Brown defines shame as “the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging, (as) something we’ve experienced, done or failed to do makes us unworthy of connection..” Guilt, however, is something different than shame. Brown writes “There is a profound difference between shame and guilt. Guilt is adaptive and helpful – it’s holding something we’ve done or failed to do up against our values and feeling psychological discomfort.” Brene Brown describes it in this way “Guilt is “I did something bad” . Shame is “I am bad.” “Guilt says: “I’m sorry, I made a mistake. Shame says “I’m sorry. I AM a mistake.”

So guilt and shame are quite different. There are behaviors we exhibit for which we should feel guilty about. When we cheat someone, are cruel or unkind, when we use our

privilege to get an unfair advantage over another – those are behaviors that should ignite a moral nerve inside of us – one that says “wow, I would not have liked that done to ME.” But shame doesn’t course correct or compel people to make better choices. Today’s Worship Associate, Peggy Lin, has a story to tell about her own experience with shame. Peggy, would you tell us that story now?

Peggy Lin speaks: *I was at a meeting, facilitated by Team Dynamics, sitting at a table with a group of fellow church members that I truly respected, admired, and felt connected to. The very skilled Team Dynamics facilitator asked a question that was something like: What would you do if a member of the church staff who is a person of color encountered an issue or resistance in the church community that you believe was related to their race? We were asked to turn to others at our table and discuss how we would respond to this question.*

I listened to the responses of others in the group, and then, when it came my turn to speak, I said something like: “I would try to use my contacts and my status as a long-term member of the church to rally support for that staff member.” With swift ferocity, one of the members of our table group said loudly to the full group: “Well, that just sounds like you are being a white savior.”

I was surprised. I was embarrassed. I was defensive. I was also unfortunately charged with being the table’s “reporter” who would tell the large group what our table had discussed. So, cheeks blazing, I made something up quickly to report out, stumbled over my words, and retreated in shame to sit silently for the rest of the session.

I have thought a LOT about that night and that exchange. In that moment, I did not know if I was exhibiting the features of a white savior; five plus years later, I am inclined to believe I was. But what a waste - it took me so long to work through that shame and embarrassment to

examine my own behavior. I wish the person who had spoken up had done it in a different way - either one on one, or with a spirit of curiosity instead of the posture of attack.

Katheen continues. In thinking about Peggy's story, I realized there were two roles that I've both witnessed and participated in myself. One of them is being the "shamer"- the person who calls out another person; and I have also been the "shamed", the recipient of being called out. So, let's look at the experience of the shamed first.

My hunch is that many of us, at one time or another, have had a similar experience, of being called out, usually in front of a group of people, for being ignorant of the ever-changing landscape of language or the most current understanding of anti-racist practices. That response, in general, makes white people want to shut down. To give up. To say "I can't get it right, so why try?" That's where the work of Tina Alvarado, a therapist from Seattle is helpful. Alvarado wrote an article which directly addresses the role of shame and anti-racist work. Alvarado references Brene Brown's work in her article, specifically the fact that most of us have what Brown calls "low shame resilience." She writes: "Low shame resilience means having a hard time moving through experiences of shame. The function of shame is to tell us when we have done something that violates our own values or our community's values. However, shame becomes a problem when it starts to control us. We can easily get fixated on how to avoid it. This fixation can send us into a shame spiral or keep us stuck."¹

In Peggy's case, the shamer's comment eventually did compel her to examine her own response, but first, she had to work through her own issues of feeling judged by another person. There was no curiosity expressed – or invitation for a deeper conversation. I can't speak of the shamer's motivation. What I can say is that when I have been guilty of the same kind of

¹ <https://seattleanxiety.com/blog/2020/6/13/seattle-therapist-discusses-shame-amp-anti-racism>

emotional reaction, it was because I wanted to assert my moral superiority, my wokeness, how much more self-aware I am than the other. And that has never - ever – been helpful in undermining white supremacy, superiority or privilege. If our intention is for mutual liberation, it has to be done in the spirit of support – of encouragement – of leading into that liberation with love.

But – is there a role for shame in our anti-racism work? I would say “no,” but there is absolutely a role for truth-telling. The recipient of the truth-telling may feel shame – or they may not. But HOW you speak your truth is as important as WHAT you say. So, for example, if someone drops the “n” word in my presence or makes a joke about GLBTQAI persons, or tells a misogynistic story, -- that cannot and should not be left unchallenged. Telling someone that you find the joke or story offensive – and why – is one thing. Telling the person that THEY are offensive – that THEY are racist, homophobic or misogynistic will likely not provide a possibility for a deeper exploration about the real matter at hand – the racism, sexism, homo or transphobia that was expressed. Each encounter, done with the hope of illuminating a deeper truth, may not avoid shame, but it may open avenues of conversation that were previously not possible.

When white people are called out, often our immediate reaction is shame. That’s the low shame resilience that Brene Brown talks about! There are some ways we deal with shame experiences that are never helpful. Sometimes we don’t want to feel shame so we’ll turn it into anger – a much preferable emotion because you can convince yourself that it’s the other person’s fault and not yours. Another response is retreating into silence. Shame becomes a reinforcer of Whiteness because if we stay silent white people don’t have to do anything to engage racism.

Both shame and racism thrive in silence. And silence, as Alvarado points out, serves White Supremacy culture because it means the system does not have to change.

What if, I wonder, if Peggy had been able to turn to the person who called her a white savior and say “Wow. I’m really uncomfortable with what you just said, but I’m curious – could you say more about your own experience of being a white savior?” That might have forced a more honest conversation between the shamer and the shamed. Because if the shamer is honest, they probably have played the role of white savior before. Takes one to know one as the saying goes, or as your former minister, Rev. Rob Eller Isaacs would often say “I am that too.” There is nothing that you have said or done that I haven’t said or done or thought as well. It’s the reality of our human-ness.

At the beginning of this sermon, (which now feels like a long time ago!) I told you the story of my church’s banner being torn down by a young, white, high school kid, acting on a dare from his buddies on a Friday night. I want to finish that story now because it’s important to my own recent experiences of shame transforming into joy. My colleague and co-minister and I had determined that meeting with this young man and his parents would be the right thing to do and would be enough. We decided that we would not press charges against him because we listened to his parents, who were remorseful but suggested, that any charge brought against him might damage his ability to get into the college of his choice because of a charge of vandalism.

When they heard about our approach, representatives of people of color in the congregation were furious at us. They tried to impress upon us that this act of vandalism was not just about this kid, it was an affront to the church’s values and to the wider community, particularly the black community of the church and of the town, who felt betrayed by our decision not to prosecute. I was ashamed of what my first instincts as a senior minister had been.

The shame spiral just got deeper and deeper, as my colleague and I responded by pulling rank (what's also called power hoarding in the characteristics of white supremacy culture) and told our members that this was a done deal and it was our decision to make. Accusations of centering the needs of this young white man and of not listening to the voices of color in the congregation made me defensive and further entrenched in my own position. I didn't see it.

It wasn't until two members of the congregation, one, a long-time black member and another an older white woman, who sat me down with a piece of paper. On it, he drew a circle and put a dot in the center. What if, she said, that dot represented the people of color in this congregation instead of the young white man? The love and the care they had for me was palpable in that moment. Although I was ashamed and defensive, their love cut through all of that. I looked into their faces – so caring – and a hardness that I had been harboring something broke inside me. These two wise members were teaching me – their minister – with great tenderness. I shall always be grateful to them for loving and forgiving me. And then, the shame went away. It didn't solve the problem. We all had a lot more conversation and work to do together to find justice for all involved. But when all was said and done, that incident was looked back upon by all concerned as an important turning point for trust in my ministry. My last Sunday with that congregation was one filled with celebration, laughter and joy – and I was so grateful that this joy was shared with the people of color in the congregation who had called me to account.

Shame is a thief of joy. Shame shuts us down, instead of opening us up to wonder, curiosity and an awareness of the ever-increasing complexity of this work. In Brene Brown's book "Daring Greatly," she describes something called "foreboding joy," which is linked to our feelings of inadequacies and imperfection. She writes "we're afraid that the feeling of joy won't

last or that there won't be enough or that the transition to disappointment (or whatever is in store for us next) will be too difficult. We've learned that giving into joy is, at best, setting ourselves up for disappointment and, at worst, inviting disaster. And we struggle with the worthiness issue. Do we deserve joy, given our inadequacies and imperfections?"

And so, we find ourselves shrinking back from moments of joy. For white people, it's often related to our perceived inadequacies and imperfections." In an essay entitled "This Joy I Have" by Austin Channing Brown, Brown writes this "I have discovered a far more despicable agent of foreboding joy in the form of racism. For Black people, and other people of color, there is a level of apprehension that isn't wrought from an uneasy feeling of undeservedness but from the knowledge that racism is the silent stalker always willing to wring joy from our lives. This level of foreboding is not in our heads, it's in the evidence of our experience. What do you do, Austin asks, "when you are all too aware that blackness makes you uniquely vulnerable in this world?" She cites a song that we sang here many months ago, by the gospel music artist Shirley Caesar, "this joy I have, the world didn't give it to me. The world didn't give it and the world can't take it away..." Brown writes: "Foreboding joy...lives paradoxically at the intersection of joy and pain, realistically acknowledging that pain may come, but that pain cannot permanently drown out joy. Our community has learned that even the darkest depths of human evil cannot snuff out our experience of joy – of laughter and love, of good food and good conversation, of family legacy and hope for the future, of creative endeavor and the pursuit of justice. The joy of Blackness persists." ²

² Essay by Brown, Austin Channing. "This Joy I Have." From the Collection of Essays: *You are your best thing: Vulnerability, Shame Resilience and the Black Experience*. Brown, Brene & Burke, Tarana. Random House | Penguin Random House LLC, New York, 2021.

Tomorrow is Juneteenth – an important day of liberation and celebration of black Americans – and for all Americans. For all Americans, but especially black Americans, may you take pride in knowing how your ancestors survived, thrived and find, as Austin said in Blackness. From the shame of living in a country that perpetuated the crime of slavery for over 400 years, may we take that shame and use it as motivation to persist. From the shame we may feel about whiteness as an instrument of oppression, may we transmute that shame into a daily and joyful practice of countering whiteness in all its forms. It is indeed joyful work. On the other side of shame we may experience, we will find this joy which is our birthright – this joy which we have – the world didn't give it – and the world can't take it away. May it be so! Amen!