

Exposure and Connection

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Last week a staff member told me she was excited to see more young adults sitting together during services. *Oh, good*, I thought to myself. *I don't have to help build relationships between young adults and the rest of the congregation. We're already doing enough!*

That relief lasted until Thursday's Young Adult Group when the conversation turned to the first of our new ends statements: to create a multicultural spiritual home built on authentic relationships.

If you were attending a service, especially as a white person, and you were sitting next to a person of color, how would you respond? A lot of "should" conversation followed. Should you go out of your way to be extra friendly? Should you bring up race as it related to the sermon or ask about how being a person of color has affected their experience at Unity? Should you only name race if you've spoken a few times before? Is that authentic? What is authentic? When you're thinking so hard about this, how can you be sincere?

Our conversation kept moving towards figuring out a single, best way to respond. Perhaps we should name race because white people need to stop tiptoeing around the topic of race. Or maybe we shouldn't bring race up just to bring it up because that could be othering, invasive, or inauthentic. Finally, someone blurted out what was going through my own head: "It sounds like I can only make a mistake!"

Indeed, what if white folks can only make mistakes while working towards dismantling white supremacy? If we accept that we will make mistakes, the question that then emerges is,

"how do we respond to making a mistake?" Perhaps what is important is not whether we make a mistake, but the act of sincerely trying to connect, being receptive to what transpires, and taking responsibility without getting defensive. Then to learn from the experience and try again.

Still, I find myself asking, *What should I do?* I really don't want to make a mistake. That's partly because I don't want to hurt someone, but more out of fear of exposing myself to be an ignorant white person. I grew up in a very white suburb, have never had

a close friend who is a person of color, and am not a part of any groups that help white people dismantle their own biases. It feels safer to hide these things. I feel shame admitting this. So often I tell myself the easy, comfortable stories: that I'm helping build community within the group that is available to me, that I'm just waiting for a more opportune moment to connect, that I'm just watching and learning from others right now. It's harder to admit the truth: that I'm choosing inaction and that part of me balks at fully stepping into the work of unlearning white supremacy, because this work requires me to be exposed and face the shame that surfaces. Yet, I don't want to look back on my life and realize I was a roadblock to beloved community, that I valued falsely preserving my ego more than the safety and dignity of others, that I thought it more worthwhile to remain "comfortable" than to risk something for a deep and lasting connection.

Sitting in a back pew together does not mean the young adult group has entered into a rich, interdependent relationship with the congregation nor that it is pulling its weight toward leaning into the first ends statement. It is a sign that the group is a place where we find belonging, which is worth celebrating. But, in keeping to our insular group, we risk allowing our bonds to become barriers to welcoming and sincerely connecting with others. We risk allowing our fear of upsetting someone or exposing our ignorance to keep us from working to live out our values.

May we lean into our discomfort. May we be exposed. May that exposure bring us closer to the holy and all of us closer to the beloved community.

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