

## On the Margins

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This year Transgender Day of Remembrance, November 20 and Thanksgiving, November 26 are within one week of each other. I can only imagine what it must be like to be both transgender and indigenous and have these two dates so close together. From my view, it is a full seven days of gruesome and painful mourning.

Most of us in this community, myself included, do not identify as either of these social locations. For many of us we hear the stories, we know a small handful or one person and we feel the pain of how others are marginalized and we accept that as our place.

But I have to ask, is that really fair? What right has anyone to label someone else as “marginal” taking on the language and the posture of the oppressor. We commit ourselves to fighting for people to be “less marginalized” but doesn’t that perspective reinforce the marginalization?

I don’t know...it just leaves a bad taste in my mouth to talk like that.

Several years ago, I met a group of important black transgender activists who were part of a panel at the National Black Justice Coalition, a national gathering for black LGBTQ leaders. I was grateful to have been invited into a room where as a gay cisgender man, I was in the minority. The conversation and discussion was rich and enlightening and a reminder to me that we are only ever marginal in someone else’s limited idea of who we are. In the group was Monica Roberts, the author of TransGriot a brilliant blog that has been a source and a resource for me since. More importantly, Monica’s blog has been a moment for others to remember that they are not defined by the marginalization that is applied to them. She said in an interview in Out Magazine in 2019

*“My blog is of vital importance, not just to me but to this entire community,...I can’t tell you how many times I’ve run into some trans millennial who tells me that my blog inspired them to do this or inspired them to do that. At least five people have told me that reading my blog posts is what kept them from committing*

*suicide. So every time I sit down and start writing a post, I keep that in mind — that what I'm writing may inspire someone who does not want to persevere."*

I was heartbroken to learn of Monica's sudden death this fall due to a pulmonary embolism. The outpouring of love and appreciation for her work and advocacy locally in Houston and across the nation is real. There was nothing marginal about Monica in the lives of those who loved and knew her, myself included. She was brilliant. She was central.

As we approach Thanksgiving, we have been invited to reframe and reconsider this holiday. The UUA has created an opportunity for us to engage in a "teach in" that is Indigenous led and it is something that we all should find a way to participate in. Yet, I worry that we approach this with the same perspective that we approach Transgender Day of Remembrance. This national holiday of "Thanksgiving" is based on myths that come from our Unitarian Universalist history book. The legend of the beneficent and grateful Pilgrims who "befriended" the Indians and then birthed American Democracy is a lie. But what is worse than perpetuating an ill informed legacy is to continually put Native and Indigenous people in the context of oppression. To only regard these people in relationship to how we see them as being "marginalized."

Let me offer a personal example of what I'm talking about. I am black. I talk a lot about being black. But then it is the world I am coming from and I recognize that my world, in the context of the American race project, will always look different to someone who is not black because of that. I mention my blackness as a tool of translation so that it is clear as to where I am coming from. I never talk about my blackness to have someone who is not black understand how I am "marginalized." Good God, I don't wake up in the morning, look in the mirror and ask myself, "how's the marginalization today?" From inside my world, I am not marginalized. This is one reason that makes any discrimination I face so frustrating...I don't get it because I'm not an 'outgroup' to myself. What is more, I make and find plenty of places where I'm perfectly well centered. What is even more, I'm happy to be in spaces where I trade that place of centrality freely with others, most notably, women and gender non-conforming folks. As

human beings, we have a much, much bigger capacity to receive each other than we put into practice.

Transgender Day of Remembrance and the National Day of Mourning are not moments for those of us who are not transgender or native and indigenous to say, “oh, poor them.” What they are are moments for us to be very aware that transgender people are central; that native and indigenous people are central; that marginalization only travels as far as we let it in our words and in our actions and in our relationships.

But what of the systems that cause marginalization in our society? We can't blame everything on systems. Systems are created by people. The power to change systemic marginalization exists within us...the people. The change that needs to happen first is a change in how we regard others in this world. If we only experience people through the ways in which the system marginalizes them, then we've lost. Our job is to teach this to the rest of the world.

As you well know by this point, I have some pretty high aspirations for the human race. And my ideas about how we reframe marginalization is part of that. I'm sure you're asking, well “how do I do this?” And I'm sure you're already poised to hear me when I say, I can't help you figure that out. And its true. This shift that I'm talking about is something that has to come from within your personal world and world view. I do believe, however that our Unitarian Universalist values and the aspirations of what Unitarian Universalism is moving toward can be part of the roadmap.

Also, I think part of the challenge may come from not knowing how to hold your part of the system that creates marginalization. What does it mean to be a multiple property owner in a city with a homeless problem? What does it mean to be white in the context of racial reckoning with anti-blackness? What does it mean to be Unitarian Universalist and facing the real history of native and indigenous people? What does it mean to be cisgender, heterosexual and have never actually known anyone who is transgender? Again, I can't answer those questions. But I can tell you about one thing I have to hold that may give you a starting point.

I am black and I'm gay and I have an invisible disability (50% hearing). One could regard me exclusively through these "marginalizations." But I also have one of the most over valued privileges on the planet: I am male identified from birth. This privilege is a constant growing and learning edge for me. Part of what I've had to learn is that it is my invisible knapsack like the one described by feminist Peggy McIntosh that carries white privilege. I have to carry maleness and masculinity with great care wherever I go. Because of what our society is, there are times when I'm asked and even required to use some of the tools inside it against my will, and there are times when I'm asked to leave it outside completely. The important thing is that I understand that although it may be invisible to me, for others the knapsack is flashing neon and always in plain view. My responsibility is to recognize this as part of who I am to others and to be willing to listen when I'm told that the knapsack or its contents is causing problems. I don't get any points for anticipating this or telling everyone "I know I've got this whole male privilege knapsack thing...see...I'm safe!" That's not how it works. My responsibility is to be committed to my ongoing internal work so that my external way of navigating the world isn't pulled off course by the weight of male privilege that I didn't earn or create. My other responsibility is to always listen when the knapsack is brought to my attention...no matter how uncomfortable or frustrating it may be for me.

As you navigate this week, where families are being asked to gather in different ways if they are able to gather at all I would invite you to consider what it might mean to emerge from this "holiday" transformed. This Thursday will be a day of mourning for people in our community who are very much still alive and vital. This past Friday was a day of mourning for transgender people who may not be close in your own life, but who represent parents, children, spouses, friends and loved ones who were central in their lives. We must not enter these sacred times of mourning by starting with them at the margins. If we are who we say we are, we must enter these times (when we are invited) with a sense of reverence and grace recognizing that no one is ever marginal. We are all in the center together.

May it be so.