

Love the Body You Are In

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When you hear words like “love the body you are in”, you might think I’m going to talk about going to the gym. Sometimes people see or hear the word “body” and they assume that it involves a tank top and leg warmers and some kind of workout. That was definitely me in the 90s but...not today.

“Critical race theory in education...it’s a racist curriculum used to teach children that somehow their white skin is not equal to black skin and other things in education.” (Marjorie Taylor Greene)

These are words from the mouth of Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-GA) during her first Oversight Committee hearing while questioning the government spending on Covid resources. Clearly, she has an agenda.

I wanted to start here because I believe in living and ministering by example. I’m not here to verbally bash Ms. Greene. I’m actually here to recognize that there is a learning moment embedded in what she says.

For the record, Critical Race Theory (or CRT) was not designed to “teach children that somehow their white skin is not equal”. Critical Race Theory, an outgrowth of Critical Legal Studies, was designed by a group of black legal scholars to explore the ways in which racialized decisions, histories and outcomes have shaped the contours of our legal system. Part of this analysis accepts that justice in the United States has, by design, attempted to be blind to most things, *except* color, specifically blackness. “Black codes”, “sundown laws”; segregation era restrictions on education, housing and employment; racial covenants in deeds and leases; and most importantly for the scholars of Critical Race Theory, the ongoing turbulence that those legal gestures have generated in our society across time. Incarceration of black men after Reconstruction as “slaves” for punishment...something that was allowed by the 13th amendment. Segregation and legal racism reinforced by Congress and the US President (i.e. Woodrow “I was the first one to screen *The Birth of a Nation*” Wilson) in the 1910s.

Segregated government and military until 1948. A generation of black people labeled and siloed as drug dealers and “welfare queens” in the 1980s locked into socio-economic trajectories by legislation. Critical Race Theory seeks to present a theoretical basis from which to explore these very real issues.

And Critical Race Theory also invites a conversation about what it means to be or associate with whiteness. This may be the biggest sticking point for some like Ms. Greene. This is not to claim that all white people are the same; whiteness doesn’t function the same way for everyone who identifies with it. White is no monolith, just as black is no monolith. There is nothing universal in any racial categorization. Still, despite the fact that race is “just” a social construct, it has, and was always intended to have very powerful and far reaching embodied impact. As a result, racism not race is a monolith and functions exactly as it was designed. There is a reason that anti-black racism is a global phenomenon. It flourished in the colonial imperial conquest starting in the 1400s and evolved to specifically protect European whiteness in Western cultures socially, legally and conceptually. But racism isn’t whiteness...even if racism can be supercharged by it. This is where the difficult, delicate and intentional dissection has to occur: separating what whiteness actually is, from how it has been deployed over time. From where I sit as a black minister, this process must begin with love.

I’m sure that as soon as I say something like that (“...it has to begin with love”) a whole bunch of folks immediately dump me into the bucket of love *generecists* who speak about a broadly universal, dewy-eyed utopic “love” that, frankly, only ever existed in a Disney movie...and not even there...I mean, *Bambi*...and for goodness sakes *Pinocchio*...and we won’t even touch *Snow White* or *Sleeping Beauty*. When I speak of love, I’m not invoking something static. Rather, I’m invoking love as something systemic just like CRT. Love is not a singular, containable thing. Love is a dynamic way of being. Love is a way of navigating in the world and calls on us to consider how we act on and with others; how we desire others to act on and with us; and how we exist in our interior lives of self.

Yes, it has to begin with love.

I also want to go on the record here by commenting on something else that needs to begin with love and I know this will likely get me in trouble with my colleagues and Unitarian Universalist Association leadership down the line. I don't think we're doing the whole Article 2 thing right. For those of you who may not be discussing UU governing politics every day, the Unitarian Universalist Association is currently revising the 7 principles and 6 sources because it is part of our governing process to do so on a regular basis. This is a healthy effort that seeks to keep our stated policies and positions relevant and current. It will be a major focus of the coming General Assembly. Article 2 in our bylaws is what contains the seven principles and 6 sources. A commission was charged several years ago to begin this process of exploration and has spent their time in congregations and among our leaders both professional and lay, gathering information about what is important to modern UUs. Again, I think this is super healthy.

My challenge with the Article 2 process begins with asking why Unitarian Universalist expressive and emotional commitments are in *bylaws* in the first place? That seems a bit cold don't you think? There's a reason that other faith communities don't do this. They have something separate from governance that is purely about "belief" and informs their faith in pliable ways that are impossible to capture in a corporate handbook. Unitarian Universalists don't want to limit people's belief, but why don't we have an entirely separate way to capture our passion, not a statement of faith or a creed or doctrine, but something that is unique to what we are, what we have come from and where we want to go that can be considered outside of the bureaucracy; something that resides on its own, entirely in the context of what is felt and lived and human.

In short, why can't we start with love? In the current process, it feels like we are, at least grammatically, trying to *legislate* love. That's not right. Here we are trying to be in relationship with each other and our process looks like a corporate merger. When you have an argument with your spouse, do you go to your marriage license to rework the language? No! You yell and you cry and you walk out of the room and you come back in sheepishly and bend and turn and jockey to understand. That's what we need

to do as Unitarian Universalists. On this specific issue, we cannot rely on being a “community of communities”, we need to be a family...a shouty, teary, pouty, “come here let me give you a hug”, “I see you”... “I *need* you” family.

It has to begin with love.

Having a conversation about love around a conference table is a huge missed opportunity. My recommendation: throw away “Article 2” altogether and create something that stands alone, away from bylaws that gives us the room to have that essential family argument and recognize each other in our wholeness, and messiness and in our magic in spirit and in body.

That kind of engagement is only possible if it begins with love. And so many of our aspirations, also must begin with love. Dismantling racism, has to begin with love. Supporting trans youth and adults in authentic ways, has to begin with love. Reckoning with the slave holding, apologist and native erasing past of Unitarians, has to begin with love. Understanding whiteness in the context of a Western modernity shaped by monolithic systems of anti-blackness, Asian hate and xenophobia, has to begin with love. And yes, even responding to Marjorie Taylor Green, has to begin with love...albeit begrudgingly.

Bylaws are only as good as how they are put into action. Nothing in a bylaw requires you love me. We need something more urgently personal.

Unitarian Universalists are all individuals, and some would say, more individual than most. And at the same time, we are part of the human family. But how do we, as rabid individuals live being human? Do we actively cultivate relationships outside of our little cohort? Are they relationships that are only based around our favorite social justice issues or are they based on being genuinely interested in and laughing and crying with people we organize with outside of our in-groups? Do we think of ourselves only in terms of “betterment” and “best” rather than acceptance and affirmation? Are we always competitive and striving both internally and externally. How do we become fully present with our whole being?

I’ll give you a hint. It begins with love.

The love I'm speaking of here is relentless and one could even say radical in embracing of self and other. It looks at the most toxic and dangerous religious communities and or political leaders and says *"because I am motivated by a commitment to humanity, a tangible sense of the magic of creation, the epic and emotional arc of existence...because I am motivated by love, I may not agree and I may eventually fight you but, I will begin by listening to you with openness, even if the world you want to create is a world that would exterminate me"*. Don't be fooled, this is not passive or weak. This is the righteous and majestic love that Dr. King spoke so often of. Although, his love was motivated by his personal relationship with Jesus, King didn't believe that one religious belief had the monopoly on love. He was very clear that this powerful force was accessible to everyone. This is love that is warm yes, but it is also love that is intelligent and witty and clever and defiant and empowered. It is love with a whole lot of muscle and a chip on its shoulder saying, "I dare you to not let me love you".

It begins with love.

And so, to Marjorie Taylor Greene's little white child in the classroom...or the white adult everywhere...or anyone who hears the story of Emmett Till and recognizes that all of the villains in that horrific story, male and female are also white. I say, love calls you to resist looking away from those monsters and every white person who has ever aimed the n-word or an actual gun at someone because they were non-white. Take the time to internalize what it means to be connected by genetic appearance, not as guilt by association but as a unique opening to be intimately informed about and transformed by that tragedy; moved to a new vocabulary of action and engagement...broken *open*. Of course, to do any of that, you must be willing to know the story in the first place. You cannot simply turn your back on the realities that non-white people carry with them every day. Those of us who are not white have to intentionally love the bodies we are in everyday, living with the past and working for the future to counter the wide range of oppressions that come our way. It is hard work. The invitation is always open to you to join us in the effort.

I cannot, I will not and I have no interest or even reasonably legitimate reason to feel responsible for teaching white people how to be white. But I can reflect back, as someone who black/Afro-Caribbean what I need to co exist and co create this world with those who are white. This takes a lot of energy...so I don't do it all the time. But when I have the chance to do it, I lean on my faith, my ancestors and my belief in humanity and I go there. What I ask of you hearing me today is that you also consider going there, especially if you are in a body identified with whiteness. I invite you into a practice of regularly unpacking the invisible knapsack and repacking it with new tools and using them. Take it on different trips to places, with people you may never have imagined. And while you travel externally, do the same internally. Explore, try, reveal, challenge this body that you are in, particularly if it inhabits white skin. Don't be afraid to give the body you are in meaning by being intimately present with what it is saying to you about your past and present.

Is it hard? Yes. But you can do this. You simply *must* begin with love.

Blessed be