

Our Bodies are the Place

Justin Schroeder

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Paper #5: De-Colonizing UUism: Imagine a Unitarian Universalism exorcised of the practices, assumptions, and mindsets of empire. What would it look like - and what would it take - to de-colonize Unitarian Universalism?

“My belief is in the blood and flesh as being wiser than the intellect. The body-unconscious is where life bubbles up in us. It is how we know that we are alive, alive to the depths of our souls and in touch somewhere with the vivid reaches of the cosmos.” - D.H. Lawrence

Over the week, we've shared papers, responses, heartfelt conversations and reflections. As we have read and discussed, Empire and Colonization doesn't just live in history, policies, systems, and the exercising of “power over;” in fact, the culture and practices of Empire and Colonization live, first and perhaps foremost, in our bodies. At its most basic level, Empire seeks to disconnect people from their bodies, their full range of emotions, and their innate desire to connect with the rest of creation in life giving ways. Simply put, the work of Empire is to traumatizes human bodies, and to disconnect them from life sustaining sources; part of exorcising and subverting Empire is to deeply reconnect to ourselves and our bodies, those around us, our ancestors, and to the land we are on. But the subversion doesn't stop there; in addition to the primarily internal work of reconnecting, those of us racialized as white must also do the external work on shifting power and pushing back against the violence and disregard towards indigenous people and people of color. (It is worth noting this violence and disregard are the often the very forces that prevent people of color and indigenous people from being able to focus on their own inner work.)

Given that Empire and Colonization center themselves in our bodies, and thrive us on being disconnected from our bodies and the wisdom they hold, let's take a moment, before we move into the rest of this paper, to connect with our bodies, to gently do a body scan, starting at our head, and moving downward to our shoulders, chest, stomach, legs, feet, and hands. Notice the weight of your body, the chair underneath you, your feet on the floor - notice the physical as well as the emotional qualities in your bodies.

Let's breathe together, knowing this can be a way to ground in, be present, and increase our capacity for connection.

As you breathe and do the body scan: You might ask yourself, “Does my body feel heavy/light? Do parts of my body feel warm/cold/numb/tingly? Is there tightness or a sense of movement anywhere? What does your body have to communicate to you about this week, and these conversations?”

We'll return to this practice of body awareness later in the paper, and explore how this practice might connect to de-colonizing Unitarian Universalism.

But first, I'd like to locate this paper in the context of my own life and ministry; to do that, I'll share a brief history of First Universalist's racial justice (de-colonizing) efforts, and how

the work of my recent two month Sabbatical shaped my response to this paper.

Background

Although First Universalist's Minister Emeritus, Rev. John Cummins, marched in Selma, Alabama, and was an advocate for racial justice during his ministry, First Universalist, as a body, has never held a fierce and unwavering commitment to racial justice.

This began to change in the fall of 2013, when First Universalist, after a year of conversation and discernment, embraced the spiritual imperative of becoming a racially just faith community. This meant that we wanted to intentionally upend the habits, practices, and conditioning of white supremacy culture that were alive in every part of our ministry. In 2013-2014, and 2014-2015, nearly a hundred and fifty members of the church, including staff, elected lay leaders, and others went through a number of 24 hour racial justice trainings, in order to ground a critical mass of people in a basic understanding of race, racism, and whiteness, so that we could make decisions, cultivate new practices, and create a religious community that led to greater inclusion, equity, and power sharing.

Congregants have had strong reactions to this effort; some have left the church, frustrated about the approach we've taken, or the language we're using, or the seemingly singular focus on race (i.e., "When will we be done with this racial justice initiative?"). Others feel like the church is finally living into its promise, as we seek to align our values and practices with our theological claims. More and more, we are naming the connections between toxic masculinity, white supremacy, and environmental degradation. It has been uncomfortable, life giving, and invigorating all at the same time.

We haven't explicitly named this work as "de-colonizing" First Universalist and our ministry, but in many ways, that's precisely what it is, as we make the invisible assumptions, patterns, and habits of Colonization/Empire more visible, naming and examining them in light of our mission, vision, and values. This effort has changed the question from, "Why aren't more people of color or indigenous people here?" to: "What are we doing (institutionally and personally) that has historically made this a place that people of color don't attend?" In other words, "What are the practices of white supremacy culture that we are perpetuating?" This effort has changed the framework from, "How can we help save those people (of color)?" to "How does this work help us save ourselves?" as we move toward collective liberation, perhaps the fullest expression of our Universalist heritage.

For many people racialized as white, these efforts and these questions, and the constant invitation to faithfully engage in these issues, have created incredible discomfort, tension, and anger. This ministry has been messy, complicated, and sometimes painful, as congregants racialized as white have both embraced and wrestled with the language (and feelings) around "white fragility," "white privilege" and "white supremacy." Our congregants of color have struggled, as well, needing to have POC only spaces to process and debrief what they're experiencing in this (historically, predominantly) white church that is focusing on becoming a more racially just institution.

Despite the pushback, the leadership of the church continues to hold fast to the vision that we must become a faith community unhooked from the normative practices of Colonialism and Empire, including power hoarding, racial oppression/racial superiority, and disconnection from self, land, and others.

These efforts have unfolded in a variety of ways, including spending the past two years meeting and building relationships with local Dakota organizers and leaders, supporting their efforts in restore the name of Lake Calhoun to Bde Maka Ska (“White Earth Lake”), partnering with them, and following their lead, to help host an indigenous, youth centered Water Summit at First Universalist. We’ve also followed the leadership of Black Lives Matter Minneapolis, engaging in public witness and police accountability efforts, as well as weaving a racial equity lens into all of our justice ministries (i.e., in our housing justice ministry, we are beginning to include the history of redlining, restrictive covenants, and mortgage lending as it relates to housing in Minneapolis.) We’ve spent the past two years building a relationship with musicians of color and are exploring an artist in residence model with several of them this year, as they help plan, shape, and lead four worship services. Our Board of Trustees and staff regular use a Race Forward Tool called “Choice Points,” which helps us slow down our decision making process, so that other voices and possibilities can be considered, as we make decisions that lead to greater equity and inclusion.

Though it is slow going, as a faith community, we are slowly creating new, more racially just ways of being. And at the same time, it has felt like something was missing. As I planned for my two month Sabbatical, I wondered about the next steps I might take to deepen my ministry, particularly as it relates to our racial justice journey, and how I teach and preach about dismantling white supremacy and an American Empire built on white supremacy. Though I planned to read a number of books related to race (including *White Rage*), I also wanted to explore how being racialized as “white” had impacted my body, my emotional bandwidth and capacity, and the ways that I showed up in the world .

Sabbatical Study

Specifically, during my Sabbatical, I wanted to focus on my body, and the trauma, stories and experiences that my body holds, particularly as they are connected to race, racism and whiteness. I am a multi-generational United States inhabitant, and my parents, and their parents, and their parents before them, learned in their bodies, what it meant to become, and act, “white.” How was this alive in me?

Prior to my Sabbatical, I reached out to Susan Raffo, a member of the People’s Movement Center in Minneapolis. The People’s Movement Center is

a collective of people of color and indigenous people, of queer and trans practitioners and healers. Our purpose is to heal and be healed, to open space for the healing in justice and the justice in healing. Our intention is to bring forward marginalized and isolated healing practices, wisdoms, healers and practitioners. We know that trauma and systems of supremacy depend on disconnection. We focus our work on connection and reconnection of the self with the self, the self with community, and the self with land and spirit.

Susan specializes in healing body work, working with both white people and people of color and indigenous people to create space to “lift up the patterns of whiteness and white supremacy and the conditioning that created them so that the invisible becomes visible.” As Susan notes, “Obviously, this is dramatically different work for those racialized as white and those racialized as Black or Native (or other POC). For white folks, much of this work is about making visible at a cellular level the conditioning that we live with, the disconnection from self, community, land, and spirit. Once that is more visible, then people can make different choices in present time rather than making choices through conditioning. Over time/generations, the accruing of these many small and large concrete choices will, I believe, along with our external work of shifting culture and power, transform how we live in communities together.”

To be clear, this work is not easy; practice and mutual accountability are critical, in order to fight the weight and patterns of a white supremacy that will always push back and seek to recenter itself.

Several of the practitioners at the People’s Movement Center are trained in a type of bodywork called Somatic Experiencing, that uses “gentle touch, awareness and words to explore where a person holds conscious and unconscious tension. Somatic Experiencing is a psychobiological method for addressing physical and emotional trauma, overwhelm, and stress-related conditions by gently guiding clients to develop increasing tolerance for difficult body sensations and suppressed emotions. The bodywork and dialogue offered through these modalities may help reset the nervous system, restore inner balance, enhance resilience to stress, increase one’s vitality, equanimity and capacity to engage in life.” My work with Susan included some bodywork, but mostly centered around Susan paying attention to my body as we were in conversation together.

As was made clear in our reading, particularly in *An Indigenous People’s History of the United States*, *Seeds of Peace*, and *After Empire*, Empire and Colonization force and depend upon disconnection; those under the rule of Empire, or those being colonized, must give up their connection to the land; in most cases, they must relinquish cultural and spiritual practices that are deemed uncivil, savage, or foreign, and they are often forced to take on the dress and language of the colonizers. Empire also forces those benefitting from Empire to disconnect from their own humanity/empathy/compassion, to dissociate on some level, so that the oppression, violence, or brutality they are participating in, is acceptable, and/or normalized. Rev. Jin S. Kim drives this point home in the interview, “The Logic and Impulse of Empire:”

One way I’ve tried to frame it for my congregation is to say that white supremacy oppresses, in this country, black people first and most immediately. But it actually oppresses white people first, because they embody it most fully and have perpetuated it and now spread it all over the world. And one of the questions I ask our white members is, ‘How has white supremacy oppressed you?’

The question itself turns paternalism on its head. And people who are actually oppressed by racism don’t need noblesse oblige of the well-to-do, they don’t need paternalistic emotional handouts. So when we are in touch with our own pain, our own

loss and oppression, and out of that enter genuinely into solidarity with others who are oppressed, then we have a movement.

This interview with Kim resonated deeply with me. As I began my work with Susan, I ultimately changed the direction of this paper, becoming more and more clear that if we want to de-colonize our Unitarian Universalist faith, we have to include, and focus on how our bodies - our own and others - are colonized, and how white supremacy oppresses those racialized as white, cutting them off from their history, their bodies, and their culture.

Given that this paper is about our bodies, let's return to our bodies for a moment. Once again, the invitation is to take a few deep breaths. And then to scan down your body, from your head to your toes, noticing what you're experiencing? Depending on how your body is 'raced,' there will be different responses to this question: and the question is, where is white supremacy and colonization in your body? Where is it preventing you from fully being alive and having access to all of what it means to be human? How might you be embodying white supremacy right now?

You may have some resistance, or not have answers to these questions. Or you may not even be able to identify exactly what you're feeling exactly, as your intellect is sorting things out into a pre-existing framework and paradigm. In my time with Susan, I often bumped up against deep internal resistance to such questions, "fighting" with myself, struggling to stay fully in my body, to feel what was coming up, and not let my head help me resettle right away.

Frankly, it's still often easier for me to go to my head, to intellectualize what I'm experiencing, rather than really be present in my body, and letting feelings and sensations wash over me.

Intellectually, I know that whiteness creates a narrative that insists that people racialized as white are "better," more "deserving," more "hardworking," and less "dangerous" than people of color and indigenous people. I also know, in my head, that there are very real psychological and emotional rewards *and* costs to "whiteness." Some of the costs include the demand that those racialized as white not know, feel, or understand the history of this country, of slavery, or the genocide of native peoples, and how white supremacy policies, systems, and practices are alive and functioning today. Whiteness demands that people of color and indigenous people be put in their "proper place" in the racial hierarchy, particularly if advances are being made (see *White Rage*, especially.) Whiteness demands those racialized as "white" be uncomfortable talking about race, racism, or whiteness, and to be unable to examine how it is that one becomes "white," and at what costs, emotionally, spiritually, or otherwise. In many ways, as Susan reminded me, "whiteness was the trade off for losing our unique culture(s), languages, stories, and histories during settlement/immigration."

I know these things in an intellectual way; I have struggled to feel them in my body.

As I'm sure you have observed in your own life, one of the costs of whiteness, is that when there is a sustained conversation about race, racism, and whiteness, those racialized as white, often experience a high level of anxiety, discomfort, guilt, shame, and anger. Their body become agitated, they often feel as if they are under attack, and the fight or flight response kicks

in, as the nervous systems seeks to resettle and find comfort, without ever addressing the underlying discomfort, grief, pain, trauma, or anxiety that was stirred up by the conversation, perhaps by the process of “becoming white,” and feeling unsafe when this “construct” is being challenged, or when we’re pushed into a place of not knowing. Clearly, this response is a barrier to a sustained effort to subvert white supremacy culture and to overcome Empire.

And so my sabbatical became a time to explore and work through this dilemma. It became a time to spend less time in my head and more time in my body, to grow more comfortable with the uncomfortable/emotional content moving within me.

The Work with Susan

Ironically, the work with Susan rarely began with a conversation about race. It always started with a check in and with noticing what was going on in my body - what I was experiencing and feeling as we met. Susan paid exquisite attention to my body, often asking, “What just happened?” “What did you notice?” “Stay with that feeling.”

In our conversations, I reflected on parenting, ministry, and on the racial justice journey the church is on. I spent significant time talking about parenting our eight year old, and how challenging that can be for me, as he frequently appears to lack all “executive” functioning, and I experience him as a wild, uncontrollable child. I love him, but I want to control him, so he doesn’t embarrass me in public, or make a huge mess in the house, or get labeled as “the wild child” at his elementary school.

At some point during every weekly session with Susan (or in the notes she share with me afterwards), she would reflect with me about the ways that whiteness can operate in human bodies - how whiteness often seeks to be in “control” and to control others, to tame the “wildness”/ “wilderness” that is in us and around us, how whiteness seeks to control emotions, and how whiteness teaches us to tough it out and be rugged individuals, disconnected from others. We discussed how whiteness often makes affection and love conditional (i.e., if you don’t act or behave ‘white,’ there’s a very real chance you will lose the love and affection of other people racialized as ‘white.’) Over several sessions with Susan, we returned again and again to the theme of “control,” and how whiteness wants to lock up - literally, to put behind bars - or to contain that which it sees as “wild,” or “uncontrollable.”

It became clear to me that very early on in my life, I had learned the “value” of staying “in control,” both emotionally and physically, and that it felt dangerous to truly feel big emotions. As I felt my way through particular experiences in my life, describing what was going on in my body, Susan helped me see possible patterns and conditioning of whiteness and how by allowing myself big emotions (in the present moment, with Susan), and truly feeling those emotions in my body (not just describing the experience intellectually, in a “I know what’s happening here” way), I was disrupting whiteness and the ways that it was working in my body and limiting my capacity to truly live in my life. (As Susan reminded me, “This kind of emotional conditioning isn’t limited to white people - but what makes whiteness different is that (for white people) the policing is internal - it is aligned with our parents/protectors and then becomes ingrained in how we know we are supposed to be alive and behave. This is different from what happens for POCI folks where sometimes the same conditioning around

emotion happens but there the threat is about real police and real violence and control from systems and institutions rather than from a sense of not belonging to your own kin/family/legacy.”)

During our early sessions, Susan often noted how easy and quickly I “went to my head,” intellectualizing what I was experiencing in my body (as I mentioned earlier), rather than being with the feeling. We both reflected how whiteness values the head/rational thought/intellect over the heart/emotions/experiences. With Susan’s coaching and loving accompaniment, I began to experience big emotional movement in my body. As we worked together, we discussed how white habits and practices shaped the generations before me, how they shaped me, and how I might shake free of these habits as I processed and felt my way through unresolved trauma and experiences in my body. Ultimately, this might lead me to parent in different ways, as well.

Though obvious, it’s worth stating: not all of my emotional responses are shaped by whiteness, but many of them are.

During our meetings, Susan helped me learn to let go, to give up power, and to trust my body, as I slowly felt my way into trauma and feelings I don’t often spend time with. I also experienced a sense of freedom and power during these meetings, liberated from a sense of emotional constriction, and tapping into the life source within me, feeling my own strength and deep connectedness to life.

As I write this paper, I am still meeting with Susan. I am still processing what I’m experiencing, and am admittedly very new on this journey of Somatic Experiencing and justice work. Nonetheless, what I have noticed since I began this work is that I am connecting more authentically and deeply with those around me. I have sensed a life energy in me that I haven’t felt before - a kind of power - anchoring me to my ministry. I am learning that actually feeling and embodying big feelings is ok, even when it’s uncomfortable.

I believe there are great gifts and lessons from this work, and that similar efforts in our faith communities might help us decolonize Unitarian Universalism, by first beginning to decolonize our bodies, emotional responses, and ways of being in the world.

In this paper, I have not laid out a grand vision of what a decolonized Unitarian Universalism looks. Instead, I’m suggesting that we start with ourselves, where we are, with our very flesh and bone. As religious leaders serving in faith communities (and in the wider community, as well), our bodies are our primary justice instruments. How we show up in our bodies matters. How we talk about the ways that our bodies have been colonized by Empire and Whiteness matter. How we model this work and recognize the cost we’ve paid to be “white,” and name that, matters. How we find new ways to be in our bodies, as we work for a more just world, matters.

To be clear: by no stretch of the imagination am I suggesting that we focus exclusively on our bodies as we strive to upend Empire and Colonial practices; that could easily turn into a self-indulgent, inward gazing practice. What I am suggesting is that in addition to teaching and preaching about the history of race, racism, and whiteness, we also share what white

supremacy does to our bodies, how it lives in us, disconnecting us from ourselves, from others, and the earth, and how adults racialized as “white” unconsciously “teach” whiteness to their children, subverting our best intentions and stated values.

In other words, white supremacy (the work of the American Empire) traumatizes all of us, in different ways. As we understand and experience this trauma in our own bodies, we build our capacity to feel pain and discomfort, to not flee from it, or shut-down, or rush for answers or solutions. Instead, we stay open, connected to ourselves and those around us, as we find a way forward. Indeed, liberating ourselves (our bodies) from the conditioning and practices of whiteness allows us to more authentically connect with people of color and indigenous people, and their experiences of living in the world..

A Unitarian Universalism removed of colonialism is many things: it is an honest preaching of our country’s history, and the history of our faith and our institutions. It is a recognition of the stolen land we live upon. It is building relationships with, and following the lead of people of color and indigenous folks. It is using our buildings (if we own a building) as hubs for community organizing, planning, healing, and mobilizing.

A Unitarian Universalism removed of colonialism is more than that, however.

A Unitarian Universalism truly committed to decolonizing itself, and having a comprehensive response to dismantling empire, must have religious leaders who understand the ways that their bodies have been impacted/colonized by empire, and model what it looks like begin the work of decolonizing our bodies.

A decolonized Unitarian Universalism helps us restore our connections to all of life. A decolonized Unitarian Universalism means we no longer ignore the violence and harm which has been so normalized and protected by whiteness.

A decolonized Unitarian Universalism starts in our bodies.