

A Response by Julie-Ann Silberman-Bunn  
to a Paper on Theology and Race by Lisa Friedman

October 2014

First of all I want to thank Lisa for her thoughtful paper which has stimulated and challenged my own reflection on race and Unitarian Universalist theology. I found in your paper a clear understanding of how my own upbringing and understanding of our UU theology has put me at odds with many in our movement when it comes to work around the issue of race and racism. Before I continue I think it is important to explain what I mean by that statement. So I will explain first my upbringing and then my personal understanding of UU theology as quickly as is possible.

I was born to parents who lived in Trenton, N.J. My father a first generation American born in 1924 was raised in an Orthodox Jewish home that spoke Yiddish and Hebrew but mostly English in Brooklyn, NY. He attended public schools, including Brooklyn College until in December of 1943 he decided he needed to get out of there and applied to colleges elsewhere. He was accepted for January admission at the University of Louisville where he experienced culture shock and a violent reaction to the introduction of new foods into his system. He was however a Jazz musician and Louisville had a rich jazz community. Following his graduation from the University of Louisville he entered the University of Pittsburgh's college of Dentistry. At the end of his first year in dental school the exams were scheduled on a Saturday and all of the Jewish

students refused to take the exams, even though my father was already not a practicing Jew he felt ethically that he must stand with the other Jewish students. He went into the army and was stationed in Japan where he traveled and interacted with the local people. When he was discharged he returned to school and became a Psychologist his career had him serve in reform schools, the county and state prison systems, State Mental Health Facilities, inner city public schools, a school for emotionally disturbed and autistic children as well as a private practice in marriage and family therapy. Additionally he served as the chair of the labor division of the NJ NAACP in the late 50's.

My mother was born in 1921 to a first generation Scottish mother and Irish father. She was raised in an upper middle class Protestant household and aspired to be a missionary. Her own battle with Polio and the physical limitations it created for her introduced her to what it means to fight to be accepted and make your way in a world that was not welcoming. Instead of becoming a missionary she became a clinical social worker and spent her entire career as a social worker first in the County Welfare system and later in state mental health facilities, inner city family clinics and schools, she too had a private practice in Marriage and family Counseling.

My parents settled in Trenton, NJ in the late 1950's. They hired a housekeeper, Mrs. Pearl Brown, and when my brother was brought home from the hospital after his birth in 1959 it was two weeks before Mrs. Brown was allowed to touch him. Fast forward to 1963 in addition to my parents, my brother and Mrs. Brown there was a Japanese graduate student. When I was brought home from the hospital I was immediately handed over to Mrs. Brown and then to the graduate student. Mrs. Brown was with me throughout my life and became for my brother and I another parent, so much so that at my mother's funeral before she sang she made this statement

“Paul and Julie had three parents, and now they only have one and it is me Pearl Brown.” There was never a time when our family, inspite of our own pale skin did not, include a multicolored extended family, or as I prefer family of choice.

Just before third grade my parents felt it necessary to move to a suburb of Trenton because the schools had deteriorated so much they could not, in spite of their commitment to the community and the quality of public education, keep there own kids in those schools. On the first day in my new school, I announced to my parents that there was something wrong with the school, all the children were white.

Flash forward to the death of my beloved Pearl Brown in 2002. My then 13 year old son a suburban white boy from small town Ohio attends the funeral with me at what can best be described as a Southern Style Black Pentecostal church. Of the 200+ in the church those who like me were what I call pigment impaired were all either family or close childhood friends of mine. Following the service we were warmly greeted by people I had always known, neighbors, relatives and church friends of Mrs. brown’s, my son was greeted with open arms and big hugs by women who proclaimed him “Julie’s baby”. The wide-eyed shock on my child’s face as he was enveloped in bosom after bosom and his follow up question “do you really know these people” introduced me for the first time to the reality of how different my childhood had been from those of others especially my own children.

Theologically I grew up in a liberal Unitarian Humanist household with lots of Jewish, Pentecostal and Protestant messages where pretty much everything was discussed and analyzed ad infinitum. It was not until I reached seminary that I began to explore the roots of Unitarian and Universalist theology. From the exploration of the Unitarian and Universalist theology of our

past and what the panoply of options for UU's is today I landed comfortably in a place of Panentheistic Universalism.

My conflict with our movement and my utter joy in reading Lisa's paper was the realization that my own understanding of the Universalism of our history was not what Lisa describes as "the invitation to go off the grid to the peace of Walden Pond or to Utopian communities" that it was instead about creating the beloved community. I think in many ways that is why so many of our youth find a theological disconnect from our congregations, they are raised to see the power of community and if they stay around and get engaged with our youth movement what they learn is exactly what Lisa says "the beloved community was a realistic, achievable goal that could be attained by a critical mass of people committed to the brotherhood and sisterhood of all people and trained in the philosophy and methods of nonviolence." This is what my parents taught me, it is what I learned from my community and it was not until as an adult I encountered racism that I questioned why the world was not as transformed as my UU community and family taught it should be.

Having said all that let me return to Lisa's work more directly...early on Lisa uses the phrase micro-aggression and follows that with the recognition of her partial knowledge in a variety of areas. I believe that Lisa and all people myself included who use this term or admit to only partial awareness are victims in a sense of the unrealistic notion that all people could ever have identical understandings and rationales for their behaviors. I recently heard a guest on the Colbert Report describe people touching another persons hair as a micro-aggression an example of racism, but I am a white woman and have also had numerous strangers feel that they can walk up and touch my hair, are they doing so because of race? or ignorance of appropriate social

norms and personal boundaries? In many cases they have been caucasians touching my hair. What harm is done when we place on an action a lens other than what is truly there, I do not deny that racism exists, but I do encourage all of us to recognize that hurts occur in human interchanges not just because of race.

Lisa I appreciate wholeheartedly that you lifted up our religion being used in complicity with a great many racist enterprises from slavery to eugenics and the ongoing reality of racism and that you then tell us we “have to ask ourselves the risky, gut-wrenching question of whether our faith will hold up to this task.” I suggest to you that perhaps that is the greatest gift of our faith, our belief in continuing revelation and that it is imperative that if we are to keep our Unitarian Universalist religion alive and vital it must change and it must be understood in such an all embracing way without that we cannot as you ask achieve the purpose of Beloved Community nor will we ever be the force for transformation, only when we have done so will our actions and our words meet.

Your statement that these many examples including that of Olympia Brown somewhat accidentally arriving at and entering into St. Lawrence forces us “to grapple with the many times that human beings have failed to meet the largeness of this God’s vision and the radicalness of this God’s message.” is in part true but in part also speaks to the slow pace of change and revelation for we Euro-americans and the religions we have crafted and understood. We have consistently been products of our times and slowly we move forward some are always out in front and others far in the rear, but our religion continues to move, we are not today restorationists. As you say “sacred love is often not comfortable, but...causes me to rethink my responsibilities, to speak up, to face conflict and fear...” and that leads me to leap forward to

King's understanding of liberalism as "too sentimental", Rasor's definition of racism as "othering" and Parker saying it is a construct of heartlessness. These views when brought together as you have done here help to create an image that all people were doing this and that our movement has consistently enabled racism, and while we have we have also at the same exact time had people fighting for humanity and heart in the way we treat those who are what some would deem other, one young child in a congregation I served answered the question "what does our church teach?" with these words "our church teaches that all peoples hearts are the same color" a view which for me removes all the possibilities of casting anyone as other and so I too honor and hope others will embrace that as the panentheistic universalist theology of our faith. And yet only last month visitors from my congregations Partner church in Transylvania were speaking of the other when they speak both of the Roma and of the Romanian's a powerful learning for my own congregants in the reality of lived racism in ways that are not as covert and contextualized as most racism in UU congregations today. May we all follow the lead of your colleague for religious education ministry who talks about RE as "that place where children are offered a safe container in which to touch what is wild and dangerous and true in the world. The truth is we all need such a container to hold us accountable to our spiritual growth, but isn't that what the church is?"

I am struck by the realization that perhaps I have struggled to these many years with my place in our movement and theology because this is where I personally had already come. Our humanity is as you quote Cone as saying "at stake in the struggle for racial justice" it always has been and always will be. The Universalist God of my understanding is one that has taught that "the interconnectedness of creation is preached in our message of radical inclusion." and what it

takes to make it real, is sadly, letting go of our own self importance. It is as you say easier said than done but in part that is because we like our Unitarian ancestors have a hard time getting out of our heads and into our bodies and taking action. We need to as you say has been building in St. Paul to create “a movement of the people that creates a safe space in which to experience each other’s truth and humanity.” Part of this is we want what is safe, comfortable and easy and frankly it will never be easy to change, but we need to throw open our doors and welcome the strangers, one at a time or in large groups.

Our resistance to all of this is what you get at in the quote from Tinker “that violence is a fundamental longstanding American value” if we did not fear violence we would be more willing to risk. I remember my father, who in 1965 with me in tow at age two had gone door to door in inner city Trenton, NJ with our friends Jim and Janie Kelly ( a week older than me) all holding hands to speak of the importance of friendship and communication at a time of upheaval in our city, saying to me in the 1990’s that in those days you only feared knives. The fear of violence is real, it was real in South Africa, it is real on the streets of our cities for our black siblings why are our lives so much more valuable than theirs that we willing allow our neighbors to be brutalized without taking action...but what action? How might we create radical change through our theology and then embody that theology?

For me Lisa, I thank you for pushing me to re engage with the messages of my parents and also to own my understanding of our theology and to recognize that our Universalist heritage would call us not just to think but to take action as well.