

**Response to Lisa Presley's Paper *Glimmers of Hope*  
By Dawn Cooley**

The question of where one finds hope cannot help but solicit a personal response. Lisa's paper is full of factual information, but it is in her experience in which we find the depth of her story. Likewise, in my response, I cannot help but reflect on my own experience.

In 2011, I participated in the Healing History Academy, sponsored by the Anne Braden Institute for Social Justice Research. Together with 25 others, forming a very diverse group of folks from around the area, we engaged in group study of the Louisville civil rights movement both historically and currently. As a part of this program, I explored the racial history of the congregation which I serve. For instance, I learned that a previous minister, Robert T. Weston, installed his wife at the door to the church as the main greeter because African-Americans were being turned away by the greeters with "I think you probably are meaning to go to that church there, across the street." And so much more.

After the Healing History Academy, I wanted a broader picture of the Civil Rights movement in the South. The Living Legacy Pilgrimage that Lisa mentioned was just the ticket, and I attended in 2012. It was transformative to walk in the footsteps of civil rights giants, and to talk to people who had lived through the experience.

And my journey continued. One year after the Pilgrimage, in 2013, my 12-year-old daughter, 65-year-old mother and I hopped on a bus with congregants and other Louisvillians to celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the March on Washington.

Who would have thought that in the fall of 2014, I would be trying to make arrangements for another trip – this time, not for an anniversary or to celebrate history, but instead to head to Ferguson to protest the murder of an unarmed black teenager. But I have not yet made it to Ferguson. One thing after another has stood in my way. I can't help but feel sympathy with those

who wanted to make to Selma, but were not able to due in large part to family pressure or obligations. Or is that sometimes just an excuse I/we use to cover our fear? It is so much easier to *celebrate* history than it is to *create* it.

I was not alone in not making it to Ferguson last month. There were relatively few Unitarian Universalists who came to St. Louis to participate. Tom Schade reports that “There was no timely national call for UU’s to come to Ferguson for the weekend of October 10-12th.”<sup>1</sup> He shares that St. Louis UU ministers “had hoped for, and had asked for, such a call, but one did not come.”

Meanwhile, hundreds (if not thousands) of Unitarian Universalists will converge in Selma in March, including the UUA Board of Trustees. We will go to celebrate history, and to celebrate our own history, for it was a time when, as Mark Morrison Reed writes, our “Unitarian Universalists’ *values in practice* snapped into alignment with their *espoused values*.”

We need such a time again, right now when, as I type, the results of the grand jury are being anxiously anticipated. What will the determination bring? Kenny Wiley touches on this in his extraordinary blog entry “Who are My People? A Black Unitarian Universalist on Selma and Ferguson”<sup>2</sup> Wiley astutely observes that “fifty years later, if we UUs show up in Selma in 2015 but not in Ferguson right now, and not for all those black and brown victims of police violence in the sadly inevitable future, we will not have learned from our past.” It is so much easier to show up to celebrate and honor than it is to show up and snap our “values in practice” into alignment with our “espoused values”.

Wiley writes “Experience has taught me that being black and UU means feeling great most of the time, yet waiting for the next microaggression, the next moment of non-belonging. It is to feel profoundly uncomfortable in the midst of the familiar.” I can’t help but reflect on his

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1 Available at <http://www.tomschade.com/2014/10/why-no-national-uu-call-to-ferguson.html>

2 Available at <http://kennywiley.com/2014/10/15/who-are-my-people-a-black-unitarian-universalist-on-selma-and-ferguson/>

experience as Lisa shares her gratitude for and finding hope in the young people of color, those who manage to stay with us despite feeling profoundly uncomfortable. I can't help but think about it when I hear a colleague tell the story of his child, who is consistently asked where she comes from, even at church, by well meaning people who know and love her. To put our hopes on young people of color in our communities is to further burden them, to force them to somehow be the torch-bearers for those of us of privilege who marvel that they are still there. We must acknowledge what they experience, and how we who are white contribute to it. All. The. Time.

By 2043, census reports indicate that America will be a “minority majority” country. My hometown is one of the places where the shift has already occurred. When I go back to visit, I cannot help but notice how diverse the lily-white neighborhood I grew up in now is. I visit my old haunts and marvel at the variety of people I see: skin tones that range from snow to coal, with everything in between. I hear many different languages, see different styles of cultural dress. I am jealous. I want my kids to grow up in this multicultural environment.

But not everyone does. Speaking to a white man I know who still lives there, he shared that it is too hard for him to be in the minority all the time. This person, who could easily be found in our congregations, is moving to the country, where he will see more people who look like him when he visits the corner coffee store or the bookstore that hosts musicians on Friday nights. This person is tired. Many of our people, I suspect, are tired. They come to church looking to be fed, wanting something familiar, something they understand. And so they resist change.

What does this resistance mean for our future? I used to believe that it meant we would have to change – become more multiracial and multicultural than we are now – or die. I no longer think this is the case. Instead, now I believe that it is more likely that we will become “the white church”. Just as the black church has been historically a place for black people to go and be nurtured and fed by their own culture, I can see Unitarian Universalists (and most mainstream

congregations) becoming part of a “white church tradition” in a rapidly changing America. This does not excite me, as I am sure it does not for many of you. However, in some way, this gives me hope, because if we are not *dead*, then there is always the chance, the possibility, of redemption.

And so it is that, like Lisa, I find hope in the bop-a-mole approach Unitarian Universalists continue to take. There is no perfect one-size-fits-all approach to dismantling racism and becoming culturally competent. Each step along the way has gotten more effective. As long as we keep trying, we will keep making progress.

Our current tool of choice is the DMIS, which I am grateful to Lisa for explaining. I had the chance to take the IDI (a quantitative tool for pinpointing where one falls on the DMIS scale) earlier this spring, and I have found it to truly be challenging to my own sense of cultural competence. My parents raised me as “Color blind” which they felt was very progressive in the 70s. But through college and seminary, and participating in many of the UUA endeavors Lisa listed, I have grown quite a lot in this area. So I was confident. I was not prepared to learn that in order to make further progress, I need to have more frequent and meaningful contact with people of different cultures. I have gone as far as I can in the white privilege bubble that I primarily live and work in. Working with people across cultures in brief interfaith situations, or on school trips, or in the abbreviated interactions I have, is not enough. Instead, I learned that I need to go and make some more friends across cultural and racial lines.

After 5 years in Louisville, I have established a strong social support network, that, at times, is so rich it can be difficult to maintain. Finding time to cultivate or nurture new friendships is difficult, even when there is not a cross-cultural component. But I cannot just give up, or resign myself to staying where I am, where *we* are. I cannot sit Shiva – I want to leave a better world than this for my kids, and for my friends' kids, and for all children. That means I am reaching out instead of sitting still.

I also find hope in our burgeoning understanding that Unitarian Universalists are *not* monocultural. Since so many of us present as white, our diversity is often hidden. But it is there. As the middle class disappears, we are getting more working class people in our congregations. Certainly, our people represent a diverse array of sexual and affectional orientation, with a growing diversity in gender identity and expression. We are becoming more fluent in disability culture and in the neurodiversity spectrum. Though these are mostly easy to hide, and race is much more visible, I have faith that as we continue to name the various cultures already present in our congregation, we will find ourselves more comfortable with diversity as a whole.

And I find hope in our ability to turn our critical eyes upon ourselves. Hope in the conversations that people are having around connecting our Selma experience with our Ferguson experience. Hope in how we may not be *there*, but we are not complacent. I don't believe for a second that we will give up. Look how far we have come in the last 50 years. Is it perfect? No. But it is progress. We continue to make progress, plodding forward, messy as it is.

And, I find hope in the increased focus on mission. Church as we know it is shifting radically. As we reorient ourselves, congregations are asking “Why do we exist?” and realizing that the answer is often some form of loving the hell out of the world. This means that congregations are getting outside their comfort zones and standing in solidarity with those in need in their communities. It is in our connections with the diversity outside our doors that we can continue grow in our cultural competency. Will that make us more diverse? I don't know. But it certainly will help us become part of, as Lisa says, “a community that helps move transformation forward.” YES! Even if that transformation feels like it comes at a snails pace.

Thank you, Lisa, for your paper, and for encouraging me to think about where I find hope for our future. The glimmers get a little bit brighter every day.