

## *Deepening our Understanding of White Supremacy Culture*

Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Phoenix

Sunday, October 22, 2017

Rev. Margret A. O'Neill

Today is, you might say, not quite a typical Unitarian Universalist Sunday morning, even if such a thing existed. In a few moments, we are going to participate in a teach-in, a process that dates back to the year 1965, the first one having been held at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor during the days of the Vietnam War, for the purpose of raising consciousness about social and political issues in our nation.

Last spring, the leadership of Black Lives UU put out a call for UU congregations around the country to hold teach-ins on White Supremacy in order to raise consciousness about the ways that people of good will in our amazing faith movement continue to participate in a cultural pattern of privilege – a pattern so often invisible to those who benefit from it – a pattern that obstructs our best intentions to affirm human worth and dignity, justice, equity and compassion in all our human relationships.

This congregation held your first White Supremacy Teach-in last spring on May 14, and today is the second time we are participating in this process, working with intention and courage to raise our own awareness, learning how to create more health and wholeness in ourselves, in our culture and society.

We live within a global culture in which for about six centuries the idea has been intentionally cultivated that those with light skin – which would be those of northern European descent – are somehow superior to those with darker skin – that would be those who are descended from pretty much everywhere else. When I say it that way, it somehow sounds both abhorrent and absurd, as though this could not possibly be, and yet it is in fact true. And it is abhorrent, yes, and deeply wrong. The work to change our hearts and minds is deeply rooted in our faith; this is work that calls us forth in our complete beings.

The term “white supremacy” is strong language, yes, but it is also accurate. I am not calling anyone in this room a “white supremacist” in the way we refer to the Ku Klux Klan, or white nationalist Richard Spencer. What we are talking about is a culture of white supremacy that insinuates itself into every fiber of American society, no matter what our racial or ethnic heritage, and creates a sort of blindness in which those of us with northern European ancestry participate unknowingly, unthinkingly, in perpetuating structures of radical inequality and oppression.

When we are unseeing, unthinking and unknowing, the first step toward healing is to learn, and learn and learn. A lot of the learning is actually unlearning, but that is learning also. This is a painful process, challenging, sometimes gut-wrenching, but if we do not do the learning, if we do not come into new understandings that can form the foundation for new ways of living, we continue passively to be part of perpetuating these abhorrent systems.

So we invite you to spend some time today learning and exploring. There are activities to fit all ages and every way of learning – music and making art, picture books and a walking tour, being challenged to take actions in the Safety Pin Box session, going deep into the experience of a Black Unitarian Universalist in the discussion sessions. And there is a chapel space if you need to stop in there and do some processing, and also a protected space for people of color who would like to seek that out.

After today, we will continue exploring ways to engage this work, deepening our understanding of the true cost of privilege, and positioning ourselves to powerfully move into new ways to unravel the culture of White Supremacy one thread at a time.

The sessions are listed, along with a map of the campus, on the insert in your order of service. There are three sections of the reading discussion, all the same, so we will help you distribute yourselves among those so there is room for all. If you do not know how to decide, or how to get where you want to go, the ushers and other helpful folks are here to help. After about 45 minutes we will gather back here to sing together and close today's experience

There is coffee as always in the Johnson Room after the service, and there will be a listening session in Annex B for those who would like to provide some feedback on how this was for you. And so now, go forth and learn!