

Awake or Woke? ©
A sermon offered by Rev. Kathleen C. Rolenz
For the Unitarian Universalist Church of Annapolis, Maryland
Sunday, March 1, 2020

I remember the first time I met someone whom I'd call a Bodhisattva. He was my husband Wayne's Zen Buddhist teacher at the time, and he was coming to Cleveland, Ohio as a guest lecturer. We hosted him for dinner at a restaurant and drove him around town. I remember feeling myself in the presence of a great soul; not so much as what he said – like hey, can you pass the ketchup or oh, so that's where the Cleveland Cavaliers play – but his *presence*. His presence was fully attentive and tinged with this feeling of bounteous love for all sentient beings. He treated the dog that came running up to him with the same respect and appreciation that he treated us – his hosts for the weekend. I remember thinking: this is what it must mean to be an enlightened being – or, as you heard from Bob Ertman's reading, this is what it must mean to be awake.

Many religious traditions use the metaphor of awake and/or asleep to describe a spiritual state of being. This is NOT to say that sleeping is, in itself, a bad thing of course. Everything, people, plants, animals need physical rest and rejuvenation. But the metaphor of being asleep usually refers to the ways in which our minds willfully deny reality. We are usually too obsessed with regrets over the past, anxieties about the future and boredom with the present to see the totality of past, present and future as it is.

And sometimes when life is too overwhelming, what's our literal or metaphorical response? To pull the covers over our heads or our MAGA hats over our eyes and, for some white people, yearn for a past that never truly existed.

At a commencement address for Oberlin College, Ohio in June 1965, Dr. King's sermon was entitled "Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution." In it, he cited that famous story of Rip Van Winkle. He says that most people remember

only one thing about that tale; that Rip Van Winkle somehow slept for twenty years. But then - and here's King's words "*There is another point in the story that is almost completely overlooked; it was a sign on the inn in the little town on the Hudson from which Rip went up into the mountain for his long sleep. When he went up, the sign had a picture of King George III of England. When he came down, years later, the sign had a picture of George Washington, the first president of the United States. When Rip looked up at the picture of George Washington, he was completely lost, he knew not who he was. This reveals the most striking fact about the story of Rip Van Winkle is not that he slept 20 years, but that he slept through a revolution. While he was peacefully snoring up on a mountain, a great revolution was taking place in the world....There are all too many people, who, in some great period of social change, fail to achieve the new mental outlooks that the new situation demands. There is nothing more tragic than to sleep through a revolution.*"¹

The Civil Rights Movement was a wake-up call for most white citizens, who, depending on where they were on the spectrum of awake-ness – either found it disturbing their comfortable status quo or the greatest justice event of their lifetimes. King delivered that address 55 years ago – but the revolution he was talking about is not over. It was in that address that King referenced one of his famous lines – "*that all of humankind is tied together, all life is caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied together in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. For some strange reason, I can never be what I out to be until you are what you ought to be. And you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be – this is the inter-related structure of reality.*"² All of are part of the

¹ King, Martin Luther King, R. Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution." June, 1965. Oberlin, OH.

<http://www2.oberlin.edu/external/EOG/BlackHistoryMonth/MLK/CommAddress.html>

² Ibid.

interconnectedness of each other's destiny. And to do that, we must wake up.

What are some of the awakenings that have affected Unitarian Universalism? UU's are proud of the fact that we responded to the call to come to Selma, we marched with Dr. King, we claim two martyrs for the cause of justice. And then we came home and ministers of color found it difficult if not impossible to get a settlement; and if they did, it was only in a subordinate role or in a small congregation that could not find anyone else.

White Unitarian Universalists for many years adopted a kind of benign paternalism towards people of color – wanting to help raise, instruct and educate UU's of color – which really is code language for indoctrinate and assimilate into white culture. When UU's of color rejected this kind of paternalism, white UU congregations were hurt and upset that they tried to reach out to people of color but their efforts were met with "No thanks." When the Crossroads model for Anti-Racism Training was offered to UU's in the early 1990's, and it began with the premise that if you are white, you cannot help but be racist; it was met with a furious critique; *how dare you call me a racist* was the cry, ignoring the 2nd part of the Training. The second part of the Crossroads Training stressed that racism is not just an individual prejudice, it is a vast and complex system rooted in white supremacy that white people cannot help but benefit from. However, this analysis was rejected by most white Unitarian Universalists.

Over the next thirty years there were various other training models and crises in Unitarian Universalism that helped move our congregations and our denomination further along the anti-racist path, but in April 2017 the UUA's hiring practices were examined under the lens, not just if anti-racism but also "de-centering whiteness", and a call for a White Supremacy Teach across the association resulted.

I would say it was then that most white UU's began to hear differently and take seriously what UU's of color have been saying along: *You are not woke to the realities of our lives; and in particular, to the realities of our lives while attempting to be Unitarian Universalists.*

This experience within our faith revealed not only the depth of our commitment to anti-racist work but also the depth of the divisions among people and congregations who felt that the teach-ins represented an initiative from "on high" telling us what to think and how to feel about racism. The conflicts and struggles around this in our faith have propelled the conversation about race and racism into deeper waters and has led to many congregations towards adopting a clearer stance against racism and white supremacy. For UUCA, this has meant adopting the Eighth UU Principle and working diligently to understand what it means to act on it on our interpersonal relationships, our worship, our programs, and our governance.

Now lest you think I am just a reporter here, as your interim minister, and above the fray, let me reassure you, I am not. Just ask Rev. John who, sometimes must remind me of my own tendencies towards white supremacy, white solidarity and white fragility. And yet – he still likes me! Some of us bound out of bed when we wake up; others of us are painfully groggy. It doesn't really matter how we wake up; what matters is that we don't continue to sleep through the revolution.

So let's look for a moment, at the ways in which those of us who identify as white people, try to stay asleep – because, let's face it – it feels more comfortable; until we develop bedsores which must be addressed. The first thing we do when challenged by another white person or a person of color on racist behavior or speech that we didn't notice, or (as far as we understand) intend, is to default to what anti-racist trainer and educator Robin DiAngelo calls "The Rules of Engagement," which are in your order of service insert.

Whew – when I read her description of these I initially got my hackles up, because I have done in thought, word or deed every single one of these rules of engagement. What I have done in our congregations in the past is to argue that we shouldn't be calling people **out** on their racism, but calling them **in** – into a circle of love and justice; into the circle of caring and sharing and helping and healing one another. That all sounds good – but here's the problem with that. While I'm concerned about my own feelings, there likely may be a person

of color in the room who is actively hurting and harmed by my so-called “innocent” slip.

And even if there isn’t a person of color to witness this, when I expect other white people to comfort me on whatever racist stuff came out of my mouth, it reinforces white solidarity. That is, the desire for white people to protect other white people from the pain of their own inherited racism.

I am not going to pretend that this is easy stuff, folks. When I get discouraged and start thinking “I can’t say anything right,” (which by the way is listed on the back of the insert as one of the claims which support white fragility); I want, like Rip Van Winkle, to just pull the covers over my head and go back to sleep. But here’s the thing – even that statement is an example of what white privilege is; because people of color never get to go back to sleep; they are always having to be alert and awake to the realities of white supremacy because to do anything less, could be a death sentence.

And here’s another thing – the reason we call each other out on our racist statements is because we don’t just talk about Building Beloved Community – we are trying to MANIFEST IT. One member of color from this congregation said it so clearly. She said: “We call you out because we love you – and because we want to have an authentic relationship with you. And we want you to know when something you said is hurtful, because that is a barrier to having authentic relationship.”

This is what Dr. King was saying, when he wrote: *For some strange reason, I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. And you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be – this is the inter-related structure of reality.*³

So when are called out on something you said or did and become angry, or outraged or insulted or feel silenced or shamed, sit with those feelings for a while. Keep this insert on your refrigerator and re-read DiAngelo’s Rules of Engagement and your own feelings, behaviors and claims. You’ll see that you aren’t alone; she didn’t create this list ex-nihilio. She created it after hundreds and hundreds of hours of doing anti-racism work and seeing predictable responses to

people’s discomfort and pain of waking up -- waking up to the realities of white supremacy and of white collusion with it.

It’s what I do when I’m hurt or angry or feel called out. I sit with it – look at DiAngelo’s list and realize I’m not unique. And then, I also realize that I’m not angry at the person who called me out. I’m furious at the systemic web of white supremacy in which I was raised, have benefitted, have supported and am still a part of. I hold out of the hope that our member Thornell Jones has proclaimed over and over again: that he wants to see Racism ended in his lifetime – and so if we are going to make that a reality – we have not got a minute to lose.

There is a disturbing trend occurring in Unitarian Universalism right now – disturbing and predictable backlash to the anti-racist and anti-oppressive work that is being expressed from UU leadership. The backlash is from UU’s who feel that the anti-racist work has gone too far; as veered into political correctness and prohibits free speech. Let’s unpack those for a minute.

Political correctness as understood in some UU circles today, means that if you don’t toe the Anti-Racist Party Line you are branded a racist and risk expulsion or banishment from the UU fold. Some Unitarian Universalists feel that this is a free speech issue; that one of the cherished values of Unitarian Universalism is the ability to speak one’s mind openly and freely – regardless of how racist or objectionable their words are. Yet, when our words and actions cause harm; why would we want to continue to say them? Rather than arguing about free speech, why not take Michael Eric Dyson’s words seriously, and instead, create together a language of moral repair? Dyson reminds us that that language is our common meeting ground, our tool of analysis, and yes, our inspiration for repentance, our hope for redemption. This is another layer of waking up. Waking up to the insidious nature of how white supremacy works in our lives. Waking up to the fact that King George III is no longer in power.

What all of these arguments have in common is exactly what DiAngelo points out in her Rules of Engagement. They center the feelings of

³ Ibid.

white people over the experiences of people of color. So, presumably, yes, as a Unitarian Universalist, I can say whatever I want. However, if it is my hope to be in authentic relationship with people of color that means realizing that my need to speak; my opinions; and my beliefs about racism and white supremacy should come in second to those of people who are the experts in living with the topic; namely people of color. The goal of this work is to both wake up and stay woke.

What do I mean, then by stay woke? The term wokeness was originally spoken by people of color – the first reference in a New York Times essay in 1962, and then popularized by Erykah Badu in 2008 when she repeats the phrase “I stay woke.” The actor, singer, songwriter Donald Glover, also known as Childish Gambino, in his song Redbone says “They gonna find you – gon catch you sleepin’ now – stay woke – don’t you close your eyes...” In a New York Times article, Earning the Woke Badge, David Stovall, Professor of African American studies at University of Illinois, Chicago, wrote that *“being woke means being aware of the real issues and willing to speak of them in ways that are uncomfortable for other white folks.”* Wokeness is not a badge of honor that white people can or should claim as having finally exorcised racism from their lives; it is instead, exhibiting a steady and sustained commitment to being awake, alert and receptive to feedback.

Our purpose as a church is not to shame or blame you personally for how “woke” you are or aren’t. Personally, I cannot say that I feel “woke” myself. What I can say is that I am committed to being alert and awake to my own racism; to my own tendencies towards white supremacy and that I am willing to be called out on it. Our purpose as a church, committed to anti-racist work IS, however, to continue to address *together* this one thing that touches all of our lives - whether we identify as a person of color or not. It is our commitment to help each other wake up – to be part of this great awakening. We don’t want to claim that we are more than we are.

As Buddha said: I don’t claim to be a God - but simply to be Awake. To be awake is to accept reality, including those parts of ourselves that we’d just as soon not see.

Remember the way I began this sermon, by telling you I met an awake person? He was not a God and he was by no means, perfect. But he did bring a quality of presence to all his relationships which was something that I aspire to do as well. How did he get to be so awake, I wondered? Then I realized the answer is right there – practice. He practiced a regular spiritual discipline until it became him. And that’s what we’re doing here. When you go to the 8th Principle PRACTICE SERIES, you get to not only learn but to practice; practice being awake to a new reality.

Lately, I’ve been revisiting the Iranian-Persian poet Rumi, and finding pearls of wisdom. He reminds us:

“The breeze at dawn has secrets to tell you. Don’t go back to sleep. You must ask for what you really want. Don’t go back to sleep. People are going back and forth across the doorsill, where the two worlds touch. The door is round and open. Don’t go back to sleep.”

Stake awake my friends, stay awake.

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