

# When We're On the Other Side

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UU Church of Annapolis

This week I had a different sermon in mind. I wanted to acknowledge the fact that we have reached this terrible milestone of 100,000 Covid19 related deaths. And then, the video of a white woman weaponizing her white privilege against a black male birdwatcher in Central Park. But that was before May 25<sup>th</sup> came and the images began flooding the TV screen and my mind; before the cries of “I can’t breathe” before the buildings set on fire, before the twitter exchanges – all of this before today.

So, I have to be honest with you, what I wanted to do this Sunday was simply weep with you. In ancient Israel, when national tragedies struck, the Jewish people would stop what they were doing, would put on sackcloth and ashes and keen and wail and compose poems of lamentation that describe exacting terrible revenge on their enemies – burning their homes down, destroying their temples. Sitting in our comfortable homes in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we may read these lines of Lamentations with horror; wondering how a God-fearing people could want to exact such cruel revenge – but after seeing the images of Minneapolis on TV this week – I know. We know. And if you are a person of color -and particularly an African American living in this country in the 21<sup>st</sup> century – you know why centuries of pent-up rage explode into violence.

The death of George Floyd at the hands of those who allegedly pledge to defend and protect the public is yet another horrific outrage and insult to the American public. And while I do not condone violence, looting or destruction, I understand it.

Because after decades of trying to make change to the law; by being forcefully quiet, by peaceful protest, there also has to be the accompanying feeling “well, maybe if they won’t listen to reasonable, rational arguments about why the police should stop killing black men and women and transgender/gender queer persons; then maybe – maybe, they’ll listen to fire. Maybe they’ll listen to the sound of breaking glass. Maybe – just MAYBE this will be the threshold moment when the nation says ENOUGH IS ENOUGH THIS HAS TO STOP. THIS HAS TO CHANGE.

A part of me is just cynical – just jaded enough to think that this is another Ferguson, MO moment, after the smoke clears, after the protests are done, white American and the institutionalized racism embedded in police departments will just pick up where they left on – and go on. But, I’m also just hopeful enough – just faithful enough – to consider that what’s happening in our country right now may be a turning point – a threshold moment – a doorway we are stepping through to create – not a new normal – but new norms. Let me share with you one tiny shred of hope that came into my Face book feed this week.

I’m friends with about a half dozen friends from high school. All of them would probably self identify as conservatives and likely all of them voted for the current occupant of the White House. Most of them react negatively to almost all of my posts about Black Lives Matter; pushing back with predictable arguments with which I’ve learned not to engage. But this week was different. I was shocked to note that two of my most politically conservative and, I would suggest white supremacist sympathizers unequivocally condemned the murder of George Floyd. They called it racist. They demanded justice. I had to re-read the posts to make sure they were indeed from my high school friends. For me, this represents a turning point in our relationship; and an opportunity for both of us – this liberal anti-racist and my conservative blinded by

whiteness friends to have a conversation. The tragedy of course is that it took the life of yet another unarmed black man to open this door of possibility.

Before the murder – before the riots – I had wanted to talk about the phrase I keep hearing as more states relax restrictions- and that phrase is “return to normal.” When things return to normal is an unexamined expression of longing for a past which, I would say, is gone. And what past is that? It’s the ease of being able to go into a grocery store without wearing a mask or gloves; it’s the freedom to go to parades and crowded clubs; amusement parks and movie theatres; it’s the comfort of being shoulder to shoulder with fellow human beings at a ball game and cheering; it’s the ability to sing together without worries. I’m not saying that these things will never happen again; they likely will once a tested and effective vaccine is readily available to all Americans. But this pandemic has forced us to look deeper at that word “normal.” The question of course is – normal for whom?

For the police officer in Minneapolis? Did he consider his treatment of George Floyd a “normal” and routine part of his police duties? For the other officers standing by – was it “normal” for not one of them to say “hey – he is saying he can’t breathe? Get your knee off of his neck?” Should it be normal that people of color are dying in disproportionate numbers of the COVID19 virus? Should it be normal that the lowest paid workers in our society are now on the front lines of infection and are not given protective equipment to do their jobs? Is it normal that there is the unspoken (and sometimes spoken) assumption that our elders are dispensable because – well, they’re going to die anyway? Is it normal to have someone in the highest position in the country be spending his time tweeting about the Mayor of Minneapolis’ response to the violence in that city? Nothing about this time is normal. Nothing about what we’re living through is normal. We can’t do anything about this pandemic except to listen to the best scientific knowledge we have and adapt our behaviors for the common good. So we may not be able to “go back to normal” but what we can do is to adapt and adopt new NORMS – norms for ourselves, for our community and for our country.

What might some of those new norms be? I want to first address the police and what Resmaa Mankem calls White Body Supremacy. **SLIDE** In his book, “My Grandmother’s Hands” Mankem talks about racialized trauma to three groups: white people, people of color and the police. He talks about how generational trauma has been inflicted upon the white bodies of our European ancestors; and how that trauma has now become part of white body supremacy. He talks at length about the trauma inflicted upon black bodies. In his chapter White-body Supremacy and the Police Body writes about the police body as a body under chronic stress and trauma itself. This unacknowledged trauma gets translated into the typical police defense “I feared for my life.” Mankem notes this response “I feared for my life” perfectly combines white fragility, imagined Black imperviousness and invincibility and what he calls the “lizard brain” annihilation response.<sup>1</sup> ...The lizard brain is the part of our brain similar to the brains of lizards, birds and lower mammals. Our lizard brain only understands survival and protection. At any given moment, it can issue one of a handful of survival commands; rest, fight, flee or freeze. These are the only commands it knows and the only choices it is able to make.<sup>2</sup> Mankem’s entire book is about how we, as human beings can appropriately deal with the generational trauma that is in our DNA, avoid acting from our lizard brains, work through the pain of trauma and make better decisions. The ability to respond to one another not from trauma and not from a position of what he calls White Body Supremacy – but from an embodied place of calm strength, can change the world. Mankem has given this training to *the Minneapolis police department*.

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<sup>1</sup> Mankem, Resmaa. My Grandmother’s Hands, pg. 123.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, pg. 5

So, I wondered had the police officer who committed this murder – did he in fact, go through Manakem’s training? Did he, for a split second, even wonder if his actions were appropriate?

Here’s the thing – the truth that we all know. In order for something to change, we have to practice it over and over again. Malcom Gladwell once suggested that to master anything – a craft – an instrument – you have to put in 10,000 hours of practice before you can claim yourself as an expert in this field. So, a weekend workshop in calming the body and not reacting from the Lizard Brain was not going to change an officer’s behavior whose body was already subjected to the trauma of police work, combined with a culture of institutionalized racism.

Nor will two or six months or even a year of quarantine will change our own personal habits or a culture embedded in classism and white supremacy. We are in it for the long haul – and frankly, that’s hard. I get it. We get weary of being warriors all the time. Sometimes I want to just buy something packaged with Styrofoam and not feel guilty about it. Sometimes I want to exert white privilege and just bury my head underneath the covers and binge watch Twilight Zone episodes.

Because what we’re living through right now – does feel like a Twilight Zone episode. Rod Serling, who was a Unitarian Universalist, often centered his stories on not just dark dystopian what-if scenarios, but also on the premise of the worth and dignity of all humankind. Many Twilight Zone episodes focus on the tension between humanity’s highest aspirations of kindness and compassion pitted against our lizard brain tendencies towards dominance and self-centeredness.

How are we going to create new norms while searching and longing for a new normal? Are we going to change or, as so many tragedies have taught us, after the lights are off and the cameras moved onto the latest disaster – we really won’t change? We’ll return to our binge consumption, our heedless and needless spending and lack of concern for the least of these among us?

I’m hoping we don’t return to normal anytime soon, because what was normal has been revealed as what should be viewed as abnormal. In a recent statement, President Obama wrote this: *It’s natural to wish for life ‘to just get back to normal’ as a pandemic and economic crisis upend everything around us,” said Obama in the statement. “But we have to remember that for millions of Americans, being treated differently on account of race is tragically, painfully, maddeningly, ‘normal.’ ... This shouldn’t be normal in 2020 America.”*

What we are seeing is the exhaustion and frustration of going back to “normal” regarding police interactions. Because what white America is coming to understand is that there is always an excuse other than racism and white supremacy for what bad things happened. He was at the wrong place wrong time. He shouldn’t have worn a hoodie. He shouldn’t have resisted arrest. She shouldn’t have run. So maybe when we get back to normal, this time will be different.

**SLIDE:**

Or this time (30x)

That’s 30 this times – and these are only the names we know about. So, when we’re on the “other side of this pandemic” there will be no new normal if we don’t change our NORMS.

Most of us who have the privilege and ability to stay home have discovered that the pace of our lives was making us ill, was making our children feel estranged, hell – even our animal companions are feeling less ignored and therefore less anxious. Our reliance on meat

consumption has been forced to go down and we've realized we can do okay with a reduced meat-based diet. Our shopping for comfort has gone on a forced diet, and we've realized there are things we'd like, but don't really need. Our Zoom presence has brought both exhaustion and more control over our interactions. When we're tired, we can take a break, when we're going to say something snarky, we can and should mute ourselves. When we want to burst into tears because of how overwhelming it all is, we can end our video and weep in private, wipe our tears and return to the conversation. We put our hands in sticky dough, in wet ground on our children's heads. We can and we must and we will do better.

AND – we have to take care of ourselves so that we can take care of our neighborhood, our nation, our world and our planet. One of the ways this congregation has affirmed that it wants to take care of itself and the community is to not rejoin in worship until the Fall – and perhaps, not even until January 2021.

**SLIDE** The conversations you had last week revealed that most UUCA'ers erred on the side of caution and concern, than a rush to reopen. As difficult as that is; I applaud you - and I'm not surprised. UUCA is composed of wise, thoughtful, caring and compassionate leaders. We really believe that NO ONE is dispensable; not our children, not our immune compromised members, not our elders. When we say 'everyone is welcome' that also means that everyone is worthy. So I'm not surprised that you made the prudent choice – to continue to do worship and meetings on-line until we can safely gather together again as one community.

Last Sunday's Washington Post ran an article about the things people missed when life would return to "normal." Although we hope and pray that we return to a new normal after the immediate threat of the pandemic is cleared, but there are some little things which we have missed which we hope will return. Here are some images from "When this is over..." during this time of meditation, reflection and prayer, I invite you to write in the chat the answer to this post..."When This is Over..."