



# Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

The Reverend Alison Wilbur Eskildsen, Parish Minister  
The Reverend Don Randall, Community Minister

---

## “What’s Going On?”

© by the Reverend Alison W. Eskildsen

A reflection delivered on October 23, 2016

At the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, GA

### Centering Thoughts

*One day, to everyone’s astonishment, someone drops a match in the powder keg  
and everything blows up. James Baldwin*

*Not only do I not know what’s going on, I wouldn’t know what to do about it if I did.  
George Carlin*

*The rebellions are not just reactions to the continued shootings and beatings  
of innocent unarmed African-American men. They are reactions to the powerlessness  
that the community feels in its inability to put a stop to them. Dr. Wilmer Leon*

*I think we spend so much of our lives trying to pretend that we know what’s going to happen next.  
In fact we don’t. To recognize that we don’t know even what will happen this afternoon  
and yet having the courage to move forward - that’s one meaning of faith. Sharon Salzberg*

### Sermon

Were you surprised that we held a fire drill this morning? If so, I hope it’s because you feel this is a place with little danger. I’d like to think that’s true, but ‘better safe than sorry’.

During the past few months UUFA leaders met with emergency management representatives from the Athens-Clarke County police and fire departments. They surveyed our building and grounds, interviewed staff, and held a workshop for the Leadership Council. They also made recommendations for improvements. Some of these are in place already, others are being worked on, and yet others are factored into our building expansion plans.

Although we called this a fire drill, it had a broader purpose. I hope this drill heightened our awareness of what might be going on around us. I hope it also served to prepare us for weather events, such as a tornado. Of course, if a tornado threatened we’d not send you out into the storm! We’d have you huddle in the interior hallways and bathrooms, away from windows.

Additionally, I hope this drill prepared us for threats posed by people, such as vandals destroying property, people disrupting a service, or active shooters intent on killing. At the Leadership Council session, the officers instructed us to learn the mantra, “Avoid, Deny, and Defend.” If there was an active threat, we should first avoid it by leaving the building. Secondly, if we can’t leave, deny the threat from entering our space, such as barricading a door. And third, if all else fails, defend ourselves by any means necessary, including attacking the perpetrator. Avoid, Deny, and Defend.

I hope this drill helped you become more aware that you might need to assist someone less able to escape, should danger threaten.

The officers also shared that most people’s first reaction to danger is to deny it. And that denial cost lives. So if you hear the fire alarm or someone shouts “Shooter!” do not sit in denial, waiting until you see the threat yourself. Move! Know that we won’t cry out unless the danger is real.

It is a sad comment on our times that we worry about protecting ourselves. This Fellowship, and especially this room, is supposed to be a sanctuary, a place of peace, love, and safety. But we cannot deny that Islamic mosques, Jewish synagogues, Christian churches, and, yes, Unitarian Universalist congregations have experienced acts of violence.

Last year many UU congregations raised Black Lives Matter banners, just as we raised rainbow flags in support of the GLBTQ community. Initially some BLM banners were vandalized. The word ‘Black’ was cut out from some, making signs read, ‘Lives Matter’. Some signs were torn up, others stolen. A neighbor of the UU Congregation of Gwinnett entered their building and shouted threats at the staff because of his opposition to the sign. That same angry white man phoned our Fellowship and left a similar message.

Last year, after the UU General Assembly passed a resolution in support of the Black Lives Matter movement, we asked you about your readiness to take a public stand of support. Some of you expressed concern about possible backlash. A few indicated being unsure about what BLM stood for and whether it was anti-police, which it is not. A few indicated a desire for education and information, while others expressed full support in taking an immediate public stand.

Based on this mixed response, UUFA’s Exploring Racial Justice or ERJ team began responding to your requests. In the process, putting up a banner became secondary to creating broader understanding and support that might include a public stand such as hanging a banner at Timothy and Rambling Roads. Because of the team’s own engagement, more recently, they produced a banner to voice their own stand, though not the entire Fellowship’s.

UUFA’s current bylaws prohibit anyone, including me, from speaking publicly *on behalf of the Fellowship* for or against an issue that has not gone before the Fellowship for a vote. I quote the bylaws:

- Any minister shall have freedom of the pulpit as well as freedom to express *personal* convictions outside of the pulpit.

- The Board of Trustees of the Fellowship may, within its area of responsibility, assume and publicly announce a position or stand, provided that the public announcement states that Trustees are *acting on their own*.
- A duly established committee of the Fellowship within its area of responsibility may assume and publicly announce a position or stand taken provided that the public announcement states that committee is *acting on its own behalf*.
- Members of the Fellowship may vote to assume and publicly announce a position, *provided that the number approving the position and the total number of members present at the meeting is stated*.

I don't fully understand that last clause. Where must this statement appear? In the minutes of the meeting or whenever we're out in public? This isn't clear, nor is it clear if a simple majority suffices to approve the position. I wonder if it should be greater than that.

Some of you may be surprised that a vote is required before anyone can say where we collectively stand on an issue. This limitation allows members to speak their conscience. This democratic right is embedded in our Seven Principles. Members should have the right to be heard. It is why the UU General Assembly put the resolution to a vote of the members at a duly called Association meeting.

But here's a challenge. At what point does our process of inclusion conflict with the need for a timely response to an issue? Is it ever too late to make a difference or be meaningful?

On the issue of black lives, is it a sign of white privilege that we can take time to explore the issue? Is it just not urgent enough for our predominantly white membership?

These questions put our values at odds with each other—and that's not comfortable. Further, I wonder how to know when to be bold leaders and when to sit on the sidelines? Is the risk of possible violence acceptable? When does studying and reflecting become an excuse for inaction?

Just what is needed before you or I can say, this Fellowship stands beside our black neighbors in the fight for justice—and that includes putting up a banner where it is most visible?

These very real questions make me hear the author of Psalm 13 who cries out, 'How long must I wait, Lord? Will you forget me forever?' That's the cry I hear from the black community.

You and I are living somewhere in the tension between being led by prophetic people taking bold action and being kept safe by the crowd hiding from the storm. Who shall we be?

If you are ready to be bold, if you are ready to take a risky stand for justice, let the ERJ folks know. If you are ready to let the larger white community know we stand beside the black community as allies, let the ERJ folks know. If you are ready for me to speak for you as well as myself, let us know. It is not too late for our Fellowship to take a bold stand and show Athens that UUs of all colors stand with the oppressed of all colors.

If you are not sure yet, please don't sit on the sidelines. Take advantage of the reflections, book discussions, and other opportunities the Racial Justice team is offering because now is the

time. Not next year. Not next week. Not tomorrow. Now, because black lives need to matter as much as other lives. And when they do, all lives will matter. And know this, what we do matters. What we do can make a difference to the larger community.

May this Fellowship stand on the side of love because justice is love made real.

May it be so.

### **Questions for Reflection or Discussion**

1. Does 'what's going on' in the world create stress in your life? If so, what are you most anxious about and how do or might you alleviate it?
2. What do you need to become more aware of personally, in the community, and/or globally?
3. When should people take risks in the public square and when should we stay silent? What factors should be considered in making these decisions?