



# Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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## “Living into the World We Dream About”

A Service Presented by Participants in the  
*Building the World We Dream About* Workshop

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### Centering Thoughts:

“When a man starts out to build a world he starts first with himself.” *Langston Hughes*

“To consider ‘Whiteness’ . . . is not an attack on people, whatever their skin color. Instead, [it] is an attempt to think critically about how white skin preference has operated systematically, structurally, and sometimes unconsciously as a dominant force in American—and indeed in global—society and culture.” *Dr. Gregory Jay*

“[A] strange necessity has been laid upon me to devote my life to the concern that transcends the wall that divides and would achieve in literal fact what is experienced as literal truth: human life is one and all men are members of one another. And this insight is spiritual and it is the hard core of religious experience.” *Howard Thurman, The Luminous Darkness*

### Reflections:

#### Practices for Growth

a Reflection by Hilda Kurtz

After many months of work on the part of the Exploring Racial Justice Task Force, the congregation voted to approve a Resolution on Racial Justice in May 2016.

The Resolution resolves that

the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens (UUFA) shall strive to support Racial Justice and Equity in every way possible and;

that we commit to practice radical inclusivity of all racial, ethnic and cultural groups, and to both promote and practice being allies to others in this struggle and;

that we further commit to interrupt racism in all its manifestations at the personal, interpersonal and cultural level as well as to do the work of recognizing, understanding, appreciating and celebrating both our similarities and differences.

The passage of this resolution is like a portal, ushering the Fellowship into a new period in which to both look inward, to reflect on and learn from shared experiences regarding racialized social relations in this country, and also to draw our circles ever wider, and build relationships across the Athens community.

Among different efforts within the Fellowship following the Resolution, we on the Ministry Council decided to offer the Unitarian Universalist Association's workshop curriculum, *Building the World We Dream About* in fall 2017. (Heather Jensen first floated the idea back in fall 2016, and by fall 2017, Vivian Sellers and I were in a position to collaborate in putting the workshop together). The curriculum draws on a rich diversity of resources, including pastors and poets, social scientists, and educators who have been working in the field for a long time. In other words, it is rich with human wisdom. It values and fosters introspection, reflection, circles of trust and candor, as participants reflect on experiences and observations of racial bias at different levels of society. The curriculum asks us to dream a different world, a world in which racialized social relations do not work to hinder human flourishing, in which we not only imagine or dream this world, but build it as well.

To quote from the curriculum "our spiritual health and moral integrity demand that we dare to confront racism and oppression in our congregations, our faith community, and the larger world. And we must begin with honest conversation" (p. 10).

Over eight weeks last fall, participants in the *Building the World We Dream About* workshop engaged in honest conversation. Today, some of the participants share some of their insights and experiences.

### **The Elevator Story**

a Reflection by Caryl Sundland

This is a true story that happened during a General Assembly and was used in the curriculum to understand different feelings and perspectives:

A black hotel employee, with a food cart is waiting to get on the elevator. A white woman is also waiting. She observes that twice when the elevator comes, youth rush past the man with the food cart and fill the elevator. The man of color tells her that he has been waiting quite a while. Then the elevator comes for the third time. Another group of youth rush on, and the white woman follows. She begins yelling at the youth to get off and let the man with the food cart on.

A woman of color gets on the elevator and hears this. The woman of color looks at the old man with the cart and sees shame and embarrassment in his face. The woman of color has a flood of emotion. In his eyes she sees herself. She wonders what she is doing with rude, insensitive white people so far removed from his world, her roots.

The white woman sees her role as speaking for the underdog, as she often does. The woman of color tells her to stop and go to her white community and discuss this. The white woman is left shaken by this incident.

This story left me confused and conflicted as to how to resolve the issue. It seems to me a metaphor for many incidents between people of color and white people, in which I have trouble

seeing things from another perspective. However, I am not giving up; I keep working to change and to understand what is happening and how best to resolve the conflict. I hope you will join me in this endeavor.

### **It's a Process**

a Reflection by Linda Gilbert

I signed up for the course on “Building the World We Dream About” in order to develop skills and understanding. “Meaning well” doesn’t do much good if you don’t put action behind it.

Self-reflection provides a good starting point, and the class offered multiple tools and exercises for that purpose. This morning, I’d like to share one that I found particularly useful. It’s a model on “white identity formation.” Like all models, it has limitations. Human beings constantly change and evolve, and often shift between stages erratically rather than following any linear pattern. Still, the descriptions resonated for me, and may for you as well.

#### *Stage 1: Pre-awareness*

From the handout: “This stage is characterized by unawareness of the privileges of White skin. Like fish not knowing that they live in water, White people in the United States can survive without noticing the advantages and privileges that accompany Whiteness.” The section goes on to say that “not seeing” race or ethnicity is a symptom of this stage. I recognize this.... Until I learned better, I was guilty of saying, “I don’t see race,” intending fairness, but being oblivious.

#### *Stage 2: Awareness and Guilt*

When awareness of racism dawns, guilt often follows. A section from the handout states: “Feelings of guilt may surface when an individual connects themselves with historical oppression of ethnic minorities by White people, which causes internal discomfort.” I recognize this, as well. I expect most of us in this room do.

#### *Stage 3: Rejection and Disengagement*

Reactions to Stage 2 can vary widely. The handout describes it best: “The internal discomfort that surfaced in the previous stage can result in a variety of responses. Some White people try to make themselves feel better by avoiding contact with ethnic minorities. Some White people make an effort to engage with ethnic minorities out of guilt and/or a need to feel good about themselves. Still others try to distance themselves from their Whiteness, such as by rejecting certain privileges that White skin brings.” Denial, feel-good activism, and “I’m not like that” rejection of privilege...all familiar.

#### *Stage 4: Integration and Reengagement*

From the handout: “In this stage, a healthy White identity is emerging. This stage is characterized by a willingness to be critical of White/dominant culture without self-punishing guilt. People at this stage work in collaboration with others, both White people and ethnic minorities, to resist and transform white privilege and systemic racism, with respect and accountability. There is awareness that moving between stages is normal.”

Stage Four is what I/we aspire to, of course, but I'm going to repeat that last part: Moving between stages is normal. All of these stages are normal, though not generally comfortable. Discomfort can be internal, or we may experience it as tension when conversing with people currently in different stages. However, we must move out of our comfort zone in order to learn and grow. Recognizing "where we are" in the moment will help us to chart a path toward the world we dream about.

**Questions for Reflection or Discussion:**

1. What has been your previous experience of talking about race? What felt awkward or risky?
2. How do you think white people can have a conversation about racial dominance without being pulled into cycles of blame, guilt, anger, and denial?
3. How do you think Unitarian Universalism speaks to people of color/those from racially and ethnically marginalized groups? Indeed, does it at all?
4. What spiritual practices can you create that may help to dismantle the systems of racial dominance?