



# Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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## “Changing Our Perspective”

© by Rev. Alison W. Eskildsen

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At the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, GA

### Centering Thoughts:

*How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity.* Psalm 133:1

*It is not our differences that divide us. It is our inability to recognize, accept, and celebrate those differences.* Audre Lorde

*We all should know that diversity makes for a rich tapestry and we must understand that all the threads of the tapestry are equal in value no matter what their color.* Maya Angelou

*Anything that brings us together – inspiring us to open our hearts, hands, or minds, to forget our differences for a moment and remember we are one – is a sacrament.* Rev. Dr. Forrest Church †

### Reflection: (after a reading of “Let America Be America Again” by Langston Hughes)

Langston Hughes, a gay, black, Harlem Renaissance poet and activist, wrote “Let America Be America Again” in 1935, in the middle of the Great Depression. He spoke broadly for all who suffered injustice and unequal treatment because of their identity—the immigrant, Native American, woman, poor, or person of color. He spoke of the unrealized dream of America as a land of freedom and equality, but also of his hope that the dream would come true. A dream Martin Luther King, Jr., would refer to decades later.

In less than two decades from now, in just 17 years, Hughes’ poem will turn 100. And instead of eliminating the list of marginalized he named, we must add the gay or lesbian, transgender, Muslim, refugee, homeless, undocumented, and others. Realizing America’s dream seems more unlikely every day.

Hughes knew America had never fulfilled its promise of freedom and equality, and not just in his time. Long before the Jamestown or Plymouth settlements, enslaved Africans had already made landfall, in 1526. Spanish explorers brought them to the Carolinas. These Africans escaped, making it the first recorded slave revolt in North America. In an article published last year in *Black Perspectives*, and later in the *Smithsonian*, Euro-American author Michael Guasco, writes:

From the early 1500s forward, the Portuguese, Spanish, English, French, Dutch and others fought to control the resources of the emerging transatlantic world and worked together to

facilitate the dislocation of the indigenous peoples of Africa and the Americas.  
[www.aaihs.org/the-fallacy-of-1619-rethinking-the-history-of-africans-in-early-america/](http://www.aaihs.org/the-fallacy-of-1619-rethinking-the-history-of-africans-in-early-america/) and  
[www.smithsonianmag.com/history/misguided-focus-1619-beginning-slavery-us-damages-our-understanding-american-history-180964873/](http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/misguided-focus-1619-beginning-slavery-us-damages-our-understanding-american-history-180964873/)

Africans were forcibly removed from their homeland and brought to America, and Native Americans were forcibly removed from their lands in America, if first they hadn't died from European disease. Guasco estimates that in the one hundred years between their first arrival in 1526 and the 1619 settlement of Jamestown, half-a-million enslaved Africans had been brought to what Europeans called the New World. (*see reference links above*)

In America's founding story, we call the early settlers in Plymouth and Jamestown *colonists*. In doing so, we perpetuate a myth that the land was empty of inhabitants. Early English, French, Spanish and other immigrants should more rightly be called *invaders*. My Scottish ancestor was such an invader, an illegal alien at a minimum, although as a prisoner of war, he was forcibly brought over in 1651 on an English ship and indentured for seven years. He was killed while defending his adopted home during what became known as King Phillip's War, an uprising led by a Pokunoket Indian chief.

What we call people, colonist or invader, undocumented immigrant or illegal alien, reveals much about our perspective. The Puritans engaged in that 10-year war viewed their victory as a sign of God's favor. History is told from the perspective of victors; I'm sure the natives would have written it differently. <https://www.history.com/topics/native-american-history/king-philips-war>

Voicing his own counter-perspective in the August 20 edition of *Time* magazine, director Spike Lee, in an interview about his new film, *BlacKkKlansman*, said, "Let's stop telling lies and teaching young people bull-s--t. The United States of America's foundation is genocide of native people and slavery!"

As an aside, Lee's film recounts the story of Ron Stallworth, the first black police officer in Colorado Springs in the late 1970s. Stallworth managed to become a card-carrying member of the Ku Klux Klan. I recommend the film for the parallels it draws between the 70s and the rise of white supremacy today.

When early Americans declared their independence from British rule, they proclaimed, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights—that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." And when they wrote the Constitution, it began "We the people..." But they never had in mind all of America's people. Liberty was not the right of all. Power, privilege, and freedom belonged only to property-owning, English-speaking, white men.

Women eventually fought and won the right to vote in 1920. But even after the Civil War supposedly freed the enslaved, it took another hundred years after its end for the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts to be passed. And the right to vote battle still wages on.

What continues to fuel oppression, marginalization, and hate today? Why do events like last year's "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville occur? Why do such white supremacist attitudes persist?

I believe it is fear, especially fear of the changes around them. I believe questions being asked by this hate-filled segment of the white population concerning who is American and who can become an American are rooted in the visible demographic changes occurring in this country. We need to examine our immigration policies, but not base any new policies on hate and fear.

Within 20 years, America will become a majority minority population. That means white Euro-Americans will no longer be dominant. Whites will still be the largest single racial group, but the white population will shrink below the combined population of other racial groups. Within only two years, white children will be outnumbered by non-white children.

Those who supported the violent rally in Charlottesville chanted, “You will not replace us.” Other unrepeatable epithets made it clear they referred to Jews, Blacks, Gays, and anyone else they considered ‘other’. “You will not replace us” voices their greatest fear—being displaced. They fear losing power and privilege. They fear not recognizing ‘their’ white country. They fear new languages and cultures. They fear demographic change that threatens their exclusive hold on economic, political, and cultural resources. They fear their jobs will be taken away, despite an all-time low unemployment rate. Their fear leads them to enact laws that allow the killing and jailing of black lives disproportionately. Their fear leads them to want tighter immigration laws and drastic border policies, like separating over 25 hundred children from their parents with no plan to reunite them. Their fear fuels their hatred.

A 2014 Cornell University study led by psychological scientist Anthony L. Burrow, found that having *a strong sense of control over one’s life* increased the likelihood of a person being comfortable with racial diversity. That may explain why whites at the bottom of the economic and educational ladders are most hostile to ethnic diversity. Fewer options in life mean less control or agency. Admittedly, progress—new technologies and energy sources—has eliminated many traditional jobs. Blaming non-white immigrants for this change is misguided.

[\[https://www.psychologicalscience.org/observer/when-the-majority-becomes-the-minority\]](https://www.psychologicalscience.org/observer/when-the-majority-becomes-the-minority)

Beyond race, our country is changing religiously as well. Our nation is no longer the P in WASP, or White Anglo-Saxon Protestant. We’re Jewish and Catholic and Muslim and Unitarian Universalist, as well as ‘nones’ with no religious affiliation. Some want to make America solely Christian again, but it’s always been pluralistic. The first Jewish congregation was established in 1654, in New Amsterdam, now called New York. And 10 – 15% of enslaved Africans in early America were Muslim, though most hid their faith or converted to Christianity. Dominant white Christians wrote this American myth they blindly wish was true.

Change is happening, despite the anger of those clinging to white supremacy, despite the silence of those comfortable with white privilege. Whatever our own race or immigrant status, we can choose how we handle this change. Can we, Unitarian Universalists who claim to value diversity, reduce this fear, perhaps even our own? Can we foster cultural harmony when we’re primarily a white mono-culture?

I believe we can help America be the America Hughes dreamed of when we break down the barriers that divide us and get to know each other. When we look closely at white privilege and make conscious effort to dismantle white cultural dominance, we’ll be making room for all cultures, and that will reduce fear. For those of us who identify as white, changing our perspective along with

the country's, is a significant spiritual challenge. It means de-centering our whiteness when we're swimming in a sea of white culture.

As a white female, I'm comfortable with white culture, but I know my white privilege must end. As a mother, I can't imagine the fear of a woman who wonders if her son will be arrested or simply be alive at the end of the day. That fear no one should have. Losing my white privilege will discomfort me, but my discomfort is nothing compared to that of historically marginalized people. I can't accept the oppression of some people while being true to my UU Principles.

This congregation will continue to offer book discussions, classes, and other opportunities to learn about de-centering whiteness and systemic racism. We'll be revisiting our Welcoming Congregation status and recommit to making room for gays, lesbians, bisexual, transgender, and gender queer folks. And we'll be making opportunities for you to engage with people who are different from you, whoever you are, whatever labels you wear. We want to engage in healthy, life-affirming ways with those who differ from me or from you, theologically, politically, ethnically, and more. For that is how fear will be eliminated and the promise of our founders made real.

Activist and columnist for Salon, Al Jazeera English, and other media outlets, Paul Rosenberg writes:

America's promise means nothing, and belongs to none of us, unless it belongs to the least among us, the most discounted, oppressed and despised. We are not doing anyone a favor or being selfless when we align ourselves with the powerless, the forgotten, the strangers among us. We are taking the only sure path to our own salvation.

If anyone is excluded from universal promises and protections, then we all are. It's just a matter of time for each of us before our individual luck runs out. There is no one whose life is so foreign, so strange and alien to us that it does not reflect on our own humanity. In fact, the more strange and alien it at first appears, the deeper the connection ultimately goes.

<https://www.salon.com/2017/02/12/langston-hughes-saw-donald-trump-coming-let-america-be-america-again-vs-maga/>

We are interconnected and interdependent beings. We cannot allow fear and difference to try to separate us.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., once said, "We must learn to live together as brothers or perish together as fools." Let us not be such fools.

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

1. America is a 'land of many colors'. What do you value most about our cultural differences? What concerns you most about our cultural differences?
2. Does the projected demographic change from a white majority to a multi-cultural majority in our nation trouble you, and/or do you look forward to it? Share.
3. Have you ever felt hate or suspicion directed at you because of some identity you display? How have you responded to that? What might this UU community do to reduce fear and hate?