

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

Whose Streets?

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WHITE BEAR UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH
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FIRST READING

from an open letter written in August 2017 to the Mayor of Richmond, Virginia (edited)

Dear Mayor Stoney and Members of the Monument Avenue Commission,

We are native Richmonders and also the great, great grandsons of Stonewall Jackson. We are writing today to ask for the removal of his statue, as well as the removal of all Confederate statues from Monument Avenue. They are overt symbols of racism and white supremacy, and the time is long overdue for them to depart from public display. In our view, their removal will necessarily further difficult conversations about racial justice. It will begin to tell the truth of us all coming to our senses.

We are writing to say that we understand justice very differently from our grandfather's grandfather, and we wish to make it clear his statue does not represent us.

Through our upbringing and education, we have learned much about Stonewall Jackson. We have learned about his reluctance to fight and his teaching of Sunday School to enslaved peoples, a potentially criminal activity at the time. We have learned how thoughtful and loving he was toward his family. But we cannot ignore his decision to own slaves, his decision to go to war for the Confederacy, and, ultimately, the fact that he was a white man fighting on the side of white supremacy.

Instead of lauding Jackson's violence, we choose to celebrate Stonewall's sister — our great, great, grand-aunt — Laura Jackson Arnold. As an adult Laura became a staunch Unionist and abolitionist. Though she and Stonewall were incredibly close through childhood, she never spoke to Stonewall after his decision to support the Confederacy. We choose to stand on the right side of history with Laura Jackson Arnold.

Confederate monuments like the Jackson statue were never intended as benign symbols. Rather, they were the clearly articulated artwork of white supremacy. There is also historical evidence that the statues on Monument Avenue were rejected by black Richmonders at the time of their construction. In the 1870s, John Mitchell, a black city councilman, called the monuments a tribute to "blood and treason" and voiced strong opposition to the use of public funds for building them. Speaking about the Lee Memorial, he vowed that there would come a time when African Americans would "be there to take it down."

Ongoing racial disparities in incarceration, educational attainment, police brutality, hiring practices, access to health care and, perhaps most starkly, wealth, make it clear that these monuments do not stand somehow outside of history. Racism and white supremacy, which undoubtedly continue today, are neither natural nor inevitable. Rather, they were created in order to justify the unjustifiable, in particular slavery.

One thing that bonds our extended family, besides our common ancestor, is that many have worked, often as clergy and as educators, for justice in their communities. While we do not portend to speak for all of Stonewall's kin, our sense of justice leads us to believe that removing the Stonewall statue and other monuments should be part of a larger project of actively mending

the racial disparities that hundreds of years of white supremacy has wrought. We hope other descendants of Confederate generals will stand with us.

As cities all over the South are realizing now, and as we know from Charlottesville and elsewhere, we are not in need of added context. We are in need of a new context — one in which the statues have been taken down.

Respectfully,

William Jackson Christian Warren Edmund Christian
Great great grandsons of Thomas Jonathan “Stonewall” Jackson

SECOND READING*Adam Lawrence Dyer, Unitarian Universalist minister*

Healing

Don't speak to me of "healing" racism,
 or "wounded souls" or the "painful hurt"
 until you are willing to feel the scars
 on my great-great-grandmother Laury's back.

Don't speak to me of "values"
 or "justice" or "righting wrongs"
 until you are able to feel the heartache
 of my great-grandfather Graham
 whose father may have been his master.

Don't speak to me of "equity"
 or "opportunity" or the "common good"
 until you are able to hear the fear
 from my grandmother Mae
 as the only black woman in her college.

Don't speak to me of "passion"
 or "longing" or "standing on the side of love"
 until you know the shame
 felt by my mother Edwina
 mocked by teachers for the curve of her back.

Don't speak to me of "together"
 or "understanding" or "empathy"
 until you know my rage
 as a young actor hearing the direction
 to "be more black . . . more male."

The pain you are trying to heal has no real name.
 This "pain" you speak of has no story;
 it is anonymous, vague, and empty.

Don't speak to me of "healing"
 for I heal the second I am ripped apart.
 My wounds self-suture,
 and like the clever creature I am,
 I just grow new legs to outrun the pain ever faster.
 It is something I have had to practice for generations,
 that feel like an eternity.

So, please don't speak to me of "healing"
 because you cannot know what healing means
 until you know the hurt.

Whose Streets?

*In the very earliest time,
when both people and animals lived on earth,
a person could become an animal if he wanted to
and an animal could become a human being.*

This is testimony from Nalungiaq, an Inuit woman who was interviewed by a white anthropologist about a hundred years ago, at the turn of the twentieth century.

*In the very earliest time,
when both people and animals lived on earth,
a person could become an animal if she wanted to
and an animal could become a human being.
Sometimes they were people
and sometimes animals
and there was no difference.
All spoke the same language.
That was the time when words were like magic.
The human mind had mysterious powers.
A word spoken by chance
might have strange consequences.
It would suddenly come alive
and what people wanted to happen could happen –
all you had to do was say it.
Nobody can explain this:
That's the way it was. [from "Nalungiaq," in *News of the Universe*, Robert Bly, ed.]*

It appears all over the world, in stories, in singing, in art, in religion: the power of language, the power of words, to construct reality or change it, to create the world and transform it. *Words were like magic*, said Nalungiaq, whoever she was. She was remembering a mystical, mythical, long-ago time, when people and animals spoke the same language, when humans were part of creation, not separate from the rest of it; we were part of the wholeness and the holiness of things and understood the implications of kinship. We were part of one another. That is an old, almost universal, remembering. *Words were like magic*, she said, and I believe they still are; this is not some quaint, folkloric, fairy-tale thing. Words define what we see and what we can't; what we're able to ignore or dismiss and to what we grant our full attention and concern, the things we name as sacred; what and whom we claim as kindred, and what as alien or enemy or other; what we ourselves might become or dream or make, and what is just impossibly beyond us, because it goes unspoken. In the Book of Genesis, another magical, mystical tale, after God grants to Adam dominion over all the animals and birds and fish, the only act to ratify this mandate is Adam's naming of the creatures. That is how he seals the deal; the names he gives them mark his claim upon them. The names are the outward signs of his intention (in his case, his dominion and his power). Words are magic. They can oppress and liberate, shed light, slam doors, conjure possibility. *Magic words*.

This morning I am holding, in gratitude and prayer, the hundreds of thousands of women who have shattered the silence that shelters sexual misconduct and sexual abuse by posting their stories, speaking true words, magic words, at #metoo - not only famous movie stars and athletes, but mostly ordinary mothers, grandmothers, daughters, of all ages, naming what has felt unspeakable, and dangerous, and frankly, futile, these horrific and humiliating experiences that have felt almost banal because they are so common as to *go without saying*. I scrolled for an hour through the brave testimony of Unitarian Universalist women ministers, naming the behavior of male colleagues, my colleagues; you have your own pages and posts. Eve Ensler, an artist, wrote some years ago lines that could have been posted to Facebook this morning:

I believe in the power and mystery of naming things. Language has the capacity to transform our cells, rearrange our learned patterns of behavior and redirect our thinking. I believe in naming what's right in front of us because that is often what is most invisible. Naming things, breaking through taboos and denial is the most dangerous, terrifying and crucial work. This has to happen in spite of political climates or coercions, in spite of careers being won or lost, in spite of the fear of being criticized, outcast or disliked. Freedom begins with naming things. Humanity is preserved by it.

*There was a time when words were like magic.
The human mind had mysterious powers.
A word spoken by chance
might have strange consequences.
It would suddenly come alive
and what people wanted to happen could happen –
so said a wise woman.*

A few weeks ago, in August, two brothers wrote a letter to the mayor of Richmond, Virginia. *Our great, great grand-father was a Sunday school teacher, a loving husband and father. So wrote his closest descendants. Our great, great grandfather was generous and kind, a reluctant warrior yet noble in battle - and he was also a white supremacist*, wrote these young, white, great, great grandsons. He was a white supremacist, they said, and statues in his likeness perpetuate, glorify and daily reinforce the white supremacist narrative upon which our country was built, and on which its great cities, its industry, universities, culture and ethos all were founded. Jack and Warren Christian quoted John Mitchell in their letter, a black member of the Richmond City Council in the 1870's, who called one such statue "a monument to blood and treason." Some people argue that to tear down the statues or the Confederate flag is a cheap fix and a kind of censorship, erasing painful history and sanitizing inconvenient truths, but these descendants of a general say otherwise: "In our view, the removal will necessarily further difficult conversations about racial justice. It will begin to tell the truth of us all coming to our senses." They're not saying, *Throw the statues out; let's pretend they don't exist*; they're saying *Just please get them off the street*. They said to the mayor, we in our time *are in need of a new context*. Their letter, their speaking, their language, their naming, begins to shape that context; their very words breathe new life and new light an old and tired world, where for years and years and hundreds of years we could only imagine one way of being, an invisible way that in

fact has served white people really well. They are naming it, speaking it, and now the great, great grand-daughters and -sons of other Confederate generals have joined them – all these young people, north and south, saying, *for God's sake, take the statues down. Let's start the conversation. No - let's humbly and wholeheartedly, respectfully, **join** the conversation that's been underway since 1492 - about what America has been, and is, and yet one day could be. let's name what that could look like.*

I heard a man interviewed shortly after Charlottesville, a black man from another city in the south, who spoke about walking every day past some other Civil War monument to some other general on a horse, rearing up larger than life. He said, *I don't know if I can tell you what it feels like to walk to my office every day* [most of this is a paraphrase, but those first words are not]:

I don't know if I can tell you what it feels like to walk to my office every day under the shadow of a sword that defended the honor of the people who shattered my family, the people who murdered my great grandparents, whom they claimed to own. They tell us the statues went up as a sign of respect, so the South could remember its history, the glorious, chivalrous Cause; they say it's so white people will remember, but we know that they're there so that we won't forget, so no black person can ever forget, who is holding the sword and who isn't.

For some people these debates about monuments and flags and American identities (what makes America great again) are theoretical, political, academic, historical. And for some people they are all this, and *also and primarily personal*. The statue is an intimate rebuke to any little child, or any adult, who's forced to see it every day. This was an older American speaking about his great grandparents who had been held as slaves. This is not that far back. Think of your own family, for just a minute – your grandparents' parents. Genealogy is so popular now; it's easy to know the names of ancestors, and their stories and their faces. Think of your own people. This is not ancient history.

Who's holding the sword?

Who notices?

Who's telling the story or keeping the silence?

Whose blood is spilled, whose history, silenced and invisible, stitched into every star and every bar on every kind of flag this nation has ever flown?

Who gets to name the heroes and historic places, the state capitols and streets, the values, virtues, vision that make us, as a country, who we truly are, who we all truly are?

Who will speak the magic words of transformation?

Young descendants of Stonewall Jackson call out the hallowed name of his sister, Laura Jackson Arnold, abolitionist. Adam Lawrence Dyer, Unitarian Universalist minister, calls out the hallowed, holy names of his own relatives, his mother Edwina, his grandmother Mae, his great-grandfather Graham, his great-great grandmother Laury. *Don't speak to me of "healing" racism, he says, or "wounded souls," or ... "painful hurt," until you are willing to feel the scars on my great-great-grandmother Laury's back.... Don't speak to me of "equity" or "opportunity" or "the common good;" don't speak of "passion" or of "standing on the side of love..." ... you cannot know what "healing" means until you know the hurt.* He's talking about, he's naming, real, beloved people. I have often tried to picture my own great, great grandmothers, whose

names I do not know. I've tried to bring their faces to my mind, but I have *never* tried to imagine what their *backs* looked like. He is speaking of real wounds. The past lives in the present and until it's spoken, until and unless the past is named in the present for what it is and what it holds, the future cannot, will not, come.

A couple of years ago, I was in Minneapolis with many of you and many, many others, at a march called by Black Lives Matter: thousands of people, in the street, in the winter, late in the day, arm in arm for warmth and solidarity, decrying and grieving the loss of yet another young black man in yet another shooting by police. I don't remember which one this was, but, as always, someone with a megaphone and a lot of spirit was urging us forward, keeping the beat with chants we have chanted many times both before and since. The speaker shouts a question and the people holler back, over and over and over, raising the energy until the people's voices on their own carry both the question and the answer:

Whose streets?
Our streets!

Whose streets?
OUR STREETS!

The call-and-response of this shouting is as sacred as any hymn in church, but for some reason, on that one day, I realized that I couldn't give the answer anymore. It came to me that for me, as a white person literally embodying whiteness, white history, white ignorance and professed white innocence, embodying white arrogance (without even knowing it most of the time), bearing both the limitations of white experience and the boundless breadth of white privilege, for me, suddenly, it seemed more than redundant to go stomping through downtown Minneapolis, Minnesota, shouting, OUR STREETS! *Obviously* they're my streets. It's my whole country, my colonial empire, whether I like that or not, where everywhere I look, everything I hear and read and have been taught since childhood verifies my right and my voice and my belonging, by virtue of the unearned accident of my genetic and cultural heritage. This is not about anything I personally have done or not done; it's about what comprises me, and how I carry it, how I carry whiteness. That evening in the street, I realized as I walked among these young, powerful, black, brown, angry, grieving, visionary leaders, that my work there, and everywhere, is to ask the question, to raise the question, shout the question, pray the question, force the question, speak it again and again, whatever I'm doing, wherever I go: *Whose streets? Whose public square? Whose statue? Whose history? Whose country? Whose church? Whose sacred land and water? Whose life matters? Whose name will be sanctified? Whose great, great grand-mother?* My work, as a white person invested in the struggle, is not to claim more dominion, but to raise the question until the answer changes. More recently, at a march right after the DACA decision came down on young immigrants, it felt like a blessing and a sacrament to shout *Whose streets?* and then to just shut up, and to hear hundreds of voices, in English and Spanish, in west African languages, joyful, undaunted, resilient, responding, *Our streets! These streets belong to us, to all of us.*

“White supremacy” is a phrase that rings harsh on the ear, on the white ear. It sounds like dogs and Billy clubs, like racist jokes whispered by relatives or coworkers in a slimy corner of the

office; it sounds like white people in brown shirts parading through Berlin in 1933, or like South Africa at the height of apartheid. It sounds like Klansmen on their horses, howling in the night a hundred years ago (or two months ago in Charlottesville, or two days ago in Gainesville). It sounds like the deepest basement of the internet, where the alt-right Aryan nationalists used to lurk in shameful secrecy, until they joined the White House staff. White supremacy is all of these, for sure, and so the term seems maybe just a little overly dramatic, a little overwrought, for speaking about anything that could have anything at all to do with us, with any one of us, or with our congregation. But white supremacy does not refer only to bad behavior or “bad people.”

It is the water we swim in.

It is the air that we breathe.

Robin DiAngelo is a white sociologist in Washington state who has worked in this field for decades. She’s coming to St. Paul next month, to Unity Church, sponsored by our congregation and others in the Twin Cities. She writes,

Many people, especially older, progressive white people [ahem], associate the term white supremacy with extreme and explicit hate groups. But, for sociologists, white supremacy describes our culture, which positions white people and all that is associated with them (whiteness) as ideal. It is a deeper premise that understands white as the norm or standard for human, and people of color as an inherent deviation. We use the term to refer to a socio-political economic system of domination that will always benefit those defined and perceived as white. This system rests on historical and current accumulations of invisible power that privileges, centralizes, and elevates white people as a group.

This is true whether you want such power or not. It is just plain true.

Naming white supremacy changes the conversation because it shifts the problem to white people, where it belongs, and points us toward the life-long work that is uniquely ours. This work includes all white people, even white progressives. All people have implicit racial bias, most of it is unconscious, and because white people control the institutions, our bias is embedded and infused across society and works to the advantage of all white people, regardless of intentions, awareness, or self-image. Our task is not to exempt ourselves from the impact of these conditioning forces, but rather to interrupt those forces.

This is why, when our children presented a petition to the Board here, insisting that our congregation join with others nationwide, to study and approve an 8th Unitarian Universalist principle, your Board, on your behalf, said yes. Monuments are everywhere across this land, some cast in stone and iron, some ephemeral, invisible and equally real. We are going to tear them down.

Our Association, founded centuries ago by white people mostly for white people, and our congregation within it, founded in 1956 by white people mostly for white people at the time, needs a new context, a new and larger, broader, deeper theological premise, a new lens through which we see the world and ourselves, and a new lens through which we are seen. *We covenant*

to affirm and promote journeying toward spiritual wholeness, working to build a multicultural beloved community, dismantling racism and other oppressions in ourselves and our institutions. Words are not enough, but sometimes they lend magic. It is our great covenant to speak the truth in love –

harsh truth,
hard words,
prophetic aspiration, beautiful things: simple hopes and common dreams;
words of forgiveness and self-forgiveness and atonement,
courageous words,

and all the clumsy, awkward, almost certainly offensive words that will almost certainly bumble out of our mouths when we don't know how to start or what to say, but we try anyway. We support each other in the struggle, because this is holy work, this speaking, and because there's really no point to being a church at all except to grow our souls larger than they are, and to serve this world better than we do; to change ourselves, beginning where we are, and thereby have a part in changing this whole world.

*In the very earliest time,
when all spoke the same language
(the animals and all the people),
that was the time when words were like magic.
The human mind had mysterious powers.
A word spoken by chance
might have strange consequences.
It would suddenly come alive
and what people wanted to happen could happen –
all you had to do was say it.*

All we have to do is say it:

name what is,

name what has been,

and name, out loud,

what, by grace and by our will,

will come.
