

Thinking about How Lives Matter¹

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My home congregation, the First Unitarian Church of Baltimore, supports the Black Lives Matter movement. There is a beautiful banner proclaiming “Black Lives Matter” hanging high on our 200-year-old portico.

The banner is also placed high for all to see but also to keep it safe. Two or three previous banners, mounted on our fence, were defaced or stolen. We were not unique in this experience. Black Lives Matter signs all over the country had the word “Black” cut out, or crossed out and the word “All” written in.

In this context, the All Lives Matter statement seems an explicit rejection of the idea that the black subset of all lives matters. I believe that there is an unstated asterisk to the “All,” leading to a footnote, like in the drug or auto advertisements, so the phrase really means, “All Lives Matter (Some exclusions apply).”

We are a denomination of both Black Lives Matter and All-Lives-No-Exceptions Matter. Our First Principle, located in the front of our gray hymn book, states that

We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote: the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

“Every person” certainly says “all” to me.

But “all” is not some uniform, same-all-the-way-through substance. The building blocks of the “All” are the group and individual identities by which we see ourselves. Our differences are important and should be recognized and appreciated, but we also need a sense of belonging to a whole, an encompassing community. The individual, the group, the community are complementary, not contradictory, concepts.

We want to “get along,” as Rodney King pleaded 25 years ago. But our goal is to do more than just get along. We want a society that respects and benefits from the different communities that make up the All.

But “all lives matter,” in this usage, lacks punch. Worth and dignity are abstractions. We

¹ I originally gave this sermon to the Unitarian Universalists of Fallston (Md.) in October 2016; further evolution resulted in this version, first given in this form to the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of the Chesapeake, Prince Frederick, Md. My gratitude to these congregations.

need to think about people. We need to think about particular and specific human lives. We need to name the lives.

Black lives matter. LGBT lives matter. Cops' lives matter. Deplorable lives matter. Unless we can say that the elements making up "all" individually matter, "all" doesn't matter. The edifice of All isn't complete unless all elements are represented and valued. So let's look at some of the elements, the building blocks of the All.

The Black Lives Matter provides us with a useful starting point. I think that Black Lives Matter is a great gift to the American people, important in its own right—indeed, crucial in its own right—but also a useful example as we approach the particulars of other identities. Here are three reasons why Black Lives Matters is important:

First, it's necessary. Our times call for specific, intense focus on black lives in American society: on history, on institutional racism, on policy, on the current situation, on future needs. We need it because in many ways, *our country acts as though black lives do not matter*. I do not need to detail the ways to you. They go on and on. All lives matter, but if a particular part of the body hurts, we pay attention to that part. If you smash your finger, you don't say, that's okay, the rest of my body is doing fine. You pay attention to the finger. This part of our social body is suffering, and we can alleviate that suffering.

Second, Black Lives Matter invites us to look at the history of our country, and discover that concern for black lives has been absent for almost all of American history. Our history has amply demonstrated, from the earliest times to the present, by *active measures* and by *indifference*, that black lives have not mattered to the dominant culture. This is important for wiping away the many myths and untruths that distort the way we look at today's America. Whatever category (or more accurately, categories) that we personally fall into, we cannot see ourselves or understand our world if we do not well and truly see our history, nor are we likely to alter our our behavior to create a better future.

There's a third reason: Black Lives Matter is good for America, including those of us who aren't black. The culture that allows police to kill and bully black people also allows them to bully and kill those who are not black with impunity. Oppressive regimes oppress everyone—as whites in apartheid South Africa discovered—even if the oppression is more burdensome on unfavored groups. Those of us who are not black should be grateful for the Black Lives Matter movement.

I'm not saying “care about black lives even if you're not black because caring about black lives might save your life.” I'm not making an instrumental argument. But I'm saying that is the way the ethical universe works. In this case, what's true for black lives is true for all lives.

Indeed, a group called the Organizing Collective of Black Lives of Unitarian

Universalism made the same point in Principle #7 of their *7 Principles of Black Lives*, which states that

Acknowledging the ways in which a Supremacist society diminishes us all is a critical part of the work of the Movement for Black Lives. When the most marginalized of our society is free, then we will all truly be free. We call on our faith to affirm the truth that *only when Black Lives Matter will All Lives truly Matter*. As Dr. King said, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”² [Emphasis supplied.]

These Black Lives Matter leaders, then, are directing us to build a true All Lives Matter movement, one that doesn't include exceptions, and is built on the components of the All. These black Unitarian Universalists are reminding us that our affirmation of the particularity of black lives is also an affirmation of the particularity of other lives. They appropriately move from their particularity to embrace the generality. In so many ways, Black Lives Matter simply and powerfully says “Pay attention!”

So, what other groups should we pay attention to? Let's look at a couple.

Consider gay, lesbian, transgender, and bi-lives. Writing in *The New York Times*, Frank Bruni wrote about a new PBS documentary about James Beard, the influential food writer. The documentary does not hide the fact that Beard, in Bruni's words, was “an exuberantly gay man,” which he did not hide when he was alive. His obituaries, however, only obliquely hinted at it. The obituary writers gave the same silent treatment to Craig Claiborn, Susan Sontag, and Sally Ride, to name just three other influential figures in American culture. Bruni sees this as an example of “. . . how often oppression is an act of omission rather than commission: not letting people give voice and vent to much of what moves them and to all of what defines them; [and] not recognizing and honoring that ourselves.”³

Here's another example. I'm sure that many of you recall the horrible Pulse shooting in Orlando on June 12, 2016 as taking place in a nightclub frequented by gays and lesbians. That hit many of us in my congregation hard, particularly those who felt that this was an attack on their community. We gathered in our sanctuary one evening to mourn and to be in community. It was a profoundly moving evening.

I don't remember the evening in detail—mostly I remember how deeply moved I was—but as I recall, those of us there focused on the attack on the LGBT community. But that was not the only identity that many of those killed or injured carried. A June 2016 statement by seven

2 Organizing Collective of Black Lives of UU, *The 7 Principles of Black Lives*(2015), <http://www.blacklivesuu.com/7-principles/>. Accessed 10/8/17.

3 Frank Bruni, “Food, Sex and Silence,” *New York Times*, April 22, 2017.

Latinx/a/o Unitarian Universalists religious professionals of color pointed out that the victims were not just gay people but were Spanish-speaking people—and, specifically, at least 23 of the victims were Puerto Rican. In thinking about the victims, we are charged to remember that

Their race and ethnicity is an innate part of their humanity and must not be erased by media that centers white expressions of queerness. . . . We assert that this is an important part of the shooting that needs to be recognized.⁴

Did you notice how the identities are adding up here? In the quotation I just read, we have race, language, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. We are not just one thing!

Indeed, this multiplicity of identities was recognized by the black Unitarian Universalists that I quoted a few minutes ago. Its Principle #1 stated that “black” is not a unitary description. It enumerated some of the lives that mattered:

Queer Black lives, Trans Black lives, formerly incarcerated Black lives, differently-abled Black lives, Black women’s lives, immigrant black lives, Black elderly and children’s lives. ALL BLACK LIVES MATTER and are creators of this space. We throw no one under the bus. We rise together.

This is absolutely true, and not only true for black lives. It's true for any category you can think of. It's true for everybody. It is true for me. It is true for you. *Nobody lives in just one category.*

We are not like gummy bears, a solid sameness all the way through. To borrow from Walt Whitman, every person is large and contains multitudes. We contain contradictions. Depending on setting, one or another of our identities might become paramount, but our individuality is multitudinous.

Our congregations are places where we can come with all aspects of our identity, with all our contradictions, and be known and loved for all our complexities, and be valued for the contributions our personalities make to the whole.

Here's an example. Many Unitarian Universalist congregations have a part of their service for “joys and sorrows,” in which people to come forward to light a candle or place a stone in a bowl. In some congregations, they say a few words, in some they are silent. We see the outer characteristics of those who for whatever inward reason come forward. We see tall people and short people, people of various hues from light to dark, people somewhat formally dressed and

4 UU Latinx Statement: Pulse Nightclub Shooting, https://docs.google.com/document/d/1QO_11X0JtG5tM_FBw863jHJ6Px4WFTKohqwdDoN-oA/mobilebasic?pli=1, June 16, 2016, signed by Theresa I. Soto, María E. McCabe, Tania Y Márquez, Julica Hermann de la Fuente, Maria Cristina Vlassidis Burgoa, Marta I. Valentín, and Marisol Caballero. Accessed 10/8/17.

people casually dressed. We only see the individual's outer characteristics, to be sure, but in many congregations, we see great diversity.

The people who come forward do so for their individual reasons, but they do so in the context of this religious community. Their thoughts might be hidden, but the act is public. Those who light candles or place a stone in a bowl, and those who remain in the pews or chairs, share the experience, each in their own way, but together. It is an expression of community.

This is a microcosm of the kind of society we want to create where all lives matter. It doesn't call for the sameness of thought, or personal or group characteristics, or even for doing the same thing. But we are all together, in this room, in mutual purpose and respect.

We want to see this mutual purpose and respect not only in our congregational community, but in our larger communities. This means not just tolerating each other, this means more than being willing to say black lives, or blue lives, or deplorable lives matter, but to actively engage in a way that doesn't just say "live and let live," but proudly says, "despite our differences, we are part of the same community."

To explain what I mean, I have to talk about two words and how we use them. The words are "diversity" and "pluralism." And here I'm going to draw on the work of Diana L. Eck and the Pluralism Project at Harvard University.

We have a *diverse* society, but as the Pluralism Project states, "Mere diversity without real encounter and relationship will yield increasing tensions in our societies."⁵ I think the "all lives matter" slogan—as used by the opponents of Black Lives Matter, not as I've been using it—is an example of the tension created by lack of relationship. Diversity can just mean that we have a lot of differences, and we're seeing each other as the "other." We live side by side, at best ignoring each other, at worst experiencing friction.

Pluralism means we've grappled with our differences. It means "the energetic engagement with diversity." It's not just getting along.

It means being able to encounter the commitments of the other. So, for many of us, it means being open to dialogue with the "deplorables" who hold such different values. To listen to them, and hope that they will listen to us. After all, their lives matter.

Think back to our responsive reading.⁶ I just said that the diverse characteristics of our lives matter, and I've also defined pluralism as a goal beyond diversity. But the refrain of our

5 <http://pluralism.org/what-is-pluralism/>. Accessed 10/8/17.

6 Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley, "A Litany of Restoration," No. 576 in *The Unitarian Universalist Association, Singing the Living Tradition* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993).

reading this morning said that differences don't matter! Is this a contradiction? I believe it is not a contradiction, but a distinction.

In “A Litany of Restoration,” Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley raises the great truth that the characteristics mentioned, and others implied, shouldn't *get in the way* of our relationships, whether social or professional or whatever, that we stand together as a community despite our differences. It's an important message, which sometimes might seem an easy read in our communities. After all, isn't this what we're about? Actually, even for us, in recent times, and perhaps even today, in some congregations, achieving these goals is still a work in progress.

Unstated in the reading, but there for us to fill in, is the great truth that we will use these differences as great gifts that give us access to human experience and possibility beyond what we can achieve by our own, limited identities. Indeed, if we ignore or don't see these differences, if we act as though they don't matter or don't exist, we diminish access to our own richness.

We are all unique and contribute something essential and irreplaceable to the ethical universe. We learn much from those who differ from us. Our relationships grow richer and deeper when we bring our uniqueness as well as similarities to the thing we are together. That, not incidentally, is something I often say to couples in marriage ceremonies: you bring your uniqueness as well as your similarities to this union.

For a long time, those of us who are Unitarian Universalist Christians, Unitarian Universalist pagans, and Unitarian Universalist humanists have not only co-existed but have created a mutually respected religious home.

Step by step, sometimes by tiny step, sometimes by giant step, we move forward. We take our steps as unique individuals but we take them in company of a precious group of people who are traveling the same road, who are creating a community that recognizes everyone's—*everyone's*--worth and dignity, that everyone's life—*everyone's life*—matters.

That's the essence of our religion. Everybody's presence affects the whole. We are separate, unique, irreplaceable individuals, yet at the same time part of the whole.

In all of our differences, this congregation represents something that we have in common--a set of values, of behaviors, a community that we want to be a part of. I believe that the way we are together is the way that our communities, our nation, even the world, can be together. The nation? The world? Maybe a stretch now, or even ever. But obtainable here, in this congregation? In your community? I believe that you are already on your way. Step by step, you will get there.