

Why We Build the Wall
Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Phoenix
Sunday, January 20, 2019
Benjie Messer, Music Director

Reflection
(following Drumming)

Would any of you use the word "primitive" to describe that rhythm? No, of course not. West African drumming is fluid, varied, endlessly complex. Its rhythms have been in creative flux for centuries. They are some of the world's most refined works of art. But if I say, think of music that sounds "refined", what do you think of? I'll tell you what I think of- a European orchestral instrument. Maybe an oboe. And if I asked you to think of music that sounds "primitive", almost all of us would hear drums.

This is why we have to talk about racism until we really, really understand it and can stay conscious of it. It's so "normal."

One of this congregation's greatest strengths is its history of anti-racism. We haven't always been perfect, but we've been trying for a long time. When I tell activists where I work, they often say, oh, the church with the statues, of the Birmingham bombing? We're known as a place in Phoenix where people have been thinking about racism, and taking action against it. I've often been inspired by sermons I've heard in this sanctuary, on this weekend. It's a little intimidating to be in the pulpit today.

I've gotten some great support. Sam shared how he suggested I relax. Yesterday, after I shared that I was nervous about speaking today, Robert told me, "Just make me think... and if you don't, you're a racist!"

Alisa, you suggested that I could talk today about poverty, the wealth gap, and economic exploitation. You reminded me that Dr. King created a poor people's campaign, and that banner has been taken up again today. And we need to talk about that, in this sanctuary. King also spoke at the end of his life about the evils of militarism and war, and we need to talk about that too. If we could put the money we spend on our military into renewable energy, a Green New Deal, we'd be on our way to stopping climate change. But we have to talk about racism. We can't skip it today. I wish we could. I wish we had done enough work that we could. But we can't. We have to keep thinking on racism until our perspective is so clear that it can no longer be used to divide us.

Trust the Russians on this. Three years ago, in the run-up to the presidential election, a small team of Russian marketers - I'm not going to call them operatives- these marketers researched the United States to figure out what messages could swing the election away from Clinton and toward Trump. What did they focus on? Racial issues. Of the 3,500 Facebook ads posted between June 2015 and August 2017 by the Russian company registered with Facebook as "The Internet Research Agency," only 100 of those 3500 referred to a political candidate. But over half of them - almost 2000 - were about race. For those who haven't read about this, the Internet Research Agency started online "groups" on the right- "Back the Badge" (supporting police) or "Being Patriotic" were two of their most popular. Those groups played into racism by posting messages about well-behaved police and badly-behaved people of color, and occasionally they posted a message supporting candidate Trump. The Internet Research Agency also started online groups on the left- "Brown Power", "Woke Blacks", "Blacktivist", "Black Matters"- which claimed to represent black and Chicano activists. Those groups posted information about social

justice and publicized protests- and every now and then, they played into internalized racism and powerlessness by posting messages like, "What have the Democrats ever done for you? Show them your power by staying home on election day." I think, instead of taking these Russian folks to court, we should be thanking them for showing us so clearly what we need to work on.

Racism is used to divide us. It divides white people from people targeted by racism, of course - our lives and our people's lives have been so separate, and so unequal. It also divides white people from each other. Us white people can't stand to associate with anyone who carries their racism more out in the open than we do - and it's also not fun when our racism is out in the open compared to someone else's. And people of color are often separated from each other by racism that's internalized. Just as an example, when people of color come to believe the lies that they are inferior - when parents prefer their lighter-skinned children, or don't value languages other than English - those are examples of internalized racism. Racism divides us.

And racism confuses us. We don't think about it well - yes, even us, who are committed to this work. It confuses us that no one claims to believe the big lies - that the majority of humans on the earth, and their cultures and cities - those with heritage from anywhere but Europe - are inferior, dirty, violent, stupid, uncivilized, primitive - and yet, the effects of these lies are all around us. We see the effects, if we can bear to look, in our own lives, in the lives of those we know, in our country's policies, in all of our institutions. But no one claims to believe it. That's confusing.

We have lots of racisms, unique lies and stereotypes for different peoples who have been exploited or mistreated in unique ways. We have a racism for black people, a racism for Chinese people, a racism for Mexican people, a racism for Native people.

Our Unitarian Universalist principles ask us to call out these lies, and to affirm the goodness, perfection, brilliance, beauty, and rights of all people targeted by racism, both in public and in private. If you're aware of a person or an institution who seems to believe a bit of racism, Unitarian Universalism asks us to disagree. You don't have to turn it into a fight; no one wins a fight. But you can listen to them, and then say, that might not be true. They will get angry at you. They will bring up all the times they were taught that message, all the times they tried to think and disagree themselves but didn't have enough perspective or support or knowledge. And you can listen, and praise their ability to think, and then if you need to, say it again, gently: that thing you think - it might not be true. Just a seed of doubt is often enough to make a difference.

And sometimes that person who needs to be disagreed with and listened to is us. Our exposure to these lies has dulled our outrage. We find ourselves repeating them ourselves. We accept that racism is just "how things are," and say things like, "it'll never change." I understand. Many of us get confused and discouraged and tired and angry and sad just turning on the news, let alone being targeted by racism ourselves. It's enough to make anyone want to give up. But when you want to give up, let me tell you now - at those times, when you want to give up, that thing you think - it might not be true. We're not actually powerless. We can end racist policies and repair the damage racism has done. We really can.