

The Commission On Institutional Change Part II: Why Is This Happening?

Two Cultural Tensions Influencing *Widening the Circle of Concern*

By Dr. Kenneth Christiansen

Two long-simmering cultural tensions strongly influenced the content and methodology of *Widening the Circle of Concern*,¹ the final report of the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) Commission On Institutional Change. This report is now guiding proposals for the restructuring of the UUA. I will clarify both tensions and explain how each helped determine the content and direction of the 36 recommendations and 114 action steps in *Widening the Circle of Concern*, many of which are already being implemented.

What are these tensions? First, two different deeply imbedded world views are in conflict. One we are very familiar with – the Seven Principles. That’s the one we live by. Individual worth and dignity. A free and responsible search for truth and meaning. Democracy. It is why I am Unitarian Universalist. How about you? These are Enlightenment values. The world is objective in this world view. Facts are facts. Logic and scientific inquiry are important pathways to the truth. Freedom, Reason, and tolerance are very important values. Individuals are judged by their individual character and actions. I suspect that is what most if not all of us present today are living and breathing.

There is an alternative world view. You can see its appearance lots of places in history. It got spelled out in the 1970s and 1980s as Postmodernism. But it has many variations, many flavors. In this world view, facts are based on viewpoints. There is an argument for that. I have a viewpoint. You have a viewpoint. Why is your viewpoint better than mine? Or mine better than yours? In this way of looking at reality, stories convey more truths than logic and scientific inquiry. And community is more important than the individual. Communities are formed and guided by common stories.

There is one caveat in the way people look at this, not only in the UUA but in many places in our society. That is the belief that only people at the bottom of society can see what is really going on. There are arguments for that. People at the top don’t have to pay attention to life circumstances facing people not as fortunate. People at the bottom must pay attention to everything to survive. Therefore, only their stories are legitimate.

I am very aware that when I entered a volunteer ministry in my early 20s and lived near and worked in the Robert Taylor Homes Public Housing community in Chicago, I was totally baffled. What’s going on here? It was a totally different world. Everybody had to live by a very different set of rules than I had to live by. Both poverty and race played a part. I had to consider that, and many experiences since then, where I had to deal with the fact peoples’ worlds are different.

It was a very valuable learning lesson. Basic understandings can change if a person believes that 1) all truth is contained in stories; 2) everyone has a viewpoint; 3) facts can be very different for different people; 4) only people at the bottom can see the big picture; and 5) everyone must stick together to survive. Individualistic values like freedom, reason and tolerance are seen as causing much disruption. Therefore, they must be discarded or kept under control.

The last paragraph is a viewpoint. In my personal work, I try to understand the other person’s viewpoint. I try to feel the other person’s viewpoint. What would I feel given the same experiences? I actually try to go that far. Even when I disagree with a viewpoint, or especially when I disagree with a viewpoint, I try to understand it.

The second long-simmering cultural tension is two different ways that racism and antiracism have been understood and dealt with historically. This phenomenon is much larger than the Unitarian Universalist Association. But the UUA has certainly been part of the conversation, part of what's going on.

One way to deal with racism is to bring people from all different backgrounds together in coalitions to change discriminatory laws and practices. Discriminatory laws and practices are the focus. That was the path used by Dr. King with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and John Lewis with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. I think of this as integrated antiracism. Or asset-based antiracism where everyone from any background is considered a potential asset to the cause. This type of antiracism accomplished major changes in our country in the Civil Rights Movement.

Because of its effectiveness, integrated, coalitional antiracism has consistently been opposed by institutions and people with entrenched wealth and power. Nonetheless, it continues to be effective when people work together for positive change. Many UUs are experiencing this today in Church Based Community Organizations like Jacksonville's Interfaith Coalition for Action, Reconciliation and Empowerment (ICARE).

The other way to be antiracist is personal. Here the focus is on white racism and white guilt. White racism has been horrible in American History. White racism can and should be part of a larger approach. However, when it is the only area addressed, there is a problem.

In this more personal flavor of antiracism, racism is seen as a white people's problem with white people needing to fix it. The role for black, Indigenous and People Of Color is to encourage white people to study the history of white racism, and own that history as their very own, by acknowledging their White Privilege and their involvement in White Supremacy Culture. Since the roles for white people and black people are quite different, I see this as segregated antiracism, or segregating antiracism, or guilt-based antiracism.

The book, *White Fragility*,² published by UUA's own Beacon Press in 2018, the best-selling book Beacon Press ever published, is an extreme example of this approach. After George Floyd was killed there were two books that were sold all over the country: *How To Be An Antiracist*³ by Ibram X. Kendi, and *White Fragility* by Robin DiAngelo. Robin DiAngelo builds an extensive case that all white people are racist. Toward the end of the book she writes, "A positive white identity is an impossible goal. White identity is inherently racist; white people do not exist outside the system of white supremacy." Taking things this far leads to a very Manichean picture where all black people are victims, and all white people are oppressors.

Both of the conflicts I have just talked about, the Enlightenment vs. Post-Modernism conflict, and the Asset-Based antiracism vs. Guilt-Based antiracism conflict, both of these conflicts inform the structure of *Widening the Circle of Concern*, the final report of the UUA Commission On Institutional Change. This reflects a major shift in ways of thinking, and not just in the UUA.

¹ "Widening The Circle Of Concern," the 223 page final report of the UUA Commission on Institutional Change, June, 2020, is available for downloading at https://www.uua.org/files/pdf/w/widening_the_circle-text_with_covers.pdf.

² Robin DiAngelo, *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism*, (Boston, Beacon Press, 2018).

³ Ibram X. Kendi, *How To Be An Antiracist*, (New York: One World Press, 2019).