

## Two Approaches to Achieving Social Justice

By Dr. Kenneth Christiansen

Presented at a UU Church of Jacksonville Town Hall, March 20, 2024.

We need to look at the proposed changes to Article II in the light of two very different ways to achieve social justice. Both ways can involve deep human emotions. Both ways have the potential to make a positive contribution to community life, but don't always live up to their potential. Both ways have a long enough history to evaluate how well they do or don't work. Believe me, one way works a whole lot better than the other way when it comes to positive outcomes. I am going to make it as clear as I can which way that is.

I will start with a true story about guilt. That's right, guilt. Guilt is one of the most basic human emotions. Guilt was a basic part of my upbringing, and I suspect some of yours as well. The question this story raises is, how much, and what kind of, guilt is about right?

In about 1972, I was part of a group of ministers in a small town in Illinois, a group of ministers that started a Chaplain of The Day program for the hospital that served several small towns and the surrounding rural areas. The hospital had only about a hundred beds. Surgical and other services were limited. There wasn't any budget for a paid chaplain. On our designated days as "Chaplain of the Day" we visited anybody who needed a visit, especially patients who didn't have a regular minister. We were also on call for emergencies.

This worked out well at first. Then one day, a fundamentalist Baptist minister who was part of our group did something a little different. He visited all the very sick people he could find, got up real close to them, and asked, "Are you ready to meet your maker?"

I suspect you all are aware – that's not what hospital chaplains are supposed to do!

We kicked him out of the group. We also brought in a psychiatrist to talk with us about guilt. He explained the difference between "real guilt" and "neurotic guilt". Real guilt, he explained, is feeling bad about something we've done that is morally wrong. This can include bad feelings about things we've not done like allowing something bad to happen when we could have prevented it but didn't.

I suspect we can all think of situations where a guilty conscience motivated us to make amends for something we had done or something we failed to do. That is just part of life. When you slip up, own it. Reality can be hard to face. A message I heard from the psychologist John Bradford has helped me on more than one occasion. He said, "The only way out is through the pain." Real guilt is something that can be objectively acknowledged and worked through. It can be difficult. But you know what you are working with.

"Neurotic guilt," on the other hand, means having the same bad feelings, the same self-doubt when, realistically, we've done nothing wrong. This can mean feeling guilty about things we

have no chance of averting. Or guilt for things for which we feel obsessively responsible without there being any reasonable basis. This can lead to a lot of anxiety, negativity, self-doubt, depression, worry, fear and low self-esteem. In other words, neurotic guilt can, and often does, just plain shut people down.

We need to ask, **how much guilt is about right?** At one extreme some people never feel guilt. We call them psychopaths and say they have an “antisocial personality disorder.” (There are some famous examples of that.) At the other extreme some people feel anxious, guilty and depressed nearly all the time. When they are not avoiding us, they walk among us hesitantly. They are suffering from what can be called “neurotic guilt” or “toxic guilt” or “false guilt.”

I am very concerned how much damage misplaced guilt can do. From 1980 to 1997 I taught a Cultural Diversity class every semester at Defiance College in northwest Ohio. Students required to take my class were majoring in Education, Social Work, Criminal Justice, and Religion. Most of the students were white and from majority white communities. My task and my challenge was to help these students prepare to work successfully in diverse settings.

At the beginning of every class, we looked in depth at the history of prejudice, discrimination, and oppression in our country. It was powerful. Somewhere in the first several weeks it nearly always became clear that many or most of the Caucasian students in the class were feeling a lot of guilt. Not guilt for things they themselves had done. Rather, guilt for things members of their race had done historically. Or guilt for the advantages they or their racial ancestors enjoyed at others’ expense. Typically, these guilt feelings caused them to show signs of shutting down. They would carefully parse every response they made in class discussion. They acted very unsure of themselves. Open class discussion became difficult.

I did not see this development as healthy. I could only imagine how tongue-tied these students would be at the end of the semester and how limited they might be working in their chosen profession later in life when they needed to work competently with persons from all backgrounds. I felt a real need to help them overcome these symptoms of neurotic guilt.

My response was to share what I observed to be an empowering message. “If you have done any of the horrible things we have been studying, you need to figure out how you are going to make things right. If on the other hand you haven’t done those things, get angry about them instead of feeling guilty. Get angry at racism and oppression. Let that anger motivate you to observe what is going on in your community. Be compassionate and empathetic. Work with others to change discriminatory laws and policies. It is very rare that you can change things by yourself. But you can join multiracial coalitions that do have the power to change things. If there aren’t any multiracial coalitions in your community when you get there, you can help build one.” I found this message to be very helpful to my students. And to class discussion.

I want to pause for a moment to think about some things I just said. The reaction I saw in my class, students feeling guilty because of bad things done by people with the same color of skin, that reaction is not unusual. It is called **collective guilt**. I like the way I handled it. I did my best

to refocus the conversation on discriminatory laws and policies that need changing. When we focus on discriminatory laws and policies, it doesn't make any difference what color your skin is, or where you came from, or how rich or poor you are. You pay attention to the problem that needs solving. You join others from any background and any skin color to figure out a way to solve the problem. Then you go at it together. That was Dr. King's approach. His approach brought about many positive changes in the laws of this country.

I think you are all aware that Dr. King had many enemies. A primary goal of Dr. King's most powerful enemies was to break up coalitions of people working for change in discriminatory laws and policies. They were largely successful in breaking up the coalitions that formed the 1960s Civil Rights Movement. What happened and how it happened is a long and complex story. It involves the Black Nationalist movement, the FBI under J. Edgar Hoover, and many other actors.

Some of the changes that came about seem subtle at first. Rather than focusing on discriminatory laws and policies, why not focus directly on white racism? At first glance it sounds good. Racism reflects a bad way of thinking and acting. Where it exists, it is part of a person's consciousness. So why not make white people aware of their racism and change their consciousness? If white people change their consciousness, won't that change everything else?

Making white people aware of their racism, sometimes called "Consciousness-Based Antiracism," became the goal of many programs including the Unitarian Universalist Journey Toward Wholeness initiated in 1997. The message from the beginning was that all white people are inherently racist because they live in a culture that gives them many benefits based on the color of their skin.

Think about it. This was a segregating form of antiracism. The job of white people was to admit they are racist. The job of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color was to get white people to see how racist they are and hold them accountable. That was the message of the proposed Eighth Principle of Unitarian Universalism. The Eighth Principle was discussed for several years and adopted by some UU congregations. The spirit of the proposed Eighth Principle was continued in the work of the Commission On Institutional Change.

Currently, we are considering the proposed changes to Article II of the UUA Bylaws. These proposed changes delete the Seven Principles. They are replaced by a commitment to follow a new Social Justice program based on "love." "Love" is explained as including Generosity, Pluralism, Transformation, Equity, Interdependence, and Justice.

The true nature of the new program can be seen in the questions used by the Commission On Institutional Change to guide the creation of the new program. The Commission's "Research Study" utilized only two questions primarily addressed to Black, Indigenous, and People of Color Unitarian Universalists. Approximately 5% of that subgroup within Unitarian Universalism responded to the survey.

The questions were...

- In what ways have you or your group or community been hurt by current racist and culturally biased attitudes and practices within Unitarian Universalism? (repeat)

Second Question.

- In what ways have we, as a faith community, been living outside of our values and commitments?"<sup>1</sup> (repeat)

The focus on harm done to Black, Indigenous, and People of Color by white people in the Unitarian Universalist congregations became the determinative faction in the rewriting of Article II. Despite the claim that it champions justice, it is NOT at all constructed to bring people from all different races and ethnicities together to change discriminatory laws and policies. Rather, it is focused on white guilt.

Fortunately for us, Social Justice programs focused on changing discriminatory laws and policies are still alive and well in many places. That includes right here in Jacksonville in the ICARE organization and in Church Based Community Organizations elsewhere.

I want to share one more very positive example of a Social Justice effort focused on changing discriminatory laws and policies. I suspect you have all heard of Rev. William Barber. He is leading the kind of Social Justice effort Dr. King led where people from all backgrounds cooperate with each other to achieve justice goals. A story he told in the book *The Third Reconstruction* is very revealing. He talks about the challenge of getting people to cooperate with each other to accomplish justice goals. It's a big challenge in part because people have many different goals. And they don't always appreciate each other's goals.

In 2006, Rev. Barber took a survey of all the justice projects being pursued in the state of North Carolina. He found fourteen of what called "justice tribes." He describes what he found in the following words.

"We had folks who cared about education, folks who cared about living wages, and others who were passionate about the 1.2 million North Carolinians who didn't have access to health care. We [had] groups petitioning for redress for black and poor women who'd been forcibly sterilized in state institutions, [We had] organizations advocating for public financing in elections. [We had] historically black colleges and universities petitioning for better state funding. ... [We had] groups concerned about discrimination in hiring, others concerned about affordable housing, and people opposed to the death penalty and other glaring injustices in our criminal justice system. [Then there were] the movements for environmental justice, immigrant justice, civil rights enforcement, and an end to America's so-called "war on terror." Any one of these "tribes" had several highly committed people who'd been working on their issue for years. Some of them had been able to mobilize thousands of people for a particular event, especially when

their issue was a hot news item. But [Rev. Barber says, the prophet] Ezekiel's bold vision got me thinking about what could happen if we all came together for a People's Assembly in our state capital, to show the members of the General Assembly who their constituents are. What if the people most concerned about these fourteen different issues could form a twenty-first-century fusion coalition, [working together instead of working separately]? Might such an assembly even give us new language and vision for the place where we gathered?"

That was his goal. Guess how it worked out. He writes,

"In December of 2006, we called a meeting of potential partners for this new coalition. Representatives of sixteen organizations showed up. We started with a blank sheet of butcher paper and asked each group to write the issue they were most concerned about. [Those issues were all over the map. There was very little in common.] Then, on another sheet, we asked them to list the forces standing in the way of what their organization wanted. We learned something important at that first retreat: though our issues varied, we all recognized the same forces opposing us. [The same people opposing us.] What's more, we saw something that we hadn't had a space to talk about before: There were more of us than there were of them."<sup>2</sup>

I want to say one more thing about Rev. Barber. Thanks to an email list set up by some UUs who want to Save The Seven Principles, I have gotten to know a man by the name of Bruce Knotts. Bruce was a career foreign service agent for the US State Department 1984-2007. With that very rich background, he served as the full-time director of the Unitarian Universalist Office at the United Nations from 2008 until that office was closed by the UUA in 2022.

Sometime during this period, Bruce hosted Rev. Barber at the UN. What really struck Bruce was how Rev. Barber reacted when Bruce introduced him to the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Prince Zeid of Jordan. High Commissioner Zeid said, "We've really got to do something for black people." He said it several times. "We've really got to do something for black people." Every time he said it, Rev. Barber said, "No. All poor people." "No. All poor people."<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> "Widening The Circle Of Concern," p. xxiv.

<sup>2</sup> Reverend Dr. William J. Barber II, *The Third Reconstruction*, (Boston, MA, Beacon Press, 2016), pp. 49-50.

<sup>3</sup> Author's interview of Bruce Knotts on February 1, 2024.