

Liberal Voices in a Not-so-liberal Place

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When I was nine years old, I was walking on Walnut St. just west of Second, near the old barber shop. The year was 1964. It was summer so it was right around the time that the 1964 Civil Rights Act was signed by President Lyndon Johnson.

But the Civil Rights Act didn't have much sway here. For you see, no black people lived in Rogers. And that was no demographic accident. Rogers was white by intention. According to Dr. James Lowen, a Unitarian Universalist and author of *Sundown Towns: A Hidden Dimension of American Racism*, considerable effort, going back as far as 1907, and perhaps even before that, was made by white citizens of Rogers to keep blacks and other racial minorities from settling here.

On the day I walked on Walnut Street, I didn't know all that. What I knew was that the barber shop reminded me of Floyd's on the Andy Griffith show. It was a place where men, some in overalls and some in business suits, gathered to share the news, gossip, and pass the time. This day was no different but because it was hot, the men were gathered out on the sidewalk instead of sitting in the shop.

As I walked toward the light at Second, I noticed all the men had stopped talking and were staring into the street. At first, I thought maybe something had gone wrong with a chicken truck on its way to the chicken plant on Arkansas Street. But it wasn't a chicken truck everybody was staring at. It was a big old blue Chevy. When I looked closer, I saw what had caught everyone's attention.

In the car, was a black family, adults in the front seat and several kids in the back.

I had seen black people before -- when we've gone up to Detroit to visit relatives and sometimes when we went to Fayetteville.

But this was the first time I had ever seen blacks in Rogers.

Nobody said anything to the people in the car when it stopped for the red-light at the corner. Everybody just stood there – staring at them. The car was turning left on 2nd Street. At that time, you pretty much had to go right through downtown Rogers to get anywhere north or south of town.

I remember thinking, *it must be pretty scary to be watched like that*. And yet, I was watching too. I was watching because it was so unusual to see black people in Rogers. I was watching because everyone else was watching. I was watching...

When the light turned green, the car lurched forward, choked, and then lurched again like the driver was having trouble getting it into gear. The kids in the back seat all grabbed on to the front seat and hung over it, like through their encouragement, they were trying to help the man, probably their father, get it started again. Anxiety was clearly rising. The woman—I assume it was their mother—said something to the kids and they immediately threw their little bodies back against the seat but they didn't look very happy about it.

When the car finally started running again, it proceeded carefully through the light so as to not draw more attention than it already had and headed on its way out of town. People on the street kept looking until they couldn't see the car anymore, then when it was out of sight, started talking among themselves again. I couldn't hear what they were saying but I knew from the looks on their faces, the way they shook their heads, and gestured with their hands, pointing toward the car that was no longer there, that they hadn't liked what they just witnessed.

I went home that day and told my mom what I had seen and asked her why everyone stopped what they were doing and stared. My Mom responded, "I don't know, dear. When I was growing up in Detroit, I had lots of black friends. They were no different than anybody else. But people around here don't like them very much. I guess

they were trying to scare them. I don't understand it either." And with that she shook her head and drew silent.

That's the first time I distinctly remember coming face-to-face with Rogers attitudes about race. But over time, I learned more about Rogers' history and witnessed many more examples of how hard it worked to maintain its white identity.

Before the arrival of Daisy Manufacturing Company, Rogers was a pretty sleepy town of about 5,000 people that hadn't changed much in quite a few years. Before Daisy's arrival in 1958, and some say even after, signs on the outskirts of town greeted visitors to Rogers. I never actually saw the signs but I've talked with others and seen reports of people who remember them. There is disagreement about the actual wording and location of the signs, but there is no disagreement about the intention: if you are anything other than white, we better not find you here after dark.

I do remember hearing the whistle that blew loud and strong at 6:00 every evening. I often asked what the whistle was for but no one ever seemed to know. James Lowen says a whistle like that was common in sundown towns to warn black domestic workers and others, it was time to get out of town. I don't know if that was the reason for the Rogers whistle but it does make me wonder.

Residents of Rogers might have feared that Daisy, which moved from Plymouth, MI, a town just outside of Detroit, would bring with it a different sensibility about race, but they had little to fear. Plymouth, interesting enough, was also a whites-only community and in fact, its black population today is even smaller than Rogers'.

I have no evidence that Daisy chose Rogers because it was all white. But it does raise a question: out of all the places it could have chosen to move, why did it choose to come to Rogers? I'm pretty convinced I know the answer to that question.

Blacks still comprise only 1.6% of the population in Rogers. For you see, it takes just as much intention as was used to keep blacks out to make a community welcoming to those it once excluded.

In 2005, the Arkansas Democrat published an article, entitled “The White Place: A good home and a little isolation in Northwest Arkansas” about a black family, who had moved to Rogers for a job. One of the adults had grown up in Little Rock and according to the article,

“That left both of them with preconceived notions about the atmosphere in Northwest Arkansas. ‘The reputation within the state is that the area is racist,’ Shanna said. ‘We knew Harrison was the headquarters for the Ku Klux Klan. No one wanted to come here for college, because this area of the state always had bad connotations.’”

They were nervous about moving here, and although they report being treated well, with only a few notable exceptions, it is hard that there is no black community, no black churches, and few other blacks to connect with. In the seven years since that article, I’m sure more blacks have moved here but their numbers are still well below the national average.

But that doesn’t mean that Rogers is anything like it was fifty years ago when I stood on that downtown street corner and observed racial intimidation first hand. For one thing, you are here. There is a Unitarian Universalist congregation forming in Benton County. That in and of itself, is pretty remarkable, especially to someone like me who has been away from Rogers for so long and has memories of a town dominated, almost exclusively, by ultra-conservative Southern Baptists.

The population of Rogers has increased 10-fold in the past fifty years and the Latino/Latina/Hispanic population has grown exponentially. I don’t have to tell you that. I remember, when I was a teenager, the only Mexican restaurant anywhere around the area was on the road to Bentonville (that’s when there was open space between Rogers and Bentonville and you could tell when you left one town and arrived in the other). Now there are Latino markets and restaurants everywhere you look. The little Catholic Church of my youth with its 100 or so families now boasts 3,000 families, one in five Rogers residents, and offers three or four Masses in Spanish every weekend.

People from cultures and ethnicities around the world have converged on Northwest Arkansas, Latino, Hispanic, Marshallese, Vietnamese, Indian, and many others. Those men standing in front of the barber shop could no longer hold back the tide of change.

But with diversity there is a danger. Change has come so fast here that no one has really had the time to adjust, to make the connections that need to be made, to develop relationships that cross boundaries.

That is where you come in. Now you are here, in this place with its complex past and its even more complex future. How will you bring healing to Northwest Arkansas of its painful racist past? How will you work to prepare yourselves and others in your community to fully embrace its multicultural future?

Northwest Arkansas has an incredible opportunity to show the rest of the world how to live in multicultural community. But it will not happen without a concerted effort to cross borders, to learn to understand each other, and commit to working together across cultures. If all you do is co-exist, Martin Luther King's dream of Beloved Community is only an unrealized fantasy.

The Rev. Peter Morales, president of the Unitarian Universalist Association, challenges us to get religion, grow leaders, and cross boundaries.

As a Unitarian Universalist congregation, you make a covenant, a promise to affirm and promote, among other things, the inherent worth and dignity of every person, Justice, equity and compassion in human relations, and the goal of world community with peace liberty, and justice for all. Our Unitarian Universalist faith is grounded in these principles and as a Unitarian Universalist congregation, you are called to embrace them.

I became a Unitarian Universalist over twenty years ago because it is a faith that calls me to be engaged in the world around me and that challenges me to change – to open my heart and my mind to a different way of being, one that embraces multiple

ways of seeing the world, and that exposes me to cultures and ideas other than my own. To me, that is the ultimate spiritual practice and, at the same time, an incredible spiritual discipline -- my willingness to concede that my way is not the only way, that people from other cultures and other lifestyles have something to offer me and that in opening myself to those ideas, not only will I grow as individual but I will contribute to the world becoming whole.

It is not easy work. Unitarian Universalism calls us to let go – to be vulnerable – to leave our comfort zones – to push ourselves when we are so tired we don't know if we can take another step. But, I can assure you, the rewards equal the task. I know because I have witnessed Beloved Community manifest in Unitarian Universalist communities I have been a part of.

It doesn't take long before, as a Unitarian Universalist, you can, at least every once in a while, begin to envision a future where peace is valued above war, where love trumps hate, and where our children grow together without the clashes that separate us today. And you become richer for the experience, you become more whole, you become more at peace.

According to the Reverend Rosemary Bray-McNatt, "Nothing that Unitarian Universalists need to do is more important than making justice real—here, where we are." Justice comes in many forms from issues of poverty to environmental justice to issues of oppression. What would justice look like in Northwest Arkansas? Only you who live here can answer that.

As a Unitarian Universalist congregation you have a choice to make. If you are like most congregations, you have come together because you have found sanctuary together, sanctuary from the conservative religious values that surrounds you, sanctuary from the intolerance, sanctuary from bigoted and even racist thinking.

Sanctuary is an important role for our congregations to serve. But if all you do is offer each other sanctuary, I encourage you to form a social club rather than a Unitarian

Universalist congregation. A congregation must feed the spiritual needs of its members, it must reach out to include others in its liberal religious embrace, and it must work for justice in its community.

“Get religion, grow leaders, and cross boundaries.”

I hope that rather than coming here to find like-minded people, you come here to find like-hearted people – people who doesn’t necessarily think like you do but who are working to find understand, to build relationships, to love.

I hope you come here for sanctuary but in that sanctuary, you renew each other’s will to go out into your community and challenge racism, to confront homophobia, and to work for justice in Northwest Arkansas.

You may already know that the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee is an active partner with the Northwest Arkansas Workers' Justice Center (NWAJWC) whose mission is to improve conditions of employment for low-wage workers in northwest Arkansas by educating, organizing, and mobilizing them, and calling on people of faith and the wider region to publicly support the workers' efforts. As you grow and develop this congregation, I encourage you to consider your own partnership with the Center. You will find a willing partner that will teach you as much about justice and community building as you have to offer.

True partnership is hard work but in the end, if it is done right, both parties grow more than either ever imagined.

But before you can be strong enough to develop strong partnerships, you must grow. I often hear UUs say they don’t like to evangelize. They don’t want to be like those other churches pushing church on people. And yet, unless we are willing to invite people into our congregations who are different than we are and make them feel truly welcome, they will not enter our doors. Unless we are willing to invite people in, we will

remain mostly white, mostly college-educated, mostly middle-aged, mostly middle-class, mostly just like us.

You have a unique opportunity to gather a multicultural community within your congregation. But just like Rogers used to be intentional about keeping people who were different out, you must be intentional about bringing people who are different from you in. And I do not buy the excuse that Hispanics would never become Unitarian Universalist. Ask our ministers Lilia Cuervo or Marta Valentin, or our active lay minister Mar Cardenas if you have any question about an Hispanic's love of this faith.

And I do not buy the excuse that people from India would never be Unitarian Universalist. Ask our ministers, Ahbi Janamanchi or Manish Mishra, and how they came from India to become Unitarian Universalist ministers.

And I don't buy the excuse that African Americans would never find a religious home in Unitarian Universalism. Ask our ministers Cheryl Walker or Hope Johnson or John Crestwell. They challenge all of us to open our eyes to a broader view of who is a UU.

And I don't buy the excuse that Native Americans could not find enough spirituality in Unitarian Universalism. Ask our ministers Daniel DiBona or Clyde Grubbs.

We are a diverse, multicultural faith and I challenge you to do more than open your doors to the diversity around you, but to active seek it out and invite the richness of the human family that has converged on Northwest Arkansas in. Work together to realize the true vision of Beloved community. Not only will the lives of the people you welcome be changed but your lives, too, will be infinitely richer for the experience.