Equity as My Spiritual Practice

At the UUA General Assembly this June, changes were made to Article II in our UUA bylaws, which included new shared values, demonstrated in a flower graphic. Love is at the center, depicted over a chalice, and around the chalice the values are listed as petals, each petal outlined by the different colors of the rainbow: interdependence, equity, transformation, pluralism, generosity, and justice. The definition of equity in Article II is "We declare that every person is inherently worthy and has the right to flourish with dignity, love, and compassion. We covenant to use our time, wisdom, attention, and money to build and sustain fully accessible and inclusive communities." Equity has been a part of my spirituality and career for much of my life, but in the last eight years it has become the biggest driver. I wanted to share with you today why and how equity has become such an important part of my life and how our church might further embody the value of equity.

To start at the beginning, I grew up as a white girl in a town that was almost entirely white. My mother is half-filipina, and she would tell my brother and me stories about the racism she and her family experienced while growing up in Chicago. It was heartbreaking, for example, to hear how when she was a young woman, men were not allowed by their parents to have a serious relationship with her…But in the small town in Connecticut where I grew up, she was a valued community member. I did not witness racism toward my mom until I was an adult and we traveled through rural Pennsylvania. I do not recall recognizing incidents of racism as a child, so although I saw racism as an important problem, it was something that happened afar or in the past.

When I was a high school senior, I went through a bit of an existential crisis as I questioned my childhood Protestant religion and I determined that there was no Grand Plan or purpose for us being here on Earth. I remember lying in a hammock on our deck in the woods of Connecticut, questioning my choices for after high school and what I should do with this arbitrary, random life. If there was no purpose in life, then I had to create my own purpose, and I decided that my purpose was to improve the lives of those who were suffering from poverty, violence, or war. Admittedly, this was formed as a naïve, white savior complex, with a sense that the others could not do it for themselves.

I went to college…and there's a reason some people call those years the "formative years" in one's life. In college, I lived on the same floor with people from different backgrounds, social class, countries, and religions, including Muslim women from the Middle East. Because of that I became very involved in anti-war demonstrations in Boston opposing the First Iraq War. In college, for the first time I was among people who were open in expressing their sexuality. And one summer I worked at an overnight camp for adults with intellectual disabilities. These experiences resulted in a few things. One, I pulled away from the Protestant church I grew up in, because I loved my gay, Jewish, Muslim, and Buddhist friends, and I could not imagine a loving god feeling differently about all his children on earth. Two, I learned that white Americans are often unaware of many factors in issues that play out in different parts of the world, including within our own country, and so we often need to step back and let someone

else lead. Third, I experienced wisdom, grace, and connection with people who were considered to be "less than" me.

Fast forward through graduate school, to working as a bilingual school psychologist. School psychologists are responsible for evaluating students to determine if they qualify for special education services and providing recommendations for the child's education program. A big bulk of my career has been working to reduce the number of Latine students being labeled as having a learning disability or intellectual impairment, which is often the result of confusing a students' lack of English proficiency for a disability.

My frame of attack was primarily from a linguistic perspective, as well as the cultural differences between the school and the students' families, but racism still felt afar to me, like it did when I was a child. I could see the systemic racism, such as school funding and a higher percentage of Black students being suspended, but racism was not something that I "saw" happening in my personal world. In my mind, I was working towards equity, but racism felt like something that was beyond my reach.

It was not until Trump's presidency when my eyes were opened to the proximity of racism occurring around me. For one, people felt more comfortable saying racist statements out loud, like a staff person at a school who told the elementary Latine students after Trump was elected that they would be leaving the country soon. But mainstream and social media began to amplify the voices of people of color, and they taught the different ways people are racist. I attended the workshops and discussions that our church held on racism and white privilege. I started recognizing the racism around me and in me, with stereotypes that I had learned while growing up in a white culture. I took to heart something Bryan Stevenson said. He is the founder and director of the Equal Justice Initiative and author of the book "Just Mercy." Stevenson said, "We can't change the world unless we do things that are uncomfortable and inconvenient. Sometimes, you need to position yourself in uncomfortable situations to see the truth, to see things for what they are." One of his recommendations is to get proximate to those who are different from you.

I began working more closely with colleagues of color and became more open to listening, and as I did, I witnessed racist incidents and how it emotionally affected my colleagues and impacted their work environment. I also saw how some incidents would not be characterized as racist, but the tone with which a person treated my colleagues of color was significantly different than how that same person treated me, despite my colleagues and I being in similar roles. I learned how to recognize the racism, but confronting it, for someone who wants to avoid conflict, is one of the uncomfortable things for me that Stevenson spoke about.

As a white, cis, heterosexual, able-bodied woman, it costs me less to speak up than it does for someone who is in a marginalized group. I have seen this, as when I advocated at work, I was "speaking up," but when colleagues of color spoke up, they were described as, "disrespectful," "complaining" or "having hurt feelings."

In my work towards racial equity, I have made mistakes because I had not yet learned enough about the stress and trauma of racism. As part of a lead team at work, I tried to

address the attrition of staff of color, but in a staff meeting, we put the discussion of the problem at the end of the agenda and ran out of time, making our colleagues of color feel dismissed, and then even more alienated as we stumbled in trying to rectify our error. Our good "intentions" were erased by our ignorance, and we created more damage. It was a lesson on the importance of prioritizing impact over intention. But, to do that, we must understand the impact.

For example, there are many white people who have made the decision to stand behind the statement "Black Lives Matter," yet they unknowingly make microaggressions to people of color. A microaggression is an indirect or unintentional discrimination against a marginalized group. Some examples are touching a Black woman's hair or telling someone who is filipino that they look like just another filipino person you happen to know. A microaggression related to sexuality might be to assume that someone is heterosexual, like asking a woman if she has a husband. An example related to disability would be to tell a person that they are inspiring, or that they do not look like they're autistic. Those are not BAD things on the face of it, but to someone who is on the receiving end of those statements or actions repeatedly, it is a reminder that the person speaking does not understand the daily frustrations and discrimination they face. Learning the many different microaggressions that people can make, is something that I continue to learn because there are so many. I want my actions to make someone feel included, not "othered."

As I struggled in my work for racial equity, I realized I needed to learn how to do it better. So, I participated in the Equity Professional Program by 4th Dimension Leaders, a six-month course with educators from all over the state, where we learned about systemic racism and implicit bias in public education, and how it negatively impacts our students of color. I also participate in a book club with colleagues that focuses on anti-racist books. This book club has a diverse group of people participating, and to hear the reflections of my colleagues of color is the most valuable aspect. I am so humbled by their generosity of time and sharing.

I've learned that it's not just about avoiding saying or doing the wrong thing. It's also about saying and doing the right thing that leads towards equity. And doing the right thing might mean doing something new or in a different way–like the uncomfortable or inconvenient. The way we've been doing things in this country…state…town…has led to segregation and discrimination. So, we need to do some new or different things.

In this church, I learned how to parent in new ways that were more inclusive of gender identity and sexuality. I'm very grateful that my children, who were raised in First U, grew up witnessing their parents and their church loving people who are in same sex relationships. As a parent, I tried to not make statements that assumed my children would have opposite sex partners when they were older. Now my children are young adults, and they and their partners are my teachers in understanding the use of different pronouns, and the microaggressions to avoid. I am practicing the relatively new skill of using *they* as a pronoun when referring to a specific person. A person feels safe when their correct pronouns and name are used because they know that they are being recognized and seen for who they are.

As I said before, it's part of my job to advocate for the needs of students with disabilities in schools, but I had not focused on their rights outside of school, until I started learning American Sign Language (ASL) last fall. I began following Deaf content creators on social media, learning about Deaf history, Deaf culture, the discrimination they face every day, and what accommodations they need to participate in community life.

In my ASL classes, I met people who volunteer to interpret at their churches' worship services. They consider it part of their personal ministry. And that got me thinking about the accessibility of church. The Pew Research Center reports that about 42.5 million Americans have a disability. A survey in 2022 found that 10% of U.S. churches offered accommodations to people with disabilities. Only four percent of Deaf people go to church; and about 5 percent of those with visual impairments attend church. For millions of people, church can be an isolating place. One reason is because churches are exempt from the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which was passed in 1990, meaning churches are not required to provide accommodations to people with disabilities. Many church organizations had lobbied against being included in the ADA due to costs and limiting the government from interfering with religion. In 1997, the Unitarian Universalist Association General Assembly passed a resolution to undertake "an aggressive plan to address accessibility within the Association for people with disabilities," with the goal that by 2020 half of our UU churches would be fully accessible—which includes removing architectural, communication, and attitudinal barriers. A certification in disability access, called Accessibility and Inclusion Ministry, or AIM, was established by a UU organization called EqUUal Access, with two U's in the word equal. By 2022, only eight UU churches had become AIM Certified, and so the certification program was discontinued.

Amanda Schuber, a UUA disability justice associate, wrote, "In both the political and medical model the "problem" lies with the individual, but what if, what if we were to start to see the experience of being disabled as an impairment within society at large, highlighted by our unwillingness to adjust our infrastructure and our understanding so that those with disabilities are not only granted access, but (are) fully recognized as valued parts of our global community? How different would our world look and feel with an understanding that a person's functioning is not the issue, but rather our society's lack of accommodation and inclusion is the true disability?"

For me, this brings to mind the history of Martha's Vineyard. In the 17 and 1800's there was a higher percentage of Deaf people on Martha's Vineyard, due in part to the isolation of the island. On the mainland, the deaf to hearing ratio was 1 in 5,730. On the island, the town of Chilmark had a Deaf to hearing ratio of 1 in 25, and the town of Tisbury had a ratio of 1 in 49. As a result, for about 200 years, the Deaf were integrated into the community, owning businesses, and participating in church and government affairs, with the hearing and Deaf population both communicating in a sign language that became known as Martha's Vineyard Sign Language. It's been said that sometimes people did not know who was deaf or hearing, and that hearing people would sign with each other. As transportation improved, the island became less isolated, the percentage of Deaf people decreased, and the Martha's Vineyard Sign Language was lost, as was access for the Deaf to the community. Deaf advocates point out that if American Sign

Language was taught in all our schools, the Deaf would again have full access to participating in community life.

A few years ago, our church made some big strides in making our building more physically accessible by putting in a lift, transforming a set of stairs into a ramp, and making our front doors automated, as just some examples. I am so grateful for those members who put their time and energy into making those changes happen. For many years, we have provided headphones to amplify the sound during worship for those who are hard of hearing, and we've been a nut-free building for a long time for those with nut allergies. But are we accessible to everyone?

If you recall, the UUA General Assembly urged our churches to remove architectural, communication, and attitudinal barriers to create more inclusive churches for those with disabilities. But I think we can look at those three things when thinking of all marginalized groups. Architecture may be more important to some groups, while our communication and attitudes may be more important to others. I've learned that there are some big and little changes needed to make our church communications accessible to everyone, particularly with those who have hearing or visual impairments. You may have noticed that some of the readings today had the text posted on the screen. This was our AV Tech Lead's and my way to explore how to provide more text for those who are deaf or hard of hearing. Closed captioning of the entire service is a technical challenge that will take time, and possibly money. The Worship Associate and I also described our appearances at the beginning of the service, and I described the graphic of the new UU values at the beginning of the sermon, for those who might not be able to see us or it. Some other ways to be more inclusive in our communication is to have pictures in our publications of a variety of people, not just white, able-bodied people.

There are other non-technical ways to be more inclusive, too—which I think addresses the attitudinal aspect of equity. For example, coffee hour can offer challenges to people with disabilities. In crowds, it can be hard for someone with a mobility or visual impairment to navigate the room or the food table. Someone who is hard of hearing may struggle to converse with all the background noise. A neurodiverse person may feel overwhelmed with so many bodies close together. These issues keep some people on the literal margins of coffee hour. A disability advocate that I saw online had stated that as a culture, we do well with asking questions to accommodate people with different dietary needs, such as vegans or people with food allergies. But we do not do this with other accessibility issues, and while I'm sure sometimes it's because we are unaware, I think at times it's because we're afraid to say the wrong thing. As a congregation, I wonder how we can ask the right questions to help people engage in fellowship, if needed. Or, what if the person feels intimidated because there is no one like them at coffee hour? How do we welcome them without accidentally "othering" them?

There is so much to be done in working towards equity, and our church has been a part of this work for me. It is more than just a series of tasks, it is a value that requires learning and self-reflection. It requires humility, accepting that you will make mistakes, learning to apologize, and then continuing to practice having learned a little more. If I complain that it's not the way we do things, it is a time to check for my value of equity and inclusion. Equity is a value that has made my world larger and more dynamic

because I'm learning new ways to do things. I have learned to consider situations from new perspectives, seen beauty expressed in different ways, and have challenged long-held assumptions. Although equity started as a value to improve the lives of others, working towards equity has improved mine.