

# White Bear

# Unitarian Universalist Church

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## A Distant Cousin

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## A Distant Cousin

A little while back I was away for the weekend in the middle of Isanti County and to a city dweller like me, it felt like I was in the middle of nowhere. I was in the middle of farms and forest as far as you could see in every direction. I saw fresh bear tracks, heard owls.

I went for a walk down those long country roads, where the blocks are a mile on each side. And after I'd walked for a good long time, there by the side of the road was the sign for "Elm Park Cemetery." It was a little thing: a patch of mown grass, ten fifteen feet by thirty, right up against the edge of the woods which had swallowed up old farmland and the rest of the cemetery 70 years ago. It only had one plot, a flat headstone right flush with the ground, two feet by one foot. Around the stone was the low fence you use to keep rabbits out of the garden, covered in silk flowers so old, so weathered that the color had bleached away from some completely.

The stone was almost completely obscured by leaves from the last fall, and grass around the foot of the fence that had grown long. And I bent down to clear it away. I could see only three letters in the middle of the last name: "HWA" and I thought, well here's some German immigrant. And as I cleared away the debris, the rest of the name appeared: "SCHWARTZ". Schwartz! In the middle of nowhere half-forgotten cemetery by the side of the road. But even better, as I clear away the rest of the stone, I saw the full name: "Charles Schwartz, 1917-1999," My grandfather, still alive, is Charles Schwartz, born 1917.

So there in the middle of Isanti county was a distant cousin – though it's doubtful I'm actually related, I was struck with a kinship and connection to this unknown man who shared the name and birth year of my grandfather, and whose body lay under grass and leaves and weathered silk flowers.

Once upon a time (goes Louis Simpson's poem) there was a *shocket*, that is, a kosher butcher, who went for a walk. Seized and pressed into service in the navy against his will, he sailed all around the world, was twice shipwrecked and had other adventures. Finally, he made his way back to the village ...whereupon he put on his apron, and picked up his knife, and continued to be a shocket.

At this point, the person telling the story would say, "This shocket-sailor was one of our relatives, a distant cousin."

It was always so, they knew they could depend on it. Even if the story made no sense, the one in the story would be a relative — a definite connection with the family.

A definite connection to the family! They show up everywhere. It's true, apparently, with Schwartzes, and it's the same way with Unitarians. Last fall I was humming a lullaby by the great old folksinger Malvina Reynolds I learned as a little child (I won't sing for you) – and a few months later, flipping through a 7<sup>th</sup> & 8<sup>th</sup> grade religious education curriculum for the kids here, was shocked to open a page at random and find her photo and biography. She was, it turns

out, a folksinger, an activist, a regular Sesame Street contributor, and a Unitarian. Finding her name in that curriculum book was the equivalent of finding “Schwartz” in the middle of Isanti county. A random folksinger out of a childhood memory, and here she was a Unitarian. A distant cousin, a definite connection to family.

Everywhere I go I find these connections. I found out on the same day that Tim Berners-Lee: the man perhaps most responsible for creating the world wide web, was a Unitarian and lives in my home town! A twofer!

The closer you look, the broader that circle of kinship becomes. It spreads out, in overlapping rings, to networks of friends, and friends of friends, until it circles the globe, and any person in the world is only six degrees of separation away from you, less if you’re on Facebook.

That kinship, that sense of relatedness – of a definite connection with the family – is bigger than name or faith, it is bigger than time or place, bigger than race or class. It’s what the Universalists taught two hundred years ago, and what we mean today when we affirm that each person, that every person has an inherent worth and dignity, and nothing, nothing can take it away. It’s a definite connection with the family to every person in this world, and all who have passed on, and all who are yet to come. We are all distant cousins.

I’ve got to stop myself here, because I can run on this line of thinking for a long time in the abstract – how great it is that all people are brothers, and so on. It is what I believe, but it has no teeth, it’s still abstract. But I am reminded of the Linus from Peanuts who said once, “I love mankind – it’s people I can’t stand.” General “goodwill to all” and affirmation of brotherhood are abstractions in search of concrete reality.

So let’s give it some teeth and put it to the test, and ask what it means to affirm that we are all distant cousins. That the story of every person is our story as well.

A thousand miles due southwest of where we’re sitting, there is a different story unfolding in Arizona.

Federal law requires aliens – people living in the US who are not citizens – to register with the government and carry with them proof of that registration. In state law SB1070, Arizona made the violation of those same requirements a state crime, and allowed state police officers to arrest anyone in violation of that requirement. But there’s more here: officers can demand papers from anyone they have “reasonable suspicion” is not a US citizen. What does that mean? It means if it seems to a police officer that you might not be a US citizen, they can demand proof of citizenship from you.

If everyone in the US was white, and you couldn’t tell a citizen of Mexican heritage apart from a citizen of Norwegian heritage, “reasonable suspicion,” might require actual detective work. But the primary, most easily identifiable characteristic shared by immigrants from Mexico is a darker skin color than me.

Senate Bill 1070 states that police “may not solely consider race, color or national origin” when executing the law. But the language is doesn’t mean a whole lot.

I think this is cynical language, and here’s an equally cynical analogy to explain: if I was told to pick out a basketball player from a group of people, and instructed not to solely consider height in making the determination, I’m still going to pick the tall person, but I’m going to come up with some other reason why I picked them. “Well, he’s tall *and* he’s wearing sneakers!” that means I’m not profiling, right? Never mind that most of the really tall people I know aren’t basketball players, that my whole approach is fundamentally flawed.

The idea that police “may not solely consider race, color or national origin” when executing the law is a red herring. And it’s a big part of why I think the legislation itself will not withstand a legal challenge. The law is a license to stop non-white people and require them to provide proof of right to be where they are.

But I’m not here today to talk about the legal failing of this law. And I’m not here to talk about the fourteenth amendment guaranteeing equal protection, or states rights vs. federal rights. I’m not here to talk about the effect I think this would have on community-police relations. I’m not even here to talk about immigration policy. After all, we can, we do, disagree about immigration policy. How many people should come in? What should the legal status be of people who are here? Of children who have grown up here to undocumented immigrants? We can disagree about these things – and do it without being disagreeable.

I’m here to talk about why a law that allows police to stop non-whites and demand papers is an affront to me not just as a citizen who takes citizenship seriously, but as a person of faith.

As a white Minnesotan, the ugliness of Bill 1070 has less to do with immigration policy, and than with the fact it allows any police officer to stop any person who the officer thinks might be an undocumented for nearly any reason and demands papers from that person. This means, if you are not white in Arizona, any cop can stop you and ask for proof of citizenship. That’s racism. There is no plainer way to say it, though they are plenty of ways to cover up that fact.

As a white person, the racism in that law, and in America is like this to me:

A house is on fire in the middle of the night on the other side of town. And in the dark, with hundreds of other people, I’m watching it burn. It’s not my house, it’s not theirs either. We’re all waiting for the fire department to come and put the fire out. But there is no fire department, and it burns and it burns.

So we go home – each of us cloaked in that anonymous night, we pick a path through the darkness back home. And then, each of us, alone in our quiet house, faces the question: what will I do, now.

Will I collect my buckets and hoses, whatever few inadequate tools I have, and go back again, back to this fire, now far away, back out of the comfort of warm home and hearth, back through

the dark night, back down the unknown path, back to the house on fire, back where I don't want to go to a project I tell myself is not my problem, where I don't need to go?

Will I go back again even if I am the only one who will return? And will I make a line, and work together, and start to pass buckets of water from hand to hand. Will I work even if we don't know if we can put it out, or if there are enough people to, or if the well will run dry, or if we will spend our whole life fighting it, only to leave it for our children to keep fighting, still burning?

Yesterday, in Phoenix Arizona, our minister Victoria and her daughter Hope joined thousands of marchers, among them dozens of UU ministers, marching to protest that law 1070. It was a ministry of presence, a physical witness to justice, to show, by putting people in the streets, hand in hand, that injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.

She wrote this last night:

Greetings from Arizona!

Thousands and thousands of people marched for 3 ½ hours today under a bright Arizona sun to protest Senate Bill 1070. The theme was resistance, but the spirit of the march was joyful and filled with hope – a true rainbow coalition of brown, black, red and Anglo Americans. Hope and I found a strong contingent of Unitarian Universalists from all over the country (including former WB Intern Rod Richards). Again and again, people on the street approached us to thank us for coming.

Two young speakers, 10 and 11 years old, addressed the rally before the march in both Spanish and English. One spoke of family who were deported. Both reminded us that federal immigration reform is urgent and cannot be decided by single states. They set the beat for thousands of marchers with the chant:

*¡Obama, escucha!*  
*¡Estamos en la lucha!*  
*Listen, Obama, we are fighting.*  
*¡Sí, se puede!*  
*Yes, we can!*

Why? Why do it? Why go, why go back to that fire and out of the comfort and anonymity of your own home. What is the why that sends you there that is deeper than good feelings and more certain than good thoughts.

Unitarian minister Ken Ollif puts the question this way:

“what about our liberal faith calls us to do this work? ... we know that we will not come to theological consensus, and perhaps it is better to concentrate on the work we can *do* together rather than argue over *why* we do it.

“But without a theological component our roots remain shallow: We can only articulate anti-racism in terms of “shoulds,” but we are unable to express why working on behalf of anti-racism goes to the depths of who we are as a people of faith. And we need deep roots in order to sustain us through a long and difficult journey.”

What is strong enough? Something bigger than our own personal moral compass, which can let us off the hook, give us permission to stop, tell us our fears are justified. Something bigger than our intellect, which can excuse us. That same intellect which I can turn towards undoing injustice I can apply towards excusing myself from doing anything about it and our intellect can do excellent work in explaining it's not our problem. What are the theological roots of anti-racism.

For us, answering that question *why* doesn't mean finding the scripture verse that's going to be the key. It doesn't mean telling you what God is like and why God thinks you shouldn't be a racist. It doesn't mean someone else instructing you what two thousand years of church history says. Those aren't what we're here to do, that's not what faith is.

Each of us has to work that out for ourselves: with your whole mind and your whole heart and your whole community, and your whole life.

So let me testify today to my own experience of it.

Why am I anti-racist? I am anti-racist because I am a human being and so is everyone else.

At the root of being human says the writer Annie Dillard, there is an “ocean or matrix or ether which buoys the rest, which gives goodness its power for good and evil its power for evil, a unified field: our complex and inexplicable caring for each other, and for our life together here. This is given. It is not learned.”

This caring is a mystery beyond thought and words that we see only partially, or intuit, and treasure when we feel it moving in our own lives. And I have no name to give it, or words to shape it or constrain it. But I know this spirit will never leave, never abandon, never forsake, never depart, even if we lose all sense of it, even if we forget ourselves, even in death, even when we ourselves are no longer even a memory in this world, as long as there are other women and men in this world, that ocean endures, that well will not run dry.

That caring, that kinship, which I can sense with my rational mind, I can describe and explain, but begins somewhere much deeper. For me, that's the source, the root, the call for justice which I can ignore, but which never goes away. It is what calls me as a white person, against the privileges I enjoy, against all the looks I never have to see, against all the benefits that come with this accident of birth, it calls me to take up whatever tools I have, and stand on the side of love.