

None of Us Free

Rev. Adam Lawrence Dyer – (San Diego) July 11, 2021

I am Rev. Adam Lawrence Dyer, Lead Minister of First Parish in Cambridge, I use he/him pronouns and it is a joy to be back with you here in San Diego...even if it is through electronic medium. Not only do I still simply love the City of San Deigo and have some of my dearest friends here but thinking back to my time...now 6 years ago when I had just finished my internship here at First UU San Diego, I have such fond memories of many of you and how you supported me. And it fills me with many emotions. I'm put in mind today as we focus on Pride, of my California Equity Ministry project. You rallied funding to help me go around the state and engage people in conversation on how they think about racial and economic equity. Most importantly, those were conversations where I was able to understand better how equity shows up in our UU faith communities in the emerging Black Lives Matter movement. I'm happy to report that I have continued with that work, developing my own theories about equity and religion and I'm poised now to do some extensive scholarly writing about this subject. In fact, earlier this spring, I had a piece published in the Harvard Kennedy School LGBTQ Journal titled "Religious Equity: A Path to Greater LGBTQ Inclusion". My hope is to build on this theme by writing more about LGBTQ policy from an equity perspective as well as writing about the experiences of people of color leading white congregations through the equity lens as well. None of that would have been possible without the start you gave me. Thank you.

I'm also aware that you are now in the throes of transition. It is complicated for those of us who have had previous relationships with the congregation, particularly as interns. Although we still hold great love for each of you and for the organization, we have collegial relationships and professional obligations that require us to remain at a certain distance which may feel somewhat cold or off-putting, but it is part of how we honor our powerfully covenantal faith and polity, allowing each congregation to do their work independently. I come here to personally wish you well in your journey and also as the representative of one of your fellow UUA member congregations First Parish in Cambridge bringing you a prayer for clarity and

excitement for the future, but most of all the wish of love for our faith and what is capable when it lives into its best promise.

All of this is to say, it is an honor to be able to be here particularly at this time, in this year to share a brief reflection about PRIDE.

Someone I have remained connected with in San Diego is the Executive Director of San Diego Pride, Fernando Lopez. Not only do I just love him to pieces, I think of him as one of the smartest people I've known, personally and professionally. One thing that always stands out for me with him and with the way San Diego Pride comes together as a result of his leadership is that it is not a bubble. Sure, there are politics, sure there are issues...where there are people there is stuff...but I know from my conversations with Fernando that his ideas about PRIDE, like my own are not limited to the borders of one neighborhood, one city, one county, state or even one country. The underlying impulse that brings together PRIDE in San Diego is understanding what it means to affirm all people's sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics publicly as part of a global movement. This is a gift to you.

I'm sad to say however, that many UUs have become "queer-placent"...like *com*-placent but queer. Meaning that although there have been flurries of energy...some momentum has been lost. There was energy in the 70's around "gay liberation" followed by some strong, if sometimes inconsistent, activism around AIDS in the 80's and 90's, then interest in becoming "affirming congregations" in the early 2000s and then a literally denomination wide push on "marriage equality". Images of angry gay, lesbian and trans folks marching and chanting in the streets feel old fashioned now. Because AIDS has become medically manageable (even if the medications can be prohibitively expensive and inaccessible to some) things feel less urgent. And now that marriage equality is the law of the land...we've lost some of our mojo here in the United States and to a surprisingly large extent in liberal religious spaces like Unitarian Universalism.

But folks, our work is not done. In fact, I would argue that our work never really began because it was always turned in on our immediate needs. If we didn't know someone who was gay, know someone who is trans, we haven't felt compelled to stay informed. We haven't remained

engaged in the tangible “make a difference” kind of ways that could change some of the horrible outcomes we see growing in this country and across the planet.

On a domestic front, the backlash from a Trump loss is evident in the scores of subtle and not so subtle local and state bills across the country that are moving into law to inhibit the lives of trans people. Whether it is the blatantly asinine “bathroom bills” or the much more subtle healthcare laws that restrict life affirming care for anyone with gender and sexuality concerns, conservative religious institutions are determined and well organized to make life hell for LGBTQ people in this country.

But they are not just emboldened by the Trumpists. They are emboldened by a global conservatism that has seen a stranglehold grip growing on LGBTQ people in Hungary, Russia, Ghana, Finland, across Micronesia, the Philippines and most recently in Hong Kong as the Chinese government cracks down. The language and the strategy is new...laws that target “indoctrination” into a supposedly deviant lifestyle...but the goal is the same: exterminate LGBTQ life.

As part of my ongoing study of equity and religion, I’ve done a great deal of research into the history of colonialism. I can comfortably say that one of the primary reasons we have people working so hard to suppress LGBTQ life on a global scale is because of all of the ongoing bits and pieces of colonialism. Colonial era penal codes from the British, Spanish, Dutch, German and Portuguese still dictate law in many parts of the world and many of those codes contain punishment for specific sexual acts. What is most interesting about many of these codes is that they were put in place primarily to control the colonizers and not the colonized. They remain in place as the blueprint for government even in these now independent states.

And if you think the United States doesn’t have this problem, just consider the fact that only in 2018 did Massachusetts finally get rid of the fine for “fornication” in its general laws that dated from the 1600s.

So, I’m not here to get into a dissertation on colonial buggery laws. My purpose in bringing this up is to make you think and ask you how often have you thought about LGBTQ oppression in central African countries? How often have you thought about it in Indonesia? You may not

have thought about it at all, and THAT's the problem. Too often, because of our own colonial roots, and because of our polity, we focus exclusively on the local concern. I believe we can better serve the local community when we are able to hold ourselves accountable as part of the global community as well.

And I want to encourage you to not just go to the political place. This is the UU knee jerk reaction...how can we change the vote, what is the policy, who do we need to influence in government...I want to encourage you to go to a deeply and powerfully *spiritual* place. It may be uncomfortable for some of you, especially those who see social justice as the great reflection of your "faith". I would argue that social justice cannot reflect what is not there. The expansive nature of Unitarian Universalism is ripe for us to recognize humanity in all of its forms. It is a theology that demands that each of us recognizes the humanity of even those people who cannot see or receive our own. It wants us to live into a promise of human connection and affirmation that gives us all of the different rights that add up to our inherent dignities and independent webs and rights of conscience. Unitarian Universalism, where LGBTQ identities are concerned needs to be less of a mirror looking back at one and more a portal through which we can receive all.

"How do we do that" you might ask? In my world and in my personal theology within Unitarian Universalism its simple. I pray. I pray for the people who are oppressed, the people I know will die at the hands of others or by their own hand today because they are told that they are deviants. I pray for the people who create that oppression. I pray for myself as one small agent of change in a vast sea of change. I pray.

You may not pray, per se, but as a community of faith, I think you/we must take the time and the intention to deliberately try to hold the world in our hearts. Faith is not an organizing collective, faith is a project of emotion, connection, hope, loss...and it is the one place where you have the excuse to openly cry because things are either so good or so bad.

I want to close by offering you encouragement. Fannie Lou Hamer said that "nobody's free until everybody's free." She was right. If you believe these words as I do, freedom cannot start with an action. That would be a little bit like starting your car and getting on the road without

knowing where you want to go. Freedom begins with the belief that you can be free even with the pressure of everything that says you cannot be free. I want to encourage you to find a way to own in your heart just a piece of the sentiment of Mrs. Hamer's words...hold in your heart the ways in which you are not free...hold in your heart the many ways in which LGBTQ people across this globe are not free...feel that pressure. And feel how precious freedom becomes under that pressure.

Don't forget, pressure makes diamonds...and like diamonds, any actions you take as part of LGBTQ liberation will be more valuable, sharper and more dazzling having experienced the pressure and the spiritual hunger to be free. May it be so.