

Clearing Myths from Our Mirrors

Mirrors are tricky things.

I suppose we learn early on that they aren't entirely accurate. I remember the funhouse mirrors at the carnival when I was a child, that could show me taller or shorter than I really was or even distorted in waves. And I've noticed, as the number of candles on my birthday cakes have increased significantly, that the person I see in my mirror every morning, appears to be much younger than when I see that same person in photographs. One of them, the mirror or the camera, seems to be wrong. But these distortions are minor compared to what happens in the mirror of Erised. Some of you know about the mirror of Erised already. But if you don't – here is the story.

During Christmas break of his first year at Hogwart's School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Harry Potter was trying to hide from a couple of staff members and he stumbled across a magnificent mirror in an unused classroom. To his amazement, in that mirror, he saw his parents, who had died when he was an infant, along with other deceased relatives he had never known, all of them seeming to be alive and aware of his presence. This orphan spent a long time in front of that mirror and was so captivated by it that he returned the next two nights to gaze into it. On the third night he was confronted by Dumbledore, the headmaster.

Dumbledore said "So, you have discovered the delights of the Mirror of Erised. I expect you've realized by now what it does? It shows us nothing more or less than the deepest, most desperate desire of our hearts. However, this mirror will give us neither knowledge or truth. It does not do to dwell on dreams and forget to live.

And yet, mirrors can be very useful things, in reality and as metaphor. It is helpful to examine ourselves and our ideas and try to understand who we are and why we are who we are.

But how do we know whether what we are seeing is accurate? How do we figure out the condition of our mirror? How do we determine if we're gazing into a magical reflection of desire which may entrance us but lead us nowhere or seeing a more mundane or even unpleasant truth?

The first clue might be where we see ourselves positioned in the mirror. And to be clear. I'm not just talking about individuals. I'm also talking about groups. Congregations. Communities. Families. One of my seminary professors, Greg Mobley, regularly reminds his students – remember these are people who plan to become ministers – people who want to help others and are always practicing pastoral care skills on each other and praying for people and carrying out public acts of social justice – good people - he says "whenever you start feeling really good about your people – whether that is your family or your denomination or your congregation – remember - at some point in history, probably many times in history, somebody lost and somebody won. Your people won and that's why you're here now. Do you know what they did to win? How does that affect your role in the world today?"

One of the victories which we, as a denomination, are descended from is the Protestant Reformation. At least the Protestants consider it a victory and we Unitarian Universalists are very Protestant. I've heard Michael Hogue, he's a professor of theology, ethics, and philosophy of religion at Meadville Lombard Theological School, the UU seminary in Chicago, describe us as "post-Christian" and "hyper-Protestant." I think that's accurate. Over time, we have taken one of the most significant elements of the Reformation – the idea that each

individual can have a direct relationship with God and refined it to the point that our community is filled with uniquely individual spiritual paths. And that's a good thing.

But there can be a down side to individualism. If we see our salvation – our deliverance from harm – our liberation from ignorance – as completely independent of other people, it can create a sense that we are at the center of the universe. It tends to place us right smack in the middle of the mirror.

It is a position that denotes importance. Power.

It is a position which tends to obscure those people who haven't made it to our level of salvation, or enlightenment, or security. They're somewhere behind us or off in the corners.

Maybe, the angle of our perspective, how we frame it, is why we don't notice the myths in the mirror.

Most of us, maybe all of us, in this room, grew up being taught some version of the golden rule, fairness, things like taking turns. But we were also taught that competition is good, winning is good, getting and having and owning is good, which is sometimes kind of an odd fit with the golden rule. And we were taught that this is a land of equality, that anyone can succeed if they work hard.

That is a myth.

A widely held but false belief or idea. Kind of like the term "common sense." In his book, *The Seduction of Common Sense*, about reframing how we look at education, Kevin Kumashiro says "What we take to be "common sense" is not something that just is; it is something that is developed and learned and perpetuated over time." Common sense is a myth because, like history, it is constructed by those in power. And they are rarely concerned with truth.

I spent most of my life thinking me and my family have what we have because we're good hard-working people. During seminary, while I learned a lot about things I expected to learn – ethics, scripture – stuff like that, I also learned I had been living a myth. Through some really good books and looking much more carefully in the mirror than I had in the past, I realized the economic survival of my grandparents was directly dependent on the oppression of African-Americans, in their case especially because of food deserts and occupational segregation. Much of my parents' economic success was due to my father's veteran's benefits, enabling the son of share croppers to earn a college degree and buy a home on very favorable terms, beginning the accumulation of assets which still support my mother. But the vast majority of black veterans were never able to access those benefits. We had more because of what was denied to others.

This doesn't change the fact that I was taught to be polite and respectful to everyone including the people of color who I worked beside in my grandfather's fields. It does not nullify the good intentions of my father promoting racial equality in our church in the late 1960's until criticism of his efforts encouraged us to leave that denomination. It does not change the fact that, despite growing up in a small southern town, I never heard the "n" word used until I was in elementary school and heard it from some classmates.

But we benefited directly from the oppression of people of color. And we still do. We are complicit because we are part of the system and we did not attempt, in any substantial way, to change it.

And it matters.

It matters because clearing away the myth of equality and opportunity from the mirror shines the light of truth on our journey.

It matters because it changes our position in the mirror from one of well-intentioned liberal innocence and kindness to one of complicity and responsibility.

It matters because the deeply embedded systemic and enduring nature of racism and white supremacy in our society means that restoration requires drastic change and that is much harder to accomplish if you can't even clearly see the problem. If the mirror is full of myths.

It matters not because of blame or guilt – those solve nothing - but because of responsibility. We are talking about millions of lives, millions of bodies, assaulted and broken and raped and killed, over 600 years, and continuing today. Specifically, so that white people, originally northern Europeans and eventually a bunch of other communities who managed to claim the title of white, could build an empire and flourish.

And those kinds of numbers can be difficult to relate to.

But if most of what I have is due to choices and liberty and property and breath itself being intentionally taken away from others, where is my moral claim to what I have? If I have little or no moral claim because of the manner in which it was obtained, do I not have a responsibility to make things right?

I talk about my family and my life partly because it is easier for me to call myself a sinner than to make that determination about someone else. And because I believe that ultimately the only people we can change are ourselves, although changing ourselves reverberates through an interdependent universe, inevitably altering others.

And I want to look at a bigger mirror for a moment.

What about us? Us Unitarian Universalists. What's the condition of our mirror?

The good news is that Unitarian Universalists are right in the thick of trying to clean our mirror. Committed to the light of truth and change.

The anxiety is that Unitarian Universalists are right in the thick of trying to clean our mirror. How will we nurture the light of truth and change?

We are conflicted and, my siblings, we are complicit.

Yes, we have a proud abolitionist history, including right here in Syracuse. And we have many buildings and endowments, especially in the northeast part of the country, which were funded from commodifying and exploiting the bodies of people of color.

Yes, twenty percent of all Unitarian Universalist ministers in the country participated in the events in Selma, Alabama, in the 1960's. And in the same decade, we lost untold thousands, maybe tens of thousands, of members of color because we refused, as a denomination, to allow them the financial and administrative autonomy to begin to grow restorative justice within our movement.

We're still trying. We are trying to clear myths out of our own mirror and take responsibility for what we have created.

While there are other religious communities who emphasize social justice, I don't believe there are any who value social justice more than Unitarian Universalists.

Clearing the myths from our mirror matters because comprehensive restorative racial justice is a project of epic proportions. In her book *Whiteness and Morality*, Jennifer Harvey argues persuasively that taking apart our entire economy and system of government and rebuilding it is the only way to adequately atone for the racial injustice which has transpired on this continent. And as radical as that may sound, when we understand that the very idea of race, of white supremacy, of whiteness itself, was created specifically in order to build an

empire, we can at least consider the argument that the profits of evil do not belong to those who perpetuated the evil or to their descendants.

What is our responsibility?

We can have all the good intentions in the world, but they mean nothing if we are not willing to at least consider what we might give up in order to move a little bit further along the arc of the moral universe.

Is there more we can we do, in addition to what we are already doing?

I'm going to name a few ideas. I'm not asking you to agree with any of them – and being good Unitarian Universalists, I am confident you will tell me if you disagree with them - but I do ask you to keep in mind the enormity of the imbalance of power in our society and the scale of change that is needed. So here goes -

Will you consider supporting Unitarian Universalist congregations and the Unitarian Universalist Association itself liquidating all their assets, including their buildings, and investing the proceeds in anti-racism programs and organizations run, led, and controlled by people of color?

Will you consider restructuring our congregation's stewardship plans to commit half of all current assets and future income to anti-racism efforts?

Will you consider pledging a percentage of your personal income and time, even just 1%, to movements and organizations specifically designed to dismantling white supremacy? Writing it down, keeping track of it, maybe not doing or buying something you enjoy one month because this is more important. I am aware that some are already doing this, even if the commitment is not so specific. Even if you're not writing it down.

Will you consider attending, once a month, every month, a religious, political, or cultural event led by people of color?

Will you commit to your own creative concept, which takes place outside of the walls of this building, to change what you see in the mirror?

There is an incredible amount of love in this place, this congregation, and this denomination. There is so much injustice in this world that we need every drop of that love. The clearer our vision of who we are and what responsibility we bear, the better choices we can make and the more healing we can support.

May it be so and Amen.