

Uncomfortable Conversations

Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda

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Emmanuel Acho is a former football player, now a sports commentator and author, who heard many questions from white friends about Black liberation movements around June of 2020. He decided that many other white folks might be wondering similar things, so he started a YouTube channel with a series called

Uncomfortable Conversations with a Black Man.

In his *Uncomfortable Conversations* series, he goes on for several episodes that include interviews with white celebrities, interracial families, a church pastor in a mostly white congregation, a mostly white police department in a mostly white California town, as well as the commissioner of the National Football League. He sought to have frank conversations for the sake of educating his white friends.

Immediately after seeing his first episode, I was intrigued. Not only is he taking on the task of explaining many questions I've encountered about Black liberation movements – or questions I've had myself, but he also does it in a very accessible way. His goal is not to guilt folks or make people feel bad. I'm not even sure he's going out of the way to cause discomfort, but he acknowledges that conversations about race can be uncomfortable – not just because of the history behind these conversations, but because many of the stories and experiences may be unfamiliar to folks who don't share his background.

There are questions that white folks may be uncomfortable asking, being unsure of how they will be received. And there are also questions that white folks might not even know are there, or might not have the words with which to express some parts of that conversation.

Therefore, these can be awkward conversations – uncomfortable conversations.

There are also parts of the stories of Black people and of racialized People of Colour, which might simply not reflect the experiences of white people, and may be therefore hard to relate to, understand, or fully appreciate, if you are white. When there is such a large gap in people's assumption of how life is for others, there can also be discomfort, even as expanding understanding may develop.

One of the things I especially appreciate about Emmanuel Acho's series is that, while it has a reasonably high production value for a YouTube series, it's also somewhat unpolished in the conversations themselves. In later episodes, when he interviews with different leaders, celebrities, and families, the conversations seek a level of sincerity that doesn't always present itself in perfect expressions... people trip over their words, stumble upon the concepts they are trying to get across – or the concepts they are trying to grasp. There are raw emotions, and sometimes contradictory conclusions.

I realized that I don't always agree with everything that Emmanuel Acho says – or the way he says it – and the same goes for what many of his guests have to say, or the way they say it... and that's OK. I still appreciate the effort that he makes in educating me from his lived experience, and the effort that his white guests make in pursuing personal growth and community development.

Uncomfortable conversations don't have to be perfect – it is far more important that they happen. To be sure, coming in with an open mind, a respectful demeanour, and a sincere heart, are all part of the equation, but perfection is not a requirement. Learning is inherently messy... otherwise, learning wouldn't be needed to begin with!

I should point out here that Emmanuel Acho has willingly taken on this task of hearing and answering these questions, but that will not always be the case, and it's important to be mindful that People of Colour

should not be expected to constantly take on the role of educator – but when they do, it is important to take the opportunity to listen to what they have to say.

Now, there's one uncomfortable conversation worth bringing up this month...

Since the last time I was at this virtual pulpit, just two weeks ago, a number of historic events have happened at our country's doorstep, including an insurrection at our neighbouring country's legislative building, as well as an unprecedented second presidential impeachment.

A lot of analysis has already been had about the meaning of these events, and I won't go over all of it now. But one of the aspects of it that is still often overlooked, and which bears reminding on the eve of the US holiday honouring Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., is the racist element in the insurrection.

Many people were quick to point out the disparity of the massive police presence last summer in Washington D.C. during Black Lives Matter demonstrations, versus the sparser, and ultimately inadequate, security presence when a mostly white mob made their intentions to storm the Capitol building known.

Even more apparent was the ideology that was welcome among many in that mob, as there were Confederate battle flags visible, outside and inside of the building.

Perhaps less obvious was the inherent element of white supremacy that was present through the longer developments leading up to that insurrection.

Many authorities have not minced words in branding key players in that insurrection as terrorist organizations – specifically white nationalist terrorists. Though it is telling that the label hasn't caught on in popular

speech, even though acts by other groups – who are often foreign and from racialized backgrounds – have often been accepted as terrorist acts without a second thought.

Of course, there are many dimensions to the events of the past couple of weeks, including complicated socio-political and economic factors, bureaucratic details, and even questions about the role of technology in public discourse. But the fact that white supremacy was a central element cannot be forgotten or ignored.

So, where does that leave us?

It is too easy to dismiss this conversation as an “American” thing... and that would be a mistake. Not only is this happening across the Lake from us, in a land where many in our community hold close ties, but it also overlaps with many issues that are also often ignored in our Canadian home. Certainly, the white supremacist legacy of colonialism endures in today’s relationships with First Nations, and it’s also important to remember the oft-forgotten history of slavery in Canada, which many in our community have been learning about over the past year.

And I’ll remind us that Wanda Robson was still alive at the unveiling of the \$10 banknote recognizing the struggle her sister, Viola Desmond, went through in countering white supremacy in this country – not that long ago.

My friends, part of the mission of our Universalist-founded church, in its ever-expanding goal of radical inclusivity, is in keeping up the ongoing conversations – sometimes uncomfortable conversations – that help us understand, and *act*, on these present issues. Here, we can stumble along, and respond to each other with grace – perfection is not a requirement – what matters is that we have these conversations toward an ever-expanding understanding.

My friends, we always take time in February, as part of Black History Month, to make space for these conversations, we'll have a guest speaker with lived experience on these matters, and our main task is to listen, with sincerity and open-mindedness, as we continue the constant task of sitting with the wisdom handed down to us, even if it's sometimes uncomfortable.

And February is not the only time we do this... today we give a nod to the US MLK holiday, and we've talked about this last summer, but the conversation is important throughout the year, because, as we have seen the past two weeks, the spectre of white supremacy is insidious throughout the year, and looms even when we're not paying attention.

My friends, today, we keep paying attention. In this coming year, we'll keep paying attention. We will pay attention.

So may it be,
In Solidarity,
Amen

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Suggested Hymns:

Opening Hymn #1 Prayer for This House

Words: Louis Untermeyer, 1885-1977, © 1923 Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, renewed 1951 by Louis Untermeyer, reprinted by perm. of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company

Music: Robert N. Quaile, b. 1867

OLDBRIDGE

Hymn #149 Lift Every Voice and Sing

Words: James Weldon Johnson, 1871-1938

Music: J. Rosamond Johnson, 1873-1964

© 1921 Edward B. Marks Music Co., renewed

LIFT EVERY VOICE

Meditation Hymn #1009 Meditation on Breathing

~)-| Words & Music: Sarah Dan Jones 1962- , © 2001 Sarah Dan Jones

Closing Hymn #287 Faith of the Larger Liberty

Words: Vincent B. Silliman, 1894-1979

Music: Bohemian Brethren, *Kirchengesang*, 1566

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