



DISCUSSION GUIDE | 2017-2018

**UUA Common Read:**  
**Centering**

*Navigating Race, Authenticity,  
and Power in Ministry*

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# Introduction

*Centering: Navigating Race, Authenticity, and Power in Ministry*, edited by Rev. Mitra Rahnema (Skinner House, 2017), has been selected as one of two books for the 2017-18 Common Read.

The book includes nine essays by different authors, each one a religious professional of color. Each essay is followed by a response, also from a religious professional of color. The book's format is different from that of previous, single-author Common Read selections. It is also the first book to center the stories, analyses, and insight of Unitarian Universalists of color who are offering their professional religious leadership.

The book is a joint project of the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association's Committee for Antiracism, Anti-oppression, and Multiculturalism and Skinner House Books. Committee chair Rev. Josh Pawelek, who is white, offers this reflection on goals and hopes for the book:

*The publication team imagined that interest in Centering would extend far beyond religious professionals of color, hoping that the book would have a transformative impact on all of Unitarian Universalism. It matters that Centering was written by religious professionals of color for religious professionals of color. There are many resources on the arts of ministry that include sections on cross-cultural engagement. But these resources are almost always written with the assumption that the religious professional engaging across cultures is white. Rarely, if ever, is the religious professional engaging across cultures assumed to be a person of color entering into white culture. So, where is the resource for religious professionals of color who provide ministry in institutions where the dominant culture is white? As far as we know, it doesn't exist. But it needs to exist, especially in Unitarian Universalism, because more and more people of color are serving as Unitarian Universalist religious professionals in our historically white institutions. Centering is an attempt to begin filling the resource gap. And more than filling a gap, it inaugurates a new paradigm for the creation of ministry resources.*

The fact that *Centering's* primary intended audience is religious professionals of color has important implications for how groups discuss the book in congregational settings where the dominant culture is

white. This Common Read invites and challenges us to keep the voices and experiences of religious leaders of color at the center of the discussion.

This guide provides the opportunity for congregational groups to read and reflect on some of the important insights offered in the essays. There are two different plans, one for a single session and one for three sessions; the full three sessions will, of course, give participants a better sense of the depth and breadth of the work.

The guide also invites people who identify as white to enter into discussion of this book differently than they would a typical book discussion or adult religious education experience. In approaching this book, those who have no lived experience as a Unitarian Universalist religious professional of color are invited to put aside the temptation to focus on or share “something similar that happened to me.” Participants create a covenant together, promising to enter into the reading, reflecting on, and discussing of these essays with humility and a willingness to listen. Please make available in advance the handout, *Spiritual Practices for Reading and Discussing Centering*. Although participants will likely wish to read the entire book, let them know that you will be reflecting on and discussing these essays in the three-session version, and only the Jackson essay in the single-session version:

- Othering and Belonging, by Rev. Darrick Jackson
  - Response, by Rev. Lilia Cuervo
- Call and Response, by Rev. Lauren Smith
  - Response, by Rev. Dr. Susan Newman Moore
- Representing, by Rev. Manish Mishra-Marzetti
  - Response, by Rev. Rosemary Bray McNatt
- The Religious Educator of Color, by Rev. Natalie Maxwell Fenimore and Aisha Hauser, MSW
  - Response, by Rev. Sophia Betancourt

## Using this Guide

The discussion guide is flexible. Adapt it to congregational, cluster, or district programming for adults of all ages and life stages, for campus groups or young adult groups, for youth groups, or for cross-generational groups of adults and youth. Two formats for discussion are offered:

- A single 90-minute session
- Three 90-minute sessions

Any session can be expanded by lengthening the time for conversation, discussion, and sharing.

While the guide asks facilitators to write questions and prompts on newsprint, [slides](#) are available to use instead if you have access to a computer and projector.

# Single-Session Version

## Goals

- Allow participants to practice centering the experiences of religious professionals of color.
- Invite readers to share their reactions and reflections in a trusting community.
- Invite participants to act from their Unitarian Universalist values in response to what they learn from the book.

## Materials

- Chalice or candle and lighter, or LED battery-operated candle
- Newsprint, markers, and tape
- Handout: Spiritual Practices for Reading and Discussing *Centering*
- Optional: Computer with Internet access

## Preparation

- Set out the chalice.
- Make copies of the handout.
- Write these covenant points on newsprint:
  - o We promise to practice centering the experiences of people of color, and guard against letting the conversation morph into a discussion of the white institution.
  - o We promise to refrain from problem-solving discussions.
  - o Although those of us who are white may at times feel guilt and shame in response to the stories in the book, we promise to keep the focus of the conversation on the experiences of people of color and not our own emotions. We will find trusted others with whom to process painful feelings outside of this discussion time.
  - o We promise to take note of times when experiences of people of color stem from a rejection of the leadership authority of people of color.
  - o We promise to approach this discussion with humility.
- Post the proposed covenant and cover it with a blank sheet of newsprint.

- Optional: Bookmark UU White Supremacy Teach-In resources ([www.uuteachin.org/](http://www.uuteachin.org/)).

## Chalice Lighting and Introductions (5 minutes)

Welcome participants. Light the chalice and share these words from the handout:

*May we practice humility in the presence of these sacred stories. May our humility engender in us openness, patience, sensitivity, gracefulness, and love.*

Invite each person to introduce themselves and to share what brought them into the room for this discussion. Tell participants that after a conversation about your covenant, you will spend your time focusing on the first essay, Othering and Belonging.

## Creating a Covenant (30 minutes)

It is important to ground discussions of *Centering* in shared spiritual practices and shared agreements. Lead a discussion of the handout, focusing on each paragraph in turn. Use these or similar words to frame the discussion:

Most Unitarian Universalist adult programs and small group ministries welcome perspectives and stories that spring from the lived experience of group participants. However, this time we will take a different approach. We are going to practice centering narratives that are not our own direct experience. The focus of the book *Centering* is on the experiences of religious professionals of color in Unitarian Universalist congregations which are historically majority white and reflect white culture, and that is what its content describes. They are sacred stories not often shared with colleagues and parishioners. Our time together will offer space for those stories to be heard, appreciated, and affirmed just as they are, written from the perspective of each author. While participants who are people of color may wish to share ways in which these stories resonate with their own experiences, white participants are invited to receive them as an offering, and to engage the spiritual practice of centering those stories without connecting them to their own.

Let's look together at Spiritual Practices for Reading and Discussing *Centering*, entering this time with curiosity, open-heartedness, humility, and a willingness to live into a new way of engaging. We will craft the covenant for our time together on the basis of those practices.

Talk about the handout paragraph by paragraph, spending about five minutes on each. At the close of the discussion about each paragraph, slide the blank newsprint down and reveal the corresponding point on

the proposed covenant. Ask participants to signal agreement on each point of the proposed covenant before moving on to the next. When you have finished discussing the handout and have general agreement on the covenant, ask if any points need to be clarified, added, or amended. Note changes on newsprint. When the covenant is complete, invite participants to again voice or signal agreement.

## Receiving the Narrative: Longings (10 minutes)

Remind participants that your focus for this session is on Othering and Belonging, the essay by Rev. Darrick Jackson, and the response offered by Rev. Lilia Cuervo. Lead participants in conversation, asking:

- What longings did you hear in Jackson's essay?
- What are the parts of the culture of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church that offer Jackson a sense of belonging?

## Discussion: Navigating Cultural Differences (20 minutes)

Share this passage from pages 5-6 of the book, or ask a participant to do so:

*The intellectualism in Unitarian Universalism comes with a culture of stillness. We are expected to sit quietly in our seats, listen intently with no emotion on our faces, no movement in our bodies. We are supposed to wait until after the service to express ourselves. I grew up in a culture of engagement. We had permission to respond to the service, to say Amen when we were moved by the words or music, to clap our hands and smile and nod our heads whenever the spirit moved us. We lived the hymn "When the Spirit Says Do" every time we gathered for worship. I have had to learn to restrain myself in UU circles, which distances me from the worship. Sometimes our worship feels more like a lecture to me. The first time I preached at a UU congregation, I was unsure of how my sermon was being received because there was no visible response. It wasn't until after the service that I learned that people did enjoy the sermon. Even now, I get slightly unnerved by the lack of response. I construct my services with UU stillness in mind; any attempt at a more embodied worship feels experimental and risky instead of one of many ways worship happens. I have always loved youth and young adult worship, as those services are generally more heart- and soul-centered and invite engagement and connection.*

*Engaging UUs in conversation about these areas where I feel disconnected from the UU culture is hard. I often struggle with how to say something, or if it is worth it. I worry about the other person's reaction, and I have to decide if I have the energy to deal with it. Often when I engage*

*with someone about these matters, the conversation quickly turns to them (how they feel about it, how they are not to blame, and so on); instead of engaging the issue, I'm engaging their needs.*

Invite participants to rest with the words for a minute. Then ask:

- What is Jackson telling us about the ways in which he feels disconnected from UU culture?
- When he does decide to speak about the disconnection he feels, what in the reaction of the other person leads to an even deeper experience of “othering”?
- What emotional work is Jackson describing that is not typically asked of a person who finds white UU culture comfortable?

## Discussion: Being Change Agents (10 minutes)

Say, “In her response to Jackson’s essay, Rev. Lilia Cuervo, who came to the United States from Colombia, recounts some of her experiences as a Unitarian Universalist minister.” Read this passage from page 16, or ask a participant to do so:

*Once I liberate my mind, my body feels free to move, to clap, to feel alive during worship. My heart aches seeing so many people in our pews restraining their desire to give in to joy through movement, frozen by fear of judgment. That is why, in my first sermon at First Parish in Cambridge, I promised that sooner or later I would have them dancing. I fulfilled my promise, and it was a happy day for me when, during a Day of the Dead service, five couples spontaneously, one by one, proceeded to dance in the aisles to the mariachi music.*

*Just by being present, a minister of color not only changes the makeup of a congregation but, if allowed to exercise leadership, helps over time to create an environment in which transformation can happen in small and big ways.*

Then lead a discussion, using these questions to guide you:

- What are both Jackson and Cuervo telling us about the experience of embodied worship and the difference it makes for them?
- What do these two narratives tell you about the stress experienced by a religious professional of color who is seen as a change agent, a cultural “other,” or a disruption to accepted UU worship practice?

## Reflecting and Acting (13 minutes)

Share this quote from page xii of the book, which is part of Rev. Mitra Rahnema’s introduction:



*Often a person of color is one of the most visible and invisible people in a culturally White faith community. A person may be highly visible by the way they look, or by name, language, accent or tone, or simply because of the energy created by a felt difference in culture. Yet a person of color's personhood, unique beauty, struggles, spirit, identity, and experiences are invisible to the White community, often because of assumptions, projections, bias, micro-aggression, and discrimination. It is common to hear in culturally White communities some version of "When I look at you I don't see race. I just see human." Yet people of color do not have the option to experience life this way, which means our experiences become invisible. The visibilizing of people of color and the subsequent invisibilizing work together to create perceptions that we just don't fit.*

Lead a discussion about how your group might follow up on this book discussion. As the discussion proceeds, remind participants of the covenant promises not to center their own reactions or move into trying to solve problems for the congregation. Here are two suggestions for follow-up:

- Encourage the rest of the congregation to read this Common Read book, with care and attention to the experiences of each essayist. Share what your group has learned about how to approach the narratives, using points from the handout.
- Explore the many resources on the [UU White Supremacy Teach-In website](#). This project, initiated and overseen by three UU religious educators of color, asks that congregations deliberately set aside time to learn more about white supremacy culture and how to dismantle it. Meet with the minister and/or other appropriate leaders to advocate for your congregation's participation (which need not be on the dates specified on the website).

## Closing (2 minutes)

Share this reading from page 43 of the book, a quote from Cuervo:

*We need to highlight the wealth of experience, the wealth of knowledge, the wealth of education, the wealth of culture—all these things that we bring. Some of them are invisible or barely visible, and the congregations and the world need to know what we are here to do, that we can do it a very excellent way.... Ministers of color bring the love. We bring the warmth, the compassion. So this kind of contribution cannot be just ignored. We need to put it out there.*

Extinguish the chalice. Thank participants.

# Three-Session Version

## Goals

- Allow participants to Practice centering the experiences of religious professionals of color.
- Invite readers to share their reactions and reflections in a trusting community.
- Lift up the importance of making space for the leadership and the stories of those most directly affected by oppression.
- Invite participants to act from their Unitarian Universalist values in response to what they learn from the book.

## Session 1: Visibility and Invisibility

### Materials

- Chalice or candle and lighter, or LED battery-operated candle
- Newsprint, markers, and tape
- Handout: Spiritual Practices for Reading and Discussing *Centering*

### Preparation

- Set out the chalice.
- Make copies of the handout.
- Write these covenant points on newsprint:
  - o We promise to practice centering the experiences of people of color, and guard against letting the conversation morph into a discussion of the white institution.
  - o We promise to refrain from problem-solving discussions.
  - o Although those of us who are white may at times feel guilt and shame in response to the stories in the book, we promise to keep the focus of the conversation on the experiences of people of color and not our own emotions. We will find trusted others with whom to process painful feelings outside of this discussion time.
  - o We promise to take note of times when experiences of people of color stem from a rejection of the leadership authority of people of color.
  - o We promise to approach this discussion with humility.

- Post the proposed covenant and cover it with a blank sheet of newsprint.

## Chalice Lighting and Introductions (5 minutes)

Welcome participants. Light the chalice and share these words from Rev. Abhi Prakash Janamanchi:

*The sacred is present and available to us wherever we look or are willing to find it. If we remain open and expectant—watching out of the corners of our eyes, keeping our ears cocked, putting away all preconceived ideas—our lives will emanate the sacred.*

Invite participants to enter into this time open and expectant, knowing that they are in the presence of sacred stories shared in the book *Centering*. Then ask each person to introduce themselves and to share what brought them into the room for this discussion. Tell participants that after a conversation about your covenant, you will spend the first session focused on the first essay, Othering and Belonging.

## Creating a Covenant (40 minutes)

It is important to ground discussions of *Centering* in shared spiritual practices and shared agreements. Start by sharing this quote from Rev. Mitra Rahnama's introduction to the book, page xii:

*Often a person of color is one of the most visible and invisible people in a culturally White faith community. A person may be highly visible by the way they look, or by name, language, accent or tone, or simply because of the energy created by a felt difference in culture. Yet a person of color's personhood, unique beauty, struggles, spirit, identity, and experiences are invisible to the White community, often because of assumptions, projections, bias, micro-aggression, and discrimination. It is common to hear in culturally White communities some version of "When I look at you I don't see race. I just see human." Yet people of color do not have the option to experience life this way, which means our experiences become invisible. The visibilizing of people of color and the subsequent invisibilizing work together to create perceptions that we just don't fit.*

Then say:

Most Unitarian Universalist adult programs and small group ministries welcome perspectives and stories that spring from the lived experience of group participants. However, this time we will take a different approach. We are going to practice centering narratives that are not our own direct experience. The focus of the book *Centering* is on the experiences of religious professionals of color in Unitarian Universalist congregations which are historically majority white and reflect white

culture, and that is what its content describes. They are sacred stories not often shared with colleagues and parishioners. Our time together will offer space for those stories to be heard, appreciated, and affirmed just as they are, written from the perspective of each author. While participants who are people of color may wish to share ways in which these stories resonate with their own experiences, white participants are invited to receive them as an offering, and to engage the spiritual practice of centering those stories without connecting them to their own.

Let's look together at Spiritual Practices for Reading and Discussing *Centering*, entering this time with curiosity, open-heartedness, humility, and a willingness to live into a new way of engaging. We will craft the covenant for our time together on the basis of those practices.

Talk about the handout paragraph by paragraph, spending about five minutes on each. At the close of the discussion about each paragraph, slide the blank newsprint down and reveal the corresponding point on the proposed covenant. Ask participants to signal agreement on each point of the proposed covenant before moving on to the next. When you have finished discussing the handout and have general agreement on the covenant, ask if any points need to be clarified, added, or amended. Note changes on newsprint. When the covenant is complete, invite participants to again voice or signal agreement.

Offer these words from the handout to close your covenanting process:

*May we practice humility in the presence of these sacred stories. May our humility engender in us openness, patience, sensitivity, gracefulness, and love.*

## Receiving the Narrative: Longings (8 minutes)

Remind participants that your focus for this session is on Othering and Belonging, the essay by Rev. Darrick Jackson, and the response offered by Rev. Lilia Cuervo. Lead participants in conversation, asking:

- What longings did you hear in Jackson's essay?
- What are the parts of the culture of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church that offer Jackson a sense of belonging?

## Discussion: Navigating Cultural Differences (25 minutes)

Share this passage from pages 5-6 of the book, or invite a participant to do so:

*The intellectualism in Unitarian Universalism comes with a culture of stillness. We are expected to sit quietly in our seats, listen intently with no emotion on our faces, no movement in our bodies. We are supposed to wait until after the service to express ourselves. I grew up in a culture of engagement. We had permission to respond to the service, to say Amen when we were moved by the words or music, to clap our hands and smile and nod our heads whenever the spirit moved us. We lived the hymn “When the Spirit Says Do” every time we gathered for worship. I have had to learn to restrain myself in UU circles, which distances me from the worship. Sometimes our worship feels more like a lecture to me. The first time I preached at a UU congregation, I was unsure of how my sermon was being received because there was no visible response. It wasn’t until after the service that I learned that people did enjoy the sermon. Even now, I get slightly unnerved by the lack of response. I construct my services with UU stillness in mind; any attempt at a more embodied worship feels experimental and risky instead of one of many ways worship happens. I have always loved youth and young adult worship, as those services are generally more heart- and soul-centered and invite engagement and connection.*

*Engaging UUs in conversation about these areas where I feel disconnected from the UU culture is hard. I often struggle with how to say something, or if it is worth it. I worry about the other person’s reaction, and I have to decide if I have the energy to deal with it. Often when I engage with someone about these matters, the conversation quickly turns to them (how they feel about it, how they are not to blame, and so on); instead of engaging the issue, I’m engaging their needs. I minister to them pastorally instead of prophetically. Tied into this is my own struggle with wanting to engage in multicultural ministry because it is important, not just because I am a person of color. Because of this, I prefer to engage people I know well, who I know will not respond defensively. I struggle with this because the line between avoiding conflict and self-care feels very narrow in these situations.*

Invite participants to rest with the words for a minute. Then lead a discussion guided by these questions:

- What is Jackson telling us about the ways in which he feels disconnected from UU culture?
- Why is multicultural ministry important?
- When Jackson does decide to speak about the disconnection he feels, what in the reaction of the other person leads to an even deeper experience of “othering”?
- What emotional work is Jackson describing that is not typically asked of a person who finds white UU culture comfortable?
- What is the tension Jackson feels between his African American identity and his role as minister in a majority white congregation? What makes the line between avoiding conflict and self-care so narrow?

## Discussion: Being Change Agents (10 minutes)

Say, “In her response to Jackson’s essay, Rev. Lilia Cuervo, who came to the United States from Colombia, recounts some of her experiences as a Unitarian Universalist minister.” Read this passage from page 16, or invite a participant to do so:

*Once I liberate my mind, my body feels free to move, to clap, to feel alive during worship. My heart aches seeing so many people in our pews restraining their desire to give in to joy through movement, frozen by fear of judgment. That is why, in my first sermon at First Parish in Cambridge, I promised that sooner or later I would have them dancing. I fulfilled my promise, and it was a happy day for me when, during a Day of the Dead service, five couples spontaneously, one by one, proceeded to dance in the aisles to the mariachi music.*

*Just by being present, a minister of color not only changes the make-up of a congregation but, if allowed to exercise leadership, helps over time to create an environment in which transformation can happen in small and big ways.*

Then lead a discussion, using these questions to guide you:

- What are both Jackson and Cuervo telling us about the experience of embodied worship and the difference it makes for them?
- What do these two narratives tell you about the stress experienced by a religious professional of color who is seen as a change agent, a cultural “other,” or a disruption to accepted UU worship practice?

## Closing (2 minutes)

Share this reading from page 43 of the book, a quote from Cuervo:

*We need to highlight the wealth of experience, the wealth of knowledge, the wealth of education, the wealth of culture—all these things that we bring. Some of them are invisible or barely visible, and the congregations and the world need to know what we are here to do, that we can do it a very excellent way.... Ministers of color bring the love. We bring the warmth, the compassion. So this kind of contribution cannot be just ignored. We need to put it out there.*

Extinguish the chalice. Ask participants to retain the handout for future use. Thank participants.

# Session 2: Leadership and Ministry

## Materials

- Chalice or candle and lighter, or LED battery-operated candle
- Covenant from Session 1

## Preparation

- Post the covenant from Session 1.
- Set out the chalice.

## Opening Reading and Chalice Lighting (5 minutes)

Light the chalice and share these words from Rev. Lauren Smith, page 56:

*I am called to minister at the intersection of Unitarian Universalism and black communities, but I chafe at a dynamic that comes up frequently in Unitarian Universalist settings. There is a constant pull to minister to white people about their relationships with people of color. Much of our antiracism work has been primarily about transforming the hearts and minds of white people. Ironically, it has consistently placed white people at the center. I cherish the privilege of ministry to all people, but the center of my call to ministry is to and with people of color.*

Carefully review the covenant from Session 1. Tell participants that discussion today will focus on ministerial leadership, looking at two essays, Call and Response and Representing.

## Receiving the Narrative: “I see you” (15 minutes)

Point out that both Smith and Rev. Dr. Susan Newman Moore write about the cultural and social issues that are reflected in the seemingly simple question “By what name shall we address the minister?” Share Smith’s words from page 51, or ask a participant to do so:

*The black church emerged in the American South, where black people were highly visible, and also invisible in significant ways. In my grandparents’ day, it was customary for white people to call black people by their first names—and it was acceptable to use generic names like Tom or Mary [regardless of a person’s given name]. Black people were expected to address white people*

*formally. It was a daily way of reinforcing the power structures of the Jim Crow South and belittling the humanity of black people.*

*So when we came to church, we dressed up. We greeted one another formally. And that formality had the same purpose as the informality in many Unitarian Universalist congregations. It was a way of saying “I see you” and “I am here,” a ritual of acknowledgment, respect, and recognition.*

Share this quote from Newman Moore, from page 62:

*Many ministers of color are the first in our families to receive a doctorate. We’ve worked hard to earn it, and unlike White people, we do not have the privilege or luxury to allow someone to not recognize our educational achievements. Calling someone by their first name without permission also gives the false impression of an intimacy that does not exist yet.*

Invite participants to respond to the quotes, asking:

- What do these stories tell you about how day-to-day practices in our congregations are a reflection of cultural and social norms? What did you learn from the stories that causes you to stop and reflect?

## **Discussion: Respect (20 minutes)**

Read this quote from Smith’s essay, pages 51-52, or ask a participant to do so:

*I did find myself mildly uncomfortable when we hosted a Juneteenth event at the church. We provided the space, but the event was organized by the Seacoast African American Cultural Center. The event organizers and many of the participants were black. Many of them included my title when they spoke to me, and they relieved me of mundane duties when they saw me doing them (helping to cart tables, moving trash cans, and so on). Respect for the office of ministry is just a cultural norm in many parts of the black community. Members of my congregation were also present, many of whom simply don’t think that way about ministers. Their choice isn’t a product of the racial difference between us. It’s just a cultural norm. But the reality was that the cultural overlay meant that white people were treating me differently than black people, in a way that felt mildly uncomfortable. I know my congregants and their respect for me. I was concerned about how our guests would interpret their way of interacting with me and what conclusions they might draw about how welcome black people were in the space.*

Follow by reading this passage from Newman Moore, from pages 62-63:



*As a Christian minister from the Black church, I was used to preaching from a biblical text. In the UU church, the reading for the sermon is usually a poem. I'd never heard of the poet Mary Oliver before coming to All Souls. Her poems are for Unitarian Universalists like the writings of the apostle Paul for Christians. Whenever I preached, before I arrived home I'd received emails about my sermon. Folks were complaining because I used a text from the Bible instead of a reading from a nontheistic source. I gradually found myself compromising my style of preaching. When I was scheduled to preach, I wrote three sermons. The first was written as I was inspired by the Spirit. The second was edited for the UU ear, and the third was watered down so I'd still be employed after the benediction. I did not feel free to bring my whole self to the preaching moment. I wasn't preaching in my authentic voice. It was only when I became angry about some injustice, like the murder of Eric Garner or Sandra Bland, that I preached uninhibitedly—not caring whether my message was liked or not.*

*After forty years as a revered preacher and homiletics teacher and after having several of my sermons published in books, I was insulted. My sermons were constantly being scrutinized and criticized by some White congregants. I later learned that for many Unitarian Universalists, it is a spiritual practice to dissect and analyze the sermon—often immediately after worship at the church. I felt like a woman who has endured hours of labor and birthed a child into the world hearing someone say my baby looks odd. For one who is unfamiliar with this type of response to a minister's sermon, it comes across as disrespectful and doubtful of the minister's abilities.*

Lead a discussion using these questions:

- How are Smith and Newman Moore navigating the intersections between the primarily white UU communities in which they serve and communities of color while being true to themselves?
- What do they say about how it affects their ministries, their careers, and their own spiritual well-being?
- What insights are you gaining from these shared stories?

## **Discussion: Representing (20 minutes)**

Tell participants that you will share another story from Rev. Manish Mishra-Marzetti, who has served in a number of leadership roles in the UUA. Read this passage from pages 78-79, or ask a participant to do so:

*Whether intentionally or not, we clergy of color are often left with an unambiguous and difficult message: "Represent to your heart's content at the regional or denominational levels, as long as you don't expect too much. But please, in the congregations you may serve, let us just pretend*

*that you're White."... Unfortunately, our current ministerial environment is one in which many, if not most, UU congregations are unprepared for the cross-cultural aspects of calling a minister of color. Further, they are not only unaware of their lack of readiness in this regard but also actively resist such self-knowledge. We parish ministers of color are then left as the ones in the field needing to navigate professional landscapes that look and feel like this while somehow being simultaneously authentic and politic. In essence, we are the ones who wind up shouldering the responsibility for our congregation's cross-cultural decision to call us, simply because the congregations themselves lack the skills and insight needed to both see this and work with it. This is a challenging and stressful reality in a profession that, on good days, already has plenty of stress and challenge.*

*Simultaneously, we are also left with the question of tokenism at the regional and denominational levels. Can this faith that I love so dearly let go of its over-reliance on its relatively small number of non-majority race, non-majority culture UUs to teach, educate, and lead on issues that directly affect us? Can those in the majority take ownership of their need to educate themselves about issues that affect Asian American, African-American, and other communities? Better still, can the majority take ownership of our faith's deep need for ongoing, meaningful relationships with communities of color at the local level? That, from my perspective, is where opportunity lies.... As often happens in genuine cross-cultural partnerships, we may find along the way that ... we are learning more about ourselves than we ever expected; we might even begin to see and hear our own UU religious leaders of color in new and different ways. Such is our promise, such is my prayer.*

Invite participants to sit with the narrative for a minute, then lead a discussion, asking:

- What does Mishra-Marzetti mean when he says, "We are the ones who wind up shouldering the responsibility for our congregation's cross-cultural decision to call us?"
- If you are a white person, what are some of the ways you can seek some of the skills and insights needed to engage in a cross-cultural professional or personal relationship? How can you take ownership of educating yourself about issues that affect Asian American, African American, and other communities?
- How does your congregation or community invest in supporting the leadership of religious professionals and lay people of color?

## **Conversation: Commitment (20 minutes)**

Share this quote from Rev. Rosemary Bray McNatt's response, pages 85-86:

*I feel possessive of this faith into which I married, for I hold in my mind's eye the Black matriarchs and patriarchs who first introduced me to their Unitarian Universalism forty years ago, who taught me how to do church, who first told me about Fannie Barrier Williams and Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin and Florida Ruffin Ridley—all Black women of an earlier era who also found themselves committed to our free but imperfect faith. Because of all these things, Unitarian Universalism is mine. I represent it as myself as best I can, in every arena that I can. In these days, I have embraced the responsibility of helping to train our next generation of ministers as president of Starr King School for the Ministry. As the first person of color to lead a UU seminary, and as one of a handful of women of color to lead a seminary in North America, I have a tremendous responsibility to my people and to my faith. It is a responsibility I am proud to assume. It is my way of serving the God who called me to this work, and who holds me still.*

Lead a conversation, asking:

- What claim are McNatt and Mishra-Marzetti making on Unitarian Universalism?
- What commitments are they making to the faith?
- Both writers expressed a commitment to a “Unitarian Universalism that is not yet.” What does that future Unitarian Universalism look like to them? To you?

## Closing (10 minutes)

Ask participants, as they are willing, to share what they are mulling as you close this session. Ask:

- What is on your mind and heart?
- What are you learning?

Close with this quote from Rev. Natalie Maxwell Fenimore, page 77:

*I'm in love with the Unitarian Universalism that does not yet exist. But I have to hold both the love for that thing and the love for the reality. It does not yet exist. It will probably not exist in my lifetime. I don't think it will in that of my children, but I can't deny my love for it. You know, wanting to be there in that struggle. That's why I'm fighting.*

Extinguish the chalice. Thank participants.

# Session 3: Ministering to People of Color

## Materials

- Chalice or candle and lighter, or LED battery-operated candle
- Covenant from Session 1
- Handout: Spiritual Practices for Reading and Discussing *Centering*
- Optional: Computer with Internet access

## Preparation

- Post the covenant from Session 1.
- Set out the chalice.
- Make copies of the handout for those who may have misplaced their copy.
- Optional: Bookmark UU White Supremacy Teach-In resources ([www.uuteachin.org/](http://www.uuteachin.org/)).

## Opening Reading and Chalice Lighting (10 minutes)

Light the chalice and share these words from Rev. Natalie Maxwell Fenimore, telling participants that she is one of the authors of the essay on which you will focus this session. The quote is from page 125:

*We are who we are all the time. We give ourselves as a gift. I don't see myself as a marginal person. I don't lead from the margins. My blackness and woman-ness are at the center of my being. I don't need anybody's permission to claim myself.*

Then share this reflection from respondent Rev. Sofia Betancourt, page 22:

*"This reminds some Unitarian Universalists of..." is used often as a justification for silencing almost anything in our communities. This is the fear that we will create some tiny place of discomfort, some memory of early pain, some small sense of lack of inclusion, and that is used to justify massive lack of inclusion. We are severely limited by that phrase. How can we as religious leaders start to undermine the notion that it is okay for a personal small moment of discomfort to silence an entire tradition, an entire people, an entire faith perspective in our congregations?*

Carefully review the covenant from Session 1. Tell participants that the session today will focus on the essay, *The Religious Educator of Color*.

## Receiving the Narrative: Lifespan Ministry to People of Color (10 minutes)

Share this quote from the essay by Fenimore and Hauser, pages 90-92:

*A question we don't often ask ourselves but that is as important, if not more important, than the question of ministering to Whites, is this: How do I, as a person of color, minister to other people of color within Unitarian Universalism? What are my relationship and my obligation going to be to the spiritual health and faith formation of people of color within Unitarian Universalism?*

*This is a critical question for all ministers and religious professionals of color in Unitarian Universalism, but it is especially critical for the religious educator of color because the religious education community within our faith movement is the location of the most diversity. Our religious education programs and communities attract families longing for a place that welcomes and reflects the diversity that they may have in their own families—interracial, intercultural, multicultural families formed through birth or adoption—as well as families of color with young children developing racial identity within an overwhelmingly White religious community.*

*And so we find ourselves as religious educators, in what is often the most diverse population in our congregations, engaged in ministering to families of color who are trying to grow vital and healthy souls in what can look like an unwelcoming, non-inclusive environment.... We are orienting them to Unitarian Universalism and interpreting it, and providing a space to explore the cultural and racial contexts of our faith tradition.*

- What are Fenimore and Hauser naming that is too often unspoken and unrecognized?
- What are they lifting up as a central part of their own calling as religious educators of color?

## Discussion: Being at the Table (25 minutes)

Share this passage from pages 88-90, or ask a participant to do so:

*As with the dominant culture outside our congregations, UU congregations may not adequately honor the importance of working with children, youth, and families. The professional religious educator may be labeled, consciously or unconsciously, as doing traditional “women’s work,” which has for so long been unpaid and unheralded in the church, the home, and the wider community.*

*Unitarian Universalist communities and staff and ministry structures must strive to present images that can counter those so very present in society at large. That is what our religious education programs do in the ways that we develop curricula and set up learning experiences; for instance, we present multicultural images of families, including LGBT families, telling stories from many cultures, honoring many religious traditions. But this work is only partially successful if we do not counteract how religious education professionals are treated in UU communities. Is the work honored? Are duties, salaries, and benefits comparable?*

*...In congregations with hierarchical governance models, the religious education lay professional is often not a part of the executive team. While this may appear to be an objective management decision, it can, in fact, amplify the perception that the religious education professional of color is not a decision-making leader. The religious educator can feel marginalized and disrespected—and unable to bring the issues of families of color to the leadership table.*

Follow with this quote from respondent Betancourt, pages 100-101:

*This need for consideration can be applied to many painfully recognizable moments. Whether it is that a member never considered a person of color might be a wonderful fit for their congregation as a minister or director of religious education and is therefore shocked when one of us has the authority to do more than hold the door on a Sunday morning, or that a member never considered that children of color would participate in UU camps and conference centers and have needs specific to their identities, or that a member never considered that youth and young adults of color might lead us in work as vital as that of the Black Lives Matter movement, or that a member never considered that religious education might serve as the vital center of an authentic multicultural ministry and should not be stereotyped as a lesser offering in our congregations, the overarching lack of consideration diminishes our communities. The question is: Who do we expect ourselves to be?*

Lead a discussion using these questions:

- What gifts do religious leaders of color, particularly religious educators, bring to Unitarian Universalism?
- How can the congregation's governance structures and its practices as an employer lift up or diminish the strength and power of those gifts?
- Why is having religious educators of color at the leadership table so crucial, not just for them, but also for families of color?
- What are you learning that will help you challenge your previous assumptions?

## Discussion: Consideration (15 minutes)

Share these quotes from Betancourt, from pages 99-100 and pages 101-2, or ask a participant to do so:

*What I hear emphasized time and again in their essay is how rarely the primary needs of UUs of color are fully considered in UU congregations. Consideration is key to this reflection. Students at Starr King tell me that worship works best for them when they believe worship leaders have considered their presence in the room. This does not mean that every worship service has to speak directly to their needs or beliefs, but rather that someone has considered their presence and participation in the community and the impact of the congregation's celebration for them. This consideration can be reflected in something as simple as a one- or two-sentence acknowledgment that our backgrounds and socioeconomic locations mean we do not always believe or experience the same things, or in something as large and vital as doing the hard work of reducing cultural misappropriation so that no one is made to feel their role in congregational life is to entertain others through their diversity.*

*Congregations should already be prioritizing professional development expenses for their religious educators. In response to the sacred partnering with families so beautifully described by Aisha and Natalie, congregations should also particularly support them, whether or not they identify as people of color, in pursuing training in cross-cultural counseling, pedagogies, and faith formation needs. This is one way we might take the time to understand where families need support.*

Lead a discussion, using these questions:

- What is Betancourt saying when she states her hope that “no one is made to feel their role in congregational life is to entertain others through their diversity”?
- What would it look like in our congregations, our communities, and our association if giving consideration to the spiritual and developmental needs of children, youth, adults, and families of color were a priority in the congregation's mission, rather than an afterthought?
- What would need to change in order to prioritize professional development for religious educators? What difference would that make to congregational or community life?

## Receiving the Narrative: Self-Care (10 minutes)

Share these quotes from page 96 of Fenimore and Hauser's essay, or ask a participant to do so:

*Self-care is a term that is used often and almost casually in Unitarian Universalist professional circles, but it is essential to the survival of the religious education professional of color. The*

*ministry they provide in our communities is a ministry of presence, of accompaniment, of attentiveness. This ministry invites in the whole person. It is not easy; our buttons get pushed very, very often....*

*Be clear with those in communities that you serve that you cannot be everything to everyone in the religious education community. Invite other professionals on staff to be present in the religious education community. White colleagues can be a resource for white families struggling with questions about race, class, and culture. White colleagues can preach and teach about issues of race, class, and culture. We must share the work in order to maintain our spiritual health.*

Allow participants to rest with the words for a minute. Then invite them to share with each other prayers, hopes, and wishes for the religious professionals of color in our movement.

## Reflecting and Acting (10 minutes)

Lead a discussion about how your group might follow up this book discussion. As the discussion proceeds, remind participants of the covenant promises not to center their own reactions or move into trying to solve problems for the congregation. Here are two suggestions for follow-up:

- Encourage the rest of the congregation to read this Common Read book, with care and attention to the experiences of each essayist. Share what your group has learned about how to approach the narratives, using points from the handout.
- Explore the many resources on the [UU White Supremacy Teach-In website](#). This project, initiated and overseen by three UU religious educators of color, asks that congregations deliberately set aside time to learn more about white supremacy culture and how to dismantle it. Meet with the minister and/or other appropriate leaders to advocate for your congregation's participation (which need not be on the dates specified on the website).

## Closing (10 minutes)

Invite participants to take yet another look at the handout, *Spiritual Practices for Reading and Discussing Centering*. Ask:

- How have we done in upholding our covenant together?
- How might these practices serve us going forward as individuals and as members of congregations and communities?

Share this closing reflection from Hauser, page 148:



*There's a Zen phrase "How we do anything is how we do everything." If we all are being treated this way, what's happening with people who walk in through our doors? This is about Unitarian Universalism, and that's why it's important to stand up for each other and change the dominant paradigm so we can grow Unitarian Universalism.*

Thank participants for their engagement in the reading and discussion of these sacred stories. Extinguish the chalice.

# Handout: Spiritual Practices for Reading and Discussing *Centering*

By Rev. Josh Pawelek, from the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association's Committee for Antiracism, Anti-oppression, and Multiculturalism

## **1. Practice Centering the Experience of Religious Professionals of Color.**

It may seem obvious at first, but it is critical for readers to encounter and discuss *Centering* as a book about the experiences of people of color, not as a book about white institutions. Throughout the publication process, we realized that discussions of the texts (regardless of the racial identity of the discussants) often led to a focus on what white institutions do as opposed to what the religious professional of color is experiencing. Though it often arises unconsciously, this focus on the white institution invariably de-centers the experience of the person of color who wrote the text. We discovered that discussion groups in white cultural settings, even if sympathetic to the experiences of people of color, very naturally begin talking about white culture and white institutions rather than the experiences of people of color. Thus, reading and discussing *Centering* requires what for many is a new skill: staying focused on and immersing oneself in the experiences of people of color, and refusing to allow the conversation to morph into one about white institutions. In short, centering the experiences of people of color is not obvious in white cultural settings. It is a skill everyone operating in white cultural settings needs to learn and practice.

## **2. Avoid the Impulse to Fix Problems.**

The experiences of religious professionals of color providing ministry in white cultural settings are highly variable. Readers will encounter incredible joy in one chapter, deep pain in another. Readers will discern frustration and confusion along with clarity and compelling vision. Readers will note moments when

writers question their faith despite their profound commitment to Unitarian Universalism. And through it all, readers will notice ways in which the white institution could function differently to achieve better outcomes for religious professionals of color. We respectfully ask that discussions of *Centering* refrain from offering solutions. We recognize it is a tendency of Unitarian Universalism's white cultural practice to move quickly away from pain and anger and into problem-solving. But far too often the people doing the problem-solving are not the people experiencing the problem. So often the people doing the problem-solving are fleeing a more fundamental process: affirming and accepting the experiences of people of color. Instead of receiving the stories in *Centering* as blueprints for what needs to change, receive them as prayerful offerings from religious professionals of color who care deeply about Unitarian Universalism.

### **3. Resist the Temptation to Confess Guilt and Shame.**

Conversations about race and racism often engender feelings of guilt and shame in white participants. While such feelings are understandable, confessing them openly in the moment rarely adds value to the conversation about race and racism. Such confessions inevitably decenter the experiences of people of color and draw attention to the experiences of white participants. The expression of guilt and shame in the moment actually serves to maintain white cultural dominance by not making room for the stories of people of color to live and breathe. Anticipating that white guilt and shame will arise in conversations about *Centering*, we urge white participants to internally notice these feelings as they arise, but instead of expressing them in the moment, receive them as cues to refocus attention on the experience of the writer. Allow the writer's story to live and breathe in the discussion. Let the writer's story be part of your larger Unitarian Universalist story. This practice of internally transforming one's response to white guilt and shame into a capacity for deeper listening to the stories of people of color is a critical skill in building white solidarity with the struggles of people of color. It is also a critical skill for evolving monocultural institutions into antiracist multicultural institutions.

We acknowledge that guilt and shame are profoundly powerful emotions. It is possible that white participants will be successful in resisting the temptation to express them during discussions of *Centering*, but then still be haunted by them after the discussion has ended. If this is the case, we urge participants to find someone with whom they can speak about these feelings—perhaps a white peer who is engaged in racial justice work, perhaps a white caucus group.

### **4. Question the UU Tendency to Question Authority.**

“Question Authority” is a typical Unitarian Universalist bumper sticker. While this phrase is typically interpreted in relation to political authority, it also applies to religious authority. By virtue of their training, their ordination, and their call, clergy and other religious professionals require a certain degree of authority in order to perform well in their jobs. Yet there is a historical anti-clerical dimension within

Unitarian Universalism. UU clergy and religious professionals of all racial identities report experiences of anti-clericalism, especially in congregational settings. Yes, there are times when questioning religious authority is appropriate; religious professionals can and do overstep the bounds of their authority. However, it is also true that congregations can and do subvert the legitimate authority of their religious professionals, sometimes without fully recognizing it. Given the reality that white cultural institutions have trouble recognizing and honoring the experiences of people of color, this anti-authoritarian dynamic is particularly pernicious when it resists the authority of religious professionals of color. Thus, it is no coincidence that resistance to the authority and leadership of people of color is a common theme in *Centering*. As mentioned above, the point of noticing this dynamic is not to fix the white institution. The point is to honor and affirm the experience of the religious professional of color whose authority is encountering resistance.

## **5. Be Humble.**

Perhaps one way to sum up the advice above for how to discuss *Centering* is for all participants to practice humility in the presence of these sacred stories. The tendency to focus on the white institution, the impulse to fix problems, the temptation to express guilt and shame, resistance to authority—all of these dynamics function to preserve white cultural dominance. They all require a certain amount of pride and, at times, arrogance. Thus, an underlying virtue to bring to the discussion of *Centering* is humility. The key to honoring and affirming the stories of religious professionals of color doing ministry in culturally white institutions is humility. The key to welcoming the authority of religious professionals of color is humility. The key to decentering one's own feelings of guilt and shame is humility. The key to not jumping in with solutions is humility. Let us approach this denomination-wide discussion of *Centering* with humility. May our humility engender in us openness, patience, sensitivity, gracefulness, and love.