

Manish Mishra-Marzetti:

First off, welcome again, Seeds of a New Way virtual launch party. Thank you for being here. I'm going to turn things over to Nancy McDonald Ladd.

Nancy McDonald Ladd:

Hi everybody. I'm going to get out my chalice here in my Zoom nook to get us started. It's so wonderful to see all of you and such a balm to my soul to see so many of the collaborators who came together on this project. It was such a joy to work with one another and elevate one another and laugh together. So you're going to encounter a whole lot about Seeds of a New Way as we work together. I'm Nancy McDonald Ladd, I am now our director of communications and public ministry with the UUA. But when we started this whole thing, I was as I still am, Manish's colleague and a colleague to so many of you in ministry in all of its forms. So I am a woman in my middle years with dark hair and dark glasses wearing a black shirt. And I want to start us with our chalice now lit with one of the poems in the book.

The book is actually broken out into three sections and we had way too much fun thinking about how to divide out those sections. We called it seeds cast on rocky ground and the labor and the tending of those seeds to grow and then ultimately, new life arises in those dry, often painfully broken places. Each of those sections has a scriptural reading attached to it, and most of those sections also have poems attached. And I'm going to read Desert Flowers, a poem from the book by my colleague right here, my co-editor, Manish Mishra-Marzetti.

Improbably, the wind-blown seed found its way here to a long, beautiful stretch of land, but one that was hot and dry and arid. A spark of life resting in an unprepared desert, quenching, giving life-giving sustenance, the rain comes and goes, even if infrequently, sometimes only a few drops at a time and the seed begins to take root possibly brought alive. But what life is this amidst the harshness? Pocket mice, rattlesnakes, camel spiders, danger, inhospitality lurking everywhere. One chance encounter gone wrong could bring death to the seedling. And yet somehow the intrinsic invitation to thrive, to flourish and grow finds a way even when it is a struggle. Poking gently up from the cracked, parched desert earth, a beautiful pink five-petaled flower blooms, spectacularly improbably. We are those wind-blown seeds, the universe's longing for itself, for thriving for beauty, even when it is against the odds. Amen. Blessing. Blessing. So good to be together. Manish, I'm going to kick it back to you, my friend.

Manish Mishra-Marzetti:

So welcome everybody. I'm the Reverend Manish Mishra-Marzetti. My pronouns are he and him. I am in Ann Arbor, Michigan. I'm a middle-aged Indian-American guy, brown skin, gray sweater, etc. We also want to make sure everybody here knows that this session today is being recorded and Skinner House Books will post the recording later on. So for those who could not be here, so that's just to let everybody be aware of that. We wanted to start out in giving you kind of a basic idea of the premise of the book, why this book? The idea was to build a bit on the ideas contained in Centering, which is now almost a decade old. So Centering edited by my colleague Mitra Rahnema, kind of created an opportunity to center some of the voices and experiences of BIPOC leaders within Unitarian Universalism. I think it's all clergy basically in Centering. The idea we wanted to expand a little bit is, okay, what does it take for those ministries that are viewed as being different to thrive. Which is something, by the way, we've been doing since at least the 19th century.

Encouraging and having ministries that are different leaderships in our communities that are different. We wanted to also expand it beyond clergy voices to include other professional positions and also lay leaders within our community. What does it take for any of us who are BIPOC in our communities to not just survive, but also to thrive and be nurtured in our positions? That was the basic premise of the book. And I will turn things over to Nancy to talk a little bit about what the project was about, how the project came together.

Nancy McDonald Ladd:

So what I want to do to begin with is kind of deconstruct the idea of a book as a finished product that like smart people come together to create and then present to the world. When Manish and I were first having the conversations that planted the seeds in sometimes some rather arid places and in sometimes some rich and growing places in our ministries, we planted the seeds for this text in the middle of the pandemic by having hours-long conversations, pacing in our separate spaces as we were to keep each other safe. And reflecting with one another about the ways in which both of our paths in ministry in very different ways, given our very different identities and our different levels of overlapping societal privilege, the ways in which our stories in ministry often came budding up against people's perception of some idea of what and who and how a minister was supposed to be in the world.

Like how to embody a minister, how to talk like a minister, how to lead like a minister. And Manish and I, both from positions of frankly great positional privilege as we were both serving as senior ministers of large churches at the time, we felt like if we were confronting time and time again in these ministries that were objectively successful by the measures of what ministry is, this sense that our whole selves weren't fully invited into the work that we were doing and it was... I describe it like wearing a suit that was designed for someone else and did not quite fit me. And I kept trying to get a suit with bigger shoulder pads that would make me look more like what people thought a minister was. And I kept trying to wear the costume both rhetorically in terms of how I'm speaking and in terms of leadership style of some abstract amorphous notion of a minister that was highly attached to patriarchal white, cis western norms.

And so what happens when and how we stop trying to wear a suit that doesn't work and let go to a tailor and get one made just for us, or stop wearing a suit at all and dance in a sari. Like what happens when we stop trying to wear the costume of a notion of ministry that doesn't fit almost any of us? And so when we began this process of the book, the most important thing to me and to Manish as well, is we did not want to present ourselves as experts on the wide variety of styles and approaches to ministry that make ministry survivable and thrive-able in our multicultural realities. What we wanted to do was create an incubator where those of us with a whole variety of different perspectives, different identities, different stories to tell, could come together and co-edit one another's experiences.

So it wasn't really like Manish and I receiving these submissions and then we pass them through the filter of our learned judgment and deliver them back out. Instead, the Seeds of a New Way incubator paired and in some cases groups of three paired contributors together to ideate what they wanted to write and to edit it for one another. And our process of the Seeds of a New Way incubator was not just about delivery of the product.

In fact, some of our participants in the incubator did not end up contributing final essays to the piece. But their participation in the group process of storytelling and of acknowledging that our identities are so complex that it is not possible to tokenize away the multifaceted nature of our being. We shared that beyond just sharing the final product of the book. And I think for me, that process was perhaps the most rewarding piece of the whole endeavor and invites us to consider how publishing itself, the creating of books, is not as much about the end product as it is about the conversation which generates the book and the conversation which comes after the words are put on a page.