

Jessica York:

Thank you, Manish. I'm Jessica York. I'm here in my home office in Birmingham, Alabama. I'm currently serving as your director of Congregational Life at the Unitarian Universalist Association. I am a 62-year-old Black woman with honey, brown skin, long salt and pepper dreadlocks, wearing reading glasses, a pink sweater, and behind me there are some white doors and a plant on a bookshelf.

When I heard that this book was being written, I was pretty excited because I think about leadership a lot. My first experiences in leadership started in high school and then in the ensuing 45 years. I've pretty much always been supervising volunteers or colleagues, and I find that I cannot be a supervisor without thinking about how my style and my expectations of leadership affect those that I supervise and those that I work with closely. I have always known that my leadership style is different from the standards set by the dominant society. This has often led to some people not recognizing my leadership or thinking my leadership is weak.

And when I was invited to write for Seeds of a New Way, I knew that I could capably write a short treatise on leadership with all the thinking that I've done about it over the years. But instead, I decided to write a very personal piece. I wrote it because I wanted anyone reading the book who's had their leadership questioned to not feel alone. And I wanted to illustrate with my story that there are people out there who can see through the illusion of a single story and recognize that there are as many ways to lead as there are leaders.

So I'm going to read to you from my chapter, which is titled Tales of the Invisible Woman, and I'm going to read the first of three stories.

Some leaders holding historically marginalized identity will tell tales of tokenism. Yet there are other ways that white supremacy culture negates the leadership of people in the cultural minority. I am a lover of stories, so let me share a few personal stories with you. Tales of invisibility, and recognition, and how I think they affect leadership in our common faith. Story number one, nothing but white people. Setting: a roadway in Haiti 2010. In preparation to write a curriculum about the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, I accompany a medical delegation from the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee.

One late afternoon, I am sitting in the back of our van, which is stuck in rush hour traffic. One of my fellow passengers observes, "Hey, why is everybody looking at us?" It is true. Many of the people in the surrounding cars are staring into our van. "Well says one of the doctors, it isn't every day they see a van full of nothing but white people." Everyone laughs. Everyone but me. I feel as I've been punched in the stomach. The doctor is white. The observant passenger is white. Our driver is white. I am Black. The only person of color shoved into the back of the van.

"This van is not full of only white people," I say in a voice louder than I intended. Immediate silence. A gay man sitting next to me, the person I have connected with the most on this trip of strangers, leans over and whispers, "But honey, we think of you as white." He has a painful smirk on his face. I bet he too knows something about invisibility and the assumptions of well-meaning people. I appreciate his remark, biting humor that it is. I snort. No one else responds to my remark. Slowly, the van returns to small, quiet conversations. I sit quietly with my anger.

Not all of the stories that I tell are stories of invisibility. There are stories of recognition there. I see Judith Frediani is joining us today. Judith, you might recognize one of those stories in there, but you'll have to get the book if you want to hear the other stories. Thank you for listening to my story.