

Classism Workshop

By Judith A. Frediani
Curriculum Director, UUA

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Judith A. Frediani and Jacqui James, editors
With Jose Ballester, Helen Bishop, Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley, Catherine
Carpenter, Eugene Navias, and Meg Riley, contributing authors**

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Goals

- To be aware of the socio-economic make-up of UU congregations
- To see classism as a form of exclusion/prejudice/discrimination/oppression that hurts people
- To evaluate classist practices in light of UU values and Principles
- To identify connections between classism and other oppressions
- To consider taking specific actions in the congregation to change classist attitudes and practices.

Materials

- Newsprint, markers, and tape
- 3 x 5" index cards
- Note paper and pencils
- Copies of Handout 1, *UU World* Reader Profile, Handout 2, The Living-Room Scale, for all participants and leaders
- Copies of Handout 3, Classism Case Studies – one for every four participants
- Copies of *Singing the Living Tradition*, for Hymn 113, “Where is Our Holy Church?”
- Chalice or candle and matches, or LED candle

Preparation

- Read this session and its handouts carefully.
- Decide with co-leaders how to divide leadership responsibilities. Take time to discuss together your own feelings about and experiences with class issues so that you will be more comfortable facilitating these activities. Try to anticipate concerns or resistance that may come up and discuss strategies to turn them into learning experiences.
- Photocopy handouts. Cut apart the four case studies in Handout 3, Classism Case Studies, so that each group of four participants will have one case.
- Post the group covenant if you have one.
- Prepare a sheet of newsprint with the heading: “A change I would like to see is . . .”
Prepare another sheet with the heading “What I (we) would have to let go of is . . .”
- Prepare an outline of this session on newsprint and post it before participants arrive.

Background

Class is an uncomfortable topic. Many contemporary writers who address the

issue begin by saying it was the most difficult subject they have ever examined. In *Class: A Guide Through the American Status System*, Paul Fussell writes that telling people he is writing a book about class is like telling them, “I am working on a book urging the beating to death of baby whales using the dead bodies of baby seals.” Or as R. H. Tawney wrote in *Equality*, “The word ‘class’ is fraught with unpleasant associations, so that to linger upon it is apt to be interpreted as the symptom of a perverted mind and a jaundiced spirit.”

Why is class such a touchy subject, especially, perhaps, to the middle class? We avoid talking about class and class issues for many reasons, including the following:

- To protect the myth that there are no classes in a democratic society.
- To protect the myth that we don’t prejudge people by such class signals as occupation, income, formal education, home ownership, and manner of speech and dress.
- To protect the myth that we deserve all the success we enjoy, and implicitly, that most people somehow “deserve” the lack of success they experience.
- To deny our fears that we could fall out of our class through such events as loss of job, divorce, or catastrophic medical expenses.
- To deny that we feel insecure and envious around others whose status we perceive to be higher, and uncomfortable and guilty around those whose status we perceive to be lower.

In short, fear, anxiety, denial, and defensiveness surround the issue of class. Sound familiar? These feelings we also experienced around issues of race, gender, sexual orientation, age, and physical disability. This is okay. Let these feelings come up in the group. Let the denials come out. But gently urge people to see that our classism, like other oppressions, affects us negatively in at least two ways:

- We hurt others when we exclude, devalue, ridicule, or ignore them. (And some of those “others” are some of us, our children, and others we care about.)
- We diminish our own lives by diminishing the diversity in our lives, including the friends and mentors we might have found, the understandings we might have reached, the spiritual discoveries we might have made in a truly diverse religious community.

As in all areas of exclusion, we might ask ourselves: Who are we hurting? What are we missing?

In addition, this session enables participants to draw connections between classism and other oppressions such as racism. We believe that classism underlies *all* oppressions, and may, in fact, be the missing link in justice-building work.

We make no attempt to define class, and we hope that you won’t, either. The concept of class is both complex and controversial. This means that class is a

perfect word to inspire a protracted semantic debate, whereas our focus is on classist behavior and attitudes in ourselves and our congregations.

If participants insist that they want or need a definition of class, here are two possible strategies:

Strategy 1: Say something like, “We probably can’t reach consensus on a definition of class if we try, but we probably all have some shared understandings of what it means.” You could read the following excerpt from Paul Fussell’s *Class* (also a good response to someone who *insists* there is no such thing as class):

Being told that there are no social classes in the place where the interviewee lives is an old experience for sociologists. “We don’t have classes in our town’ almost invariably is the first remark recorded by the investigator,” reports Leonard Reissman, author of *Class in American Life* (1959). “Once that has been uttered and is out of the way, the class divisions in the town can be recorded with what seems to be an amazing degree of agreement among the good citizens of the community.”

People can’t always define class, but they know it when they see it.

Strategy 2: Say something like, “We don’t want to spend a lot of time defining and debating a complex concept like class, but would rather address it through the stories, activities, and information planned for this session. Let’s take a few minutes to brainstorm the elements of class by completing the following sentence: “I’m not sure exactly what class is, but it has something to do with . . .” Write the responses quickly on newsprint, make an appropriate comment and move on.

SESSION PLAN

Opening

5 minutes

When the group is comfortably gathered in a circle, light the chalice and share the following reading, “Shaky Skaters” by Rev. Jane R. Rzepka.

Roller World is a typical roller rink that rents foul-smelling skates with fragile laces, and then pounds your ears senseless with hard-driving rock music. Roller World caters to people with no standards, no taste, and no class. Like my family and myself.

I love Roller World. No one was born to skate, but there we all are, a roomful of unlikely skaters, doing our best. A few of course are hot shots, whizzing around on one foot, backwards half the time, breezy as you please. And another bunch, sad to say, is hopeless—their eight little wheels completely ignoring mission control. But round and round the rest of us go, steady and solid, one foot and then the next, in careful time to the Beastie Boys or Twisted Sister.

Folks look pretty darn good out there. I suppose I do, too. No one knows that if even one word is spoken in my direction, I will lose my concentration and hit the floor hard. No one can see that this steady skater is so precarious that the act of skating, just skating, takes everything.

As we roll around the rink, uncertain of our stride and rhythm, may we yet see the instability of those who surround us. May we help when we are steady, holding those who falter; may we calm the reckless and urge the timid forward; may we keep gentle company with the skaters at our side. Let us move with the spirit of love, and may some quiet presence help us with our laces at the end.

Living Room Scale

15 minutes

Introduce Handout 2, The Living-Room Scale, by saying that this exercise is intended to be fun.

Distribute copies of the handout and give participants five minutes to fill it out and calculate their status.

If the group is larger than seven, divide into smaller groups of three or four. Then take about ten minutes for participants to discuss what came up for them in this exercise. Ask questions such as the following:

- Does this survey have any validity as a measure of class?
- Can you identify factors that you would agree are class indicators?
- How did you like your class rank?
- How do you feel about this exercise?

Don't dwell on this scale or take it too seriously, but look for opportunities for people to identify class indicators that they *do* recognize in real life. Also, look for indications of feelings of discomfort and allow people to express them.

Qualities of a Friend

10 minutes

Engage the group in a quick brainstorm by inviting them to complete the following sentence: "The qualities I most like and respect in a friend are . . ."

Write all responses on newsprint.

Likely responses will include personal qualities such as honesty, sense of humor, dependability, and good listening skills. It is unlikely that the list will include characteristics such as college education, high income, or a fancy house.

Referring to the newsprint list, make the point that we come to UU congregations seeking friends and friendly acquaintances. The brainstorm identified the qualities we look for which are not based on income or educational level.

Yet as a denomination, we tend to come from a certain socioeconomic level and do not have the same profile as the population as a whole. The next exercise invites us to look at who we are and what our demographic profile suggests.

Profile of Unitarian Universalists

10 minutes

Ask participants for their reactions to the profile of Unitarian Universalists described in Handout 1, *UU World* Reader Profile. Invite discussion of thoughts and feelings about this reading with the following questions:

- Did you recognize yourself and/or your congregation in this profile?
- What does this profile mean, what's going on here?
- Is there a problem? Why or why not?

If some version of the axiom "birds of a feather flock together" comes up, say that we will look at this important perception in the next activity and later in the session.

Note that the following activity begins to address what is wrong with the notion that people just like to be with their "own kind." Keep in mind the underlying questions of this session: Who am I hurting? What am I missing?

Case Studies

30 minutes

Have participants divide into groups of three to five. Give members of each group copies of one of the four case studies from Handout 3, *Classism Case Studies*. Ask each group to appoint a recorder to take notes on note paper (not newsprint).

Emphasize that each case study is a true story of actual events in real UU congregations. (We emphasize the authenticity of these cases and all case studies in this program because some participants flatly refuse to believe that these incidents could ever happen in a UU congregation today. Please believe that they have, and help resistant participants accept these experiences as new information for their consideration in seeking openness and diversity in their congregations.)

Invite participants to use the questions on the handout to guide their discussions and to be ready to report back briefly to the whole group. Tell them they will have about ten minutes and warn them when they have only two minutes remaining.

After about ten minutes of small group discussion, facilitate reporting and sharing in the large group for another ten minutes.

Break

10 minutes

Sharing Stories

20 minutes

Distribute 3x5" index cards to all participants. Tell them that the rest of the session provides a way to think about how we define our congregations and whether there are changes we would choose to make.

Ask participants to think about the stories that they have shared and heard in the group, and think about the readings and case studies they have considered today. Ask:

- Are there class issues in your congregation (UU community)?
- Are there classist assumptions or practices in your congregation (UU community) that have hurt you or members of your family?
- That have hurt others in your congregation (UU community)?

Next, ask participants to take a few minutes to think about their own experiences or observations in their congregation and, if they wish, to write down the issues or events that come to mind. Let them know that in a few minutes they will divide into pairs to share their experiences.

After a few minutes, when people are ready, invite them to form pairs to share their thoughts. Tell them they will each have about five minutes to share.

Encourage the partner who is listening to listen carefully, speaking only to ask clarifying questions or to reflect back on what is heard. It is important that people tell their stories without analysis or other discussion, and feel that they have been heard. After four minutes, give the group a gentle one-minute warning. After five minutes, ask the pairs to change roles.

Making Changes

20 minutes

When both partners have shared, bring the whole group together and ask:

- What did you learn?
- What surprised you?
- How do you feel?

After participants have shared several responses, ask them to reflect on the experiences they have just shared and then focus on what they would like to do differently in their congregation. Suggest that they complete the following sentence: “A change I would like to see is . . .”

Post the newsprint sheet on which you have written this question, and record each suggestion.

Letting Go

20 minutes

Change involves letting go of old patterns of belief, practice, and power as well as adopting new ones.

Ask participants to look at the list of changes they would like to see and then ask themselves: What would I (we) have to *let go of* for this change to be a reality?

Post the newsprint sheet on which you have written this question, and record the group’s responses.

Note that “letting go” may include a variety of activities, traditions, assumptions, feelings, biases, or aspects of lifestyle. Examples might include letting go of the assumption that all our children will (or should) go to college, letting go of the usual “classical” music in Sunday worship, or letting go of tendencies to stereotype people by their occupations.

Closing

10 minutes

Distribute hymnbooks and invite participants to stand in a circle. Light the chalice.

Read, or have a participant read, the following “On Being Scared” by Jane Rzepka.

I spent some time this weekend with an old friend, a dentist. She’s considering buying her own practice, but wonders if she could retain the current patients and attract new ones. She wonders if the office staff would like her, or befriend her too much, or resent her, or desert her; she wonders about bill collecting, spending too much time on crowns and root canals (which she likes) at the expense of oral surgery (which she doesn’t); she wonders about being a good wife and mother and all-around person. She’s scared.

My friend is intelligent, well organized, energetic, terrific with teeth . . . but

scared. It makes me think we all are. Scared we'll lose the company's big Formica account, scared we'll miss the time change, scared we're handling the kid's curfew wrong, scared our money will be in all the dumbest places when the tax laws change, scared of failing health, scared of everything falling apart, scared that nobody really loves us, scared of the fragility of all creation. Scared.

O Spirit of Life and Love, we aren't the giants we'd like so much to be, and the world can loom so large. When all is quiet and we are small and the night is dark, may we hear the tender breathing of all who lie awake with us in fear, that together we may gather strength to live with love, and kindness, and confidence.

Close by singing together, "Where Is Our Holy Church?" – Hymn 113 in *Singing the Living Tradition*.

Reflection and Planning

Take a few minutes to reflect on these questions and discuss them with your co-leader.

1. What was good about this session? Why?
2. What was not so good? Why?
3. What can I learn from this session to strengthen my leadership skills?

Handout 1: *UU World* Reader Profile

UU World Reader Profile

Source: Lewis and Clark Research, April 2005. This demographic information can be found on the website of the [UU World](#) in *About Our Readers*.

Education:

Attended college	94%
Graduate study	65%
Graduate degree	52%

Affluence:

Own their primary residence	77%
Average household income	\$79,000
Average household market value	\$324,000

Occupation:

Professional (doctor, lawyer, architect, etc.)	19%
Retired	26%
Self Employed	7%
Homemaker	6%

Age:

Median 57 years

Gender:

Female	65%
Male	31%

UUWorld readers own investments

Mutual Funds	55%
IRA/Koegh	53%
Money Market Funds	44%
Corporate Stocks/Bonds	43%

49% of *UUWorld* readers use the services of investment advisors

UU World Readers Are Responsive

- 89% of *UUWorld* readers ordered merchandise/services by mail/phone in the past year, with a mean spending of \$2,674.

Books	73%
Travel: Airfare, Car Rentals, etc.	58%
Clothing	58%
Travel: Accommodation and Information	56%
Gifts	52%
Records/Tapes/CDs	38%
Computer Software	33%
Magazines	30%
Seminars and Continuing Education	20%
Gardening Tools	14%
Environmental/Natural Products	13%

- The mean spending by mail/phone in the past year was \$2,674.
- 73% of *UU World* readers purchased books in the past year.

Active...

The leisure activities of *UUWorld* readers:

Read Books	90%
Attend Concerts/Music Performance	82%
Church/Charitable Work	78%
Exercise/Physical Fitness	77%
Visit Gallery/Museum	72%
Attend Show/Theater	70%
Gardening	65%
Adult Education/Workshops	60%
Volunteer for Social Causes	50%

***UU World* Readers Are Socially Responsible**

- 95% of *UU World* readers have contributed to one or more causes in the past year:

Religion	67%
Public TV/Radio	56%
Environmental Funds/Endangered Species	44%
Education	42%
Hunger	48%
Social Services	35%
Reproductive Rights	32%
Medical/Health Issues	30%
Animal Rights & Shelters	26%
Women's Rights	23%

- *UUWorld* readers hold liberal political viewpoints:

Liberal	60%
Moderate	16%
Progressive	12%
Centrist	2%
Conservative	2%

***UUWorld* Readers Are Connected**

- 85% of *UU World* readers have a computer at home connected to the internet.
- 94% of *UU World* readers purchased books in the past year, spending an average amount of \$247.
- 90% of *UU World* readers prefer to purchase "green" products.
- 75% of *UU World* readers participate in spiritual practices, and 48% practice meditation.

Source: Lewis and Clark Research, April 2005

Handout 2: The Living-Room Scale

The Living-Room Scale by Paul Fussell

Begin with a score of 100. For each of the following items in your living room, add or subtract points as indicated. Then ascertain your social class according to the table at the end.

Hardwood floor	add 4
Parquet floor	add 8
Stone floor	add 4
Vinyl floor	subtract 6
Wall-to-wall carpet	add 2
Working fireplace	add 4
New Oriental rug or carpet	subtract 2 (each)
Worn Oriental rug or carpet	add 5 (each)
Threadbare rug or carpet	add 8 (each)
Ceiling ten feet high, or higher	add 6
Original paintings by internationally recognized practitioners	add 8 (each)
Original drawings, prints, or lithographs by internationally recognized practitioners	add 5 (each)
Reproductions of any Picasso painting, print, or anything	subtract 2 (each)
Original paintings, drawings, or prints by family members	subtract 4 (each)
Genuine Tiffany lamp	add 3
Reproduction Tiffany lamp	subtract 4
Any work of art depicting cowboys	subtract 3
"Professional" oil portrait of any member of the household.	subtract 3
Any display of "collectibles"	subtract 4
Transparent plastic covers on furniture	subtract 6
Furniture upholstered with any metallic threads	subtract 3
Cellophane on any lampshade	subtract 4
Refrigerator, washing machine, or clothes dryer in living room	subtract 6
Motorcycle kept in living room	subtract 10
Periodicals visible, laid out flat:	
<i>National Enquirer</i>	subtract 6
<i>Popular Mechanics</i>	subtract 5
<i>Reader's Digest</i>	subtract 3
<i>National Geographic</i>	subtract 2
<i>Smithsonian</i>	subtract 1
<i>Scientific American</i>	subtract 1
<i>New Yorker</i>	add 1
<i>Town and Country</i>	add 2
<i>New York Review of Books</i>	add 5
<i>Times Literary Supplement (London)</i>	add 5
<i>Paris Match</i>	add 6
<i>Hudson Review</i>	add 8
Each family photograph (black and white)	subtract 2
Each family photograph (color)	subtract 3

Each family photograph (black and white or color) in sterling-silver frame	add 3
Potted citrus tree with midget fruit growing	add 8
Potted palm tree	add 5
Bowling-ball carrier	subtract 6
Fishbowl or aquarium	subtract 4
Fringe on any upholstered furniture (less than 100 years old)	subtract 4
Identifiable Naugahyde aping anything customarily made of leather	subtract 3
Any item exhibiting words in an ancient or foreign language (Spanish excluded)	add 7
Wooden venetian blinds	subtract 2
Metal venetian blinds	subtract 4
Tabletop obelisk of marble, glass, etc.	add 9
No periodicals visible	subtract 5
Fewer than five pictures on walls	subtract 5
Each piece of furniture over 50 years old	add 2
Bookcase(s) full of books	add 7
Any leather bindings more than 75 years old	add 6
Bookcase(s) partially full of books	add 5
Overflow books stacked on floor, chairs, etc.	add 6
Hutch bookcase ("wall system") displaying plates, pots, porcelain figurines, etc., but no books	subtract 4
Wall unit with built-in TV, stereo, etc.	subtract 4
On coffee table, container of matchbooks from funny or anomalous places	add 1
Works of sculpture (original, and not made by householder or any family member)	add 4 (each)
Works of sculpture made by householder or any family member	subtract 5 (each)
Every item alluding specifically to the United Kingdom	add 1
Any item alluding, even remotely, to Tutankhamen	subtract 4
Each framed certificate, diploma, or testimonial	subtract 2
Each "laminated" framed certificate, diploma, or testimonial	subtract 3
Each item with a "tortoiseshell" finish, if only made of Formica	add 1
Each "Eames chair"	subtract 2
Anything displaying the name or initials of anyone in the household	subtract 4
Curved molding visible anywhere in the room	add 5

Table of Social Class

245 and above	Upper class
185-245	Upper-middle
100-185	Middle
50-100	High prole (proletariat)
Below 50	Mid or low prole (proletariat)

Handout 3: Classism Case Studies

Case A

In many of our congregations, one way that new members are introduced to the congregation is through the newsletter. A short piece with a title such as “Meet Mary So-and-So” is written about the new member.

In some of our congregations, this introduction always begins with the person’s college and graduate degrees and the institutions from which they received them. A newcomer in one such church, after attending fairly regularly for five months, stopped coming before her turn to be profiled in the newsletter. She is a high school graduate and wondered whether she would ever fit in anyway.

At an end-of-year service in one UU congregation, the Director of Religious Education (DRE) gave a book to each graduating senior, and announced to the congregation where each was planning to attend college. One young man apparently hadn’t finalized his plans, but the DRE assured the congregation that he was sure he’d be going to college somewhere.

Another UU church calls its adult religious education program “First Parish University” and its children’s program “First Parish University Junior.”

What is happening here? Is there a problem? Is this an example of classist assumptions or behavior? Who is directly affected in a negative way? How are others in the congregation negatively affected?

Case B

A Latino-looking man attends a UU congregation he has never been to before. He is dressed in clean, pressed, designer jeans and a clean, pressed shirt.

After the service, while parishioners are filing downstairs for coffee hour, he is politely but unquestionably shown the door. He is actually a UU minister who likes to visit different UU congregations while on vacation, although he doesn’t identify himself as a minister.

He never gets “the bum’s rush” when he visits a church dressed in a three-piece suit.

What is happening here? Is there a problem? Is this an example of classist assumptions or behavior? Who is directly affected in a negative way? How are others in the congregation negatively affected?

Case C

A single mother of five children attends a UU church for the first time. People are very friendly, and a member of the hospitality committee makes a point of inviting her and her children to come back next Sunday for an all-church brunch right after the service.

The woman and her children come back, and after they have all gone through the buffet line and are eating their food, the hospitality woman comes over and says, "By the way, did I mention that it is \$8 for adults and \$5 for children? You can pay me now or on your way out." The woman is shocked. She thought the meal was provided for everyone by the church as it would have been in the church of her childhood. She is also embarrassed because \$33 is more than half her weekly food budget and she simply cannot afford to pay.

What is happening here? Is there a problem? Is this an example of classist assumptions or behavior? Who is directly affected in a negative way? How are others in the congregation negatively affected?

Case D

John and his family have been active members of their UU congregation for eight years. He has served on and chaired committees, pledged at above-average levels, and attended worship regularly.

At age 53, John was laid off from his job of 18 years, and after months of searching, could not find another. He stopped coming to worship, dropped off the committee on which he served, and considered withdrawing from membership rather than becoming a non-pledging member.

Much anecdotal evidence suggests that in our UU congregations, people who have been very active members greatly reduce their activity or even drop out when they lose their jobs. Just when one would think they would most need the nurture and encouragement of the religious community, they withdraw from it.

As Helen Bishop wrote in "The New Evangelism: A Vision of True Diversity," "The element of economic precariousness is a factor we need to consider within our congregations. Middle-class people are only now coming to realize what working-class people have always known: your job is as secure as your last paycheck. One of the prices we pay for this is that we can't reach out for support to our fellow UUs if unemployment hits."

What is happening here? Is there a problem? Is this an example of classist assumptions or behavior? Who is directly affected in a negative way? How are others in the congregation negatively affected?