

Smoke and Mirrors

A Message for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation

By The Rev. CJ McGregor

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A reminder that the theme for our messages this month is Staff Picks. Each staff member picked a topic, and I developed a message around their chosen topics. This morning we engage the topic of Kathy Fanny, our Director of Child and Youth programs. You may know that Kathy is working to become a candidate for the Lee County School Board. When Kathy was discerning whether she would take on this endeavor I asked her, why? Kathy's greatest concern was politics getting in the way of educating our children. That is, politicizing classroom instruction. And so, that is what we will explore together this morning.

There is something rotten in the state of Florida. Politicians are selling oppressive ideas, mandates, and legislation under the guise of empowering parents to have input into their child's education. This whole operation is nothing more than smoke and mirrors. That is, something intended to disguise or draw attention away from an often embarrassing or unpleasant issue, in this case the issues being disguised are racism, transphobia, and homophobia. They have found a way to erase people of color from our history, erase the transgendered, and erase LGBTQ folk. It's bundled in a neat little package called parent empowerment. You see, it's easier to shove parent empowerment down the gullets of the public than to admit that you're a bigoted and racist society. Unfortunately, people are gobbling it up and asking for a second serving.

We can start in June 2021 when Florida's state Board of Education banned "critical race theory" from public school classrooms adopting new rules it said would shield schoolchildren from curricula that could "distort historical events." Gov. Ron DeSantis appeared by video at the top of the board's meeting, urging its members, many of whom he appointed, to adopt the new measures he asserted would serve students with the facts rather than "trying to indoctrinate them with ideology." Do you see the holes in and the idiocy in this response? Behind the smoke and mirrors, he would tell us we shouldn't present historical facts, but we should keep our children in the dark and present them only with a whitewashed version of our history.

This isn't new. In fact, in my own early Catholic and public education I only learned the whitewashed version of history with a paragraph about Rosa Parks, a few lines about Frederick Douglas, and a paragraph about Martin Luther King Jr. in my textbooks. People of color weren't talked about or celebrated. I never learned about the genocide of native people. And I grew up next to a Mohawk reservation and always wondered what the conflict was about and was taught about those bad and lazy Indians. I was taught that the good white man invited the native people to dinner and wasn't that nice and that's why we gather on Thanksgiving. White privilege was built into our textbooks and schools then and it is now. Racism and bigotry were being taught, but it seemed no one knew or didn't want to admit it. Now those are sanctioned in our school system. The job of educators is to challenge students with facts and allow them to question and think critically about information, and that's the antithesis of indoctrination. No matter our color, background or ZIP Code, we want our kids to have an education that imparts honesty about who we are, integrity and how we treat others, and courage to do what's right.

The Parental Rights in Education bill, dubbed the "Don't Say Gay" bill by LGBTQ activists, has been passed by the Florida House of Representatives. The bill limits what classrooms can teach about sexual orientation and gender identity. Under this legislation, these lessons "may not occur in kindergarten through grade 3 or in a manner that is not age-appropriate or developmentally appropriate for students in accordance with state standards." The bill would also allow parents to sue schools or teachers that engage in these topics.

Supposedly, the bill is about protecting the rights of parents, which sounds well-meaning enough. Behind the smoke and mirrors, a close read of the text shows it to be an overly broad piece of legislation that requires school mental-health counselors to "out" LGBTQ+ children to their parents and makes any discussion of LGBTQ+ issues or identities practically forbidden because parents could start a state investigation and sue for damages any time they feel aggrieved. The bill endangers the lives of children who already suffer disproportionately high rates of homelessness and self-harm. Really, it's the "Don't Discuss Anything About Queer or Trans Existence and Don't Counsel Trans or Gay Kids (Instead, You Must Out Them to Their Parents) or Else Parents Can Force a State Investigation of the School, Get Money Damages, and Probably Get You Fired" bill.

If the bill is ultimately signed into law, it would go into effect on July 1. Gov. Ron DeSantis has said he supports the bill though he hasn't explicitly said he will sign it if it crosses his desk. LGBTQ activists and advocates slammed the decision to move the legislation forward, saying it will harm queer youth by shunning representation and inclusion from classrooms. Lawmakers should be supporting LGBTQ students and their families and encouraging schools to be inclusive, not pitting parents against teachers and erasing the LGBTQ community from public education. When lawmakers treat LGBTQ topics as taboo and brand the LGBTQ community as unfit for the classroom, it only adds to the existing stigma and discrimination, which puts LGBTQ young people at greater risk for bullying, depression, and suicide. Activists say erasing LGBTQ presence from lessons implies students should be ashamed or suppress their gender identity or sexual orientation. In a recent interview on ABC News' podcast "Start Here," Rep. Joe Harding defended the bill, saying the bill would not prohibit people from talking about gender identity and sexual orientation, it would ban curriculum and lessons. He said the decision to talk about these topics should be left to the parents.

What does all of this mean to us as Unitarian Universalists? It means that our values of justice, equity, and compassion are under attack. Civility, being recognized and celebrated for who you are is under attack. Basically, being something other than white, male, cisgender, and Christian means you have no worth, your history is erased, you deserve to be excluded, you should be ashamed and fearful. The result will be exclusion, violence, and unprecedented suicide. Yes, the beliefs, these policies, this legislation will contribute to the normalization of racism, violence, and discrimination of people of color. It will normalize the hate and violence against those who express their gender identity—ultimately leading to a rise in suicide of our youth. This doesn't seem to matter to its supporters. Why would it? If the goal is to beat down, silence, and erase people of color and their communities and if the goal is to force exclusion, crush dignity, and worth of the LGBTQ community, then why would it matter? These exclusionary snake oil salesman just don't care. Supporters of this hateful nonsense and its rise across the nation hate the American Dream being opened up to undeserving people and hate that the poor don't work until they die. They have also been working to limit voting rights, civil rights, celebrating surveillance and censorship, and criminalizing access to knowledge.

Dr. Bessel Van der Kolk, a leading expert in trauma once said, “Our capacity to destroy one another is matched by our capacity to heal one another.” The love of the stranger; the capacity to see the other as like oneself and worthy of the same mercy and charity. The love of and concern for those who do not yet exist and whom one will never know but whose lives one is shaping in the selfish present. The love of the truth: the strength to resist illusion and lies and square up to uncomfortable facts of all kinds. The fate of civilization lies ultimately not in the law courts, at the ballot box or in the corridors of governments. It lies in our ability to master the most short-term, selfish and violent of our impulses active in the dense folds of organic matter between our ears; it lies in learning how fiercely to compensate for the flawed architecture of our minds.

We can move away from the edge by reaching out in love. Reaching out in love implies moving beyond our places of comfort, including those we have placed around meeting our individual needs, and radically reaching out to those who may be searching for whatever we have found, and what we may be able to offer the world including those who are needing to find help for their human longings. What does reaching out in love actually mean? First, it is about reaching, reaching out past the edge of our traditional comfort as individuals, and as congregations. It is totally understandable that we look for and hope for a community that wraps us in the comforting blanket of familiarity and reaching out in love can challenge that equilibrium. But radically reaching out in love can also challenge the systems and structures that have brought public racism, that deny and complicate our climate crisis, that continue the political stalemate that impedes us coming together to solve problems, and that feeds the growth of fundamentalism that threatens long-term peace. Reaching out in love is hard to do and our work is to think about how to crawl back when we get too close to the edge, how to care for ourselves and each other when the edge feels really scary and how to deal with the unknown when we reach the edge of what we know or have known.

When we are reaching out to the world with the values and principles that we cherish, we should be mustering the strength of others so more voices can be heard. When we stand with those who are oppressed, we should be doing that arm-in-arm and shoulder to shoulder with other UUs, other faith communities or partner organization who may not share our faith but certainly share our values. Instead of feeling overwhelmed today with the chaos and lack of love in the world, I am encouraged by the incredible efforts being put forth by so many. There is so much good, there is so much love, there actually is some progress, we have come so far with so much more to go in what may be a shorter time than we think. Find sources of strength and sustenance. Be willing to appreciate your comfort spots and yet, being willing to let go of things as they have always been done. Love still can prevail as we continue to walk towards trouble, reach out in love, and stand together on the edge. Let compassion be our hands, reaching to be with each other, all others to touch, hold, heal this fractured world. Let wisdom be our feet, bringing us to the crying need to friends or foe to share this body's blood. Let love be our eyes, that we might see the beauty, see the dream lurking in the shadows of despair and dread.

May it be so.

