

## Waking UP

A sermon preached by Wendy Page  
At The North Parish of North Andover, MA, Unitarian Universalist  
February 19, 2017

“Making all his nowhere plans for nobody.” That Beatles song takes me back. “Nowhere Man” was written in 1965: the year ground troops went into Vietnam. By the end of the year, 190,000 American soldiers were in Vietnam. It was the year Martin Luther King Jr. marched in Selma. The year Malcolm X was shot to death. The world was changing for everyone. It felt out of control. Not unlike today.

Waking up the day after the election, I turned on the radio and suddenly I felt that the world I lived in was radically different from what I had thought it was. Lennon and McCartney’s lyrics say:

*He's as blind as he can be*

*Just sees what he wants to see*

*Nowhere man, can you see me at all?*

Now that we realize we are in a reality that is different from what we thought, how do we wake up to this new world?

Rebecca Parker Unitarian Universalist theologian and minister defines prophetic witness as “our capacity to see what is happening, to say what is happening and to act in accordance with what we know.... Prophetic witness ...is the ability to name those places where we resist knowing

what needs to be known.”<sup>1</sup> Let me say that again “Prophetic witness ...is the ability to name those places where we resist knowing what needs to be known.” Today I would like to share with you three stories where I have begun to wake up to those places where I have resisted knowing what needs to be known. These have been humbling experiences.

In the summer of 2015 I did my first unit of Clinical Pastoral Education otherwise known as CPE at Brigham and Women’s Hospital in Boston. There were three CPE groups running simultaneously. We were a diverse group of seminarians from several Christian denominations and rabbinical students. Of the fifteen students, three of us were Unitarian Universalist. Most of us were under 30 years of age. Jamie and I gravitated to each other because we were both roughly twice the age of most of our group peers.

The two of us would eat lunch together, she would share stories about her sons. She would sometimes compare some of our CPE peers to her children. We were comfortable with one another and a support in the stresses of intense chaplaincy boot camp.

One of the exercises we each had to do was present to the entire group the arc of our life story in the context of our cultural location. I enjoyed these presentations, they helped me get to know and connect with other CPE students.

And then Jamie, my friend, did her presentation. She opened her talk by saying that she needed to do her cultural location presentation through the lens of race in the United States. Jamie is Black. She told her life story. In that telling, elements of Black American History that I have read in books and seen in movies came to life for me in a way that was very personal:

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<sup>1</sup> SoulMatters January 2017.

sharecropping in the South, emigration to the North to escape Jim Crow laws, poor housing options, school bussing to get a better education, worrying as a parent about the safety of Black sons in America.

Jamie's story broke my heart and opened my eyes at the same time. I remember walking home from the subway that evening through a park filled with cyclists, soccer players, and dog walkers. I was looking for faces darker than mine. Faces that Jamie could relate to and I realized that there were painfully few.

I had assumed commonality with Jamie because of age and sex and our shared liberal theology. I had minimized our differences because we had grown up on different sides of the color divide in America. When I think of busing children, I remember relating to friends of mine who were bus drivers during the desegregation effort in Boston in the 70's. They were doing it as a political act. For the first time, through Jamie's eyes, I saw the experience through the eyes of a scared five year old.

I was embarrassed and humbled by how much I did not know. What I have learned from Jamie is that I minimize differences and I make assumptions about other people's lived experience. I am trying to listen more, to question more, to recognize my assumptions. Those are all hard for me to do. I also recognized that I live in a White Bubble and that I need to work to get out of it. I am trying, at least once a month, to put myself in an environment where being Caucasian puts me in the minority, where my skin color or the language I speak stands out as different. So my take away from my friend Jamie's story is that I need to get out of my White Bubble.

In early December, I decided to go to a vigil which was to be held in Lawrence remembering Lee Manuel Vilorio-Paulino, a 16 year old whose horrific murder had stunned the city. The paper said that the vigil would be held outside the City Hall.

I arrived at the appointed time and saw no gathering. I paced up and down the block in front of City Hall asking passersby if they knew about the vigil. I quickly realized that my lack of Spanish was a real inhibitor to communicating with people on the street. I would approach a family, looking at the adults and ask a question. They would look at their seven year old who would translate back and forth. I realized how important the children were for the family surviving in an Anglo world. Eventually I found a family that was looking for the vigil too. There were three Spanish speaking adults and one twelve year old boy who looked like he wanted to be anywhere else but on that street. He hung as far away from them as possible so was not translating what next transpired. We waited in the cold and eventually a woman approached wearing a tee-shirt with what looked like Lee Manuel's picture on it. She chatted with my companions, they discussed things, she made a phone call, and soon a taxi pulled up.

They got in and gestured for me to come with them. It suddenly dawned on me what had been transpiring...the vigil was at another location and they needed transportation to get there. I declined their kind offer and asked where the vigil was. The youth said the police station. Feeling like a complete idiot, which I was, I said I had my car and would go on my own. If I had known what was going on, I could have offered them a ride! I was the totally unprepared Gringa. Chastened, I got into my car. To my credit, I did not immediately drive home in humiliation but looked up where the police station and drove over to the new location. There

were swarms of police directing traffic, there was a vigil in a lot across from the Police Station. I realized I would have to park blocks away and walk back to the vigil. I was cold and tired and disheartened and I drove by and went home.

My learning from this experience included that I need support in the work that I do. It is too hard to stay the course without support physically and emotionally. I also learned that if I want to do work to stand in solidarity with Hispanic populations, some basic language skills in Spanish would be a good start.

In January on a crisp sunny day I ventured into Lawrence again to attend an Organizing meeting for Sanctuary churches held at the Lawrence Heritage State Park in a beautifully renovated old mill building. I met a North Parish congregant in the parking lot. We walked through a park and into the building. We met another congregant and they talked about the homeless person lying in the park that they had both seen. I had walked the same path, and had been preoccupied with finding the door to get into the unfamiliar building and had missed what was right in front of me.

Inside we gathered in a meeting room. We had coffee and tea, and breakfast goodies provided. The group was varied. Several churches in the Valley were represented. I saw Reverend Lara from the Andover UU Church there as well as several congregants from North Parish. The meeting was lead by a coalition of young activists from different organizations. They were millennial, they were black and brown and white. They spoke English and Spanish. A woman was introduced and spoke about how she was undocumented but she refused to be silent any more.

I was so inspired by the energy in the room, the leadership and the articulateness of the organizers. It was a first step in coming together, sharing ideas and resources and building a coalition to work around a serious threat to undocumented people in the Merrimack Valley. This was my introduction to the good work being begun and the many ways individuals, congregations and organizations could participate whether or not their congregations became sanctuaries.

My learning from this experience was, keep my eyes open as I walk through the park so that I can see the homeless man asleep under newspapers. When I ride the subway, instead of always reading my book, watch where people of color are standing and sitting, where women in hijab are sitting and whether there is tension and fear in their bodies. This means being aware, not only of my own sense of safety but also thinking about whether other people feel safe. I also learned that there is energy and joy in working with others. I learned in the organizing meeting, that as a white privileged woman it is good to keep quiet and learn from others with lived experience.

So as I have been waking up, and believe me, I have a long way to go, I have learned a few things. One is to be curious about other people's experiences and not to make assumptions about them. Another is to get out of my white bubble, to put myself in situations where I am a minority and to pay attention to how that feels.

I have learned that it helps to have support, buddies along the way because it is not easy to wake up and I need support. I learned that basic language skills are essential. I learned to be

quiet and listen to others with different experiences. I learned that there is power and hope and energy when a coalition of people come together to do important work.

The process of waking up will be different for each of us, we are in different social locations, different stages of waking up. Whether the next step for you is going to your first march, being willing to be arrested in a non violent action, teaching a child, or learning a new language there is a next step. We are all learning as we go. This is not the time to be stunned into numbness, into inaction. As Lennon and McCartney said:

*Nowhere man please listen*

*You don't know what you're missing*

*Nowhere man, The world is at your command*

Be galvanized to join with those around you that want to make a change. Exchange ideas, be inspired. Look for work that stirs your soul and put your shoulder to the work. Share what you are doing and invite others to come along. Ask about what is stirring others to action and catch their enthusiasm. Ask where there is synchronicity between and among what you and others are doing. Encourage one another. Feed yourself and others. Pay attention to what is happening around you. And, equally important, pay attention to what is happening inside you and... wake up.

You can be prophetic: name what you resist knowing...wake up!

Blessed be and Amen.