

Transgender Inclusion in Congregations

Transforming Hearts Collective

TRANSCRIPT: Session 5: The Role of Culture in Trans Exclusion

Hi, everybody, welcome back. Thanks for your patience and bearing with us, as it took a while to get this fifth section out to you. So glad that you're still with us.

We have an opening reading for you today, and that comes from a fantastic book called *The Emperor Has No Clothes: Teaching About Race and Racism to People Who Don't Want to Know*, by Tema Okun. It looks like this. A very cool book.

And the reading is, "One of culture's most important characteristics is how embodied it tends to become in those of us living inside it. A metaphor would be the water in which fish swim; this trope communicates both the pervasiveness and invisibility of culture-- if we're the fish, how many of us grasp that we swim in water?"

When we do notice culture, we tend to assume its inevitability; we see it as 'natural' rather than constructed. This is particularly true for those of us who have never had to navigate multiple cultures. An example is the commonly understood truism that enslaved peoples understood the white plantation families-- their thinking, their habits, their values-- much better than the white slave-owners understood those whom they enslaved.

The survival of enslaved people depended on their knowing how to navigate white culture, while slave-owners were not similarly required to intimately know or understand the culture of those they regarded as less than human and thus without cultural value."

Thanks, Alex.

I'm going to light our chalice.

(sighs)

Thank you, Alex, for our opening words and for lighting our chalice. Poignant words for our time. At this moment in our faith and relevant for our time together here.

Again, welcome, it's good to be back. It's good to be sharing this time with folks.

What we did last time was really talk about trans experience and spiritually. We talked about the richness of our lives and communities. We gave folks a sense of who we are-- using some really incredible statistics from the U.S. Trans Survey from 2015, talked about some of the things that many of our folks struggle with, and we included things like economic justice issues, policing and incarceration, health care access-- we talked about, and also documentation.

We also spent some time talking quite a bit about spirituality-- 63% I think it was, of trans people identify as religious or spiritual-- and talking about the ways in which our

communities are rooted very deeply in spirit and spirituality, and what communities of faith miss out on when we're not able to be there, to be able to show up fully as ourselves.

And so, ultimately, at the end of the day, the conversation was about-- the fact that being trans doesn't automatically come with suffering; but that culture creates that suffering. And so that is how we made our way here, to talking very specifically about culture and culture's impact-- both trans culture, UU culture, and dominant culture-- the ways in which cultural realities have an impact on our lives and experiences, and thinking about ways to shift those.

Yeah, absolutely. You know, and we're like, we really are excited for this course to conclude in our next session with understanding how to truly shift culture, in congregations specifically, become a more trans-inclusive and trans-affirming culture. And, in order to do that-- because we recognize that trans inclusion isn't something that we can do just by creating quick fixes or band-aid solutions to issues of exclusion, that it really is a cultural problem that trans folk are experiencing a lack of inclusion in congregations. It's deeper than just bathrooms and pronouns and language.

But in order to talk about how to shift culture, we have to understand first what culture is, because it's a complex thing. The concept of culture is far more complex than we might even think it is. So what do we mean when we say "culture" in the context of this course?

Well, the very simplest definition of culture that I've seen recently that speaks to this is-- it comes from Anne Stewart, who says. "Culture is how you do life,"

- which is super simple.
- Pretty straightforward.

Yeah, super straightforward and yet, like, okay, but what does that mean? How do we do life? And that's such an incredible question to ask. What do we do-- Who are we, and how do we do life together?

And so Tema Okun, who the opening reading came from, shares a more complex definition of culture, which is: "culture is the set of values, beliefs, norms, and standards held by a group of people in order to ensure the group's ability to operate"-- which I think makes a lot of sense.

And she developed that definition based in part on the work of [Ronald] Inglehart, who said that "culture is not just a random collection of values, beliefs, and skills of the people in a given society. It constitutes a survival strategy."

So this idea that culture is all of the things and practices and ways of being that help us make meaning and be in relationship with a mutual sense of group cohesion with the other people who are in a group with us.

It often gets talked about as being really specifically tied to a particular country, or a particular society, or a particular territory, but in this context of this course, Mykal and I are really talking about culture as the sort of standards and practices, and norms, that are held by any group of people that has something in common. And that could be gender, that could be religion, that could be a country, or a territory, or a society. It could be age, it could be generation, it could be sexuality or ability.

There are many different ways in which we are members of different groups or different social locations, and being a part of that group comes with participating in a group culture in some way.

Right. I also, just in listening to you talk about or reflect on some of these definitions of culture, I was also thinking about the fact that much of what happens in congregations has to do with how folks understand the culture of that space.

Inglehart was talking quite a bit about the ways in which the cultural system is likely to have a mutually supportive relationship with the economic and political systems. There's a way in which-- he goes on to say that culture, therefore, "is closely linked with power," and it serves to, as he says, "legitimate the established social order-- partly because the dominant elite try to shape it to help perpetuate their rule."

In other words, there is a way of being, there's a way of being that is supposed to make sense in any given context. And everybody who's anybody is supposed to understand what that context is. They're supposed to know how those things work.

I saw this a lot in congregational life ministry where folks who were brand new coming into a space don't understand the culture, or often don't understand the culture. And they come in with the very clear sense that they don't know what's going on. And often it happens quite a bit that congregations and folks who are active in leadership aren't clear that it really matters to help folks understand what's going on in the space of congregational life, in the space of church. And that often does not happen.

So who any community is, it becomes a part of their DNA.

- Right.
- Right?

The People's Institute for Survival and Beyond explains it this way-- They say that "culture is a way of life. Culture is created and recreated by individuals, groups, communities, and institutions, in every act of our daily lives. It's expressed and passed on through language, values, symbols, history, attitudes, behavior, food, music."

Whether you or not have food after service is a part of a congregation's culture. What kind of music you have is a part of a congregation's culture. Whether or not children are in the community throughout the entire worship experience or not is part of a congregation's culture.

So, it's this incredible thing that happens that nobody can really see, but that exists in a really big and deep way. And it has an impact especially when people who are on the margins in any particular way show up in a space, it becomes really apparent the extent to which folks are able to settle into those spaces.

Yes, absolutely.

Culture is "the way we do things," like that's at base. How do you know what those unspoken rules are about how things are done here? And what feels appropriate and what doesn't feel appropriate that are completely unwritten rules and expectations of any group of people.

So, there's a great conceptualization of this that's called the iceberg model of culture. I don't think it was ever created by just one person; it's something that many different people have written about and talked about for many decades. But we're going to share a little bit about it because it helps us build from here to talk about congregational culture a little bit more and how congregational culture can work to unintentionally exclude trans people.

So, I'm just going to share my screen.

So this is one version of that iceberg model of culture that comes from James Penstone who's building on the work of lots of other people. And, as you can see, what we were just talking about in terms of what culture is, there's elements of culture that are visible and obvious, and those are the things that are above the surface of the iceberg.

The reason why it's an iceberg is that-- the thing with icebergs is 90% of the iceberg is underneath the surface-- that's the way icebergs work. So what we're seeing when we think about what culture is is just 10% of what is actually going on. The other 90% is underneath the surface.

And the things that are above the surface are things-- they're the artifacts of a culture: the holidays, the arts, symbolism, dress and expression, rites of passage-- that sort of thing. And then the things that are underneath the surface are the beliefs, the values, the norms, the assumptions that this is how things happen or this is how we do things here, that are often unspoken and just completely go without notice unless you are an outsider to that culture, and you come in and you think, whoa, what is with these gender roles, or what is with these views on raising children, or this way of approaching time, or learning, or social status?

And this is when things start to get really confusing for folks in cross-cultural situations, which most folks watching this can probably relate to. If you've ever been to a different country, for example, it can become really obvious really quickly when there are completely different standards or norms or assumptions for how things happen here, whether it's something as simple as saying hello. Do you shake hands, do you bow? Do you make eye contact, do you not?

Or something as subtle as religion and what are your beliefs about that which is bigger than ourselves.

Right, right.

But it's not just between different countries, it's also between different groups within the same country.

Right, absolutely. Looking at this actually reminded me of the fact that many congregations - have, for example, an order of service that they hand out to people at the beginning of a worship time. That might not communicate anything to anybody other than the fact that, "Oh great, I get to know who wrote the music that we're using."

However, the fact that there's an order of service, which is the piece that is above the surface, communicates that time is important (laughs) which is below the surface. (laughs)

We're not necessarily going to think that that communicates anything about how community thinks about time. But it actually does. Because there are many congregations that don't have an order of service because they're not as invested in thinking about time in those ways.

Yes.

So, that's just one example of that that might hit closer to home.

Absolutely.

The iceberg model feels pretty clear, like the stuff above the surface feels more tangible. Things you can see, taste, touch-- all of your senses are kind of enacted by those things, whereas the stuff that's below the surface are the things you're not necessarily going to see, you're not necessarily going to hear about. There aren't necessarily going to be rules written down about those things, and yet the guidelines and rules and understanding about how to be in a particular community certainly are impacted by those things that are below the surface, even though we're not talking about them.

So, we're going to move on to talking about how does this show up in congregations, and in trans community, using this iceberg model. So, we're going to start with UU culture.

What is Unitarian Universalist culture if we try to break it down in this way? This is what Mykal and I came up with. (laughs) Let us know what you think.

So, what you're looking at is an iceberg model of culture that is specific to Unitarian Universalism, and the ways in which Unitarian Universalists congregate and gather, more specifically.

Right.

And so there are those above the surface kinds of things related to dress, and holidays, and the arts, rites of passage, and symbols-- things that really impact our senses in some specific ways. The things that you'll see there are the things that we see, that would make sense. Hymns, we're talking about the chalice, joys and concerns, Mary Oliver, (laughs) which is fantastic, Alex. (laughter) NPR-- equally fantastic. ministerial robes, Sunday morning worship, Earth Day, coming of age, Easter-- all of these are things that we can put our hands on, things we can see, taste, touch, feel above the surface.

Folks might immediately-- When somebody asks you, "What's it like to be in a UU congregation?"-- those are typically the things that people are going to mention because they're above the surface, they're easily accessible in those kinds of places.

Below the surface, that 90%, that rules aren't necessarily written about but that exist are related to norms, assumptions, values, and beliefs. So, UU congregations employ a democratic process. The fact that nature is sacred, interconnectedness, the interconnected web of all things.

But there are also some other pieces under the surface that, while we don't talk about, they show up in how we exist in those spaces. Like, for example, only certain people lead worship. There's a very clear hierarchy in many congregations, not all, that they're folks whose job and work it is to lead us through worship spaces.

A sense of perfectionism that also exists just in terms of making sure that things are done right. We want to make sure that things are done well, and what things being done well means is things being done right.

-Or perfect.

Or perfect, right, which is where that perfectionism comes from.

I see here, Alex, that we had put "conflict avoidance." I would love to hear you talk a little bit more about that, especially as somebody who has been a lifelong UU and what that looks like and means for you in this context.

Yeah, absolutely. And I think that one of the important things to keep in mind is that we're not saying that all UU churches are anti-Christian, for example, or that all UU churches have hierarchical leadership because that's not necessarily true. But what we're talking about here is these are the sorts of norms and assumptions and beliefs and values that undergird the concept of what is Unitarian Universalist culture at large.

The things that even if a particular person, a particular UU, or a particular congregation isn't super into recycling, for whatever reason, they sort of understand that Unitarian Universalism, as a whole, is kind of into recycling. The language around recycling is familiar to them. The practices around recycling are familiar to them, even if they're not really it themselves, if that makes sense.

And I think the anti-Christian one is really a good example of this because, again, as somebody who was raised Unitarian Universalist, I was raised in a period of time and also in a part of our faith, geographically, where the congregation I was raised in was very anti-Christian. And it wasn't something that was explicitly stated. It wasn't someone up in the pulpit going, "I'm anti-Christian"-- it wasn't that obvious, which is what makes it an under-the-surface kind of thing.

But I grew up without a real understanding of the Bible, I grew up with a sense that saying the words "God" or "Jesus" or "Christ" was somehow not valued and that those concepts weren't valued. It was very under the surface. There was backlash against that that was very obvious even though it wasn't explicitly stated. Even though Unitarian Universalism originated from Judeo-Christian religious practices--

-Super confusing!

...and even though the Bible is one of our six sources.

I was very confused by this growing up. I actually really loved the Bible stories and was super into that, but wasn't encouraged in that excitement. In fact, my sister went to a Christian college and ended up taking a Bible studies class in college, and my parents tried to talk her out of it, which is kind of incredible to me, from a Unitarian Universalist place.

So, yeah, in terms of conflict avoidance, I think this is one that I hear time and time again when I work with folks in UU congregations is this idea that it's better to be nice than to be truthful. It's better to try to get along than to actually be in authentic relationship.

And it gets us into trouble all of the time, but it's this super under-the-surface idea that we shouldn't be in conflict or that we're gonna pretend that we're not in conflict, even if we are. It had a huge impact on me as a teenager when there was an adult in the congregation that was not being a very great leader for the youth and nobody wanted to challenge that person, even though they were having a negative impact on the youth in the congregation.

And that person went on to continue to have a negative impact for many, many years because no one was willing to actually say, "Hey, maybe you should think about this differently," or "You're having a negative impact," or...

- Right?

- Right.

Well, this is definitely something that we hear a lot.

- Makes sense?

- Perfect, thank you.

So, that's UU culture. (laughs) So, we wanted to compare this, now that we have a sense of how does this work how does this iceberg model kind of work when we start to think about culture.

We want to compare this to dominant culture, mainstream culture in the United States, specific. So, let's share that one.

- So, yeah.

- Yeah.

These are all things that might make quite a lot of sense to everybody who's taking a look at this. Things that are above the surface tend to be the focal point of dominant culture in the US. Certainly, Judeo-Christian belief, right? So, folks are often in many ways going to focus-- you might get time off at your job for Christmas or Easter in a way that you will not get time off for Passover or Yom Kippur, or Ramadan, or any of the other religious practices and beliefs.

Marriage and parenthood are certainly aspects of dominant culture that we focus on. The American flag. Money is right at the top because we exist in a capitalistic society and system, so the focus is on money and how much money we make, how much things cost, the value of things is based in monetary standards often.

But then when we look below the surface at norms, assumptions, beliefs, and values, what sort of undergirds so much of how we exist, so much of how systems are set up and created in the US, and more broadly in the Western part of the world, has to do with operating with sexist gender roles, thinking about America as the best-- Oh my goodness, don't even get me started.

Right. (laughs)

Militarism. Individualism feels really big to me. Yes. That feels really big. There's a way in which we as part of dominant culture operate under the notion that as long as I'm okay, everything's okay; as long as my family's okay, then we're okay. A sense of looking beyond oneself and beyond one's own lens. We're certainly not taught how to do that, which, in my humble opinion, is kind of at the heart of what it means to be in community, in congregations, in an authentic way, is to really understand how to look beyond one's own lens. But individualism is at the heart of dominant culture and shows up everywhere.

Are there other aspects of this that you want to highlight Alex?

No, I think it just bears thinking about as you're listening to us and looking at this iceberg to think about how does this resonate with you. What does this feel like in terms of... Knowing that growing up in United States culture and/or Western culture, in general, because a lot of this is an overlap there, like means being steeped in all of this, whether it's the above-the-surface stuff or the below-the-surface stuff.

And some of this feels really comfortable for a lot of us, and some of this doesn't feel comfortable, but knowing that these are the sorts of just general understandings of who we

are and how things work and how life is led in dominant mainstream US culture, that everyone has the ability to have massive debt and everyone does have massive debt.

Christianity is something that you just have to understand in order to navigate this culture, even if you're not Christian. That sort of stuff is really what we're talking about when we're talking about culture.

Yep, absolutely. And it'd be interesting to think about at some point whether you're going to see all of them together, but it'd be interesting to think about the ways in which what shows up under the surface in dominant culture also shows up under the surface in UU culture, as well.

But before we get to that, we have one more culture, one more iceberg we want to share with you. One more iceberg.

Trans culture.
Yay!

What do we mean when we're talking about trans culture? What does that look like? Dig into this one Alex. (laughs) Talk about it.

So, this one's trans culture. You could do this with anything, right? You could do this with gay culture, LGBT culture, whatever. Like if you were to brainstorm any particular culture, you probably could come up with the stuff that's above the iceberg, and maybe a couple of the things that are under the iceberg.

If you just were thinking off the top of your head what is trans culture. When Mykal and I were thinking about this for the purpose of this exercise, we were thinking about, again, the arts, the holidays, the dress, the rites of passage, the symbolism that trans folk, in general, sort of trade in, the things that we all understand even if they don't apply to all of us.

Because, again, this isn't about every trans person having the same experience. There is no single trans experience, there is no single trans community. But there is shared cultural understandings and shared cultural artifacts and practices that exist.

That's right.

I'm really appreciating what shows up below the surface that has impact on our lives as trans folks, thinking about, in particular, many definitions of truth. There's no one way of being or existing, that gender is culturally constructed. Definitely shows up under-- is under the surface-- and shows up above the surface in some really unique and beautiful ways.

But it is one of those things that ultimately we may not be-- I would say, we may not talk about, but we actually do talk about (laughs) which actually may show up is an under-the-

surface kind of-- maybe an above-the-surface kind of thing for trans community, but that may ultimately be under the surface for dominant culture.

-Right, right.

But for us, talking about gender as culturally constructed, in many ways, is definitely above the surface. So that's a real clear difference. Elevate queer as default, thinking about family and what family looks like and means. For many of us, as we sort of built community and understand what family looks like, we've had to build family in all kinds of ways based on our ability to exist in the same space with our families of origin.

So chosen family impacts how we even think about being in community. What does it look like and mean to connect with somebody who isn't related to us by blood, but related and relatable to us in other ways. Definitely, definitely unique and different in so many ways from dominant culture.

Yeah, so, and I think there'll be other things that we want to touch on once we start to compare these. And folks have probably already started to see how there's some overlap between these three icebergs that we've showed you and there's some super enormous conflict between these three icebergs, right?

So, let's just go ahead and do that and put all three of them next to each other and then talk about that a little bit.

Great, it's bigger.

Awesome.

So, yeah.

So, you can start to see how there is a lot more overlap between Unitarian Universalist culture and dominant culture than there is between UU culture and trans culture, or between trans culture and dominant culture.

- Right?

- Right.

And this is the stuff that we really wanna be able to help engage with all of you on in terms of how UU congregations, or congregations in general, regardless of whether or not they're UU, become unwelcoming spaces or uninclusive spaces for trans people.

It's not just the stuff above the surface; it's the stuff under the surface that makes it possible for trans people to either feel a sense of belonging and a sense of home in a particular place or not, and not have the first ability to get spiritual needs met.

- Right?

- Right, absolutely.

It's interesting, you know, as I've, sort of, navigated some UU spaces over the last several years. I'm thinking about the ways in which problems get solved and the ways in which movement happens or doesn't happen in terms of decision-making. Much of the ways that decisions get made are often with a few folks who have power to make decisions, sometimes not in the wider community in which decisions can get made.

Whereas in much of trans culture, my experience has been that problem-solving happens in a community-based kind of way. A very, very different way of thinking about what it looks like and means to be connected to other people. If you're solving problems together as a community, then you've invested in connection in a particular kind of way.

That doesn't always happen in congregations of any kind, honestly, not just UU congregations, but many. And so it really calls upon congregations as they are, as you may be investing in the coming places that are truly trans-inclusive to really look below the surface.

Yes.

It makes sense that the things that folks are going to grasp at first are going to be the things that we can see and taste and hear and touch. And so, yes, folks are going to think about bathrooms, right? That is going to be often the number one thing, and maybe the only thing that folks feel like they can shift and change, whether or not restrooms are gender neutral or if there are spaces for folks to really be who they are in those spaces.

Yes, folks are going to look at and think about honoring everyone's gender pronouns--super important, right? And while those things are all important, those and many, many others, there's also a way in which some of the stuff below the surface may not be touched upon, and if they're not, then folks may be really grateful that they have a gender neutral restroom to go to, but ultimately don't feel like the space honors body positivity or doesn't feel like the space, understands or talks about gender as being culturally constructed.

Yeah.

If folks don't feel like they're connected to the community in a way that really looks at what's below the surface, then folks may still not be as comfortable showing up fully as themselves in those spaces. And so it really calls upon communities to delve deep.

One of the things that I say to communities all the time when I go in and do work with them is let's not look at vocabulary and language first, let's look at ourselves first, let's look at how we operate as a community.

Yes!

Let's look at the ways in which gender has impact on our lives, and let's talk about that in a way that we don't ever talk about that. Because we're not only understanding ourselves better, we're not only understanding our community better, we're understanding what it is

that other folks are showing up and seeing that we don't ordinarily see, and it helps us take a glance at how we can be different as communities and truly create some spaces that are really brilliant and multifaceted for the folks who want to be there.

Yes, absolutely.

Yeah, so just, you know...

We would encourage you to take a look at really not only the ways in which-- what this brings up for you and how this may or may not relate to your experience of your congregation, but also specifically looking at the things that directly conflict with each other, between trans culture and UU culture specifically.

And one of the points of really bringing dominant culture into this conversation is to say that when we aren't intentional, when we aren't aware of the culture that we're creating, and when we're not creating a culture that is specifically reflective of our values and how we want to be in the world as people of faith, dominant culture becomes the default.

And, you know, Howard Zinn said it best: "you can't be neutral on a moving train." Dominant culture is the moving train that we are all on. And if we don't actively become aware of what we're taking on from dominant culture and what we're not, we're just going to take it all on because that's the presumed default.

And it's not to say that everything about dominant culture is bad. There's nothing inherently wrong with Christianity. It's just when Christianity becomes the only possibility that people can imagine that it becomes a problem.

-Right?

-Right. That's right.

Same thing with a lot of the stuff in the mainstream.

So, similarly, when you look at the interplay and the conflict between trans culture and UU culture, I think one thing that I'd really love to just briefly touch on is that bottom of the iceberg where in dominant culture and UU culture you see hierarchical leadership, and in trans culture you see leadership from the margins. That's direct conflict, right? Like you can't really reconcile those two things very easily.

And that's a way in which when trans people come into a congregation, if the norm and assumption and value of that congregation is hierarchical leadership, that's going to be tough. That is tough for trans folk, for a lot of trans folk, from a cultural place, not from an individual place.

Because in trans community, the leadership and the folks who have been leading the charge in terms of all of the gains that we've ever made as a community, have been the people with this most to lose. It's been the people who literally had nothing left to lose but to try to survive by changing things. Because the people who could just blend into the

background and become a part of dominant culture, did so potentially and largely, those aren't the folks who are the dominant leaders in our movement because they didn't have as much to lose.

So, that's a really big difference. (laughs) That's a problem when you're actually talking about how do we create space for difference in this particular way.

Another super direct conflict is you see in trans culture, financial insecurity is the norm, and you see in UU culture financial security is the norm. Does that mean that everybody in UU congregations is financially secure? Absolutely not. But the assumption gets made that folks have financial security rather than the assumption being made that folks have financial insecurity which is what happens in trans communities.

These are the sort of things that start to get in the way of feeling a sense of true welcome and real belonging.

Right, right.

Thank you for raising that-- the financial security versus financial insecurity. Because when the presumption is that the vast majority of the folks in a congregation have financial security, even if it's not true, if that presumption exists, that impacts how people talk about money,

-Yes.

--and it impacts how people ask for money.

It impacts the presumptions that get made about whether or not folks will contribute in particular ways. And that's the stuff that can ultimately have folks backing away, backing away, to the point that, ultimately, they're out the door. And afraid to come back. Afraid to come back-- because if the presumption is that folks have money, then I certainly can't talk in any public way about the fact that I don't.

You might not think that that would be an issue around trans inclusion, but it is a huge issue (laughs) around trans inclusion because it's under the surface,

- That's right.

- because it's under the surface.

So, it's great if I can access... I'm going to stop sharing because we've shared a lot (laughs) of those icebergs. It's great that I can access a congregation because you have put the effort into creating a place where I can go to the bathroom. Like, that's important; access is important.

We told you from the beginning of this class that this wasn't going to be your mama's trans 101, (laughing) that we're going to try to push you a little bit harder.

And for me, access is important and access is not the end. Access is step one. And just being able to use the bathroom in a congregation does not mean that I'm gonna be able to get my spiritual needs met in a congregation. If I can't use the bathroom, I probably am not gonna be able to get my spiritual needs met.

- So, yes, let's deal with that.

- Let's do that.

Let's create access; access is important.

But what I think Mykal and I are both spending a good amount of time on is this idea that that's not enough; it's not enough just to create access. And that when we're talking about true welcome and real belonging, we're talking about stuff that just exists on such a deep level under the surface that it takes a lot of intention and a lot of hard work to shift.

It really does. A lot of intention, a lot of work, and therefore time.

-Yes.

-It takes time to do.

And so, while I feel really clear that the time that we all have spent together-- and we'll keep spending together because we have one more session-- is meaningful time,

- this is really the beginning.

- Yes.

Like, if what we all want (chuckles) is for all of us to be able to fully show up as ourselves, no matter our gender identity or expression, at any given point in time or another, then this has to only be a beginning, it can't be an end point. There's too much to do.

We're too steeped in so much of what dominant culture provides, so much of what UU culture instills within all of us in all kinds of ways. We're so steeped in it that it really takes work to undo it.

And being able to talk about it helps because we don't talk about these things. We have to be able to talk about them, we have to move ourselves to a place of being comfortable with discomfort because it's really unconformable; culture shift is not comfy. (laughs) But it gets better the more we practice, and practice involves engaging and talking about it and moving toward some new things and trying some new things on and engaging in conversation and issues that we might not otherwise think to talk about.

I love that you just brought up that idea that we aren't taught to talk about this or we don't generally talk about this stuff. Because, frankly, like, that's part of culture, too. That's the "way things are." The way we do things is we don't talk about this stuff. Even by virtue of taking this class, being willing to stick with us up until this point by watching this video, and thinking about how can I start talking about this stuff, it's hugely countercultural to do

that, so know that that is a huge piece of work is leaning into that discomfort that you might feel around that.

And also just to be clear that in this moment in Unitarian Universalism, certainly, it's important to point out that when we look at what's under the surface in dominant culture, particularly, a lot of what's under the surface in dominant culture is actually tied into white supremacy culture itself; that dominant culture and white supremacy culture are actually synonymous in the minds of most of us who do anti-oppression, anti-racism education.

And the characteristics, those under-the-surface characteristics of white supremacy in this country, particularly, is what ends up seeping in when we don't actively work to be intentional about what kind of culture we're creating in congregations. And there's some really good resources about that that we're going to provide in the resource section for this course.

So we just wanted to touch on that so that you know that that's why those are there, to be thinking about how this conversation connects so intimately with the larger conversation about white supremacy in our faith movement as a whole.

That's right.

If folks are invested in doing this kind of work, like work that is this deep, it can impact everything.

Yes!
Everything.

It can and will impact how folks think about race and racism and racial injustice, how folks think about and are impacted by gender justice, will impact conversations about class ableism-- like all of it. If we can really get down and do the difficult work around culture and around white supremacy culture, it can totally shift the spaces that we're co-creating, because then we really begin to co-create space...

Yes.
... in a way that doesn't happen as much now.

And you start to understand the ways in which, like we were talking about earlier, you wouldn't necessarily think that making assumptions about money and financial reality would be a huge issue for trans inclusion, but it is. And you wouldn't necessarily think that talking about race and ethnicity and the ways in which that plays out in congregations would be a huge issue for trans inclusion, but it is. (laughs)

Same thing with disability, same thing with age, same thing with sexuality. When you start talking about trans communities, the layers of experience and marginalization becomes so unseparable that you can't actually just pluck out gender and expect people to create a truly inclusive space for those of us who are bringing those lived experiences.

That's right.

So that's why we wanted to spend so much time talking about culture and hope to set you up really well for the last session which is going to be all about how to shift it. Now that we understand it, what do we do about it? (laughs)

Right.

Yes, yes. So, I believe what we're going to invite folks to do as we close out here is to take some time and reflect on how all of this-- everything that we've talked about relates to your understanding of your own congregation because every congregation is different.

- That's right.

- Right?

That's really important to keep in mind. But to spend some time in reflection about that as you're thinking about culture, cultural realities more broadly, and what culture shift might look like and mean for your community.

And so, before you do that, I'm just going to close us out here, and just bring back to the surface a portion of the opening reading that Alex shared. I'll just read it again here.

"One of culture's most important characteristics is how embodied it tends to become in those of us living inside it. A metaphor would be the water in which fish swim; this trope communicates both the pervasiveness and invisibility of culture-- if we're the fish, how many of us grasp that we swim in water?"

You know, the invitation at the conclusion of our time is to-- --is to grasp that we swim in particular waters, and to understand what it would look like and mean for individuals and for a community to shift the tides of those waters, and do some things differently.

It can be done; I've seen it happen. And I'm sure some of you have seen aspects of it, as well. It's possible, but it really begins with understanding it and grasping that we swim in particular waters and it's up to us to do the work of changing the tide and therefore shifting the cultures in a way that will enable all of us to be who we are called to be in the spaces that we want to call home.

So, thank you for being with us. We are really happy to be back with you, and we will look forward to coming together for one last time, for our last session to talk about culture shift.

I'm gonna blow out our chalice.

Take good care, everybody.

Yes, please.

And I know that we're in General Assembly season, so take good care of yourselves. For those of you who are working hard to prepare for GA, and I'm sure I may see some of you there. So, take care in the meantime, and we'll see you soon.