

## **“How to Be Uncomfortable”**

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*“White Privilege doesn’t mean your life isn’t hard, can’t be hard, or was never hard; it means the colour of your skin will never be a factor in what’s causing your difficulties.”*

–Indygo Arscott, a 16-year-old gender non-conforming Ojibwe from Toronto

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There are all kinds of ways to feel uncomfortable. Here are three snapshots – true events – to help us frame the discomfort that I’d like us to talk about, during this Pride month and on the cusp of the community-wide discussion of *So You Want to Talk About Race* (by Ijeoma Oluo).

### **Scenario #1**

My ministry includes serving on the staff of our UU Association, where I edit a weekly spirituality series. One of my authors, Mandie McGlynn, wrote a beautiful reflection for Mother’s Day about an experience years ago, when she and one of her partners parented her now-teenager through a tantrum when the child was three years old.

My editorial note explained that Mandie refers to her child as “they” and “them” because Q. identifies as agender and uses they/them pronouns.

Now: as a Welcoming congregation, we strive to make this community feel welcoming and accepting to anyone, regardless of their gender identity – or their children’s gender identity. So we’ve spent time learning about the continuum of gender identity and gender expression. We know that some people are gender non-conforming, or genderqueer.

But that’s not true everywhere – not even in the UU universe. A few days after I posted Mandie’s reflection to social media, someone left a comment:

*I really didn’t like the way it was written. Using “they” instead of he or she was very confusing. What’s the difference if the story was about a male or female child? Aggravated me. Sometimes things are taken too far!*

### **Scenario #2**

On the last Monday in April, around lunchtime, a woman in Rialto, California called 911.

“Hi,” she said. “I’m observing a young black man at one of my neighbor’s homes walking out with luggage. It’s.... just curious. Very curious,” she tells told the dispatcher. She found the man and his companions “suspicious” because they did not wave to her.

These Black artists and filmmakers, visiting from Canada, were in fact Airbnb guests packing up their car after a stay. As four separate police officers approached them, with hands on their gun holsters, a helicopter buzzed overhead. The guests left, unharmed – but not before the story made international news.

### **Scenario #3**

I was up the coast, leading a wedding rehearsal – a joyful but mildly chaotic event in a beautiful park overlooking the ocean. I had just finished guiding the couple, their families, and all twelve members of their wedding party through the rehearsal. As I asked the crowd to gather ‘round for one last set of reminders, one of the groomsmen sidled up to me, put his arm around my shoulder, and pinned me against his body.

To recap, here are our case studies for examining what it means to be uncomfortable, and how we respond to that discomfort:

1. A reader criticizes a mother for referring to her child as agender.
2. A white neighbor calls the police because an unknown black man is carrying a suitcase out of a house.
3. A man who does not know me touches me inappropriately in front of a crowd of his friends.

Who’s uncomfortable in the first scenario?

The reader. Whether because she’s been taught the myth that “there are only two genders,” or because it’s confusing to her that a teenager has the agency and self-understanding to identify themselves as agender, or because the teen’s mother, Mandie, respects that.... the reader is uncomfortable.

How did she signal her discomfort?

The commenter was, at first, unwilling or unable to be curious in her discomfort. Instead of asking to know more, she shut down. By criticizing... and in criticizing, by refusing to acknowledge what Mandie and her teenager have asked people to acknowledge.

### Who's uncomfortable in the second scenario?

The white neighbor. Just like the white woman – on the same day! April 30th – who dialed 911 at Colorado State University because there were two young men on a college tour with her – people of color – who she thought were “odd.” Just like, two weeks earlier, the white Starbucks barista in Philadelphia called the police because two black men, while waiting for a friend, hadn't bought food.

How did these white callers signal their discomfort?

By calling the police. More and more white people are calling the police when they feel uncomfortable with black and brown people in what they think of as “their” space. White callers, says Jason Johnson,<sup>1</sup>

*feel that the police are there to work as their personal racism valets and remove black people from the situation... When white people call the police, they know no matter how shaky or inconsistent their story is the police will listen to them first...*

...while Black people know that the most innocuous of police encounters, even when prompted by white discomfort, can turn deadly.

### Who's uncomfortable in the third scenario?

Me. I was uncomfortable – to have my personal space violated, and to be touched intimately by a man who I'd never met. I was doubly uncomfortable because (as God is my witness) the exact same thing had happened two hours earlier at a private child dedication.

How do you imagine I signaled my discomfort, in that moment?

I managed to get the words out: “I'm not comfortable with you touching me,” I said – and the entire circle heard me, and two other groomsmen pulled him off of me.

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By now, some of you are trying on various perspectives in these stories. Some of you are identifying with certain characters; some of you might be feeling defensive. I'll wager that the response you're having depends on your *identity*.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.npr.org/2018/05/15/611389765/why-white-americans-call-the-police-on-black-people-in-public-spaces>

That was a hint to answer this question:

What do all three of these scenarios have in common?

These scenarios have to do with layers of privilege.

*More specifically, people who were unaware of their privilege.*

Our culture centers around, and gives enormous yet unexamined power, to some identities – like people who are white, straight, male, able-bodied.

Privilege is a real social force; like gravity, it's there – doing its job – whether we notice it or not. Like our Earth that has been in continual formation for the last 4.54 billion years, privilege is constantly at work *whether you believe in it or not.*

And the more time I spend in my garden this summer, the more privilege reminds me of my super-duper, 10-function hose nozzle: if you don't watch where you're pointing it, you could end up making a mess instead of giving life to whatever you're trying to grow.

In all three of our scenarios, the person with privilege caused harm – maybe unintentionally! maybe, even with *good* intentions!

But meaning well doesn't cut it. Good intentions are not the currency of justice. I did not *mean* to send the "jet" function of my sprinkler nozzle through my open car window. That doesn't undo the wet sloppy mess that I made.

The goodness in my heart, and yours, is not enough to stop the gears of the harmful systems that rob people of their worth and dignity; and their connective power.

The theological imperative at the heart of Unitarian Universalism is to love the hell out of this world; to dismantle the systems of oppression that keep us divided, and greedy for power.

Let's return to those case studies and ask how to do better. The short answer is: if you have privilege, you do better by learning to be uncomfortable: to practice curiosity instead of certainty; and use your privilege to be an ally to those with less – or without.

When I was manhandled at that wedding rehearsal and I found the composure to say, "I'm uncomfortable with the way you're touching me," other people were watching

and listening. It wasn't just my words that got me free; it was that others stepped in and freed me.

That's what allies do: they redirect harmful energy; they interrupt harmful conversations; they use their power and their privilege not to get what they want, but to help those with less of a voice get what *they* want.

Allies make sure that we all get free together.

There are lots of ways to feel uncomfortable; many meanings for that word. But now that you know how I've used it today.... I wish it upon you. I wish upon myself, too.

I wish for each of us – who are rooted together in a commitment to bring about the Beloved Community – the opportunity to notice that we're not there yet.

Sometime soon, you'll be out in the world and will notice (I hope) privilege at work – yours, or someone else's. You'll notice discomfort – perhaps in yourself. When your discomfort calls to you, what will you do with it?

Remember this beloved community; this congregation, trying to do better. Remember our UU call to all get free together, and to love the hell out of this world. And use that to find the courage to speak, and be an ally.

May it be so.