Notable highlights of my GA 2020 experience – Martina Muller

It's hard to believe GA happened already over 6 weeks ago. Back in early June, I was interested in attending GA, yet felt a little daunted by the commitment of 5 consecutive days on Zoom. But I registered anyway, made plenty of coffee, got some crafts and my favorite sweatpants out, and mentally prepared myself for 5 days of sitting still (not my natural state). There was so much interesting programming that the conference actually flew by. I didn't have even have time to participate in any of the many meet-up groups, the online poster sessions, the online exhibition hall, or most workshops (fortunately most content is still accessible online for the rest of the year!) but I did join the following:

(1) **General sessions** – which dealt with administrative things and were new, intense and instructive for me. I learned about the main issues the UUA is grappling with, how various decision-making processes work, many details about bylaws (that I mostly don't remember), and as a delegate I was able to participate in online voting, which was quite fun.

(2) **Daily worship services** –diverse in theme and content, wonderful music, very spiritually nourishing.

(3) **Workshops** – probably my favorite part because I was able to interact with other UUs and delve deep into interesting topics. I noticed that there were many workshops related to racial justice.

(4) **Keynote speakers** – really interesting thinkers/writers/academics, the highlight for me was the inspiring Ware lecture by Naomi Klein.

(5) **Fun evening programs** – I finally got to see Mike Galib play Sleigh Ride on Zoom, which he had been promising us since winter. Loved watching his program – kept forgetting it wasn't choir rehearsal and that there were hundreds of people watching from around the country. (I definitely had to rein myself when it came to joking around and commenting in the chat.)

My most memorable experience was a powerful workshop about dismantling white supremacy, led by Chris Crass – a fellow UU, who helped launch the national anti-racist network Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ) that many of you might be familiar with (he's also done a lot of other organizing, educating and writing about social justice issues). This workshop happened only a month after George Floyd was murdered, so everyone was still feeling very emotionally raw and many were just starting to seriously grapple with racial justice work for the first time. Here are some highlights of what he said, combined with some valuable reflections from other participants. The workshop was mainly intended for White people engaging in racial justice work, so when I use the word "us" I'm referring to White people. Also, these notes are from words spoken aloud, and I haven't polished them up much at all.

Chris told us that when it comes to racial injustice in this country, we often think the problem exists because there is something wrong with us White people. But actually, it's White supremacy that is keeping us divided. White supremacy as a system is deeply committed, sends messages, and reinforces a culture, that maintains institutional segregation (e.g. White people tend to live in different neighborhoods than Black people), and cultural segregation (why most White people have few Black friends). White supremacy whispers words of encouragement into our ears not to challenge racism. And it is our spiritual calling to say "White supremacy – you can't have me, my heart, my soul, my community."

We've all heard about the importance of being anti-racist. Chris pointed out that we often don't realize that it's not only about White people helping Black people not have racism impact them (though that is crucial work as well). But we White people should be enraged about how White supremacy has negatively impacted us. White supremacy malnourishes the souls of White

people. He says "It has cut us off from knowing about Black history, Latinx history, Indigenous history, White anti-racist history. Malnourished us of freedom dreams, malnourished us of a multiracial movement for democracy, freedom, human rights. Tells us that when other people want their human rights it has to come at the expense of yours."

Anti-Black racism really started to take root in our country with the minstrel show – one of the first forms of mass popular culture in the late 1800s and early 1900s, which demonized and dehumanized Black people, but actually the main goal was to teach European working class immigrants to become White. It taught them that to be White is to look down on, hate and pity Black people. And not only to see yourself as superior to Black people, but also to turn yourself into a hard working cog in a machine that helps create profit for other people, to not complain about your situation about economic inequality, but to blame people of color for it. It has taught White people how to become part of the capitalist system – to sell their labor, lives and souls, and instead of complaining about public schools crumbling, or mass incarceration of poor White people, taxes being cut from our schools, parks, public resources, it has taught us to think this is happening because of "all those people of color on welfare" (as opposed to tax cuts on the wealthiest in this country).

Chris emphasized again and again that we need to be clear that White supremacy is the enemy. We need to cultivate an anti-racist love that engages other White people, deeply loves the humanity in people and sees their racist beliefs not as something they personally chose, but as something that White supremacy has culturally and politically been fostering in them and us. Anti-racist love needs to nourish the hearts and souls of White people to be able to come into the fullness of our humanity and create racial harmony and justice.

We're in a unique point in time right now, and the ongoing crisis of racial inequity and violence has been brought into the awareness of the mainstream. As White people doing this work, when a new White person shows up, there can be a feeling of "where were you before? Why now? I've been doing this work for 'X' number of years…" Chris firmly tells us that we need to greet people with a welcome mat. We need to remind ourselves again and again that when we feel rage, we need to direct it not at White people but at White supremacy as a system, power and structure. We need to bring love to people. In fact, White fragility is the result of what White supremacy has done to White people. So attacking White people for being fragile just reinforces the whole thing.

As people committed to anti-racism, part of our goal needs to be nourishing and helping White people develop a resilience for racial justice and collective liberation. White supremacy has malnourished our hearts and our souls and then left of us incredibly fragile. Much of this fragility comes from deep-seated White guilt and shame. Black folks have been oppressed in this country for 450 years and they have a heritage of strength, perseverance and determination that they can run to. On the other hand, White folks have a history of hate and oppression they need to run from. We have to confront that. What do I do when I feel guilty? Change doesn't come from a comfortable place. If you feel uncomfortable, embrace it, you have reached the doorstep of opportunity.

It's easy for us to forget that White people have been brutalized by White supremacy and capitalism (in a different but also very destructive way) – it has turned our hearts into machines, has tried to disconnect us from our souls and tried to keep us away from the intelligence of our body, keep us locked and stuck in our heads. We can't forget that we White people need to do the deep spiritual work of liberating ourselves as part of the process of racial healing.

Finally, during the GA I was inspired to create this little UU-related painting: