

Class Matters

Amanda Udis-Kessler, High Plains Church Unitarian Universalist, January 15, 2012

A friend once told me a story about his father taking him to college for the first time. This friend grew up working class, the son of a trucker, and was the first in his family to attend college. When his father took him to college, they travelled there in his father's 18-wheeler, of course. And my friend, who I know to be a wise and gentle soul, was ashamed and asked his dad to please park far from campus so no one would see the truck. My friend carried his luggage a long ways rather than let his new classmates see that his father drove a truck for a living, that his family had no money to send him to college by plane or train or any other way that my friend thought was more dignified.

My friend's perspective on this painful story has changed now that he is an adult. He didn't mean to be hurtful to his father, but the presence of classism in our society overwhelmed him when he was young. He could not help but be embarrassed that he came to college in a semi with a man who had never gotten an education. The power of the American Dream's hold on our lives is just as important now as it was when my friend went to college 30 years ago. It's easy to think about class as a matter of money and power. Whether you approve of the Occupy Wall Street movement or not, you've got to admit that they've been clever to differentiate the 99 percent from the 1 percent. Not just because most of us fall into the 99 percent, but because this language reminds us that class really is about money and power and the opportunities and experiences we will get to have in life.

But class is about much more than money and power. Class is about shame or the lack of it. Class is about confidence or the lack of it. Class is about the words you use and the words you don't use. Class is about whether you believe that you could record an album or write a book. Class is about what you think you are going to be when you grow up. And class is about whether you think you are going to get to grow up at all. Class matters because of the inherent worth and dignity of poor and working-class people whose lives can be grindingly, and unfairly, hard.

For a long time, class has been the elephant in the room for Unitarian Universalists who otherwise have pretty solid commitments to social justice. We're finally paying more attention to it, partly because of UU minister Mark Harris's book *Elite*, which provides historical background that helps explain how we became who we are – an overwhelmingly upper-middle-class group of people, in education if not always in income. But we have a long way to go to welcome working class and poor people to UUism, and today I would like to contribute to our having that conversation here in church. Although it appears to be very challenging, I believe that we can stand on the side of love when it comes to class just as we do on immigration rights, LGBT rights, and the other worthy causes we support.

First, a confession: I cannot tell you how tempting it is for me to give you all an academic lecture on how class inequality works, structurally and culturally. This is stuff I taught for years as a sociologist. But I am going to try to resist that temptation today, precisely because academia has traditionally been reserved for those in the middle, upper middle, and upper classes. Poor and working-class people have a long history of being talked down to by those with more wealth,

power, and education than them. So today I've tried to switch that up a bit. Those of us in the room who are middle-class or above got to listen to someone from a lower class background, something we don't normally have to do. And this is good for anyone in a position of power or privilege who wants to work for social justice: listening attentively to the less powerful and privileged, decentering ourselves, trying to make sense of the world through the eyes of the disenfranchised.

In a spirit of such listening, I'd like to invite us to think about some class privileges that I and people like me enjoy at UU churches. I wish I could say this list was entirely my own, but it includes items from a blog post by UU sociologist Christine Slocum, as well as a Facebook conversation by members of the UU growth lab. I have, however, put all of these items into the first person to model what it's like to actively, unashamedly, claim class privilege for the purpose of using it in the service of justice. If we don't see where our power and privilege lies, we can't figure out how best to engage it. So here goes:

- My class background, particularly as it relates to my education, means that sermons, both those I hear and those I write, are aimed at me and people like me. They are often quite intellectual and frequently use college-level language – my language. They may incorporate poetry or refer to historical UU leaders. As it happens, I like poetry and I know something about those leaders. How would I feel if I were a poor or working-class potential UU with less education? If I had not been exposed to poetry and did not have a sense of connection to it? If names from UU history just made me feel dumb because I had never heard of them? Would I stick around? Would I join the church?
- Sermons focus on interesting ideas that help me learn and grow; they are rarely aimed at helping me survive times of economic struggle because I, like plenty of UUs, am doing more or less okay. How would I feel if I were a poor or working-class potential UU who needed a message of strength and hope from the pulpit? If I needed a focus on the reality of financial struggle? Would I stick around? Would I join the church?
- I experience church requests for money as completely legitimate, and I feel fine giving as much as I can, knowing that while others give more what I can give is put to good use. How would I feel if I were a poor or working-class potential UU who had no money to give to the church? Would I stick around? Would I join the church?
- My UU social justice work is overwhelmingly about helping “other people” with the exception of one particular group, sexual minorities. I am not usually assumed to be the one to need help, unless it is pastoral care help. How would I feel if I were a poor or working-class potential UU in need of financial or other kinds of material help from the church? Would I stick around? Would I join the church?
- In conversations with fellow congregants about work, I can reasonably assume that many of us are trained to hold professional positions and that we have careers rather than jobs. I don't feel out of place listening to someone talk about being a doctor, lawyer, or accountant, though my own professional training is quite different from theirs. How would I feel if I were a poor or working class potential UU whose work life consisted of working the floor at Wal-Mart, doing day labor in construction, being a janitor, or being a plumber? Would I stick around? Would I join the church?
- In conversations with fellow congregants about vacation activities, I can reasonably assume that I have had or might someday have the travel experiences they do. I don't feel

out of place listening to someone talk about going to Hawaii, though I have never been there myself and might privately be just slightly jealous. How would I feel if I were a poor or working-class potential UU who could not afford a “vacation” to my state fair let alone Hawaii? Would I stick around? Would I join the church?

- The ministers I see in UU pulpits are largely middle-class or upper-middle-class in background, due to the insane UUA requirements that make it virtually impossible to complete the candidating and fellowshipping process while holding down a full-time job and that more or less require going deeply into debt. I could have been one of those ministers. How would I feel if I were a poor or working-class UU with a strong call to the ministry and no practical way to get there? Would I stick around? Would I join the church? Would I give up everything to become a UU minister?
- Most UUs, like me, are politically liberal, particularly on social issues. This makes church an especially comfortable place for me. How would I feel if I were a poor or working-class UU who did not approve of same-sex relationships and who really did perceive undocumented immigrants as threats to my job, accurately or not? Would I stick around? Would I join the church?
- Regular worship at my church is only held on Sunday mornings, which is fine with me since I am not at work then. How would I feel if I were a poor or working-class UU who held down a job with Sunday morning hours? How would I feel if I could never get to a worship service that I knew would be deeply meaningful? Would I stick around? Would I join the church?
- As it is, I am free to decide how engaged I want to be with the ethical eating studies and practices taking place in UUism. If I choose to be heavily involved, I can certainly afford to buy ethically grown and prepared food. This allows me to fit in and feel good about myself. How would I feel if I were a poor or working-class UU who simply could not afford to eat “ethically”? How would I feel if I perceived that people judged me for my eating? Would I stick around? Would I join the church?

You might well be feeling uncomfortable right now; I know I am. And discomfort is not something we tend to seek out all that often in Unitarian Universalist contexts, especially if we came here from religions that were spiritually violent or even just intellectually unbelievable. Certainly, some comfort is called for. But true diversity, whether it involves race, class, or any other difference that justifies inequality, is never comfortable. It is not comfortable to be among those who are different from us if they have either a lot more social power than we do or a lot less social power than we do. And so I think our real challenge in dealing with class is not about whether our intentions are good. Our real challenge is to think about what we take for granted in UUism, the cultural practices that make us comfortable, make us feel like we fit in, and often exclude other people regardless of those good intentions.

So why should we take class inequality seriously at High Plains? Because we have made a promise to ourselves, to UUism, and to the world. We have promised to live for each other to show to all a new community. We have promised to build a land where we bring the good tidings to all the afflicted and all those who mourn. We have promised to give garlands rather than ashes to those who suffer. Those are lovely poetic words but they mean nothing unless we know who it is who suffers and mourns in our world today. And when we promise to live for each other, we

don't just mean our friends at church. We really mean all those others who we encounter as other, as different, as uncomfortable.

So, may we appreciate the ways in which class matters. May we make individual commitments as well as a collective commitment to standing on the side of love with class no less than with the other matters of inherent worth and dignity that we support today. And may we listen well, learn much, and then do the work of justice in all the places that call to us. Amen, and blessed be.