



PRACTICE THE PRACTICE

Experiential Education for Religious Professionals

Practice the Practice: Experiential Education for Religious Professionals is a course born from a recognition that justice-centered experiential education is a powerful tool for growing a liberatory faith community and that many religious professionals need support to learn how to lead such experiences skillfully, responsibly, and in right relationship with the communities in which the experiences are shaped.

Please reach out to info@uucsj.org if you are interested in being notified about the next iteration of Practice the Practice.

The following is a journal project from the pilot journey of Practice the Practice, held in New Orleans, Louisiana in May 2024.

PTP 2024 New Orleans

Abolition: Surviving and Flourishing as a Collective Place-Based Justice Education

Participants

- Kirsten Hunter, LREDA Leadership Development, Director of Lifespan Ministries, South Church
- Rev. Pastor Patti Hanks, Minister, Unitarian Universalist Church of Tarpon Springs
- Gina Collignon, Senior Associate for Justice Education, UU College of Social Justice
- Rev. Amy Kindred, Developmental Minister, Unitarian Universalists of Clearwater
- Rev. Deanna Vandiver, Director of Justice Education, UU College of Social Justice

Chalice Lighting

"What ultimately must be abolished are the means by which community resources are drained to perpetuate harm and present the community back to itself as unworthy of care. Those who see the current situation as untenable or too far gone are pessimists. Abolitionists cannot be pessimists. The vigilant imagination of abolition is a confluence of resistance to persistent and evolving forms of oppression and steadfastness in the knowledge that another world is possible."

—**Madison Snider**, *The Vigilant Imagination of Abolition*

Tuesday, May 21, 2024

As we gathered in New Orleans, participants were offered the following framework for their experiences, providing a consistent thread of reflection:

This week will exemplify place-based justice education. We will be offered an opportunity to experience embodied interconnected stories about the people of New Orleans within an abolition framework. Although we each arrive with our own hopes and goals, our time here is intimately and ultimately shaped by the consent of community partners, centering their experience and experiences.

Kirsten: This morning we were joined by our community leader for the week, Ashana Bigard, founder of Amplify Justice and an education advocate and organizer working for legislative reform. Ashana shared many stories with us about the New Orleans school system—a school system already struggling in many ways, but was then systematically gutted in the years following Hurricane Katrina. She told us about the complete turnover to charter schools, the promises that were made—and the vast amounts of money given to fulfill those promises—and then story after story of corruption, broken promises, educational neglect, and harm to the children of New Orleans, children who were already traumatized following the hurricane and the unfolding consequences that have played out from then to now, 18 years later.

Together we went to visit Ubuntu Village NOLA, an organization that works to achieve social, economic, and transformative justice through community interventions promoting health, hope, and healing. The director, Mr. Ernest Johnson, shared that they had spent more than 5 years working to make changes to laws related to incarceration for minors as young as 12 years old. After years of advocacy and incremental improvements, the governor recently walked back all their progress "with the sweep of a pen."

"People have illusions about our structured systems," he said. "It might not be feasible to tear down some of the systems, but we can build something different."

That was a clarifying moment for me to hear. Abolition feels possible when I think about doing what we can to resist and change the harmful things in the systems that are currently operating, but putting as much energy as we can toward building the new; communities where "we keep us safe," where joy and collective care are centered, and where children flourish.

Patti: I was inspired by Mr. Johnson's thoughts about "our illusion of structured systems" including our drive to create things like five-year strategic plans. He reminded us that our energy and heart may be better spent focusing on what we are doing each day for individuals. He said instead of a five-year plan, he thinks of each day in those five years; 1,825 moments to do something for someone. That is a vision that can change the world.

Wednesday, May 22, 2024

Gina: Every day of this program began with a specific framing. On Tuesday, Mr. Johnson had told us that he uses the culture of New Orleans as medicine to help him through the difficult parts of fighting for justice. Our invitation to the group for Wednesday was to look/listen throughout the day for the relationships/webs that kept people going through the work. With that in the back of our mind and hearts, we were so fortunate to meet Antonio Travis of Black Men Rising. With the calm presence of someone who works lovingly with teenagers and young adults, Antonio spoke of his work of holding circles and teaching young men that, "you have to acknowledge your feelings to avoid participating in risky behavior." A lesson for us all, truly.

Thursday, May 23, 2024

Rev. Amy: Ashana emphasized the importance of reminding ourselves to "check-in" often. She tasked us with writing letters to ourselves which was such a mind-blowing idea. It's a way to self-nurture in order to help one to continue to remain in the fight for justice.

Meghan: We went to an amazing book store and met the owners, Ms. Vera and Mama Jennifer. I was inspired by the art at Studio Be and the story of Mike and how he created art in the ruined buildings left by Hurricane Katrina. I especially enjoyed going to the Unitarian Universalist church to participate in their last labyrinth walk before selling their building. I could feel the sadness of the participants but felt hopeful after seeing how many buildings the congregation has occupied over the years. They clearly know how to stay in community despite losing their building.

Friday, May 24, 2024

Rev. De: And suddenly it was the final day of the program. We traveled to the Lower 9th Ward at Guerrilla Garden where Food and Education Justice advocate and organizer, Courtney Cocoamo Clark and her daughter, a soon-to-graduate high school senior, had canvases, paint, and brushes awaiting us under a recently clipped jasmine arbor. We made art together as we listened, learning about the struggle to access disability and education justice within the New Orleans charter school system and the community organizing that makes it possible to survive and find ways to thrive together. We were invited into practicing the collective wisdom rooted deeply in the place of New Orleans that joy does not wait for the struggle to be over.