

Tips for Talking About the UU World Article

This week the UU World published [an article](#) that was harmful to trans people in the Unitarian Universalist movement. Many cisgender (non-trans) UUs are wondering how to best understand and support non-binary folks, trans women and men, intersex people, and others most affected by the article when they talk about it with other cis people. Here are some tips.

Key Practices

Believe trans people

Listen more than you talk

Be willing to remain in discomfort

Have hard conversations, with love

Value relationships over perfectionism

Don't expect every trans person to want to educate you, but honor those who do

Stay in your heart rather than your head

Don't ask a trans person anything you wouldn't ask a cis person

Comfort those who are hurting and build awareness with other cis people

Uplift trans voices



1. Impact matters. The author and editor of the article had good intentions. Yet the impact was that trans people in our movement have been harmed. That impact needs to be the focus. If your toilet breaks and your neighbor wants to help but isn't a plumber and, in trying to fix the toilet, floods your apartment and causes massive damage, having other people focus on that person's good intentions would be awful when everything you own is ruined.

2. You don't have to personally understand the harm or feel harmed yourself to recognize that harm happened. Many cis people don't immediately understand why trans people are so hurt by the article. That's okay. The most important starting place is to, in the words of UU lay leader Barb Seidl, "start with that it's true," even if you don't completely understand it. Also, not all trans people feel the same way about the article. That's also okay. But those who have been harmed need to be believed.

3. The article contained false and harmful information. A lot of cis people feel that the article is informative. Unfortunately, the author was not knowledgeable about the subject and thus shared information that was misleading, incorrect, or otherwise problematic. As just a few examples (see trans UU leader [CB Beal's piece](#) for more):

- The title gives the impression that trans people are an afterthought; that lesbian, gay, and bisexual people existed first or are more important; that many trans people aren't also lesbian, gay, and bisexual in addition to being trans; and that UUism has completed its learning/welcome of lesbian, gay, and bisexual people (and thus can now "move on" to trans people).
- The author presents as an unchallenged fact her belief that hormones and surgery are "central" to who a person is and that it is impossible for her to get to know someone without knowing this extremely private information—even if she already knows a person's identity is "woman" and the person goes by "she" and "her."
- The trans history that the author presents is factually inaccurate. As one example, the word *transgender* did not replace the words *transsexual*, *transvestite*, and *cross-dresser*—it was invented to speak to something different and transsexuals and cross-dressers still exist. As another, the quip that the trans movement has moved from "passing" to "pride" invents a linear progression that simply does not exist and flattens the lived experiences of untold trans people from every age and era.
- The author conflates trans people and intersex people, talking about the incidence of trans people and the incidence of ambiguous genitalia in the same breath, and also mentions nonconsensual surgeries for intersex people multiple times without condemning this violent practice.
- The author communicates that *people of color* is a preferable term to *black* or *African American*, when each of these refers to different overlapping groups of people, and also that *differently abled* is preferable to *disabled*, when in fact the vast majority of disabled people and groups despise the former term.



4. Trans people aren't just being harmed in the act of reading the article, they are being harmed by cis people's reactions to it. There are myriad ways trans people are experiencing harm because of the article. As CB Beal [eloquently spoke to](#), the article's author modeled asking trans people harmful and violent questions, so many cis people now feel emboldened to do the same and are cornering trans people at church to do so (this started immediately last Sunday). Trans UUs of all ages everywhere are now the subject of debate, subjected to cis people's opinions about the piece, and burdened with the expectation of educating cis people (for free) about their very existence. We are currently in the final weeks of the search process, when all congregations seeking a new minister are interviewing candidates; fully 10% of the ministers in the search pool right now are trans. How many congregations will decide they "just aren't ready" for a trans minister because of the reception of this article?

5. This is not an example of incremental progress. There was no reason to publish an article that got so much wrong and caused so much pain to trans people. A lot of cis people are saying things like "At least it started a conversation" and "It's better than nothing." But in fact, no article at all would have been better than such a harmful article. As people of faith, it is unacceptable to say that the collateral damage to trans people caused by this article was somehow worth it, when that damage was completely avoidable. Furthermore, misinformation lodges deep. If the intention is to meaningfully work toward a world where trans people are fully free and honored, then accurate, respectful information is the bare minimum and is vital for people who are newly learning about trans identities; therefore, the article compromised this progress.

6. The article centered a cisgender perspective. "Centering" is a concept that speaks to whose worldview is most affirmed and whose voices are loudest; whose perspective is treated as "normal," and thus at the center, and whose perspective is treated as "different," and thus at the margins. In this case, the assumption is that the "default" reader is a cis person who struggles to understand and interact respectfully with trans people, just like the author. This assumption renders trans people invisible or further pushed to the margins. It's not that cis people can't ever talk or write about trans people, it's about how they do so—and whether they are adding to and uplifting a conversation started by trans people or displacing the voices and agency of trans people.

7. The article's publication was based on an assumption that cis people's perspectives on trans people are more valuable than trans people's perspectives on ourselves. There are dozens, if not hundreds, of trans UU leaders, writers, poets, and prophets who could have written an incredible feature article about trans lives, spiritualities, struggles within UUism, and more. It could have been a conversational piece co-written by a trans person and a loved one, such as the person's parent, partner, or child. It could have been a series of profiles of trans UUs that showcased the diversity and brilliance among us. There is nothing this article did that couldn't have been done better by a trans author in a way that did not cause harm to trans people.



8. Kimberly and Chris are neither evil nor are they being expected to be perfect.

Kimberly French (author) and Chris Walton (editor) caused a great deal of harm. But making them villains is a sleight of hand that keeps us from looking at the institutional systems involved and our own human failings and prejudices and the ways we too (depending on our identities and social location) stumble regularly. On the flip side, dismissing the anger and hurt of trans UUs by saying that Kimberly and Chris should be “given a chance” and “shouldn’t be expected to be perfect” is unacceptable. Perfection is neither an expectation nor a helpful goal. The expectation is that they are in relationship with and [heed the counsel](#) and expertise of trans UU leaders, in order to avoid causing such harm.

9. This article is not an isolated incident. The *UU World* has arguably just as much impact on the direction of the denomination as General Assembly; every registered member of a UU congregation gets a print subscription to this magazine. It is immensely well-respected and often offers forward-thinking and leading-edge pieces that help all of us grow, spiritually. Yet the magazine consistently features articles about marginalized people written by authors who do not have lived experience in the topic they are writing about. In the same issue as this article, there was also an [article about autism](#) written by an allistic (not autistic) and non-disabled author and an article reflecting back on the [racism of the TJ Ball](#) written by a white author. The six-person staff of the magazine is 100% white. After two years of intentionally grappling with dismantling white supremacy culture within this religion, this shows that the learnings are not being applied at *UU World* and there isn’t enough institutional will to ensure they are.

10. This article, and the experiences of trans people in UU congregations, are a further example of the workings of white supremacy culture. It’s tempting to see trans people as yet another community that has been harmed (in addition to people of color, for example) rather than the *same people being harmed again and again and again*. Trans people are also people of color, disabled people, low-income people, queer people, young people—in fact, all of these identities are [more present](#) among trans UUs than the general UU population. For this religion to survive, much less live into its potential and promise, Unitarian Universalists must stop using a “flavor of the month” approach to talking about oppression. Learn and talk about the ways that [UUism is failing trans people](#), how [white supremacy culture](#) is at the heart of this failure, and how trans people of color and other multiply marginalized people face many more barriers to inclusion because of intensified oppression.

*The **Transforming Hearts Collective** is a collective of four trans and queer faith leaders (Rev. Mykal Slack, Zr. Alex Kapitan, LeLaina Romero, and Teo Drake) that supports congregations in becoming radically welcoming spiritual homes for queer and trans people of all races, classes, abilities, sexualities, and ages.*

For those interested in deeper learning and transformation, we offer a comprehensive online course, "[Transgender Inclusion in Congregations](#)," for individuals, congregations, and groups, as well as in-person workshops and guest preaching. Visit transformingheartscollective.org or contact us at transformingheartscollective@gmail.com.

