

## LREDA Fall Con 2017 Summary

### Christina Rivera

When I said yes to being asked to be the Summary Speaker this year I had no idea what I was getting myself into! Suffice it to say, you all made it interesting!

First I acknowledge I didn't do this alone. In my community we don't do anything alone because we know that in order to survive and thrive we need each other. And so, I asked Leia Durland-Jones, Yvette Salinas, Sana Saeed, Greg Boyd and Adena Danouff to act as collaborators. Each has their own lens on Fall Con, everything from first timers to 25 year veterans, and LGBTQ and POC among their identities. I had planned a lovely powerpoint filled with photos and maybe even a conversation up here with some of my collaborators. But it soon became apparent that we needed something different. And as the weekend progresses and I grew more anxious at ever being able to capture what was happening, I had to remind myself that nothing would be perfect, that there are a million ways I could do this summary all of which would have value to us.

The theme of the conference is Building Brave Space. And the work to do that started long before our arrival on Friday. It began with planning both by LREDA and with individual religious educators making the decision to spend resources to attend. And let's not forget that those resource allocations are also steeped in white supremacy, the gathering of the resources to attend conferences such as Fall Con and GA by religious professionals of color takes more work, more time and more effort than our white colleagues. Let me say it again, it takes us more work, more time and more effort to amass the resources to make Fall Con a reality for us.

Our time together began with an acknowledgement of the indigenous people's upon whose land which we are guests and a lament for how we got here. The question for me that came up is "who is the 'we' we are taking about here?" There was no acknowledgement that those very indigenous people may be in the room and their lament is not as guests and is vastly different than non-indigenous and could actually be celebratory homecoming. So who is the we, we are taking about here? This is a question I often ask in UU settings to help move us out of centering whiteness. Feel free to use it!

We then heard that one focus of this conference was dismantling white supremacy by Building Brave Spaces. We were told that this would be uncomfortable work...how right you were Annie! We were reminded of Aisha Houser's words from the #UUWhiteSupremacyTeachIn "when you start to feel defensive and uncomfortable choose curiosity" and I'm hoping a lot of us were walking around curious this weekend! Because if you identify as white and were not uncomfortable this weekend, you weren't paying attention.

This work takes the ability to "get comfortable with being uncomfortable" and then a willingness to stay there while doing the work of dismantling white supremacy. It is not done without changing not just our views but our behaviours. And behavioral change is hard and uncomfortable, as we heard from Jessica and Annie. They modeled for us on that first evening how relational conversation was going to be at the center of our work together this weekend. Little did they know at that moment that they would again be modeling that relational conversation in a very different setting less than 48 hours later.

We were then inspired by the words of our new UUA President Susan Frederick-Gray. She called us to action and to our theology based on love. She said that “this is no time for a casual faith” and no sooner was she done that this statement was put to the test.

I hope all of you have taken advantage of the multiple opportunities to hear about what happened Friday night and Saturday morning with our NVC presenters. By now you should know the deep debt we hold for the emotional and spiritual work of Jessica York, Aisha Houser, Mark Hicks and other POC in holding our presenters accountable for the harm they were inflicting.

I hope you were here yesterday to listen to Jessica York and Annie Scott have a conversation about how we specifically got to this conference with NVC and those particular presenters. You would have heard a clear and resounding withdrawal of any kind of perceived endorsement of NVC by LREDA leadership. You also saw Jessica and Annie share a slide with the characteristics of white supremacy culture. And that was important information, but it also centers whiteness. And so it is equally important to show how to de-center whiteness (and I wish we could come up with a another term that doesn't center whiteness in decentering it!) So I created

this slide to show some of the characteristics of multi-cultural collaboration. Full disclosure I created this at about 7:30 this morning, I'm certain there are characteristics I've missed as well as we could probably debate some that are included. What I do know is that we turned the ship and embraced many of these this weekend. So here is the only slide I will share with you today.

So let's see how we shifted:

- Collaboration –
  - oh my how we collaborated (please stand if you answered the call to action)
- Apology in community
  - Annie's apology was not just for herself but for the process and the community because she didn't exclusively create this culture.
- Asked for help
  - This is a hard one because white supremacy culture tells us we have to do it on our own, that exceptionalism is a thing. And often as religious educators we are working alone in silos in our congregations. Even knowing that, I still have a hard time with this one but I do it because I've experienced the life and heart saving value of it.

- But we did reach out and what a blessing the Restorative Justice Circles were led by the gifts of Rev Paul Langston Daley
- Over 20 facilitators stepped forward to lead RJ Circles
- Cost benefit
  - This is not just about \$\$, but about morality, and in our case about our faith. We can't do a cost/benefit analysis without adding in our theology to the mix
- Embraced discomfort
  - This we did to varying levels of success
  - There was still clear evidence of white people's expectations of comfort
- Embracing complexity
  - what Brave space means to POC is different than what it means to our white colleagues. One of my POC colleagues said they hope their white colleagues were taking time to be introspective of what Brave space means to them rather than critiquing how others took the opportunity to be Brave.
- Dance, sing and eat together
  - This is key to me, the opportunity to get to know each other is crucial in building trust

and community and I'm all for eating together!

I would be remiss if I didn't also acknowledge and celebrate the amazing gifts of worship we received by the worship team! In particular Erica Shadowsong, every gift you presented touched me to the core. The Panel Speakers were well received and many said that they could have been the entire program. And I'm sure I've missed others contributions, you know who you are and you have our gratitude.

So how do we move forward? I heard from some restorative justice circles that we should compensate religious professionals of color for the work done this weekend. And acknowledgement that the resources we expend are exponentially greater in doing this work. A recognition that the price paid by POC to continually raise issues of racial justice cannot be sustained and it is up to our white colleagues to engage in this work and make it part of their own faith formation.

And most of all I heard that this is faith development in action. And that is what I would say to those of you who've come up to me and say, "Chris, this was my first Fall Con, my congregation insisted I come and they will

want a report as to what I learned. What do I report out back home. ” So I’d say, “We stumbled, no, that’s ableist language, I’d say we messed up, it was messy, painful and POC paid the price, we regrouped and found a new way. We hope not to stumble in the same way again but knowing that is likely to happen again in a different way, we will work to center voices of color and other voices from the margins. And guess what? We can do that here too, in our congregation. That’s what I learned. And not by requiring the emotional labor of our congregants of color but by creating circles of accountability and relationship.” To me that is what we have done here together at Fall Con, while we were Building Brave Space. And the church said amen.