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Arlington Street Church  
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## **Even When You Think They're Not Listening**

In the mid-1980s, when I served our congregation in Provincetown as it was ravaged by the AIDS crisis, I regularly answered the doorbell of the Meeting House to earnest young men – visitors to the Cape – who were eager to insure the state of my soul and the soul of my people for eternity. I was endlessly irritated at the interruption of these proselytizing fundamentalists, and offended by their mission. Polite through gritted teeth, I sent them away.

And then my friend and colleague, Jay, said that it was absolutely critical that I speak with them – that I share Unitarian Universalism's good news of a god of love, a prayer of service, and a faith in the possibility of heaven on earth with no fear of an afterlife in hell.

"Jay," I said, "the theory is great, but they're gleefully spewing hatred and divisiveness and terrible theology ... and I can't get a word in edgewise."

"I know," he said. And then he surprised me. "I was one of them. It was all I knew until I was just a little older than they are. And then, gradually, I just couldn't reconcile everything I'd been told with the person who stood before me: a child of G\*d, just like me. "I acted like I wasn't listening," Jay said, "but I was. I'd start in on one of them, and even though I kept right on talking, I began to listen, just a little bit, to those who were willing to tell me their stories."

That first flicker of doubt grew into a steady flame. "And then a Pride parade came marching right past my church. I came outside to pray for those 'poor sinners.' But when I saw how much love and sheer joy were in the streets that day, I just broke – broke right open. They were singing and cheering, "Off of the sidewalk and into the streets," and I found myself stepping down off the church steps and into the crowd.

“O, I looked back,” he said. “I looked back, but I never returned.”

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When I’m tempted to hopelessness about the vast divide in this country today between “us” and “them,” I remember this conversation. Here’s the directive:

Listen!

Try to understand why they believe what they believe.

And speak.

Get really clear and really articulate about what you believe,  
and just keep talking ...  
even when you think they’re not listening.

This is a spiritual practice.

*Don’t give up.*

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I know another story, reported by journalists Studs Terkel,<sup>1</sup> Osha Davidson,<sup>2</sup> and Kathryn Schultz.<sup>3</sup> It played out almost 50 years ago in Durham, North Carolina. I’ll begin on April 4<sup>th</sup>, 1968, the day that Dr. King was murdered. Claiborne Paul Ellis, called C.P., owned a gas station and, on the side, ran the Durham branch of the Ku Klux Klan.<sup>4</sup> When Dr. King’s death was announced on the local radio station, C.P. let out a whoop and began calling his fellow Klansmen, inviting them over to celebrate. “We just had a real party at the service station,” he said, “really rejoicin’....”

By the 1960s, one hundred and twelve chapters of the KKK included eight or nine thousand members in North Carolina – the most active and best run in the nation.<sup>5</sup> In Raleigh, future senator Jesse Helms used weekly news commentaries on TV and radio to denounce Dr. King and the civil rights movement and to expound on “purely scientific” evidence about the so-called “superior race.”

C.P. Ellis grew up poor and uneducated in this cradle of white supremacy. He had dropped out of the eighth grade, married at seventeen, and, despite working every day, could barely support his family. The Klan

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<sup>1</sup> Please see Studs Terkel, *American Dreams*

<sup>2</sup> Please see Osha Davidson, *Best of Enemies*

<sup>3</sup> Please see Kathryn Schultz, *Being Wrong*

<sup>4</sup> C.P. Ellis was Exalted Cyclops – the head of the Durham KKK

<sup>5</sup> according to the Anti-Defamation League

provided him with the explanation for why his life was so hard – “because of black people” – and white supremacy gave him a little bit of self-respect.

In 1954, *Brown v. Board of Education* had declared school segregation unconstitutional. Fully sixteen years later, it hadn’t made a difference in North Carolina. In 1970, the federal government directed \$75 million dollars to desegregate North Carolina schools. An organizer named Joe Becton was charged with organizing workshops in Durham to persuade the citizens to cooperate with the law. Joe chose C.P. Ellis as the best person to represent the city’s poor, white, anti-integration citizens.

C.P. wasn’t having it – you can imagine his response – but Joe insisted that C.P.’s constituents needed a spokesperson. Eventually, he relented.

Meanwhile, organizers across town recruited an African American community leader named Ann Atwater to represent Durham’s most impoverished and disenfranchised black citizens. Married at thirteen years old, she was left by her abusive, alcoholic husband to raise two daughters on her own. Despite hard, hard work, she could not make enough money to lift her family out of poverty. She poured her anger into activism, educating welfare recipients about their rights, organizing housing protests against unscrupulous landlords, and serving as the unofficial mayor of her neighborhood.

Journalist Osha Davidson tells the story of their first meeting. C.P. Ellis opened by losing his temper over the premise of the workshops – that racism was a problem in the schools. “If we didn’t have [those expletives deleted] in the schools, we wouldn’t have any problems,” he shouted. Ann Atwater came right back at him, “The problem is that we have stupid white crackers like C.P. Ellis in Durham.”

Bill Riddick, the man charged with running the workshops, stepped in ... and asked them to serve as co-chairs.

Constituents on both sides were appalled. But C.P. knew the Klan was powerless in the face of the Supreme Court decision. And when he searched his heart, he decided all he could do was “help make desegregation less painful for white children,” starting with this own.

The first meeting of the newly minted co-chairs of the desegregation workshops took place in a coffee shop in downtown Durham. C.P. paced, unwilling to sit down with a black person. When he finally did sit down, he spoke to Ann Atwater through Bill Riddick. It was an inauspicious beginning.

A few nights later, C.P. picked up the phone in his apartment. “You keep working with those [expletives deleted] and you gonna get yourself shot,” a voice said. The line went dead, but C.P. didn’t put down the phone. Instead, he called Ann and told her he wanted to make the program work.

Shortly after that, at the end of a workshop, Ann and C.P. found themselves alone in an auditorium. Somehow, they started talking about their children’s experiences at school. Both Ann’s daughter and C.P.’s son attended the same high school, the poorest in the district. As Ann described her humiliation at not being able to provide her kids with what other kids had, and deep desire to keep them from feeling ashamed, a jolt ran right through C.P.: He recognized that Ann’s struggles were exactly his struggles.

To both of their amazement, he began to cry: for himself and his children; and, astonishingly, for Ann’s children, and for Ann.

C.P. Ellis later told Studs Turkel that that was the moment: For the first time, he looked at Ann Atwater and saw another human being. “I began to see, here was are, two people from the far ends of the fence, havin’ identical problems, except her bein’ black and me bein’ white.... The amazing thing about it, her and [me], up to that point, [had] cussed each other, bawled each other [out]; we hated each other. Up to that point, *we didn’t know each other*. We didn’t know we had things in common.... From that moment on, I tell ya, that gal and I worked together good. I began to love [her], really.”

The workshops lasted ten days during which C.P. met African Americans who lived in substandard housing, sent their children to substandard schools, and worked substandard jobs for substandard pay. They were not his problem – they were just like him, with one crucial difference: *He* was their problem.

And what had the Klan actually accomplished for white people? Nothing. All it had done was to make black people’s miserable existence

more miserable. C.P. Ellis went to a meeting of the local KKK chapter and turned in his keys.

From the time Joe Becton had invited him to participate in the workshops to the moment C.P. stood to speak at the closing ceremony, only a few weeks had elapsed – a few short weeks that had utterly changed his life. “Something ... has happened to me,” he said, and paused for a long time. “I think it’s for the best.” People told him that his transformation had cost him his standing among the power brokers of white supremacy in his community. “That may be true,” he acknowledged, “but I have done what I thought was right.”

Ann Atwater continued to work with black people who were poor. Eventually, she remarried – happily – and became a deacon in the Church of Christ.

For thirty-four years after he left the Klan, C.P. Ellis worked as a union organizer. After he retired, when asked about his greatest professional accomplishment, he said – without hesitation – that it had been helping forty low-income African American women negotiate the right to take Martin Luther King Day as a paid holiday, the first contract in Durham to honor Dr. King’s memory.

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Beloved spiritual companions,

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