

NAME

Conversations to Empower mp3.mp3

DATE

February 12, 2022

DURATION

16m 12s

3 SPEAKERS

Speaker1

Speaker2

Speaker3

START OF TRANSCRIPT

[00:00:00] Speaker1

The following is a message from WellSprings congregation.

[00:00:05] Speaker2

Welcome, it's nice to see everybody and I am. My name is Chris Groppe, and I'm very excited this morning to be here with my good friend and colleague, Dr Oscar Torres Jr., whom I've known for 20 plus years. We were hired at the same time and put myself out there a little bit in terms of crossing paths of my work life, my personal life, my church life, and I'm really excited to be here. And this came about through our work with our anti-racism springboard that we did over the last year and also with a community organizing Zoom thing that several of us did here in the congregation as well. And so I was really excited when Reverend Lee asked me to be part of this, so I wanted to really turn the floor over to Dr. Torres. And I have a couple of questions for him, and this ties into what we as Unitarian Universalists here at WellSprings can do to help out in the world in a really important area about racial equity, diversity and inclusion. So, Dr. Torres, so I know your story. I've heard it many times. Give us a short version of like, how is it that we came to be here on this stage together?

[00:01:24] Speaker3

S. Por supuesto, mi amigo Chris Co-owner Status. It's about selling good seeds. I appreciate the song you just sang. My name is Oscar and I am from. I was born in the center of Puerto Rico in my mom's small farm. Eventually, my dad was able to find a a job in North Philadelphia after being a farmer in New Jersey, at a factory, at a candy factory, and we all came from Puerto Rico to Philadelphia. Part of my story comes with unfortunately some trauma that many of us might experience, and the trauma that I experienced when I was a child really has allowed me to continue to do the work that I'm doing because I always remember that not everybody has a wonderful life, right? Although we all want The Wonderful Life. When I was a child, and I remember. I was must have been about five years old where a person tried to get into our house with a gun and and hold up my, my siblings and my my mom up to try and get into our house. And and then experiences like that and then going to school. And because Spanish was my only language at the time, the teacher's not allowing us to speak Spanish in school. So therefore, if I saw my siblings in school and I said something to them in Spanish, they'd keep us after school until we figured out that you don't speak Spanish in school. Ongoing. Some experiences where the teachers would tell me that don't ever consider going to college because you don't have what it takes to be there. So follow in the footsteps of your family. Get a job at one of the factories in Philly and you'll be fine.

[00:03:25] Speaker3

And then through that, those experiences and another experience where. You know, walking down the streets with my with my cousins and and somebody holding me up again, you know, because my cousin had a radio that these guys wanted. So all of these different experiences along as well as even in high school where kids would, you know, spit in my books or write on on my shirts in the back? Things that would really tell me that I didn't belong. So all of these experiences growing up, it was about me not belonging in that community, and I thought that they were a threat to me, that my people that I lived with, no matter how many times we moved in the city, that they were a threat to us. And going through this work and understanding my own history and the work that I do, I realized that I was a threat to them, that us being different in that community was threatening their lives. And I think that in this work of equity, sometimes the idea of threat keeps coming up that if you're different, if you have a different race or a different identity or different gender gender expression that you become a threat to everybody around you. And and my work is is focused on that identity and belonging that we all strive for in our daily lives. So I have 67 cousins in Puerto Rico. I come from a big family. My wife and my three children. We live in Berwyn. And, you know, we're always talking about these things, how we can make the world a little better place just by planting those seeds wherever we go.

[00:05:16] Speaker2

Thank you. So I have heard that story a lot and all. Every time my response is always like, I want to give you a hug because you belong and you deserve it, deserve all the good things, tell us. So currently, you're the director of equity and public programs for our district, two different east town. Tell us a little bit about that work and how that plays out in our community in the broader world of Chester County.

[00:05:45] Speaker3

You know, my social justice work started when I was a high school kid in Philly, even though things were happening to me, I felt that it was important to to embrace my community. And whenever kids would come from Puerto Rico and and I knew what my story was coming from Puerto Rico and how was it school? I experienced school. I always wanted to help my community and help students by tutoring and or running a summer camp to help clean up our neighborhood or something like that. And and the work that we do now is work that I do now is based upon that. It's based upon those experiences that if I can acknowledge myself and my experience and who I am, then and I have a story that's very unique to your story. And we've sat down and talked about our stories that we all come from different places with different experiences. And yet, isn't it amazing that we're here together today trying to understand each other and. The work is about listening to stories and listening to our students and listening to the pain that they have experienced or the pain that they're hiding because they're not, they don't feel belong, that they belong to a larger community because they might not look like the larger community or might not show up every day looking or acting or feeling as part of the larger community.

[00:07:06] Speaker3

So a lot of the work that we do is understanding race, culture, ethnicity, identity, gender identity, religion and just listening to kids and listening to the parents and understanding that, yes, the experiences are different. And because those experiences are different and many of them unfortunately come with very sad stories. That our job is to plant those seeds and teach folks that, yes, you can stand up and you can tell your story if you feel compelled to do so. But even then, if you're even if you're not ready to tell your story that the environment is welcoming enough, that allows you, that includes you, that what you're learning in the classroom demonstrates your race, your culture, your perspective. And that. It's about belonging in the community, in the school community, and that we all have a responsibility to make sure that our fellow students, parents and community members really do feel that they belong because if not, those moments of trauma or those moments when you feel that you are the threat to your community or your classroom when when people are singing, singling you out because you're the only one of that race and something shows up in the classroom about that race, and everybody thinks that you're the representative and you now have to teach everybody about your race when that statement may have been wrong in that textbook or in that lesson, and you're already experiencing that pain and yet others are expecting you to teach them.

[00:08:46] Speaker3

So the idea of walking through the hallways and not having students make fun of you or you're in the classroom and everybody is the teacher might be breaking everybody up by male, female. And yet you don't feel as though your identity connects with that. So understanding the pain that happens on a regular basis in the hallways, in the schools, and sometimes from the lessons that we we might deliver. So allowing our students and our teachers to really understand who they are and who and just you're not going to know everything about your students or your colleagues or the other members of your community. But if you believe that everybody belongs. And you'll make space and you'll be humble enough to allow folks to be able to show up as who they are. And that's our job, because we're educators are. Our goal is to not just have 80 percent of the students succeed, but every student succeed, and in order to do that, you have to really make sure that what they're learning and what they're reading and who they're interacting with looks like them at least believes in them. Right. And and supports them.

[00:10:03] Speaker2

Thank you, so that's so important, and I think that's the part that resonates a lot with me in this faith is that everyone belongs and there is a place. And one of the things that I think that we are working to discern is what our faith calls us to do in this area. But I'd like before we get into some more concrete steps. If you could share with us a little bit like how your faith, which is not Unitarian universalism, how your faith informs what you do.

[00:10:35] Speaker3

So I'm raised Catholic, I'm a practicing Catholic, but I've always believed that it's not about. The group that you worship with it's about the people that you journey through life with and. That everybody is important and every single person around you matters. And therefore, if my faith tells me that I want to get to heaven, I want heaven on Earth. Then what does that? What's the responsibility that I have in order to achieve that? And that means that I have to treat people the way they really deserve to be treated, not just the way that I believe one should be treated. So my faith is an important part of who I am. And I have to tell you, sometimes it's really hard because people come after you when you want change in society and in your community and somebody thinks that you're a threat to their way of life that has been successful and that the children that you're interacting with, that you're actually going to harm the larger population because you're raising the voices of our students and our parents who have had a very difficult experience. I think that that is something that allows me to keep going is understanding that I had to pray, sometimes take a few minutes before I go into a space because it could be harmful. Yeah.

[00:12:09] Speaker2

Thank you for that. So I know one of the things that comes up a lot with us is, you know, so what are things that we can do right? When we did the anti-racism springboard, for example, there was a lot of discussion like, OK, this is really valuable work. It was similar to the work we started several years ago with Peg, for example. And what do we do next? And so what are some things that folks here could do to support their local districts DIY efforts?

[00:12:39] Speaker3

So one thing is about learning about ourselves and who we are in regards to race, understanding your race and how race shows up in your life or your identity, and how that shows up in your life and you're thinking about that. One of the things that this those those people, those of us who are doing this work many times are attacked by a group of folks, and that group of folks keeps getting larger and larger across the country. That identity doesn't matter that we're all one group, and therefore we need to eliminate differences or not see color, not see different perspectives. It's important to to not sit in this on the sidelines like, say what you feel. Say what you think and share that. So whether it's an email to your school board or to your your leaders in your community, let them know that you believe in the work that they're doing. Again, that's part of planting the seeds of support. While those, even though you might not be able or willing to stand out there and preach about how you feel and that everybody really does belong, at least communicating with those who are doing the work and letting them know that it's important what they're doing. And if there's any type of support that you can lend to to show up in a space that needs support, that is one way to do it. So whether it's writing to your school board and letting them know or an administrator or a teacher who's trying to do some really cool stuff in the classroom without harming students, but yet bringing awareness, let them know that that the work that they're doing, it matters to you. Great.

[00:14:14] Speaker2

Thank you. Is there anything else you'd like to add or share with us?

[00:14:19] Speaker3

You know. When my teachers told me that I was in, I wouldn't amount to to being a college student. And and later on in high school, when a teacher did say to me that you can go to college, here I am with a bachelors to masters and a doctorate degree. And if it weren't for those people who who were there for me. We all have people who are encouraging us every single day, identify who those people are. Hold on to those people and let them know that that they made a difference in your life by how you show up every single day because we're not here, just because of the work that we did for ourselves. We're here because a lot of people, even though you didn't know who they were, really supported you.

[00:15:04] Speaker2

Thank you, thank you. I know from my perspective, you've been that person for me and it's showing

[00:15:10] Speaker3

Up for me in my journey, which is why our friendship is so deep and I appreciate being here. And again, keep planting those seeds.

[00:15:17] Speaker2

Thank you. Thank you, Oscar. I really appreciate it. Will you pray with me? God of our understanding. Thank you for this day with my friend, my colleague, from whom I've learned so much. Help us discern what it is that we need to do. To move this forward so that all people, all individuals, feel welcome in every space. That's the only way forward. Amen.

[00:16:00] Speaker1

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END OF TRANSCRIPT



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