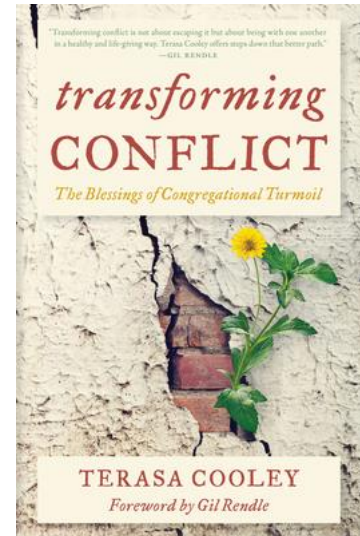


## Good Advice But Misses the Pandemic of Self-Righteousness

A Review (2-2023) by Dick Burkhart of

# Transforming Conflict: The Blessings of Congregational Turmoil

By Terasa Cooley (2022)



Rev Cooley has years of practical experience in Unitarian Universalist settings in helping congregations work through conflict. If successful, conflict resolution can strengthen a church, but failures can reverberate for years. It takes persistence and often a wise elder or experienced team, using “listening circles”, “respectful inquiry”, “powerful questions”, and the like.

Yet Cooley fails to deal effectively with the recent dramatic escalation of conflict due to the rapid spread of new forms of self-righteous bigotry, though she does recognize that “we can get lost in our own righteousness” (p 52). Today’s ideological intolerance in liberal circles is not concerned with traditional Christian theology but with social issues like disability, gender, and race. Today new orthodoxies arise, get weaponized, and spread far faster than in the past due to digital technologies. Churches are no stranger to zealotry, not just politics, so history is once again repeating itself. Just read Robert Lifton’s classic work on brainwashing, “Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism”, especially chapter 22.

Thus Cooley quotes Robin DiAngelo, approvingly, despite the fact that DiAngelo goes to great lengths to promote racial conflict by blaming and shaming everyone of predominantly European descent (= “white”). DiAngelo’s fundamental dogma of race is that “white identity is inherently racist”, projecting her own racism onto all other “whites” without credible evidence. This is how she justifies gaslighting people in her workshops who resist accusations that they are racists, accusing them of “white fragility”.

In fact, it is very likely that such resisters are not racists, or are even active antiracists. In my judgement, as a life-long UU activist for justice, these resisters are to be commended for challenging these condescending accusations. I recently heard a quote from Daniel Berrigan: “Find your ground, then stand on it”.

The studies I’ve seen show that only about 1 out of 10 Americans demonstrate racist language or attitudes, as a ballpark figure. So-called “implicit bias” affects are also plausible, such as in responses to racist dog whistles in politics. Yet such effects remain

controversial since they are more subtle and hard to tease out from other effects - class, culture, etc. Likewise, the MIT test of implicit bias has turned out to be unreliable.

In any case, given wide variations in exposure to racism and resistance to racism, across the American landscape, and the extraordinary success of black Americans in politics, entertainment, sports, etc., it is clear that a solid majority of Americans are not racist in any meaningful way. This destroys the ideological basis of “white fragility”, also the dogma from “whiteness studies” that “racism...pervades our whole culture” (p 127).

Ironically Cooley does recognize that covenants of right relations may fail if interpreted “as punitive” because this means “a calling out that can humiliate” (p 111), leading to resentment, not resolution. This is a very healthy attitude toward the dangers of covenants, but Cooley misses an even more disturbing aspect of covenants – that it is often the accusers themselves who are “out-of-covenant”. Consider that the UU 4<sup>th</sup> principle specifies “A free and responsible search for truth and meaning”. Unfortunately, covenants are being used by some to impose censorship on some UU proceedings – to prevent open and honest debate on certain controversial doctrines, policies, or practices - based on unsubstantiated claims of “harm”.

Today the national UU leadership continues to provoke conflict by taking partisan ideological positions, such as promoting the dogmas of DiAngelo and whiteness studies, and directly violating the UU principles in its bias and salesmanship. Many of the best practices described by Cooley need to be applied nationally, not just locally, and with a humility and respect that has been sadly lacking. It would be an amazing service, worthy of the ages, if Unitarian Universalism would become a model for the larger [society.as](http://society.as) how to heal the cultural wars and polarization.