



Mrs. Warfield-Lewis

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My dear collegial friend, the Reverend Dr. Mark Morrison-Reed has encouraged me to preach a sermon about Pauline Warfield Lewis for over a decade. A decade! What took so long? Basically, I didn't know what to say. Mrs. Warfield Lewis and her relationship with this congregation, is very complicated with issues of race, power, authority, and personality.

In 1955 Mrs. Warfield Lewis taught the Senior High Class. A year later, in 1956 she was hired as the Director of Religion Education at First Unitarian Church. There is a photo of Mrs. Warfield-Lewis on the church timeline wall in the foyer. I urge you to look at it. Warfield-Lewis, from all first-hand accounts and this photo, appears as a dignified, forthright, confident woman. She was also African-American.

Think back to America in the fall of 1955, prior to the Montgomery Bus Boycott, and definitely before the Freedom Rides of 1961, the Voter Rights Act of 1964, the March on Selma in 1965, feminism and the sexual revolution. Warfield-Lewis was hired as an employee in this congregation during a time of legal segregation and disenfranchisement for not only people of color, but also women.

In his Sophia Fahs Lecture from 2014 Morrison-Reed notes that Warfield-Lewis was the African American who served longest in a professional UU capacity during the decades of the 1950's and 1960's. Her few peers, two women and four men, struggled for gainful employment in any UU congregation and when hired, none lasted more than three years. This congregation and Mrs. Warfield-Lewis were different, very different. First Church is to be commended for seeing beyond the color and gender line 60 years ago (and while I know that religious education is often seen as the domain of women, Mrs. Warfield Lewis was a leader). She was exceptional in other ways as well.

To begin with, the children both loved her and were in awe of her. A graduate of the RE program in the 1960's, David Stargardt, came just to hear a sermon on Mrs. Warfield-Lewis. He wrote to me

Pauline, without being overly didactic, I mean, spoke to you as if you were teaching her, and guided your mind beyond the written word of the church school material . . . The gift Pauline gave was the sense that, having been exposed to the lives and writings of moral leaders . . . your life could clearly be lived like the hero's covered in the course work because YOU had the wisdom to understand principles they embodied in life and in writing . . . under Pauline's wing the church school also went to services with other faiths to expose young people to good people whose beliefs were different from our own."

Shelley Jackson Denham wrote to me years ago about Mrs. Warfield Lewis explaining

Pauline was - I am absolutely sure! - at least 10 feet tall . . . I was fascinated with her. When Pauline would stand before us and talk with us in the Ellen Hall Room she was what I now understand as the epitome of "dignity" . . . She was so beautiful - her steely-grey hair always pulled into a bun and she always looked so elegant. Her huge eyes would look straight into you . . . I would feel her love absolutely washing over me when that direct gaze would linger on me . . . but Pauline was no-nonsense as well. She suffered no foolishness and I never wanted to attract "the other look" - the one that would instantly banish any misbehavior or inattention.

And here are the words of former President of the UUA, Reverend Bill Sinkford, who entered this congregation as a teenager in Mrs. Warfield-Lewis' classroom

It seemed that as soon as mother and I crossed the threshold we were introduced to the director of religious education, Pauline Warfield Lewis, an African American woman of about my mother's age . . . I went to the youth group that next Sunday evening and found that of the ten or so young people in the group, four were African-American. This church was clearly a place where it was acceptable to be Black in the company of whites . . . To have one of the religious professionals at the church be a person of color said volumes.

And it was not just the children who enjoyed her. One of our current members, Lucille Blocksom, taught under Warfield-Lewis. She wrote to me of her experience

Her program was very, very solid . . . I remember the good the good discussions in class when I was teaching sixth graders using the Socrates book . . . Pauline was a very dynamic leader, a no nonsense person who ran an extremely ambitious program. I remember . . . the time when Pauline matched the high school students with members of the congregation to discuss career interests.

Mrs. Warfield-Lewis also chose to work here during a time when Unitarian curriculums and hymnals were woefully Euro-centric, something that Reverend Dr. Mark Morrison-Reed explained for those of us who gathered here on Friday night. It was hard to find a story with a picture of a child of color, a hymn from a black church or a poem by an author of color. In the 1950's and 1960's the Unitarian, and then Unitarian Universalist Association as Morrison-Reed explains "Worked for racial justice but lived inside a Euro-American cultural hegemony which engendered a kind of blindness. From inside this cultural bubble they could not imagine that African-Americans, who were coming in increased numbers because UUs were such visible allies in the area of fair housing and equal access, would like to have their own culture reflected in UU worship."

What did it feel like to be Mrs. Warfield-Lewis at First Church? What caused her to silently or not so silently roll her eyes? What was it like to "not suffer fools gladly" and live with a foolish cultural blindness?

Ten years of this. Did anger and resentment build? How do you think you would have felt if you directed the RE program and all the children in the RE curriculum pictures were a skin color other than your own? And year after year you faithfully taught all the children, of all colors, without prejudice? What sort of authority was she given here as a powerful female leader? This was the era of Mad Men and three martini lunches. What was that like for Warfield-Lewis?

But it was even more layered than just race and gender (as if race and gender were a "just" in 1960's America).

Another new member at the time wrote "At the time I came, she had detractors in the congregation and few intensely loyal. The loyal seemed to be those who had worked with her in RE, and were, as I remember, white. I only met her once and it was indeed a strange encounter, really strange! Unusual as from the time I joined I was advisor to the junior high group social club. . . I do not know how Mrs. Lewis functioned earlier, but by the time I came along it appeared that she viewed the church as a babysitting service for the adults while First Church's primary function of RE took place. If you are thinking that I'm hinting at her appearing to be somewhat divorced from reality, I am."

I thought about this comment for a long time. It is matched by another one from another member, Dick Bozian. He wrote about how good her curriculum was and added "She was fantastic!" Then he added "There was no interaction with the RE Committee. The congregation was not too unhappy with that because the program ran quite smoothly. Mike, my wife, was chair of the RE Committee at the time but Pauline wanted no input from them and did not want them around. Mike had very negative feelings about her because of that. Mike was an experienced educator and she retreated after that."

You and I know Dick and Mike Bozian, the friendliest people with a long interest in social justice. Dick is a walking pastoral care-taker and thoughtful to all. I have a hard time believing his observation is based on racism. In fact, he is very objective. Noting on the one hand that she was a fantastic educator, and on the other hand, that she pushed talented lay leaders away. She would not be the only person to be so described. It sounds like Mrs. Warfield-Lewis was not always collaborative and open to dialogue with members of differing opinions. It is also possible that she just wanted to run the program her way, without the input of a committee. She would not be the first staff person who did not want to have her program "meddled" with by lay members.

It is also possible, and what I suspect, that in the haze of overt racism and programmatic challenged by intrusive lay members, Mrs. Warfield-Lewis became unable to recognize loyal critics and lay members offering sincere input from those who were intrusive.

Because according to letters, some members of this congregation were intrusive.

You are probably guessing this does not end well. You are correct. Thus far we have the issue of race and a talented, non-nonsense employee who may not have enjoyed working collaboratively with others. Add to this that in 1966 Mrs. Warfield-Lewis became outraged by the treatment of a young adult by older members of this congregation.

In October 1966 this update appeared in the newsletter. It concerned the conversation of the Adult Forum. "The subject of 'Boat Rocking' centered on the rockers in and around the

church. Sandy Brown related a case of trivial liturgical occurrence causing a major congregational reaction. Dot O'Hara suggested that we read poetry instead of responsive reading. Olivia Chenault cited the value of tradition in the service. Duane Christy accused some critics of missing the boat. The thing that really lit up the place was a statement about the way Larry Wiegand looks."

When Mrs. Warfield-Lewis read this update in the newsletter she became outraged and wrote a response that she wanted posted in the newsletter. Her response reads in part

"Although I read it in the last edition of the Newsletter, it is most difficult for me to realize that a forum conducted by and participated in by liberal religious adults, could bring itself to the point of adversely criticizing a young member of the church personally, in his absence, and in open session . . . Was the attack brought on by the ghost of age-old persecution-of man's inhumanity to man . . . Was no voice with "milk of human kindness" raised in his defense . . . This young member of the church also deviates from the norm in another respect. For more than four years, (very, very seldom missing), he has spent a portion of his Sunday mornings helping Mr. Ware prepare and serve punch for the children and coffee for the adults."

The newsletter editor did not publish this letter for two weeks in a row and Mrs. Warfield-Lewis' outrage only grew. The newsletter editor, not certain this was the place for this conversation, sent Mrs. Warfield-Lewis's letter to the President of the Board, John O'Hara, and the minister, Reverend Jim Hutchinson. They both agreed it should not be published. Mrs. Warfield saw this as a sign of "revolting, conspiring intrigue" and "bias." Within a month she sent a three page, single paged letter to all the members of the congregation detailing her "twice submitted and twice suppressed letter."

Well, most of you work or have worked. If you published such a letter detailing your concerns and sent it to all your clients, customers, etc., what would happen to you? No one does this and keeps his/her job. Nobody. Such a letter is a "termination" offense and it should be. Letters like this are destructive to a congregation, a team, a community. They spread waves of distrust long after publication. In addition, they are a very poor way to resolve conflict. Rather, they inflame mistrust and conflict.

In December 1966 the Board of Trustees dismissed her from her position as Director of the Church School effective June 1967. I can't completely tell, but it seems that the Board kept this decision confidential, not even informing Mrs. Lewis. If so, this was a mistake. Employees need to be given timely and direct feedback, especially about dismissal. Boards should not be in the business of making silent, major decisions to take place at a date in the future. Clearly the Board was dreading this conflict, and their dread led to decisions that made it worse.

I have long wondered if Warfield-Lewis knew the outcome of what she was doing when she sent that first letter and then just did it anyway. She must have known and it seems like she had just had it. Why had she had it? The end of this story thus far seems to be that Mrs. Lewis went too far, broke professional rules. Why? And why did one awkward comment about the hair of one youth outrage her? Yes it was an awkward comment, and no it should not have appeared in the newsletter in the first place, and it should not have been said at all. We forget this basic lesson that applies to casual conversation "if you can't say anything nice,

don't say anything at all." But people make mistakes like this all the time. All the time. Why was this comment so "hot?"

In March 1967, four months after her first letter, Mrs. Warfield Lewis sent another letter, a five page, single spaced letter to supportive members. This letter so upset the Board that they terminated her employment effective immediately, and sent a letter to the congregation informing them of this decision.

I have in my possession all three of these letter, two by Mrs. Warfield-Lewis, and one by the Board of Trustees. They were given to me within five years of my arrival here, when I first began asking questions about the intriguing Mrs. Warfield-Lewis. They were given to me by Mrs. Ruby Malone, one our African American members who joined with her husband, George, in the early 1960's. She gave them too me and said "Don't tell anyone I gave these too you." I tell you now because Ruby and George are both dead and we need to know about this. But consider Ruby gave these to me almost 40 years after the forced dismissal and she did not want anyone to know. Forty years later. I asked her if she thought that Mrs. Warfield-Lewis' dismissal was race based. She replied "Yes." Joy Haupt, a new member in the 1960's wrote to me "Pauline was very strong willed and perhaps a bit rigid, but the real issue, I have no doubt, was around race."

Trying to unpeel the story of Pauline Warfield-Lewis and First Church has reminded me of the many layers to most conflicts and the various sides and stories that develop, which is why it is best to sit and listen rather than leap to conclusions. As Antoine St. Exupery said "What is essential is invisible to the eye."

Mrs. Warfield-Lewis' last letter, dated March 16, which led to her immediate dismissal, is the most enlightening about her side of the story. She wrote it after finally receiving word from the Board in March 1967 that they would not renew her contract for the coming year.

She writes "At several times during the years of my service to the church, I have been on the verge of resigning as director of the school. The first time was just before Mr. Obrien resigned [Reverend Bob Obrien resigned in 1962]. In a church without a minister all laymen must double their efforts. The next time was just before the latest serious crisis in this church, not too long ago, when family after family was contemplating leaving [I do not know what crisis she refers to here]."

Well this is interesting, there seemed to be several small crisis within years of each other in the early 1960's at First Church, enough to make staff and lay members consider leaving.

Then she refers to things she has been criticized about, a third party unexpectedly joining a private conversation, her unwillingness to let reluctant children remain in the Pre-School program past their age, and her complaints about poor communication. Later she adds "Dr. O'Hara accused me bitterly of not having good cooperation with the minister. I will state quite candidly that I do not have personal rapport with the minister."

She later names the minister as Mr. Hutchinson, and given that this letter was written in 1966 I am surprised that she does not refer to either O'Brien or Hutchinson by their given title of "Reverend." To me this reflects her lack of respect (conscious or not) for the ministers with which she worked. This was probably a problem for her that grew over time.

My guess is that by 1966 she found herself isolated due to racism, sexism (I don't doubt that the many men who ran this congregation at the time were unused to a woman in a position of power), personality, challenges to authority and no nonsense demeanor. She did seem to have some loyal followers, but this too presents a problem. Healthy congregations are not divided into "camps." So as much as First Church was growing in numbers and diversity, it was rotting from the inside due to misunderstandings, race, and power struggles.

Her letter also explains what upset her so much about the published comments about Larry Wiegand's hair. And here I think we find her Rubicon, the last straw. In June of 1966 she was asked to do the sermon in honor of her tenth year at First Church. She chose to have five youth speak instead because she thought their voices should be heard.

She writes "Very soon after I invited five young people to speak, I had a call from a member of the church, strongly objecting to one of my selections of speakers. Soon a second call came in practically the same vein from the same person . . . Soon after Church School opened in the fall, this same member of the church, confronted me as I was entering Ellen Hall Room for some copies of the Church School Prospectus to give two waiting new and very interested families. With eyes flashing and face flushed, she stopped me with fierce hostility and demanded, "Why don't you say something to Larry Wiegand about the way he looks?"

Warfield-Lewis suggested this woman speak to Larry herself but this woman refused. This woman was Dorothy O'Hara and her husband, John, was President of the Board of Trustees. In her letters it is clear that Mrs. Warfield-Lewis thought that Mrs. O'Hara misused her husband's position of power to get extra leverage. Mrs. O'Hara was also at the Adult Form where Mr. Wiegand's hair was mentioned and Warfield-Lewis surmises that Mrs. O'Hara had her friend to raise the issue. This really aggravated Warfield-Lewis and seemed representative of a hypocrisy, or that Unitarian and Universalist white "cultural blindness" that Morrison-Reed mentions in his book, *Selma Awakening*.

It is truly outrageous that anyone would complain to any staff member about the physical appearance of a young adult (or any person) three times. Clearly Mrs. O'Hara was having an issue. Mrs. O'Hara was in some kind of pain about something. I wonder what it was?

And do you know, Larry Wiegand was in some sort of pain too. I met Larry Wiegand this week, this mysterious person who appears in all these letters. For years I have wondered what exactly was going on with Larry's hair, and who he was and what he knew and what he thought. Turns out I know Larry and you do too, he is Rolf Wiegand who is working our sound board this morning. Rolf Wiegand rejoined our church three years ago, and I never knew that his given name is "Laurence," and that as a child and young man he was known as Larry Wiegand.

And here is Rolf's story, utterly missing from all these letters. Rolf is white (for those of you who don't know him), and in 1966 at the age of 19, was influenced by music, as many youth were in those days. So he decided to style his hair after Bob Dylan on the cover of *Highway 61*. According to Rolf it was a messy, highly unsuccessful affair that many people noticed, even at the University of Cincinnati where he was a student. Rolf laughed at the memory of it and told me one of his friends at that time referred to him as "tumbleweed."

But much more importantly, Mrs. O'Hara started making those calls to Mrs. Warfield-Lewis in June 1966. One month earlier, in May 1966, Rolf's father unexpectedly died in difficult circumstances that deeply upset Rolf. Rolf was in definite pain. Did Mrs. O'Hara know? I don't know. Was she worried for him and it came out wrong? Was she upset by the unexpected death of Rolf's father? I don't know.

But given the character of Mrs. Warfield-Lewis, I bet she knew. Rolf's father died, and she intentionally asked Larry to speak as a way of including him.

Perhaps the greatest irony of all, Rolf knew about none of this. None of the letters, Mrs. Warfield-Lewis' stand, nothing. Pauline Warfield Lewis never said a word to him about any of this. Now that is some character. She did what she did not seeking pity, but to do what felt right to her.

Rolf explained to me that as of May 1966 when his father died, "Larry was not there." Rolf doesn't remember this time well. Rolf stopped coming to church that year, not because of the letters or Mrs. O'Hara, but because he was in personal pain and began to spend more time with his friends.

So we have Mrs. O'Hara in some pain, and Rolf/Larry in some pain, and we have Mrs. Warfield-Lewis in some pain too. Many people have told me that Mrs. Lewis' son, or maybe it was her nephew, named "Bill Lewis" attended the church. Bill Lewis was not her son, nor her nephew. Bill was Pauline's grandson. Rolf, who was good friends with Bill Lewis, cleared this up for me.

The very last phrase of the last letter she wrote reads "to all the fine and stalwart men and women of this congregation, may I say that I dedicate my work in the School of First Unitarian Church of Cincinnati, Ohio and any work I shall do in the field of religious education in the future, to my deceased son, **WILLIAM WARFIELD LEWIS, SR.**, I have given my best. "William Warfield-Lewis, Sr." is capitalized, bold, and underlined. In all her letters, the name of her son is given the most emphasis. What happened to William Warfield Lewis, Sr., and why did he die before his mother? She seemed stricken by this loss, and then committed to raising her grandson. What was this like for her?

And finally, one more thing Rolf remembers. One more very important thing. Young Bill Lewis and the daughter of the O'Hara's, Donna Jean, were attracted to one another, a black young man and white young woman in Cincinnati, Ohio in 1966. At the time you did not need to be a racist to be worried if your child dated a person of "another race." (I have trouble even saying "another race" because we know this is just a social construction).

Rolf remembers that Bill was tailed by the police from the moment he entered Amberley Village to visit girls he knew from church, until he left. Intimidation. A year earlier two Unitarians were murdered at Selma for supporting Martin Luther King, Jr. and the protests. Both the O'Hara's and Mrs. Warfield-Lewis could have been conflicted, upset, and afraid about this attraction. We have no way of knowing but I have a feeling that Larry Wiegand's hair was a "presenting problem," code for a host of other changes and fears within this congregation and society.

Three people in pain and fear (probably without safe places to discuss and process their pastoral needs) added up to one red hot congregational mess.

In addition, it seems like conflict was very poorly handled at First Church in the 1960's; multiple crises, families and ministers resigning, staff fights, confused and often "silent" avenues of power and authority, members taking sides, secret letters, complaints, and decisions, as well as intrusive, bullying behavior. Members and staff must have lacked a respectful process to air their differences, something every healthy community and organization needs.

If there is any lesson to be learned from this going forward, it is that this congregation (and any congregation) needs to have positive forums and clear and positive shared understandings about how to discuss difficult issues so we can grow in understanding rather than disagreement. Without them, there really isn't a chance of managing the even more complicated and painful issues of racism, sexism, homophobia, religious and ethnic differences, ageism, ableism, personal pain. Add to that our complicated Association struggles with authority and power, holy moly. Don't light a match. We can be like a Molotov cocktail.

After all this thought, questioning, and research, I still feel like I don't quite know what happened here with Mrs. Pauline Warfield-Lewis. Somewhere in the mix of racism, sexism, sexual attraction, challenges of authority and power and many poor management decision, lies the truth, or maybe several truths. I am certain that Unitarian cultural blindness played a significant role. I know Mrs. Warfield-Lewis was not treated fairly and I know that her letters caused more harm than good at the time. Secret letters become a divisive wedge. I know that First Church culture was not healthy then. And I know that a negative church culture only encourages misunderstandings and poor behavior. In the end, as a white, female minister serving 50 years later, I don't feel qualified to judge. I feel qualified to learn. I hope you do too.

In 2014, the question remains, what do we as human beings and people of faith want to do in this place to help ourselves face, hold, and accept our deepest pains and fears? What do we want to do to create a culture of open and respectful conversation and management? What do we as a congregation want to do in order to attract and retain qualified people of color, and a more diverse staff in general, now, and in the future. As Reverend Dr. Mark Morrison-Reed shared with us on Friday, it is about living richer and deeper lives and ultimately, lives that are more whole. How can we do that here?
