

A Public Statement from Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker

In response to "What Really Happened at Starr King," UU World Online, June 22, 2015

In March of 2014, members of the Starr King School for the Ministry's Presidential Search Committee asked me to offer my confidential opinion on the three final candidates for the next president of the School.

The request was within the rights and the responsibilities of the Search Committee and was in keeping with time-honored practices in academic searches. I considered the request very carefully mindful of the amount of power I held in the system. Before giving my opinion, I consulted outside of the School (and outside of Unitarian Universalist circles) with others familiar with academic practices and ethics, and with a spiritual director. Based on the thoughtful counsel I received, I chose to respond to the Search Committee's request. A key factor in my decision was that I felt it was respectful and responsible to trust that members of the Search Committee had the experience and wisdom to weigh my input appropriately, without being unduly influenced. I believe then and now that this trust was warranted.

In giving my opinions to the Search Committee, I expressed myself honestly and truthfully from where I sat and what I knew. The UU World has chosen to publish the accusation that I lied to the Search Committee in my assessment of one of the final candidates, and has suggested that this purported breach by me is "what really happened at Starr King" that caused so much difficulty.

It is not possible to defend myself publically against the accusation of lying without speaking about personnel details that as a matter of ethics as well as law should remain within a framework of confidentiality. I accept that keeping appropriate boundaries sometimes means that one's actions and perspectives cannot be fully understood and may be misjudged and mischaracterized.

What I can say is that I deeply regret that the private and sensitive nature of my opinions was exploited by those who obtained the confidential feedback and used it to accuse me of corrupting the search process. To my sorrow, people have felt free to erroneously fill in the blanks on things I did not say, assume I meant things that I did not mean, and have refuted things they believed I meant but are in fact contrary to my perspective. I am sorry that my carefully chosen words—never meant as a public statement for broad distribution---were not precise enough to close the gaps of speculation, and that by condensing into a few short paragraphs what would have required a long narrative to fully explicate, some important nuances to my comments were vulnerable to misinterpretation. I am sorry, too, that the public coverage has ignored the fact that I spoke highly of the gifts and talents of all three of the finalists.

I believe in accountability and I agree that confidentiality should not be tolerated as a cover for unjust or unfair actions. If the motivation back at the beginning of the troubles in March of 2014 was to call me to account for a believed infraction of ethics, I am simply heartbroken that no one with this concern chose to address it through appropriate and available channels. Starr King School and the UUMA have established processes for grievances and for accountability.

Now that the School has concluded its efforts to address the breach of confidentiality, has awarded diplomas, and plans no further investigations of the breach, it is time for new things. Looking back, I trust that those who know me and my work will recognize that I moved with careful intention and thoughtful integrity through the presidential transition. Looking ahead, I have confidence that the School's outstanding leadership now will carry the School's mission forward with strength, will create new approaches to theological education that will inspire and transform our congregations and our communities, and will attend with grace and courage to the deep work of institutional integrity and health.