

## **SYLLABUS**

### **Introduction to Systems Thinking**

**Course # RS 8400**

**3 credits**

**Starr King School for the Ministry – Graduate Theological Union**

**Spring 2020**

#### Instructor Information:

Rev. Dr. Devorah Greenstein

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Available by email or Zoom/phone office hours

#### Meeting Dates and Times:

This course is entirely asynchronous.

#### Course Description:

This is an introductory course in “systems thinking.” Our study of family systems, congregations, and other organizational systems (e.g. medical-industrial system, educational-industrial system) will all be rooted in anti-oppressive understandings of the interconnections of systems and ethnicity, class, gender, age, and disability. Our work will also be to explore community/non-hierarchical systems, resilience, and resistance to systems of power and privilege.

Wherever your ministry takes you: serving a congregation; working as a hospital chaplain; supervising volunteers in a voter registration drive; living in an intentional community or a protest encampment, knowledge about systems thinking offers you tools to respond appropriately to the needs of the system in which you find yourself.

#### This class fits into:

MFC Competence 2: Pastoral Care and Presence

MFC Competence 4: Social Justice in the Public Square

Any textbook that is required is from the UU required reading list.

#### Course outcomes:

After completing this course, students will be expected to understand

- how individuals, and small or large groups interact within formal and informal systems
- the role of power and privilege in a group’s, congregation’s, or organization’s functioning
- how organizational anxieties, traumas, stressors, create and shape leaders’ abilities to effectively lead
- how to use systemic forces to influence change in the direction of health and strength

#### Course policies:

As stated in the Starr King School for the Ministry student handbook, two absences are allowed in the semester. If there are urgent family or other needs that will keep you from participating in any given week, you must email me immediately so we can arrange for make-up work. I am flexible, but I insist on being contacted so that we can negotiate.

Course assignments:

There is a weekly assigned personal reflection/discussion of 300 words (more or less) plus responses (of any length) to two other students' reflections. Self-directed "rabbit holes" strongly encouraged, following any of the many topics in the current unit being studied.

Grading:

I always prefer that students take this course Pass/Fail. It's about intrinsic vs extrinsic motivation. But I am fine if you want (or require) a letter grade.

Required Texts:

Most of what we read will be on Moodle. Pedagogically, because I know that people learn in different ways, I always try to offer a "buffet" of reading resources (some academic, some more popular); youtube and vimeo videos; audio interviews, etc. There will be book chapters (but not entire books) assigned from three of the MFC required books.

Required textbook for everybody:

adrienne maree brown, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*. AK Press (2017). \$12 on Amazon. ISBN: 978-1-84935-260-4

Required for UU students (and highly recommended for everybody):

(Required textbooks from MFC required reading list:)

- Sheryl Kujawa-Holbrook, *Injustice and the Care of Souls: Taking Oppression Seriously in Pastoral Care*. Fortress Press (2009). \$32.00 on Amazon. (some used copies on abebooks.com. ISBN 978-0-8006-6235-6
- Peter Steinke. *How Your Church Family Works: Understanding Congregations as Emotional Systems*. Alban Institute (1996). \$24. Paperback, 13.50 Kindle on Amazon. Lots of used copies available. ISBN 13: 978-1-56699-329-6
- UUA, *Safe Congregations Handbook* (2005). Available online.
- Allan Johnson, *Privilege, Power, and Difference* **second edition**. McGraw-Hill. (If there are cheaper copies of the **third edition** buy a copy of that. I hope there will still be many used copies available from \$3 or 4 up. ISBN-13: 978-0072874891; ISBN-10: 0072874899

**Weekly topics**

### **Unit 1. Weeks 1 and 2: Introductions and thinking “vertically” (systems of oppression)**

The introductory section will introduce some of the concepts underlying systems thinking, and will introduce the roles of power and privilege as the cultural framework for our semester’s work. Included in our cultural overview, we will look at several systems models, beliefs,... look at microaggressions, and of course, a bit of history, thinking about “resilience” and looking at several different levels of systems thinking methodologies.

### **Unit 2. Weeks 3 and 4: Starting at the center and working outward – Bronfenbrenner’s social-ecological model, Social Dominance Theory, and introduction to Bowen family systems theory (BFST)**

Our most important influence in life is our families of origin (sometimes called our “nuclear family.” We are shaped by our early family experiences. Families of origin profoundly affect us as adults; our thoughts, feelings, actions, in the ways we engage in our personal and work relationships. We have discovered that congregations function as emotional systems (similar to the way families function), and family systems theory has proven invaluable as a tool for clergy and religious leaders to use in managing personal and organizational challenges. Most of our reading this week is by White men, and we will pay attention to why this is and look at ways to decenter all this white theory... (Those of you who are familiar with BFST will have alternate reading assignments.)

### **Unit 3. Weeks 5 and 6: Family Systems Theory, and Congregational Life**

These next two weeks we remain in deep analyses of congregational life and leadership (we will be mindful that we are learning about our derived-from-Protestant culture, Eurocentric, etc)... There are many excellent resources that will enable students to grasp the basics of systems thinking and its application in relationships and situations that religious leaders are likely to encounter in their work. In the last unit we covered two of Bowen’s basic concepts; this unit we will focus on three additional family systems concepts. Those of you who are familiar with BFST will have alternate reading assignments.

### **Unit 4. Weeks 7 and 8: Continuing our Exploration of Family Systems Theory and its Utility in Religious Leadership, and looking at resources for healthy, safe clergy and congregations**

Expanding on what we studied in the last two week unit, we will focus on the final three of the eight Bowen’s family systems concepts and will integrate all eight concepts as we look into organizations and systems. As Friedman writes in his prologue to Steinke’s book, using the tools we have looked at these weeks, gives us “... a new way of thinking about human relationships that can help religious leaders understand the waves that are engulfing them and here and there perhaps even turn the tide.” (p. vi). Given our political climate, we will venture into exploration of tensions and stress/secondary trauma within congregations about social justice work.

These two weeks we will also study the system in which we, as clergy, function. We will explore resources for our own support, including topics of: self-care; safety; justice making; professional misconduct; clergy sexual abuse policies; mandatory reporting responsibilities; clergy longevity and burnout; communication/miscommunication and strategies; confidentiality responsibilities; Unitarian Universalist Good Offices resources.

### **Unit 5. Weeks 9 and 10 Moving away from congregations to large systems.**

Some of you in this class are called to serve a congregation or to serve as chaplains. Others of you are going to be what we call “entrepreneurial” ministers, or you may not be heading to ordination. Regardless of where you are heading, you do live in the 2020 world.

We will start with the medical-industrial system in Week 9. I’ve chosen this particular huge system because so many of you are heading to chaplaincy and you will be working in or with this system. The first week we will introduce the Social Dominance Theory – which will really help us as we look at the medical-industrial complexities. We will look at the hegemonic forces, and we will look at disability activists’ work – disability activists’ perspectives – looking at the medical-industrial system from the perspective of people whose lives are profoundly shaped-constrained-supported-or-unsupported by the medical-industrial system.

Week 10 we will look at a second large system with an agenda – the public educational-industrial system, looking at how we learn, how we teach, how we perpetuate an intentionally hierarchy-enhancing system of public education. We will again look at activists’ perspectives, and wind up this week by introducing rhizomatic systems in the context of education, i.e. public school activists’ efforts to humanize public education. Introducing rhizomatic systems in the context of public education will give you a framework to go on to the final portion of this course.

### **Unit 6: Weeks 11 and 12. Looking for and finding hope, rhizomes and uprisings**

These two weeks will expand our horizons, as we focus on systems thinking in the “global imaginary” (commonly shared understandings that bring our systems thinking together into a single, coherent ‘global’ whole). Especially in light of our “networked society” – we are discovering that our old hierarchical models do not reflect networks and coalitions of people working to bring change.

So as we head to the concluding weeks of the semester, after these past few weeks of difficult and sometimes upsetting system work, we will consider the paradigm shift to a “rhizomatic” (network) global model of systems thinking, social media, resistance and protest movements. These two weeks will bring you joy because there are so many people organizing systems that are inspirational.

### **Unit 7: Weeks 13 and 14. Wrap-up and Catch-up.**

Depending on the issues that catch the class’s interest and the issues that arise during these next few months, we will finish the course with a unit about system

change, focusing our system-change conversations on specific issues as yet unknown – what will be in our hearts and minds in April and May, 2020? It will become clearer, as the semester unspools, where to take this conversation. Are books still the source of information about changing systems? In the past two weeks we read the words of some well-known systems-change agents. How do we apply it to the immediacy of the moment, as yet unknown as I write this syllabus.