

THE POWER OF RACE IN AMERICA

A Sermon by Reverend Lynn Thomas Strauss

Racism is a form of cultural and economic violence that isolates and fragments human beings.

This week I was with a small group of Unitarian Universalist ministers when I learned that the Unitarian Universalist Association is planning a new diversity initiative. One that will focus on mentoring and supporting in myriad ways candidates for our ministry who are not white.

I confess that I reacted badly to this proposed plan. Even though I had few facts or details, even though the plan is only in the talking stages, even though I have long participated in the anti-racism work of our association, even though I am proud of the small growing edge of diversity here in the Rockville congregation, even though I fully realize that ministers of color have a more difficult time in the search process, knowing all this...still, I reacted badly.

In that moment, in that circle of trusted colleagues, I had a visceral experience of my fragmented self.

Let me explain. As a first generation college graduate, I have an inner narrative that says- I made it “on my own”. My narrative goes something like this...No one in my family encouraged me to go to college. I worked my way through, in a low wage job while living at home. I rode my bike or took the bus to the city college. I did it on my own.

I didn't consider going into the ministry until after my fourth child was two years old...and no one ever suggested that I should consider ministry as a calling. I did it on my own.

Four years later, when I received my Masters' of Divinity degree, I entered a very competitive job market, and no one mentored me through the process, in fact I was told not to try for a mid-sized church, but I did it anyway, and I did it on my own.

I love ministry and it is a true calling for me...but it isn't easy...and I've Had successful ministries now in two congregations and you, dear friends are my third ministry...and I did it on my own.

This is my story and I'm sticking to it.

At least my inner narrative is alive and well and was shouting in my ear that morning, when I learned that some new ministers are going to get a lot of help. My inner fragmented self...shouted wait a minute..."Why should they get all that help?" "It's not easy for any of us."

Yes, racism is a form of cultural and economic violence that isolates and fragments human beings. And in that moment I was feeling some of the violence, some of the isolation and much of the fragmentation.

I was sure my colleagues were thinking that I was some kind of crazy racist. Luckily, they know me better than that. In fact on occasion they count on my passionate responses to point us toward a more thorough examination of the issue at hand-whatever it may be.

I offer thanks to Rebecca Parker for this succinct definition of racism and for her wonderful essay in *Soul Work*.

My thoughts this morning flow from her work and that of other colleagues whose writings appear in that volume.

On recent Wednesday nights, a group of us have been watching and discussing a video series called "Race: the Power of an Illusion". In the first episode, the series de-constructed the myth that race is genetically based. Decades of efforts to prove the genetic basis of racial traits and categories have not been scientifically upheld. Genetic differences between people are minimal. We haven't been around long enough as a species, to have evolved much diversity.

The recent mapping of the human genome gives further proof that biologically, we are all members of the same race; the human race.

The second episode of the series gives the historical overview of our national narrative concerning race. It is a false narrative intended to justify slaughter of the American Indian, conquest of Mexico and the Philippines, and the enslavement of Africans in America. It is a narrative that is still deep in the American psyche and serves to justify economic oppression and violence and inequality based on race and culture.

It is a narrative that justifies a sense of manifest destiny and the right of the United States of America to occupy and force our values and institutions on people we perceive as “other”.

It is a narrative of white supremacy and white privilege and we have all been fed it along with Wonder bread and four glasses of milk a day.

The video makes it clear that race is a social construct held in place by racist institutions. The third episode tells the violent story of housing policies in America...and how they have been clearly race-based...and discriminatory.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina we see the current and unavoidable reality of how housing patterns have supported racial injustice in New Orleans. This pattern is not limited to New Orleans. Housing in America has always been separate and unequal.

“The struggle for racial justice is imperative. Racial injustice is not only a tragedy that happened yesterday.” These words of Rebecca Parker call me to a deeper reflection and to consider what action for racial justice I need to take as an individual.

But, even if each one of us awakens to our own fragmentation and isolation, even if each of us uncover, learn from, and change our own internal narrative...our own version of “I did it on my own”...it will not be sufficient.

We must also act in community...as part of the institutions we inhabit. Racial injustice thrives on passivity. Author, James Baldwin, writing in “the Fire Next Time” wrote, “this is the crime of which I accuse my countrymen, and for which I and history will never forgive them, that they have destroyed and are destroying hundreds and thousands of lives, and do not know it, and do not want to know it.”

One of the institutions that we of the middle class do not want to know much about is our prison system. We don’t want to know, at least not close up, about the hundreds and thousands of lives- mostly young African-American lives that are being destroyed in our prison system...through our legal system.

One practice that has become common-place in America has bothered me for a long time. It is the practice of bringing those who are arrested to court in chains...orange jumpsuits and chains...when did this become ok? Every time I see a young man treated like an animal, instead of a human being...I wonder how or if he will ever recover from that experience of degradation.

And I wonder what will the next step down in degradation be in our prison system. Will hooding become common practice, even outside of our political prisons?

Giving up our passivity, is not small matter. If we open our eyes and our ears, if we come truly awake to the suffering caused by racial injustice, we will all be quite uncomfortable. If we give up our passivity what will we do about the racial injustice closer to home. Racial profiling on the Maryland and DC streets, the lack of affirmative action hiring, the acceptance of so many drastically under-performing urban schools.

What will we do about the day labor center issue or about the hangman's noose discovered on the campus of the University of Maryland?

What will we do about the Unitarian Universalist congregations that are not yet comfortable calling an African American to their pulpit?

Is Barack Obama black enough? And why do we not ask a similar question of the white presidential candidates?

If we give up our passivity in the face of racial injustice, what will this congregation need to do differently?

Should we or should we not think and talk about race?

Should we pretend we are color-blind?

What are your childhood memories and learnings about race relations?

Did your ancestors experience pressure to become more white?

The questions go on and on.

What does it mean to be Asian, Black, bi-racial, Hispanic, Arab, or East European, or Israeli in Montgomery County today?

In Montgomery Co, we take pride in our diversity, so everything is ok, right?

Everything is not ok!

I recommend an amazing collection published last year.

The title is “Being a Black Man: At the corner of Progress and Peril”. The authors are all staff members of the Washington Post. It is an offering of personal stories of what it means to be a black man in 2007.

Some of the stories in the collection that touched me deeply.

One amazing story in this collection is a positive one. It’s titled “For the love of Ballou” and the author is V.Dion Haynes.

It is a true story about two boys, who were friends in middle school where they developed a friendly academic rivalry, one ended up as valedictorian in 2002 while the other was salutatorian. Though they were recruited by an elite private high school, the boys decided, with the support of their fathers, to enter Ballou High, the neighborhood school, which was in a difficult inner city neighborhood and had lots of problems and a bad reputation.

The boys made a pact with each other that by the time they graduated from high school, they would make Ballou a better place to be young, black and male.

One of the boys said, “My whole thing is to change the stereotype of people in Southeast, We wanted people to say that good, intelligent, athletic students come out of Ballou.

They decided that could do it together. Their friendship saw them through. They started achieving good grades right away...and soon they both joined the football team. When the coaches realized they had two A students on the team, they set up morning study sessions for the rest of the team, and the boys became tutors. The next year, the tutors encouraged several of the team members to take AP classes.

Jack and Wayne became co-captains of the team. They continued the early morning tutoring. By the end of their fourth year at Ballou, most players had B and C-plus averages. There were more football players in AP classes than ever before.

Jack and Wayne were incredible role models. They were popular –liked by teachers and students alike.

When they graduated from Ballou, one was validvictorian and the other was salutatorian.

In the fall of 2006, Wayne and Jack went off to college together in Massachusetts. , they were looking forward to their sophomore year, when they could choose each other as roommates.

We, in America have been socialized to make much of skin color and other superficial differences among us. Our individual internal narratives regarding race have been heavily influenced by our culture, our neighborhoods, our parents, our media, our schools. We have learned to project negative traits on people who look different from ourselves.

Many of us have withdrawn behind passivity or cynicism – anger or resentment. We are tired of the racism conversation.

But it is a new day in America. Diversity is slowly, gaining the upper hand. And this is a good thing. Race is still a powerful social construct. To be involved and responsible citizens, we must give up our passivity...move beyond cynicism and anger and arrogance. The work, our work, is not yet finished.

Anti-racism work is best done in community. We here at UUCR have the opportunity to re-educate and retrain ourselves, we have the opportunity to be more aware and responsible, we have the tools to do the soul level work that racism requires.

There's an addendum to my personal story of "I did it on my own."
I was troubled by my outburst and confused by my emotions.
I called one of my colleagues who had agreed to be part of the UUA diversity initiative. I didn't want him to think I was unsupportive, or that I was opposed to efforts to help ministers of color get appropriate settlement in our congregations. My plea was simply that all ministers needed help, needed mentoring, needed scholarships, needed support.

My gracious, loving colleague copied me on an e-mail that he was sending to the UUA team, part of his message included some of the points I was trying to make. He thanked me for trusting enough to express my unpopular point of view, it helped him think some things through, he said.

There is so much good work that we can do together, if we trust one another and are honest.

Here and now, in 2007, we are writing a new chapter of the diversity story of UUCR.

There is much healing to be done.

There is much conversation to be shared.

There is much action that we can take, together.

After thinking deeply about my reactions with my colleagues, I e-mailed the UUA diversity team and asked if UUCR could be matched with an intern minister of color. I received a quick response and it is my hope that once again we will have the opportunity to welcome a ministerial intern who is not white.

I invite you to consider your own inner narrative on race.

I invite you to consider what you wish to unlearn.

I invite you to join with others who will share the journey to wholeness.

I invite you to continue the struggle for racial justice.

As Rebecca Parker said, “Hope lies in our ability to renew our citizenship through engaged action”.

“The struggle is imperative. Racial injustice is not only a tragedy that happened yesterday.”

Amen/Blessed Be

