

Atonement and Commitment

Rev. Peggy Meeker, 10/01/17

Reading: *CENTERING* is one of two books chosen for this year's Unitarian Universalist Common Read. It takes the experiences and stories of people who are marginalized and moves them to the center. In particular, it tells the stories of UU religious professionals of color. In these words of the Rev. Darrick Jackson, listen for the voice of someone different from you ["Othering and Belonging," pp. 1-2, *CENTERING: Navigating Race, Authenticity, and Power in Ministry*, ed. Mitra Rahnema, Skinner House Books, 2017].

In the wake of Ferguson and the Black Lives Matter movement, I have found my Unitarian Universalist identity and my African-American identity at odds. These recent events have brought to light, once again, my struggle with being in a faith that is sympathetic to my identity as a person of color but just does not get it.

... [After] the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, I attended a vigil hosted by one of our UU congregations. We stood outside holding candles and sang songs of justice. We went back inside, and all the ministers processed. We listened to prayers and reflections from ministers in the community, UU and otherwise. As I looked out at the sea of mostly White faces, I felt alone and isolated instead of drawn into the community. It was clear to me that my UU community was looking at this issue from a distance. They were supporting justice for the "other." In that moment they saw me only as a Unitarian Universalist. They saw the police violence as something that happened to "other people"; Michael Brown did not represent their brother, son, nephew, cousin. They were outraged about the injustice; I was feeling the pain of my people. I saw no space to name that pain in my UU community ...

I was a Universalist before I even knew there was a religious home for my beliefs. And yet, I still go back to the spirit of the African Methodist Episcopal Church within which I was raised. I often ache for the music that makes my heart soar, that brings the divine into the room during worship. I miss ministry that is grounded in and speaks to my Black identity. I miss a message of hope that is grounded in an understanding of struggle. I miss all these things, and yet theologically I can be nowhere else than where I am. So I make my home here in Unitarian Universalism, as imperfect as it is, and find ways to stay grounded, to stay connected, and to stay whole.

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I was about 7 or 8 years old when I first thought about race. I was standing in line in the school cafeteria, waiting to pick up my lunch, and just ahead of me were two African-American

girls. I didn't know them. They were about my age. Maybe they were in my grade, but in a different classroom. I remember noticing that their dresses looked dingy, and then I looked again, and wondered if that was really true or if it was that the color or the fabric looked different against their dark skin. I stood there puzzling for not more than a few seconds, but I've never forgotten that moment, because I didn't know what to do with my observation or my wondering. I grew up in a small town—Naples, NY—and I was pretty sure that these two girls were part of the only black family in our town. I also knew that they were poor, and the dresses were probably hand-me-downs, as were my own. And I sensed that there was more to know, and that it wasn't okay to talk about. I don't remember ever mentioning that moment to my parents or anyone else. I wouldn't have said my parents were prejudiced, but it just wasn't the kind of thing you talked about.

Well, nowadays we're all talking. It's everywhere, from kneeling at the national anthem to the UUA's White Supremacy Teach-Ins. Some of it is angry, and some of it is defensive, and that's understandable. And some of it is thoughtful and careful and hopeful.

In a book called *Waking Up White: And Finding Myself in the Story of Race*, Debby Irving talks about her own journey from “white oblivion”—a lack of understanding of what it means to be White in American society and what it means to be a person of color—to “white awareness.” One of the stories she tells is about a diversity workshop she attended a few years back in which the trainer asked people how they would respond if they were in a grocery store and their child pointed to a black person and asked why their skin was so dark. People weren't sure what to say, but most thought they'd hush the child and explain later that we don't talk about people that way. The trainer explained that if you send the message that race is a taboo topic, then you're saying there's something very wrong with dark skin. He helped them see that talking about race could be more natural, that they could simply say “Just like hair color can be different, so can skin color” [p. 25]. It's an easy shift, once you see it, but we need to talk about these things in order to see them. Irving shares her own journey, including questions designed to help the reader think back on their own life experiences with race. She'll be giving a talk at First Unitarian next Sunday night.

There are *many* opportunities right now—including the Facing Racism exhibit at 1st Unitarian and, in November, a RocACTS Public Action Meeting on racial equity—opportunities for us to listen, to talk, and to begin to take action. Some of the talking and listening is hard. White people are struggling to hear difficult truths, because so much of what most of us were taught falls short of truth.

The Rev. Mark Morrison-Reed, minister here at First Universalist for nine years back in the 80s, has written that Unitarian Universalists could benefit from a Day of Atonement. America, he says, like many other modern nation states, was built at a “brutal human cost”—beginning with the genocide of Native Americans, compounded by the enslavement of kidnapped Africans, and moving on through the Spanish American War, the railways built by Chinese who were then

subjected to exclusion, the Jim Crow laws, which arguably continue today in different guises, the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II, the use of atomic weapons, and today the demonization of the undocumented aliens who are so integral to our economy [“Returning to Ritual,” Part II]. We are a nation whose story includes oppression and exploitation as well as the struggle toward justice. And we, a predominantly white congregation, are a part of a culture built on the idea of white supremacy. That doesn’t mean that I’m a white supremacist, or that you are; but as Debby Irving says, “All Americans live within the context of one dominant culture, ... brought to this country by white Anglo settlers. Exploring one’s relationship to that culture is where the waking-up process begins” [p. xiii].

The Jewish high holy day of Yom Kippur recognizes the human necessity of acknowledging our failures and of committing ourselves to do better, to draw the circle wider, so that no one stands alone. As a congregation, we make a promise today to begin a journey, the journey to justice of facing systemic racism. We are promising to listen, to consider, to learn who else is doing this work and how we can participate, and to discern how we can offer our presence for those most hurt by racism.

As we begin the commissioning part of our service, I want to thank the Board of Trustees and the Social Justice Task Force [names deleted] for starting us on this Journey to Justice. Thanks also go to the Rev. Richard Gilbert for his work in creating the reading that you are about to hear, as well as the congregational response that we’ll be reading later.

Choric Reading: the Social Justice Task Force

All Three: Nurture the spirit; serve the community.

1st Reader: That is our mission—the mission of this congregation.

2nd Reader: It suggests what we do in the community begins in our spiritual life.

3rd Reader: It presents itself in what we do to help mend a broken world.

1st Reader: It has been a long time in process—this commissioning of these people by this congregation.

2nd Reader: It has moved through seemingly endless meetings, phone conference calls, reports, and hard work.

3rd Reader: Today is in one way a culmination of our work, but in another its beginning.

1st Reader: While we charge certain individuals with leadership roles, the work is really that of the congregation.

2nd Reader: It is your support in time, talent, and treasure that enables this effort.

3rd Reader: There is no time to waste. Our community needs us. We must get to work.

All Three: Nurture the spirit; serve the community.

Statement of Purpose: And so we recognize and celebrate those who will be engaging us to identify the important issues, educating us, galvanizing us, and developing the strategies and action plans that will help us to actually *do* the work of facing racism. And we recognize those

among us who are already offering service, social witness, and social action. And we ask the blessing of the interdependent web of all existence, of which we are a part.

Charge

I would like to invite [our board president] to come forward and, as I call your names, the members of FIAC (the Faith in Action Council), the members of the Project Team, and the Leaders of our Social Justice Circles please come and stand here across the front (and bring with you the Congregational Response insert from the OOS): [names deleted]. Will the congregation please rise in body or spirit?

President [to the leaders]: You are our leaders in this sacred calling. The members of this congregation charge you with the work of reflecting, educating, strategizing, and acting for justice—the work of serving out the mission of our beloved community and of our Journey to Justice. We charge you to be guided by our principles, to hold in your hearts both our downtown neighborhood and the wider community in which we live, and to guide us all toward racial justice. Are you ready and willing to accept this charge? If so, please say “We are.”

President [to the congregation] Do you, the members and friends of First Universalist, affirm the work of these leaders and pledge to them your attention, your open mind, your support, and, as you are able, your participation? If so, please say “We do.”

Congregational Response: Please find the insert in your order of service with the congregational response, adapted by Dick Gilbert from a poem by Marge Piercy. Look down the left-hand side to find yourself and your lines. You may have more than one part. And you won’t necessarily be next to others reading the same line, so just plunge in. As we make our way through this reading, more and more of our voices will join in. Are you ready?

Minister: One person can have faith, but it can be lonely.

Two members of the Social Justice Task Force: Two people make a dyad—one to talk, one to listen.

FIAC: Three people are a delegation, a committee, a wedge.

Project Team: With four you can play bridge and start an organization.

Board of Trustees: With six you can rent a whole house, eat pie for dinner with no seconds, and hold a fund-raising party.

SJ Circle Leaders: A dozen make a demonstration.

All Committees: A hundred fill a hall and make a worship service and have their own newsletter.

All: It goes on one at a time; it starts when you care to act. It starts when you do it again after they said it couldn’t be done. It starts when you say We and know who you mean, and each day you mean one more.

Commissioning: In the name of the First Universalist Society of Rochester, NY, I commission you, our justice leaders, to guide us, challenge us, and move us in the work of facing systemic

racism, so that together we might make a difference. As a thank-you and to inspire you in your work, Becky and Joy will be presenting each of you with a copy of the book *The Third Reconstruction* by William J. Barber II. And I commission all of you, the members and friends of this congregation, to be receptive to this work and to the “other,” and to find your way to participate. May our work together be liberating both for ourselves and for our community.

Bread Communion: As you folks take your seats, with our thanks, would [four of the Worship Associates, names deleted] please distribute the bread for our communion. As you take your bread, hold on to it until we can all eat together. // The Christian communion that used to be part of most Unitarian and Universalist churches was a remembering of the story of the death of Jesus. Today, as we focus on racism, we remember the story of others who have been marginalized and crucified by our dominant culture. We eat this bread in honor of them. We eat this bread in thanksgiving for the bounty of nature and of the interdependent web. We eat this bread in communion with all the faithful here and everywhere and with those who have gone before us and with the Spirit of Life. We eat this bread as an affirmation of our intention to welcome all to our table. Take and eat. // May it be so, and amen.