

LOVE WILL GUIDE US

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ATKINSON MEMORIAL CHURCH
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Readings:

The Legacy of Caring by Unitarian Universalist theologian Thandeka

Despair is my private pain

Born from what I have failed to say
failed to do
failed to overcome.

Be still my inner self

let me rise to you
let me reach down into your pain
and soothe you.

I turn to you

to renew my life

I turn to the world

the streets of the city
the worn tapestries of
brokerage firms
crack dealers
private estates
personal things in the bag lady's cart
rage and pain in the faces that turn from me
afraid of their own inner worlds.

This common world I love anew

as the life blood of generations
who refused to surrender their humanity
in an inhumane world
courses through my veins.

From within this world

my despair is transformed to hope
and I begin anew
the legacy of caring.

Sermon:

You've been hearing a lot about General Assembly lately because it is coming to our backyard. Something on the order of 5000 Unitarian Universalists from all over the continent and even the world will be converging on Portland from June 20-24. One of the most moving GA traditions is the Opening Ceremonies – a combination worship service and ingathering. The best part for me is the Banner Parade. People from almost every congregation come in carrying their church's banner to celebratory music and raucous applause. It is simply stunning to see the banners keep coming and coming. It is a grand way to know that we are not alone. Not at all.

One thing always used to bug me about the Opening Ceremonies, and then last year it got turned on its ear in a delightful, surprising, painful and quintessentially Unitarian way. For many years, the General Assembly Planning Committee has invited a member of a local native tribe to offer a blessing. This was a very well-meant gesture, acknowledging that the land we stand on once belong to someone else. Too often this moment has felt affected, done not so much to make amends, but to take pride in our own enlightenment.

Then last year in St. Louis, something marvelous happened. The Planning Committee couldn't find anyone from a local

tribe. The native peoples of that part of Missouri had been driven so thoroughly from their land that none remained. They looked wider and wider to find someone without luck until, finally, a member of a tribe from Kansas City, hundreds of miles away, answered the request. With a firm refusal. He was unwilling, to drive 4 hours to speak for 5 minutes so that a group of mostly privileged white people might feel less guilty. He said quite directly – Do your own work. We won't do it for you.

What a hit to the gut. How wonderful to hear such plain truth. Yet what I love about this story is that we told it on ourselves. Right there at the very beginning before all assembled, the chair of the Planning Committee had to explain why we would not be having the Native American blessing. That moment expressed so beautifully both our failings and our great strength. We can be self-satisfied at times. Too carefully politically correct. Yet we are also willing – even seeking – to hear the truth, and we are willing to learn and grow from the truths we hear.

I don't know what will happen at the Opening Ceremonies this year. The land of Lewis and Clark seems a very apt place to acknowledge the price Native Americans have paid to the European expansion so many others have benefited from. Yet however the moment is handled, it will be informed by what we learned in St. Louis.

What I learned is that we must indeed do our own work. Examine our own hearts, see our own privilege and pain, and speak from our own experience. Try to understand the assumptions we operate from and see how they affect others around us – especially those less privileged.

And in doing our work, it is probably more important, at least at first, to work among ourselves – to help raise our consciousness as mostly, but not all, people of privilege.

I count myself fully privileged. As a person of European descent called white in this land, my privilege is conferred upon me. Add to that an economically affluent background, and my privilege is secure. It is nothing I sought and from inside the dominant culture, it is hard even to see. It is challenging, even scary work to examine that privilege and to understand its affects on others all around me.

Scholar Peggy McIntosh, a white woman, calls white privilege “an invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was “meant” to remain oblivious. White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools, and blank checks.”

Recognizing privilege is the first step. That's hard enough. Next, we must begin to accept a level of responsibility. That does not mean being blamed for being a racist, but it does require that I see how I participate in racist systems and institutions.

A place to start is looking at language.

One of my pet peeves is when people use the pronoun ‘you’ when they are speaking about themselves. Celebrities are notorious for this. “Well, when Clint Eastwood is your director, you have to respond with the deepest parts of yourself. But he makes it safe for you and you do your best work.” Or “You know, when you're reaching the summit of Mount Everest and you can't breathe because the air is so thin, and you start getting a little fuzzy-headed...” Truly I don't know. I've never been to Everest and it's scary to contemplate Clint Eastwood directing my preaching.

There are times that we speak to a common “you,” but too often such language distances us from our own experience, especially the despair we can feel at our failings. I learned the power of speaking for myself in a dreamwork class with Rev. Jeremy Taylor. Jeremy has taught dreamwork throughout our denomination. I have found the work profound. For it invites me to take responsibility for my own experience, my own projections and judgments. It holds me to account and demands greater depth and honesty.

Jeremy's technique is simple. Someone tells a dream to the group. Everyone much respond saying, “If this were my

dream... Rather than saying – oh, that dream is clearly about *your* issues with *your* mother, not something that is likely to be heard well. Instead, I must say, “If this were my dream, it would be about my issues with my mother.” That is really the only true thing I can say.

Speaking for ourselves, from personal experience, rather than trying to speak for others is really all any of us can do. And it’s the first step in work to counter oppression. Even if it’s the system that is most racist, we can only begin in our own hearts. That feels to me like both a great relief and a frightening challenge.

Ultimately, racism hurts us all – privileged and oppressed. We can learn from that pain. Speak from it. Heal from it.

People of color tell us that our work is within and among ourselves. The “we” I speak of now is white people of privilege – a description that applies to many, although I know not all of us here today.

My work is to understand my privilege, see how it affects others and then work with others who share my privilege to break down systemic racism in myself and in my society.

Peggy McIntosh again, “Many, perhaps most [white people] in the United States think that racism doesn’t affect them because they are not people of color: they do not see “whiteness” as a racial identity.” This is the very reason the Adult Faith Development Committee wanted to bring us the workshop on racial identity after church today.

For without an understanding of whiteness as racial identity, we miss the point that, quoting McIntosh, “In proportion as my racial group was being made confident, comfortable, and oblivious, other groups were likely being made unconfident, uncomfortable, and alienated. Whiteness protected me from many kinds of hostility, distress and violence, which I was being subtly trained to visit, in turn, upon people of color.”

It is hard work to look inside and see the ways we have unwittingly participated in oppression simply by living with a privilege that doesn’t feel like privilege most of the time. It’s just my life. I don’t mean to hurt anyone. Yet it’s important for us to see how racism hurts all of us. Keeps us distant from the common world, cuts us off from what Thandeka calls “the life blood of those who refuse to surrender their humanity.”

Yet, as I can only speak from my own experience in doing this work, let me tell you a story of my own complicity and pain.

The school where I taught for 10 years was the most ethnically diverse in the district. About half the students were white, with a mix of many minorities – black, Hispanic, Asian, Arab, Pacific Islander. I loved teaching there. One year an African American student enrolled in 5th-grade about mid-year. His name was Sir Cameron, and his teacher could not bring herself to call him by name. She insisted on calling him Cameron. I knew this was wrong, but I never said anything.

Sir Cameron was a bit rowdy, and in a team meeting, his teacher called him uppity. Now I knew this was at best a very poor choice of words. I also knew my fellow teacher was a good woman, not an overt racist. I knew that she meant well, but I also knew she was not being fair to this student. I knew it was serious matter, a matter of race and racism. I suspected that Sir Cameron’s parents had named so everyone – black or white – would have to call their child Sir. It was a statement of pride and of resistance. I knew that my colleague was a good woman, and I knew she was wrong. And I didn’t say a thing.

I made a point whenever I saw him to call Sir Cameron by name, and perhaps he even noticed and appreciated it. But my real work was not in reaching out to him. My real work was in speaking to my colleague, someone of my own background, race and status. That might have helped Sir Cameron and future students far more. I didn’t say a thing, and I regret it to this day.

I suspect most of us who have grown up white in this culture have similar stories. Times we consciously or

unconsciously stood on the side of privilege. It is hard for me to tell you this. It is a painful memory and I am still ashamed of myself. Yet carrying such pain in silence helps no one.

Our task in the work of becoming an anti-oppressive, anti-racist society is to examine our own experience and privilege. From that understanding, find ways to be allies to the oppressed. That's what Pee Wee Reese was doing when he put his arm around Jackie Robinson's shoulder that day back in May of 1947. He was Robinson's teammate and ally, and I am sure Robinson appreciated it. But Reese's real audience was the white folks in the crowd. Reese was fully aware that it could be his family and friends who were saying such horrible things. He hurt for his teammate and he was ashamed for himself.

It is from that place of compassion and shame that our work to counter oppression must begin. It's hard work. I didn't like telling you that story, but it's true and I hope all can learn from it.

Now it's not often that any of us will have an opportunity to make such a grand gesture. It's really not the grand gesture that makes up a life. It is a series of small and seemingly mundane gestures of times that we speak or remain silent. Small gestures that add up. Small gestures that can take great courage.

I was afraid to say anything to my fellow teacher. Afraid she would get mad and defensive, thinking that I was calling her a racist. I have rehearsed what I might have said ever since. Something direct and yet graceful and kind. More importantly, I have tried ever since not to remain silent out of fear. Rarely am I as graceful as I would like to be. Often it is awkward, but I remind myself that it is not as painful as the silence has been.

Thandeka tells us to look inward and soothe the pain and then turn back outward to the world – in all its brokenness, pain and rage – and learn to love anew. To know that the

life blood of generations
who refused to surrender their humanity
in an inhumane world [still]
courses through [our] veins.

In that place, out of love for the world, for ourselves and each other, despair can be transformed to hope.

Let us take on this hard work together. Tenderly, honestly and with small steps. Doing, each of us, what we can. Breaking the silence. Acknowledging the pain and fear. Allowing ourselves, as ever, to let love guide us. So that our gestures, grand and mundane, move us closer to being the wise and righteous men and women we long to be. Move us closer to bringing forth the world of peace and justice we so deeply yearn for.

Amen, Blessed be.