

When Darkness Was A Virtue

A service celebrated at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Grand Traverse on 07 January 2007
Chip Roush

OPENING HYMN

"Full of the faith that the dark past has taught us, full of the hope that the present has brought us..."
James Wheldon Johnson wrote these words for a celebration of Lincoln's birthday in the year 1900. By 1919, the NAACP adopted Johnson's *Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing* as the "Negro National Anthem." In the 1970's, it was often sung immediately after *The Star-Spangled Banner* at events in black communities. In the early 1990's, it was entered into the Congressional Record as the official African American National Hymn.

In celebration and solidarity, let us also lift our voices and sing... Please rise as you are willing and able and join us in singing hymn #149, *Lift Every Voice And Sing*

{singing} Please be seated.

FIRST READING Zora Neale Hurston was born on this date in 1891, in Notasulga, Alabama. Trained as a folklorist and anthropologist she used the actual speech patterns and idioms of the day in the words spoken by the characters in her fiction.

Critics at the time claimed that her dialogue caricatured black culture, and her work did not receive its full due until Alice Walker led a revival of her work in the 1990s.

Hurston was also against communism, unlike most of the other black authors of the mid-20th century, and wrote against the 1954 Supreme Court ruling, *Brown v. Board of Education*, in a letter entitled *Court Order Can't Make the Races Mix*.

In keeping with her anthropologist exactitude, although she might herself use different words today, we have not changed her original, gendered, language in the following quotations:

No man may make another free.

It is hard to apply oneself to study when there is no money to pay for food and lodging. I almost never explain these things when folks are asking me why I don't do this or that.

Sometimes I feel discriminated against, but it does not make me angry. It merely astonishes me. How can any deny themselves the pleasure of my company? It's beyond me. It seems to me that trying to live without friends is like milking a bear to get cream for your morning coffee. It is a whole lot of trouble, and then not worth much after you get it.

Ships at a distance have every man's wish on board. For some they come in with the tide. For others they sail forever on the horizon, never out of sight, never landing, until the Watcher turns his eyes away in resignation, his dreams mocked to death by Time. That is the life of men. Now, women forget all those things they don't want to remember, and remember everything they don't want to forget. The dream is the truth. They then act and do things accordingly.

I am not tragically colored. There is no great sorrow dammed up in my soul, nor lurking behind my eyes. I do not mind at all.

SECOND READING Marcus Valerius Martialis, more commonly known in the U.S. as "Martial," was a Latin poet and satirist. He lived in what is now Spain, in the first century of our common era.

You sold a slave just yesterday for twelve hundred sesterces, Cal; at last the lavish dinner you've long dreamed about is in the pan. Tonight! Fresh mullet, four full pounds!

You know I'll not complain, old pal, about the food. But that's no fish we'll eat tonight; that was a man.

MUSICAL TEXT "I wish you could know what it means to be me; then you'd see and agree everyone should be free." Please rise as you're willing and able and join in hymn #151 *I Wish I Knew How*

{singing} Please be seated.

SERMON How many of you have heard the joke about how many Unitarian Universalists it takes to screw in a lightbulb? We choose not to make a statement either in favor of or against the need for a light bulb. However, if in your own journey, you have found that light bulbs work for you, that is fine. You are invited to write a poem or compose a modern dance about your light bulb. During next Sunday's service, we will explore a number of light bulb traditions, including incandescent, fluorescent, three-way, long-life and tinted; all of which are equally valid paths to luminescence.

How many of you identify with the following "You might be a UU if..." statements?

you think socks are too formal for a Summer service. you know at least 5 ways to say "Happy holidays!"
your idea of a guy's night out is going to a "National Organization of Women" rally. your Easter Brunch includes unleavened bread. the name of your church is longer than your arm. you find yourself rewriting a church survey, rather than taking it. you refer to construction paper as "paper of color."

We poor UUs. We try, really hard, to be open and affirming and sensitive to the needs of our fellow humans. Sometimes we get so caught up in trying to do "the right thing" that we form mental rules about how to treat and speak about others, and our rules take the place of actual, authentic engagement with people. A little political correctness is understandable, but it can relatively easily turn into leftist totalitarianism.

For example, I have heard about some of our earnest and well-meaning youth and young adults walking out of district events because an all-white choir was singing the Black National Anthem without sufficient explanation, or apology, beforehand. I understand their desire for solidarity, and sensitivity, *and* I think it is similar to what happened to Zora Neale Hurston. Her text hasn't changed a bit, since she wrote it in the 1930's and '40s, but the public understanding of her approach has changed from outrage to appreciation.

In the early 1990s, when our grey hymnal was published, we were trying to reach out beyond our mostly-white, mostly-middle-class, culture. The Hymnbook Resources Commission did its best to include a wide range of musical choices. Nowadays, not even fifteen years later, we may cringe a bit at some of their choices. Perhaps the Commission hoped that future, multicultural congregations would appreciate singing African American spirituals. But it would be quite difficult for most of the UU choirs I've heard to sing #154, *No More Auction Block for Me*, with any kind of authenticity.

It's a complicated issue. No, beyond that: it's a dangerous issue. Racism, and oppression of many kinds, are alive and powerful in our world today.

The Jews and the Arabs are fighting, Irish Catholics and Protestants, Indians and Pakistanis, Sunnis and Shiites...

In our own country, just in the last few months, we've heard Michael Richards use the "N" word, Mel Gibson go on an anti-Semitic rant, and Senator Allen call somebody a "macaca."

In Oklahoma, a young woman had the word "Lesbian" carved into her arm; and another was tied to a tree with the word "hellbound" written deeply into her chest. Just yesterday, CNN reported that black workers found a noose hanging at their workplace- put there by their boss! And closer to home, a Michigan State engineering professor sent an anti-Islamic email to the Muslim Student Association, and Nazi leaflets have been found in neighborhoods right here in Traverse City.

We may want to challenge such intolerance; to reduce it or stop it, but we may feel powerless to do much about it, *and* we may fear that we'll somehow do it wrong, and alienate or hurt or anger the very people we were trying to support.

How many of you know what I'm talking about?

When I was in seminary, I served as a student chaplain in a nursing home. Two of my "congregants" were comatose women who shared a room at the far end of the medical wing. I read bible verses to them, once or twice each week, but I never got any response. Once, when I was on my way for my weekly reading, I walked in their room and discovered a half-dozen Nursing Assistants sitting around, watching the television that belonged to one of the comatose women. I was aghast, and I was keenly aware that I was

a white male grad student while these were black women working for an hourly wage. In my role as chaplain to these patients, I certainly had the right to ask the women to leave; in my role as a relatively privileged white man, how dare I interrupt what little ease these generally-hard-working women had found?

I spoke with my supervisor about the encounter, and he found it sufficiently compelling to raise the issue with the rest of the student chaplains. The sole black person in the group thought she'd have no problem shoos the nursing assistants out of the room. The other three students, all white, and all younger than the black woman and myself, hemmed and hawed and sought desperately to not make eye contact.

How many of you have overheard someone say something racist or sexist or otherwise insensitive, and wished for a way to gently-but-effectively challenge and educate the person making the comment?

The poet Martial in our second reading, would not complain that his friend had sold a slave in order to pay for their feast— he evidently thought it was his friend's right to do with his money and his possessions, including his slaves, as he saw fit. Still, Martial did prod the man's conscience, hoping for a better result in the future. My point here is not to make us feel guilty, for not doing more to end racism, or classism or ageism or sexism or ableism or heterosexism or any other form of oppression: my point is to validate our experience that these are dangerous and difficult topics, and they create in us unpleasant, and often competing, feelings.

Further, my hope is to de-sensitize us: that at least among those of us in this congregation, in this sanctuary right now, we might be less afraid to talk about these complicated issues. If we cannot talk about them, in an authentic, honest manner, without the rules of political correctness censoring our speech, then it will be much more difficult to do the real work toward ending the many forms of oppression that plague our world, our society, and our own minds.

Obviously, these issues are far bigger than one sermon can hope to address. Any one of these oppressions could require a whole series of sermons to properly describe the many ways, both evident and subtle, that they affect our lives... and the various theories and approaches that people are using to reduce their effects... and the criticisms that proponents of one model have of the competing models... and the ways that the oppression is evolving as different people in different situations live out the same basic human dynamics in new ways...

So, in the interests of simplicity, without intending any disrespect, and knowing that no one form of oppression can be separated or fully disentangled from the others, this morning I will focus mostly on racism.

Also in the interests of simplicity, I will not speak about racism in other countries, nor about the differences between individual racism and institutional racism, nor about the facts and myths of reverse discrimination, nor the issue of reparations for the descendants of slaves, nor the fact that many models of racism in the US are based on the experience of blacks and whites, which is not at all indicative of Hispanics, Latinas, Latinos, or Asian Americans, nor the whole shameful saga of how the Native Americans have been treated, nor about the "Journey Toward Wholeness" or any other Unitarian Universalist approach to racism, nor the strengths or weaknesses of those approaches, and we certainly won't come up with anything close to *the* *right* *answer* about how to address racism in the 21st century.

We will talk about the facts of racism in the United States, and how it got started, and why it is so powerful and pervasive, and maybe we'll get to the point where we can say "white" or "black" or "race" and our knees won't automatically jerk, and our pulse rates won't immediately skyrocket.

According to research done by the Rev. Dr. Thandeka, racism was not a big deal in the colonial period of our United States. The most significant social division made at that time was about class: there were a very few landowners and a growing number of people who worked the land. The laborers, both white and black, shared a common bond, and even began to spend their leisure time together. This frightened the landowners, who feared that the workers would eventually rise up and overthrow them. To solve this problem, they used the classic "divide-and-conquer" strategy: they created a legal distinction between whites, whom they called 'Christians', and Negroes and Indians. In 1670, the Virginia legislature made it

illegal for free Negroes and Indians to own white slaves; by 1705, it was legal for Negro slaves to be given lashes upon their bare back, but illegal for masters to whip white servants naked.

From this point forward, and with many additions to the legal codes, poor whites perceived themselves differently from their black brothers and sisters, with whom they had so recently felt a kinship. Even though the white laborers became more and more impoverished, when compared to their landowner bosses, they were appeased by their legal status. In effect, they could always say, "well, we have it bad, but at least we're not as bad off as those poor abused black folks." And the likelihood that they would revolt became vanishingly small.

Two hundred years later, this legal, and now cultural, distinction of "whiteness" proved useful once again, as the owners of businesses and factories searched for ways to control their employees. New immigrants were pouring into the United States, looking for work but trying to maintain their traditional identities. Struggling with absenteeism from the various religious holidays and cultural customs, employers held up the ideal of the hard-working white laborer, who quickly shed her or his old identity and behaviors, and assimilated into American "white" culture with its (*newly established*) values of punctuality and perfect attendance.

Wave after wave of immigrants were accused of behaving in "animal-like" and "uncivilized" manners, until they shed their individuality and assumed the new behavioral norms. As members of one culture became more acclimated and acceptable, immigrants from a different country were always available for the newspapers and magazines to degrade. Even *Scientific American* magazine urged deportation for immigrants who did not civilize themselves quickly enough.

The insults did not change, but the people at whom they were hurled did, as the definition of "whiteness" slowly evolved over time. The Irish and the Italians, for example, are rarely accused of being "animals" anymore but they were, at one time. And now people from certain other countries, and those professing other religions, get called "animal-like" by the ignorant and the hateful.

The definition of whiteness has expanded over time, but the definition of blackness, the standard against which whiteness was created, has remained static.

How many of us have ever taken a test that was graded "on the curve"? Instead of setting pre-selected grade levels, like 90-and-above gets an "A" and 80-90 gets a "B" etc., curved grades depend upon how the other test-takers do. If several people do particularly well, then it might take a 95 to get an "A" and a 90 would only earn a "B" Or, if some people do really badly, they help set the curve lower, and even a 75 might get an "A."

On the social ladder of the United States, those with black skin have been defined as the low point on the curve, so that the rest of the people have a better situation, by comparison. Some impoverished white people, with little wealth and less opportunity, still find their self-worth in racism, and say, "at least we're better than they are."

{beat}

Now, all of this may be true *in general*, and there are still many individuals whose experience is different. There are blacks who have thrived in spite of the cultural obstacles and stereotypes. There are whites and blacks who work together, relatively free from prejudice. These generalizations are meant to help educate and orient, they are not meant to take the place of real engagement with other human beings.

A recent study, by scientists at New York University and Harvard University, demonstrated that human beings show greater persistence of learned fear toward members of another race than those of their own race. The researchers administered electric shocks to volunteers who were looking at pictures of white and black males. They measured changes in the volunteers' sweat glands, which indicate a fear response. When the electric shocks were stopped, the volunteers' sweat glands quickly returned to normal functioning when presented with pictures of people of the same race. But their sweat glands continued to act up when they were shown pictures of people of another race.

This finding may not surprise you, but I find another part of the study hopeful. The only thing that was found to affect this fear response was interracial dating. Those who had dated members of the other race

had their sweat glands return to normal more rapidly. The scientists reported, “positive inter-group contact reduces negativity towards outgroups.”

In other words, if we get to know each other, we’ll be less fearful.

It seems to me that everyone has their difficulties. Whatever our race, class, gender, sexuality, age and ability, we all have challenges. And some have it significantly harder than others. The more we can interact as individuals, the less we react based on stereotypes and old fears, the richer our lives will be.

At our last UU General Assembly, the delegates charged each congregation to do “something” involving racism and oppression this year. Some congregations have existing outreach programs with neighborhoods and schools and churches of different racial, cultural, religious or socioeconomic backgrounds. Some do film series, or adult religious education classes. Some ask for help from our UUA “Just Change” teams. For some, just listening to a sermon like this would be more than they’ve done in the past year or two, or five.

I invite us to think about what we might do to explore and act on oppression in our community. And I invite us to learn together. Let’s challenge and support and forgive ourselves and each other as we push the boundaries of these uncomfortable topics.

A lot of us are so relieved to finally find a group of people who are liberally religious, who believe many of the same things we do, that we hate the idea of “rocking the boat,” and possibly losing this like-minded community.

I wish for us that we learn to feel safe enough, and strong enough in our own beliefs, that we can withstand a little rocking.

I’m going to preach about the Grateful Dead, their spirituality and their drug use, next week. I’ve already preached about money, at my very first sermon here, and I’m scheduled to do it again. If you’d like, I’ll preach about sex for Valentine’s Day. And we can talk about race, too.

In my one-on-one conversations, I’m seeing that virtually everyone here has a loving heart, and is doing his or her very best to live with authenticity and compassion. We really are trying to “live into” the big questions of life.

But in groups, we tend to withdraw to “safe” topics, or express only “safe” viewpoints on topics that may be risky. This is understandable, and it is okay, and I hope that we’ll learn to trust each other enough to push the boundaries just a bit.

If you disagree with me, about anything, come tell me. If we disagree with each other, let us name that, with as much tact and respect as we can muster, of course. Let us engage each other. We will all grow stronger and richer for the experience.

So may we be.

CLOSING HYMN Unity-in-diversity is the goal for many process theologies. While honoring and making space for our very real differences, we would be one in a deeper sense. Please rise as you are willing and able and join us in singing #318, *We Would Be One* Please remain standing for our closing words.

{singing}

BENEDICTION I once saw a bumper sticker that read, “the most radical thing we can do is introduce people to one other.” May we, sometime this week, introduce ourselves to someone.

So may we be.