

2005-1-16 Competing Oppressions

Mark Belletini

Opening Words

We are here,
after a long week of gray light, wet skies
and strangely warm breezes,
to worship, to turn toward the truthfulness
which constantly turns toward us,
and asks us for our whole lives. And so we say:

Living our lives with purpose and gratitude, moved by the beauty of the world and claiming justice for all who live upon it, we open our hearts to greater loving, healthier knowledge, deeper compassion and hope of peace...

Children's Story by bell hooks "Skin Again"

Affirmation: #579 The Limits of Tyrants

Hymn #157 (tune: Solidarity)

The Sequence

You, silence,
are the ground on which we build the fragile sandcastles of our every spoken word. You, silence, are quicksand where curses and cockiness and arrogance find their end. You, silence, are the strand of beach we stroll where loneliness turns into solitude, and our small heartbeats join the much vaster heartbeat of tide and wave.

You, silence, are the hand in which the pearl of the universe, grown around the painful grain of human suffering, rests in heartbreaking beauty.

You, silence, are the wide, bright delta into which the river of this prayer fans out, before it flows into the Deep, quiet, dark and lovely, Come, Silence, fill this moment....

silence

Flow, Silence, into shapes formed by the fingers of the heart, images of those whom we love, and whom we struggle with; images of our lives, and their wonderful and strange tangle of all of our relationships! Flow, Silence, into our quiet inward seeing of those people, or into our whisper, as we quietly name these brothers and sisters into our present hour.

naming

Oh Silence, you flow like a river in music too, true undercurrent supporting every beautiful sound. You move between the notes of a song like you move between our hearts...tenderly, and with grace.

Solo/Choral Anthem

Readings:

The First Reading is from the great and neglected Bayard Rustin, from Time on Two Crosses 1987

Bayard Rustin: Born in 1912, in Pennsylvania. Attended Wilberforce University (OH), and other colleges but never got BA. A Quaker, trained by the American Friends Service Committee. Odd jobs. Musician. Involved in race relations for 40 years, with Randolph, Committee of Reconciliation, and Martin Luther King, Jr. Helped protect property of interred Japanese-Americans. Pacifist. Jailed for resistance, three years. Socialist. Openly gay. Free India Com. Studied Gandhi's methods. Advised Independence leaders in Africa. Advised MLK Jr. on Bus Boycott. Organized 1963 March on Washington. Worked for many refugee organizations. Served on dozens of boards. Twelve honorary Doctorates. Died 1987. Survived by partner Walter Naegle.

Back *then* is not *now*. There was not a gay liberation movement; there was tremendous prejudice to gays and I think that Dr. King had every right to raise questions as to whether prejudice to gays would affect a very important movement. I think the likelihood is, had he made me the executive director, it

would have created some problems for him, so he declined. But let me say, in Dr. King's defense, that a few years later, when the question emerged in 1963, he stood behind me 100 percent and my right to continue organizing the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. I think that was, in part, because times were changing, but also because Dr. King felt unhappy with what he had to do earlier.

I think the most important thing I have to say is that black, gay activists should try to build coalitions of people for the elimination of all injustice. Because if we want to do away with the injustice to gay people *it will not be done because we get rid of the injustice to gay people*. It will be done because we are forwarding the effort for the elimination of injustice to all. I say we will win rights for gays, or blacks, or Hispanics, the aged, or women within the context of *whether we are fighting for all*. You have to all combine and fight a head-on battle – in the name of justice and equality – and even that's going to be difficult. But if we let ourselves get separated, we're in trouble.

The Second Reading is from June Jordan's
Technical Difficulties 1994

June Jordan: born in New York City in 1936. Books of poetry include *Kissing God Goodbye: Poems, 1991-1997*, *Haruko/Love Poems* (1994), *Naming Our Destiny* ('89), *Living Room* ('85), *Passion* ('80), and *Things That I Do in the Dark* ('77). Jordan authored children's books, plays, a novel, and *Poetry for the People: A Blueprint for the Revolution* ('95). Political essays include *Affirmative Acts*: ('94) *Political Essays* ('98) and *Technical Difficulties*. Memoir: *Soldier: A Poet's Childhood*, 2000. Jordan received many admired grants and prizes for her work. A bisexual woman, she taught at several Universities, including. California, Berkeley, where she founded *Poetry for the People*. She died of breast cancer June 14, 2002.

And no, I do *not* believe it is blasphemous to compare oppressions of sexuality to oppressions of race and ethnicity: Freedom is indivisible or it is nothing at all besides sloganeering and temporary, short-sighted, and short-lived advancement for a few. Freedom is indivisible, and either we are working for freedom, or you are working for the sake of *your* self-interests and I am working for *mine*.

If you can finally go to the bathroom wherever you find one, but you cannot follow your heart – then how much freedom does any one of us possess?

Or, conversely, if your heart and your honest body can be controlled by the state, or controlled by community taboo, are you not then no more than a slave ruled by outside force?

Freedom is indivisible; the Politics of Sexuality is not some optional “special-interest” concern for serious, progressive folk.

Sermon

Over the last 25 years of my preaching ministry, I’ve noted that *Racism* is one of those words which, almost magically, makes a whole lot of people... *uncomfortable*. As soon as the sound of it is spoken, there is tension. This tension tightens in the American necks of people of every ancestry: European, African, Asian, Native American or mixed. For different reasons. And for some of the same reasons, too.

So I thought I’d begin my sermon on this Martin Luther King weekend by naming the elephant sitting in the room, because elephants tend to take up a whole lot of space. And frankly, I’d like that elephant to leave so I can move freely this morning, and fill this space with a different strength.

So now that I have said that, I guess I clearly have to define this difficult word “racism.”

As far as I am concerned, racism does not begin with feelings of one group of people toward another. It has nothing to do with “not liking” certain people, or just plain bigotry, like many of the Hutus and Tutsis seem to have for each other, or like members of the KKK express toward Catholics and Jews. It has nothing much to do with “colorism,” the romantic or cultural preference for a lighter shade of skin color found among various peoples around the world. It also has little to do with feelings of personal hatred rising from some altercation, or simple fear of the different. These things are often associated

with racism but they are not racism. *Racism has to do with the creation and maintenance, by systems, laws, vocabulary and rhetoric, of power and privilege for one group of people at the cost to, and of, another group of people, usually defined by skin color, but sometimes by culture, as in Germany in the case of the Jews.*

Over the last few years, I have studied a lot about race and racism. I've attended trainings, workshops and the like. These have made amply clear to me for a long time that race, per se, simply does not exist, biologically. There are no significant genetic differences between human beings anywhere on earth. We are all the same species inside and out, especially inside, as our children's story this morning made abundantly clear. And we all share common ancestors in Africa. However, since that is true, it must be that the concept of "race" was entirely created socially and politically. In other words, it has no biological truth to it, but it does have a historical and social truth to it.

And one of the things that has most startled me, and taken me by complete surprise, is how recently racism was crafted. Just a couple hundred years ago. That's all.

Historians can find no evidence that the Egyptians and Babylonians were racist in the modern meaning of the word that I defined. Neither the Greeks nor even the Romans passed policies to oppress particular pan-national ethnic populations. Oh, they employed slavery, true, a hateful and cruel institution. And they seemed to have developed bigotry toward foreigners. But they felt bigotry against, and often enslaved *anyone* who was not of their citizenship. There is no evidence that color ever had say in the matter.

Actually, a number of Roman emperors *were* of African ancestry. And the Christian churches seemed to have operated without any of the structures of modern racism. For example, the tradition of always celebrating Easter on a Sunday, instead of a particular fixed date, was established by an African Pope.

In the Middle Ages, some Moors, that is, black people, were defamed, but not because of their color, but because of their religion, Islam. Such bigotry is based on personal ignorance, not systemic policies. Racism as I have defined it was not a hallmark of the Middle Ages.

No, racism is young, historically. It began here in the Anglo-Colonies. I would actually be bold enough to date its conception. It's 1676, when, in Virginia, a man named Nathaniel Bacon led a rebellion with a rag-tag army of poor people of both African and European ancestry. This rebellion began as a protest against Virginia's policies directed against Native Americans, but turned at last against the leisure class elite in Jamestown and Gloucester County. Bacon and his followers were convinced that members of this aristocracy, by deliberate intent, were keeping them all from a share in the economic life and educational and social opportunities. The governor and the rest of the privileged class actually had to leave the state for their lives, and a large militia had to be brought over from England to suppress the uprising. Bacon himself died of illness soon afterward. The aristocracy, while in their brief exile, then slyly figured out what they had to do to maintain their privileged lives back home. They realized they could pit poor Americans of pan-African ancestry against poor Americans of various European ancestries. One of the ways they did this was to stress visible color differences. The term "white" was *first* used around this time to refer to a particular group of people with mixed European ancestry, mostly Northern European. (Please note, white people are not really white. Clouds and snow are white. And black people are not really black, they are various shades of brown, like the earth or certain kinds of wood. This very observation reveals these words to be polemical, not descriptive.) Now to make this history lesson all the more poignant, you need to know that *before* this uprising in Virginia, *marriage between men and women of different color and ancestry was completely common; blacks could file lawsuits, testify against people of European ancestry in court, bear arms, and own property.* (!) Access to economic, social and educational opportunity was what they wanted. But, not only did they not gain such access, they lost even the amazing privileges they *did* have. Laws were passed. Policies established. These systemic oppressions slowly changed into what I defined earlier as racism. Frederick Douglass, whose bold words we read together earlier, put it this way: "The slaveholders...by encouraging enmity of the poor, laboring white man *against* the blacks, succeeded in making said white man almost as much a slave as the black himself. Both are plundered, by the same plunderers!" Powerful words, those, and I say they hit the mark.

Racism was crafted by incredibly devious methods! For example, when it was noted that African slaves bound for the Colonies usually stopped in the Caribbean islands first, so that the slaves could be schooled in English language and Protestant values (thus arriving educated in the culture), they put a stop to that, pronto. In this way, the slaves arrived knowing only their native African languages and customs. They couldn't speak English. And so their owners called them stupid, thus beginning the calumny that continues to this day in many sectors of American life: "Africans are not as smart as Europeans. They are only good for physical labor." By the time a century had passed, Thomas Jefferson, a man of considerable privilege and power himself, and a slave-owner, had put all this down on paper. Blacks, he mused, were biologically and intellectually inferior, and he considered them the most unattractive of "the races." Now don't imagine Jefferson invented the concept of race...he only helped to twist it and shape it, certainly a sad story to tell about such a brilliant man. The actual concept of race came from Europe. The German philosopher Kant had first used the term to insist that color was important if you wanted to sort humanity into categories. His ideas were twisted by the Americans first, beginning with Jefferson, who considered a black person to be worth only 3/5 of a white person. And then, 200 years later, and building on the pseudo-science of "race" which, embarrassingly, Americans perfected, Mr. Hitler decided that some races weren't even human at all. By racializing the Jews and the Gypsies, by insisting that they were vermin (i.e. not human,) and trying to kill them all, Hitler made the Twentieth Century the most horrific and tragic era in the history of humanity. Race may not exist biologically, but *racializing* certainly exists in society, and has become the largest focus of oppression over the last couple centuries.

But I want to be clear that the origin of racism in the Anglo-Colonies and States served primarily as a way of keeping some people...of a certain color, yes...from having even a small piece of the America Pie. That was, and is now, the main purpose of racism as I have defined it. Martin Luther King Jr. understood this very well when he wrote, "The American racial revolution has been a revolution to 'get in,' rather than to overthrow. *We want a share in the economy, the housing market, the educational system, and social opportunities.*"

Martin Luther King's work would not have been as well honored as it was had it not been for the immense contribution of another man of genius, namely Bayard Rustin. Bayard Rustin studied Gandhi's methods and taught King how to use those methods in the United States. He organized the famous *March on Washington* where King thrilled us all with his Dream.

But Rustin, a black man, was also a gay man. As the title of his collected works movingly attests, he often felt he had spent "time on *two* crosses": the cross built by racism, and the cross built by a perverse and too often religious ignorance of sexual orientation.

Some colleagues put pressure on King to offer no power or prestige to Rustin *because he was gay*. In fact, the fiery Congressman and Pastor, Rev. Adam Clayton Powell called him while he was on a trip to Brazil and told King that he intended to spread gossip suggesting that King and Rustin were having a sexual relationship unless Rustin was sent packing. King was understandably terrified. Rustin, a brilliant and sensitive soul, recognized that King could not appoint him director of the Southern Christian Leadership Council, whose structure was actually drafted by Rustin himself. He was devastated, but he stepped aside.

Years later, when he was reflecting on this issue, Rustin wrote, "Back then is not now. But let me say in Dr. King's defense that a few years later, when the question emerged in 1963, he stood behind me one hundred percent. I think that was because times were changing, but also because Dr. King felt unhappy with what he had to do earlier."

Rustin's words move me, revealing, in King's own words, "the content of his character." He had sympathy for the pressures King lived with. He was not full of self-pity. Part of this was because, as a gay man of that generation, Rustin was lucky. His Quaker family and friends loved and supported him. And, with all that support, he turned out to be a courageous man, open about his sexual orientation long before Stonewall, the uprising in New York City in June of 1968, which marks the symbolic beginning of the gay civil rights movement.

Rustin wrote extensively about both the black and the gay liberation movements. Oh, mind you, he was well aware of the differences. He knew that his skin color assured that he was perceived to be black immediately. He also knew his sexual orientation may not have been as apparent, at least to most people. He also knew the differing histories of racism and anti-gay legislation. He knew the economic and religious differences to be found in each group.

But these differences, of which Rustin was well aware, are some of the reasons why the civil rights movement for blacks, and the civil rights movement for gay, lesbian, bi and transgender people are often set at odds with each other. One minister of color even said he would even join the KKK unless the anti-gay national marriage amendment passes.

But despite Rustin's healthy respect for their differences, Rustin himself saw the two movements as related. He saw *all* oppressions as related. With June Jordan, he agreed that "Freedom is indivisible, and either we are working for freedom together, or you are working for your own self-interests, and I am working for mine." Both Rustin and Jordan knew that to try and weigh pain and humiliation on some sort of competitive scale is ludicrous. *Of course* the history of Jim Crow laws and the history of job discrimination against sexual and gender minorities are not the same history. But, for that matter, the history of women trying to get the vote, the history of the farm-workers, the history of the Chinese railroad workers or the Japanese internment camps, the history of Jews or Italian-Americans being lynched are *also* not the same history. Each have their own details.

But the point is, *there is no good to be found in ANY of these oppressions. There is nothing moral, ethical, right, religious, or spiritual about ever singling any group out and denying them the ordinary access to rights and privileges enjoyed by the majority. Ever. What scoundrel is going to offer me a list of the groups of people that **should** be oppressed by law, language, and social sanction? Which group should not have access to a good education? A safe neighbor-hood? Good healthcare? Who gets to rise to the top, and who must sink to the bottom? Who gets to be first? Who dares?*

You see, I am convinced we can no longer afford to do what the 19th century abolitionists did. The women seeking the vote said they would put their dreams

on hold, and work with the abolitionists to help emancipate the slaves. The abolitionists agreed that once slavery ended, they would help women get the vote. Slavery ended but the abolitionists did nothing. The women had to do it themselves. The abolitionist men did not understand June Jordan's once and future mantra: "Freedom is indivisible", and that by not working for other freedoms at the same time as they were working on their own, they were seriously undermining the very freedoms they already had.

Systemic racism began, I told you, when the privileged elite in Virginia got the unprivileged to compete and fight against each other, not for a piece of the pie... they didn't get any... but just to keep them distracted from their desire to be free. This may be what is happening now when I hear debates as to whether some freedoms are entirely unrelated to any other freedoms.

When loud, cantankerous voices tell me now that there is no reason to work together; and that freedom *is* divisible; and that they have divided it; when someone tells me they have made lists of people who do not deserve access, privilege or civil rights, I remember the history of the Bacon Uprising in Virginia. And I think "Hmm...they're at it again, the powers that be. Trying to keep us divided. Trying to keep us apart. Trying to get us to fight and compete and be nasty to each other, to one-up each other.

Sorry, it's not going to work this time. As Rustin said, "If we let ourselves get separated, we're in trouble." So I will say the message loud and I will say it clear. Let no one be separated. And with all my heart and soul I say "No population has a right to oppress any other population *for any reason whatsoever*. Till the end of time. Freedom *is* indivisible. End of discussion." And end of sermon.

Offering

It's simple really. Don't need to be a genius to figure it out. No living thing thrives without food or air. No living congregation lives without the support which makes it thrive. The opportunity to help support the needs of this, our common spiritual home, is upon us. Those who have pledged are welcome to send their gifts in by another way, but let this moment be, nonetheless, a sign of the generous spirit which marks our religious tradition.

Solidarity Prayer:

No more caves. We left them for a reason.
No more pyramids. Stone tombs are *still* tombs..
No more forums. They've all crumbled,
pulled down by escaping slaves.
No more houses of God from which any
God worthy of the name fled long ago.
No more parceling out of freedom.
No more competition to be free first, so we
can stand on the shoulders of the not yet freed.
No more nations or national leaders
claiming to be buddies with the holy Spirit.
No more boasting, not one word, unless everyone can boast that the struggle is
over; the dream, the glorious, splendid sacred dream,
is fulfilled at last. Let slavery to protected
privilege be ended. Let the table be set for all.
This is my prayer this morning, O Truth.
Amen.

Hymn: # 150 All whose boast it is....