

2006-1-15 Whiteness and Sacrifice
Mark Belletini

Greeting
Centering
Opening

We are here,
after a week woven of grey sky and bright sun,
to consider the deep places of our lives
and to question the superficial,
so we might worship truthfully.

And so, gathered in community, we say:

Mindful of the responsibility our freedom presses into us, blest by the beauty of the world, and drawn by a vision of a community known for its honesty, generosity, depth, love, and justice-work, we focus our time together by the kindling of light.

Kindling

Praising: 123 Spirit of Life

Ingathering: *Sweet Smell of Roses*
A story about children marching with Dr. King

Greeting (the children leave for classes
with music, then announcements and
rising to greet each other)

Affirming:

We who must keep the church going, and keep it alive, have certain basic guidelines to follow...to preach good news to the poor, to heal the broken-hearted, to set at liberty those who are captives. You see, the church is not a social club. The church is not an entertainment center. The church has a purpose. The church is dealing with ultimate concern. Sunday after Sunday, week after week.

(from 1966 sermon given by Dr. King at Ebenezer Baptist Church)

Sequence

Breathing in. Breathing out.
The pulse of life. Amen. Amen.
The sun in the east. The sun in the west.
The pulse of life. Amen. Amen.
The sun at high noon. The moon at midnight.
The pulse of life. Amen. Amen.
The opening of the eyes. The closing of the eyes.
The pulse of life. Amen. Amen.

The heart contracts. The heart expands.
The pulse of life. Amen. Amen.
The mind worries. The mind's at peace.
The pulse of life. Amen. Amen.
The imagination opens. The imagination closes.
The pulse of life. Amen. Amen.
Joy and sorrow. Sorrow and joy.
The pulse of life. Amen. Amen.
Hello. Goodbye. Goodbye. Hello.
The moment is now. And the moment is now.
And now is Amen. And now is Amen.

the great silence

The pulse of life. Near and far.
The pulse of life. Amen. Amen.
The pulse of life. Our friends, our loves.
The pulse of life. Their names. Our hearts.
The pulse of life. Their names. Our loss.
The pulse of life. Their names. Our joys.

the naming

The pulse of life. Amen. Amen.
The song of life. The song of loss.
The song of heart. The song of truth.

Choral Anthems

Readings

The First Reading is the beginning of a lecture I heard at General Assembly last June. For those who are visitors or new to this church, General Assembly or GA is the annual conference of all the Unitarian Universalist congregations in the United States. The lecture was given by a Harvard student, Ian White Maher. For me, it was the single best thing that happened at GA. More about this in the sermon. The lecture was called by the powerful title "Ritual, Human Sacrifice and the Maintenance of White Identity."

The genesis of this project was seeded in classes I led for men convicted of battering their partners or children. The courts assigned these men to me and a co-worker, for forty weeks, with the hope of changing their abusive patterns: physical, emotional, psychological, sexual. Our goal was not to get the men to admit that abuse was wrong; many would admit this within the first few classes. But rather, it was to change the belief systems these men *held* about men and women. It is their belief system of male superiority and female inferiority that provided the justification for their behavior. The abusive behavior is an external manifestation of the belief system.

It is in this vein of understanding that I hope we think about racism, whiteness, white-superiority. That is, most white people will very quickly admit that racism is bad, or even that they have engaged in, hopefully small, external manifestations of racism. While the manifestation of racism is what we demonize or even criminalize, it is the belief system of white superiority that guides identity and action and it is here that we must probe.

This is a lecture on the use of ritual sacrifice as an instrument for creating a cohesive and unified body of people called “white.” But ultimately, I don’t want to get fixated on the mechanics of the ritual behavior, but rather see it as an external manifestation of a belief system, the belief system of white superiority.

The Second Reading comes from the remarkable book “*Learning to Be White*” by my colleague and friend, Thandeka.

I had recently moved to Massachusetts to teach at a local college. Several weeks after arriving on campus, I had lunch with a member of the college staff. My luncheon partner, a fifth generation Smith College graduate with a New England genealogy older the state, wanting to get to know me, asked what it felt like to be black.

I was not offended by her query. Her face was open; her eyes were friendly and engaged. She simply believed that *nothing* from her own background or experience could help her understand me. I knew better. I had been assigned a race by America’s pervasive socialization process, and so had she. I thus believed that if she drew upon her own experience of being “raced,” she might then be able to see what we had in common. But how could I make her *conscious* of the racialization process to which her own euro-American community had subjected her? Searching for an answer to this question, I invented the Race Game and invited her to play it for a week.

The Race Game, as my luncheon partner very quickly discovered, had only one rule. For the next seven days, she must use the descriptive term *white* whenever she mentioned the name of one of her Euro-American cohorts. She must say, for instance, “my white husband, Phil,” or “my white friend Julie,” or “my lovely white child Jackie.”...I guaranteed her that if she did this for a week, and then met me for lunch, I could answer her question using terms she would understand. We never had lunch together again. Apparently my suggestion had made her uncomfortable.

African Americans have learned to use a racial language to describe themselves and others. Euro-Americans also have learned a pervasive racial language. But in their racial lexicon, their own racial group becomes the great unsaid. I wanted my luncheon partner to give voice to her whiteness as the racial unsaid in her life. By consciously referring to this unvoiced color, she would become aware of what it feels like to take on, and maintain, a racial identity in America.

Sermon

I am sure that almost everyone in this room has heard, or read, the famous words uttered by the amazing man this weekend celebrates. On August 28, 1963, when I was just 14 years old, Martin Luther King, in Washington DC, uttered these words in his famous “I Have A Dream” speech:

“Many of our white brothers (and sisters), as evidenced by their presence here today, have come to realize that their destiny is tied up with our destiny, and their freedom is inextricably bound to our freedom.

We cannot walk alone. And as we walk, we must make the pledge that we shall march ahead. We cannot turn back.

I have a dream that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream today.”

Those are powerful words. King says, quite correctly, I think, that the very destiny, and freedom, of white and black people must be one and the same. Always, but always, we are all in this together.

“Not by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.”

Again. Powerful words. But what is the color of their skin?

The biologists who have studied skin color are clear that since humanity seems to have started off in Africa, near the equator where the sun is high overhead, all human beings were dark with melanin once. The substance called melanin in our skins protects us from ultraviolet radiation from the sun. In lands closer to the equator, skin is darker because the evolutionary process called natural selection allowed darker skinned human beings to thrive.

However, when human beings began migrating, and then living, far away from the equator, natural selection allowed lighter-skinned folks to thrive, since their paler skin enabled the highly slanted rays of the sun to help their bodies produce vitamin D, a necessary vitamin for digestive purposes. Thus, over time, people in the far north became “white.” Or did they?

My former partner-in-life, and friend, Phil Porter (who wrote the song Gathered Here in the *Mystery of the Hour*, which we sometimes sing here on Sundays), wrote the following words in his latest book. In his tiny essay “The color of their skin,” Phil wrote:

“Black, white, red....who ever thought up that system? Obviously not a gay man.

Here is the new system for dividing people according to skin color:

Mocha, butternut, beige, cinnamon, midnight, ecru, ebony, cream, taupe, coffee, rose, parchment, melon, ochre, seashell, terra cotta, olive, ginger, taro, beechwood, tan, bone, sandstone, caramel, golden, peach, cloud, oak, burnt umber,

OK. Everyone get organized. Into your groups!”

Of course, though his approach is meant to amuse as well as teach, Phil is technically quite correct in his assertion. No one, even an albino, is *really* white, like fresh-falling snow. No one, even the darkest citizen of the Solomon Islands, is really black, like the pupil in our eye.

Yet those are the exact words by which we identify each other in US culture. And this metaphorical dishonesty should tell us plenty right there at the start. Except, as Thandeka is quick to point out, most of us who are white are far more likely to use the word “black” than we are to use the word “white.” I don’t say “my white friend Kevin is coming to visit me.” I just say Kevin. But I might say, “You know who I’m talking about, that guy Lamont, the black guy over there?”

Whiteness has just become “humanity in general.” White neighborhoods are not really white, just neighborhoods. White music is not really white, just music. But no one winces much when someone says “black neighborhood, or when certain kinds of music are set aside as “black music.”

I’ve been around when Thandeka asks people to play “the Race Game.” It’s really amazing. As soon as she suggests it, the discomfort in the room gets so thick you could cut it into bricks and build a pyramid out of it. She asked me to do it one time, and I felt the same way. But I said to myself, “OK. It will feel strange, sure. But how difficult can it be, really?”

Plenty difficult, I found out. Plenty. All of a sudden, just as she predicted, I discovered that I, with my raw umber beige skin, was just as “racialized” as she is with her burnt sienna-chocolate skin. Except that for

me it felt like news.

Because, you see, I know my basic biology. I am well aware that there are no significant differences between human beings at all. We are all, biologically, *exactly the same*, except for a few utterly external and utterly irrelevant features, like eye-color, skin-color and hair-color.

Thus, to be “racialized” is to be arbitrarily straight-jacketed into a category that doesn’t even exist, biologically.

It was a profound learning experience, realizing that my Northern Italian raw umber-beige skin, inherited from my Roman and Etruscan ancestors two thousand years ago, is actually “white” here in the United States.

And of course, I know more than basic biology. I know my history too. Over the years, I’ve learned of the other, more political and economic sources of this racialization business. It was here in the States (since there was no racialization in ancient Rome or even in Europe until Immanuel Kant invented the foolish idea), that racialization was born. I’ve studied about the Baker Rebellion in 17th century Virginia, which I talked about last year on this day. I’ve read the personal writings of that powerful but decidedly bigoted mind, Thomas Jefferson. I’ve studied the economic reality of American slavery, which required cheap labor to maximize profits, comparable to our attitude today in employing Chinese workers at less than minimum wage to make our auto-parts.

And little by little, I came to understand how a *twisted system of belief* turned beige, taupe, ecru, chocolate and cinnamon human beings into the non-biological groups called white and black, red and yellow...with the exception that white people often don’t know they’re white.

I learned I was white slowly and without words. I could give you ten examples or more from my childhood. But that’s for another sermon.

Maybe next year.

But this year, I want to explore the social methods used to maintain this division of equal human beings of *many* colors, hues, shades and tones into the non-biological, but very *real* social categories of black and white especially.

Now I will take you to General Assembly in Fort Worth. There were only about fifty people at the lecture, sitting scattered in a hotel meeting room that could have handled 250 easily. Ian White Maher, the remarkable man who was delivering a paper he had written, was speaking less from the text that morning than from his mind and heart much of the time. He seemed totally present to us all, and at ease in front of folks.

The audience consisted of Unitarian Universalists, both black and white, with Asians, Native Americans, Latinos and Islanders in the mix as well. But primarily I notice there were a lot fewer white people than black people.

Referring to the work of the French anthro-pologist René Girard, whom I had read many years earlier, and also to the American anthropologist Mary Douglas, Ian Maher deftly created a sense of the whole dire and disgusting history of human sacrifice here in the West. Whether practiced by the Carthaginians, or the Aztecs, or the Canaanites; whether tied to the aims of the military elite, as in Aztec practice, or the maintenance of religious and regal hierarchies in Near Eastern practice, the practice was always surrounded by strict ritual, and claimed for itself cosmic connection. For example, to sacrifice humans,

adult or children, in ancient Aztec practice, was to keep the sun coming up daily and the stars in their places.

Ian Maher rehearsed then the history of the development of racialization in this country. He mentioned pre-Revolutionary days in Virginia when anybody of any color could own land or marry whom they wished (provided it was different sexes, of course). Then, as potential equality of economic and social status threatened the elite, Maher outlined the slow and deliberate creation of both the white and black races...which from that time on were never to mix. And the blacks could only marry blacks, and could not own land all of a sudden. Soon the original, and quite pale indentured servants, all of European origin, who worked the cotton fields, were replaced by men and women of African origin, whom Jefferson himself believed to be barely human and not capable of "white" achievements.

Now of course, this false division was questioned at the time. Not just by people in the North, but in the South too. Many educated folks realized that the whole false anthropology of a divided human race was economically motivated, and that hatred can grow from a wallet like seeds can grow from the soil.

So, as in ancient times, a victim for human sacrifice was chosen to keep the cosmic black-white split in place. Not consciously, of course. Most social movements, religious and secular, are far more unconscious than deliberate. But just as in ancient times, the victim for sacrifice had to be precious, yet dispensable. Children were often the source in ancient times. Or conquered warriors from an enemy nation. In our nation it was young black men.

And so began the ubiquitous American custom of lynching. If any young black man questioned the boundaries separating white from black, he was sacrificed with no less ritual than accompanied the human sacrifices of earlier eras. This practice, often blest by Bible-waving preachers and local magistrates, lasted for many, many decades. The numbers put to death every year seem quite proportionate to the numbers of victims in ancient cultures which practiced human sacrifice. One Cincinnati anthropologist, in his 1992 book *Festival of Violence*, supports Maher's assertion thoroughly. The author, Dr. Tolnay, wrote:

"Lynching... had three entwined functions: *first*, to maintain social order over the black population through terrorism; *second*, to suppress or eliminate black competitors for economic, political, or social rewards; *third*, to stabilize the white class structure and preserve the privileged status of the white aristocracy." (18-19).

But as the civil rights movement, culminating in Dr. King's work, slowly uncovered the power and privilege maintained by this terrible violence, the number of lynchings went down. Drastically.

But this does not mean that the practice of ritual sacrifice stopped. It was relatively quickly transformed from the notion of a quick death on a tree to a slow death of the spirit locked away in a cell, or tied up in the knotty tangle of the justice system. Check out, if you want to, on your own computers and libraries, the drastic leap in numbers of young black men who were incarcerated for often victimless crimes as soon as the civil rights movement exposed lynching for what it was. The number of young black men incarcerated went up so much, and so quickly, that new prisons "had" to be built right away. So what happened here is that the ancient ritualized practice of human sacrifice, reinterpreted by the ritualized lynching movement, was then slyly translated into the incarceration movement, a form of slow-motion destruction of life. So that if you are a young African American man in our society, say, in your twenties, you have a one in three chance of being incarcerated. And I am talking about this Common Year, the year 2006.

And the purpose of such a culture of incarceration is not any different, Maher suggests, than the culture of lynching. It's to maintain boundaries, territories, privileges, status, and the settledness of human beings who are beige and sienna instead of cinnamon and chocolate.

And just as husbands who beat their wives believe deeply in the destined inferiority of women, so the culture that supports and maintains the culture of incarceration does so on the foundation of a belief system that accepts the false labels of "white" and "black" as *biological* categories.

After the lecture, a number of us stayed in the room, both stunned and empowered by the powerful ideas. A pretty deep conversation began among five of us, all strangers to each other, and continued for an hour, until one fellow suggested that we all go out and have lunch together and continue the connection. We kept talking at a pretty deep level until late in the afternoon. Oh, we laughed too, and spoke of other aspects of our lives (I remember some conversation about dancing), but it was this whole notion of ritual sacrifice and race in the United States that got us going.

I suppose some folks may dismiss the whole idea raised in the lecture as grandiose. After all, some will surely say, we are not Aztecs here, or Carthaginians, killing children on high altars with religious clarity. And others may find the whole idea disturbing in a negative sense...it's too depressing, this talk of lynching and the underbelly of American history. Is there no way you can say such things in a positive way, so we can leave on a lighter note, with hope and our fires kindled?

Well. Fine. I'll do that in fact. But what I first want you to hear is that these ideas are worthy of discussing at a very deep level, with all aspects of the human soul aware and alert during the talks. And Thandeka's Race Game is worthy of playing, too. I promise you, you will learn a lot. The questions are worthy of asking. And every suspicion is worth raising. The details are worthy of knowing.

But King was right too. The sordid past, the power and privilege contrasted with human degradation is powerful, but more powerful is to have a redeeming dream, and to live one's life empowered by that dream.

A dream where we can imagine at last a world where we are judged, not by the color of our skin, whatever that may be, but by the content of our character; a world where violence is never the first answer, but ever held in the embrace of questioning; a world where children are valued, women and men are alive with love, and where "all God's children" have a place at the table. A dream of equality, of equity, of freedom. A dream of peace for all members of the one and only human race. I've offered you tough ideas this morning. I admit it. But now, I am asking you in response to dream the glad dream...and to find ways every day to make it real.

Offering:

This time is offered for those who wish to pay their pledges, or make a gift. It is a time of taking seriously the responsibilities generated by an institution which shelters our visions, our social justice planning, our grieving, our rejoicing, our relationships. The offering will now be given and received, for all of us together make the circle which now we support.

Litany (words by King and Belletini)

We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in single garment of destiny.

A single garment of destiny, a coat of many colors, a dream coat.

We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in single garment of destiny.

Inescapable, meaning any attempt to escape it is a form of denial and a commitment to futility.

We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in single garment of destiny.

Network, meaning different minds, different hearts, different cultures, but all part of the whole, and all tied to each other by a ligament that is an emblem of ultimate concern, a power greater than ourselves.

We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in single garment of destiny.

Oh Love, we cannot escape from you either. So embrace us this day. Amen.

Singing #134 Our World is One World

Blessing