

2008-1-20 MLK

Opening Words

We are here
to lift our voices and sing,
indeed, to make of our lives a song,
each person a note
harmonizing with their sisters and brothers
to overcome the sad noise of injustice. So,

Mindful that a growing vision of a just world calls us together, that a community of commitment, courage and care sustains us, and that a life transformed by depth of spirit may illumine our way, we have kindled this light as the sign of our circle of life and love.

Sequence

Every day is different from the day before.
Every night is different from the night before.
Every day the body gives up its cells.
Every night, the body grows new cells.
Every day the clouds change: they seem to boil
or spread like batter, or fade or thicken.
Every day, memories are created,
memories are forgotten.
Every day, change, movement, becoming.
Becoming. Every moment, coming to be.
I say, there are no human beings anywhere,
only human becomings.
I say I am not finished, I'm only beginning.
I say that families, congregations,
cities, and the world are not frozen
in ice, fixed in amber, nailed down for good.
I say that everything rises and sinks,
circles and soars,
every day we are saying goodbye,
every day we are saying hello.
I say, even the very silence becomes, moves and changes. Let that silence now flow....

Silence

I say there are many worlds in the one world, many eras in every moment, many windows in our hearts where we open up to everything outside our heart. Imagining the images of those we love, those we miss, those with whom we struggle, those we honor, or saying their names in our hearts, or in the common air, let us move through this moment with open hearts, thankful for our lives.

Naming

I say, every piece of music has many notes, not one. And these notes move along the lines of time and change as we do, for there is no melody without change, as there is no humanity without becoming, and there is no justice without growth.

Readings:

The First Reading comes from Beverly Daniel Tatum's phenomenal 1997 book, which, if I could, I would make required reading for everyone in the church, heck, everyone I know. It's called "Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?"

Many people use the terms *prejudice* and *racism* interchangeably. I do not, and I think it is important to make a distinction. Author David Wellman argues convincingly that limiting our understanding of racism to prejudice does not offer a sufficient explanation for the persistence of racism. He defines racism as a "system of advantage based on race." In illustrating this definition, he provides example after example of how Whites defend their racial advantage –access to better schools, housing, jobs – even when they do not embrace overtly prejudicial thinking. Racism cannot be fully explained as an expression of prejudice alone.

This definition of racism is useful because it allows us to see that racism, like other forms of oppression, is not only a personal ideology based on racial prejudice, but a *system* involving cultural messages and institutional policies and practices as well as the beliefs and actions of individuals. In the context of the United States, this system clearly operates to the advantage of Whites and to the disadvantage of people of color. Another related definition of racism, commonly used by antiracist educators, is "prejudice plus power."

Peggy McIntosh, a White feminist scholar, identified a long list of societal privileges that she received simply because she was White. She did not ask for them, and it is important to note that she hadn't always noticed that she was receiving them. They included major and minor advantages. Of course she enjoyed greater access to jobs and housing. But she also was able to shop in department stores without being followed by suspicious salespeople, and could always find appropriate hair care products and makeup in any drugstore. She could also be late for meetings, and talk with her mouth full, fairly confident that these behaviors would not be attributed to the fact that she was White. She could express an opinion in a meeting, or in print, and not have it labeled the "White" viewpoint. In other words, she was more often than not viewed as an individual, rather than as a member of a racial group.

My oldest son, Jonathan, was enrolled in a day care center where he was the only Black child in his class. One day, as we drove home Jonathan said, "Eddie says my skin is brown because I drink too much chocolate milk. Is that true?" Eddie was a White three-year-old in Jonathan's class who had observed a physical difference and was now searching for an explanation.

"No," I replied, "your skin is brown because you have something in your skin called melanin. Melanin is very important because it helps protect your skin from the sun.

Everybody has melanin, you know. But some people have more than others. At your school, you are the kid with the most!"

In fact, Eddie's question, "Is your skin brown because you drink too much chocolate milk?" represented a good attempt to make sense of a curious phenomenon that he was observing. All the kids in the class had light skin except for Jonathan. Why was Jonathan's skin different? It didn't seem to be dirt – Jonathan washed his hands before lunch like all the other children did, and there was no change. He did often have chocolate milk in his lunch box – maybe that was it. Eddie's reasoning was first-rate for a three-year-old.

The Second Reading comes from a recently published essay written by colleague David Bumbaugh, who now teaches at Meadville Lombard School in Chicago. It's called Cherish the Dream and it was just published this year.

I suppose that every American of my generation has a "Dr. King" story. Here is mine. I had graduated from seminary in 1964 with a clear idea of my ministry. I spent my time reading, reflecting and crafting sermons.

Then came the day that Martin Luther King sent out his invitation to clergy to come to Selma, Alabama. Now, I did not for a moment believe he meant me. I had grown up in a community in which we had been carefully taught to avoid attracting attention to ourselves. It never occurred to me that an invitation to the clergy to come to Selma meant me, too. I did not go.

Then came the terrible news that James Reeb, one of our Unitarian Universalist ministers who did respond to that call, had been clubbed to death in the streets of Selma. Another call went out. Once more, it never occurred to me that I was included.

The next Sunday, two members of my congregation asked if I was going to Alabama. I must have looked very confused. I explained that we had a small child, and another child on the way, and I really did not have the money to spend on a plane ticket, and.... They interrupted my ramblings to say, "We have the plane ticket; will you use it?" And so I went to Alabama.

The years have passed. I have grown older and watched what has happened to the image of Martin Luther King, Jr. First we made him a hero. Then, we softened his message so that it would not challenge us in any fundamental way. Gone is his concern about the morality of an economic system in which the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. Gone is his challenge to examine our cultural life. And then, having made him a hero, we have proceeded to find his feet of clay. We poke each other in the ribs and suggest that he was really a womanizer. We point out that he was less than meticulous in crediting his sources in writing his thesis. After a while, we have demythologized and anesthetized his legacy so that we need no longer feel or hear the challenge of his life and work.

I tell you, as one who was there on the fringes of this history, that all the critiques may well be true. Martin Luther King, Jr. was, like all human beings, flawed and imperfect. He was a creature of his times. His reach often exceeded his grasp. But despite this, or

perhaps because of it, he remains one of the few true heroes. He was a man who rose above his limitations. He taught me what it means to live a life of integrity and courage.

From him I learned that the invitation to be engaged in the life of the world, in the issues of the day, in the challenges of the times, is *always* addressed to me.

Sermon

Like David Bumbaugh, and like many of us in this room, I can remember where I was when the Rev. Dr. King was killed. I was a first year student at Oakland University in Rochester, Michigan. The April sun was just setting. I was coming out of the library into the blue light of evening, after studying for a final the next day.

Someone, I don't remember who, came running up and said, "Oh boy, there's gonna be trouble tonight in the city!" (meaning Motown, meaning Detroit). "Why? What's going on?" I asked.

"Someone just killed that guy, you know, the guy who went to Washington with all those people. It's gonna be worse than it was last year, I tell you. (He was referring to the Detroit riots, or uprising, of 1967, which tore the city apart.)

"Oh, that guy," I said, "That's *awful*! But hey, do you *really* think there's gonna be riots?"

"Well, I dunno, for real," the guy mused. "To tell the truth, I don't know much about what he's all about, but it sure is gonna shake things up. Almost as bad as when Kennedy was shot."

Well, sad to say, that pretty much summed up all I knew about King when I was 19. Civil rights? How about pulling an all-nighter to pass my French finals instead. A march? How about finding a good summer job to earn enough to pay my tuition. And, besides, it wasn't really my problem anyway, I thought. After all, I wasn't some fool racist down in Selma wearing a pillow-case over my head.

"But, time has passed," summarizes David Bumbaugh with notable economy. "That guy," namely Rev. King, "was turned into a hero." Then little by little - Rev. Bumbaugh is right about this - his radical understanding of how economics and war are intimately tied up with the racialization of America, was almost totally lost.

Racism itself was trivialized into mere prejudice, something which perhaps a little scolding from a wise parent or teacher could erase in a trice. And, yes, some folks indeed found ways to snicker at Dr. King, tossing him away as both a cheat and womanizer. They found his "feet of clay."

But, you know, time has passed for me, too. And I cannot think of anything in my experience these last 30 years that undercuts what Dr. Tatum asserts and what I totally believe:

Many people use the terms *prejudice* and *racism* interchangeably. I do not, and I think it is important to make a distinction. Author David Wellman argues

convincingly that limiting our understanding of racism to prejudice does not offer a sufficient explanation for the *persistence* of racism. Instead, he defines racism as a “system of advantage based on race.” Or as others say: “Power *plus* prejudice.”

I think that when Dr. Tatum quotes Peggy McIntosh, she describes with feminine references what I could describe using masculine ones. Peggy McIntosh “did not ask for” any advantages, “and it is important to note that *she hadn’t always noticed that she was receiving them.*” They included, you will remember, “greater access to jobs and housing.” But she also was able “to shop in department stores without being followed by suspicious salespeople, and could always find appropriate hair care products and makeup in any drugstore. She could also be late for meetings, and talk with her mouth full, fairly confident that these behaviors would not be attributed to the fact that she was White. She could express an opinion in a meeting or in print and not have it labeled the “White” viewpoint. In other words, she was more often than not viewed as an individual, rather than as a member of a racial group.” Exactly. I don’t usually go around thinking of myself as a member of the white race. I think of myself as an individual. A person. If I claim any shared cultural identity, it’s usually my Italian heritage. But, my God, especially as a Unitarian Universalist, I announce my individuality first and foremost. But the point Peggy McIntosh is making, I think, when “white” people associate that word “race” with anything, they usually associate it with brown skin tones, or saffron skin tones, or chocolate skin tones, *not* their own paler skin tones. White people tend to think of themselves as just people...not people with color. And this association is *systemically* taught to all of us who have very little melanin in our skins. And to those who have plenty ... and every variation in between ... in this blended era.

We who live in the United States (and by this “we,” I mean blacks, whites, Asians, native Americans, Latinos etc) learned that white is *normal* and black is a *race* when we were children. Tatum tells that story about her son’s friend Eddie and the chocolate milk. And she says, when three-year-old Eddie reasoned about why one child had brown skin and the others paler skin, it *was* pretty fine reasoning for a three-year-old. Children naturally and wisely want to figure things out about perceived differences.

When I was just a year older than her son Jonathan and his friend Eddie, that is, when I was four, my mother took me downtown, on the now-barely-remembered streetcar system, to get my eyes examined. She promised me that, if I was well behaved when the ophthalmologist dilated my eyes, she would buy me a hot dog for lunch, the hot dog being the only typical “American food” I enjoyed eating as a little Italian American kid. Well, I survived the dilation and all the brightness, and my mother kept her promise. But when the woman behind the hot dog cart handed me the hot dog all covered with mustard and relish, I refused to eat it. Why?

Because I had never seen an African American person before, up close. And I saw that her palms were lighter than the back of her hands. And I assumed she had mud of some kind on her hands, mud like I used to get on me as a child. And so I was afraid to get mud in my lunch. I was using the reason of a four-year-old to explain what my sight showed me. My mother told me I was just “silly,” instead of saying anything about melanin, of course, like Jonathan’s mother. And you know, I really don’t remember if I ate the hot dog or not.

But, listen, my mother simply would not have known in those days what we know now... which is that, since our ancestors *all* came out of central Africa before migrating around the world, our most remote ancestors were *all* black once. That melanin protected us from the bright light of the sun drying up the last ice age. As some of us moved north, we slowly lost the melanin and became paler, since pale skin allowed the slanted and weaker sunlight of the northern climates to enter our skin and generate necessary Vitamin D. In Africa, the rivers and lakes, then full and thriving, had plenty of fish, which generated that same Vitamin D. But despite that one simple difference, based on migration more than biology per se, there really is no such thing as “race” biologically. Things like skin color or hair color are merely superficial...I mean, obviously, since no one goes around talking about a “race” of redheads, do they? It was a European named Francois Bernier who first used the word race to divide human beings into distinct types back in 1684. Not so long ago. But we know that all human beings, of whatever color, are genetically related to all other human beings. Period. No exceptions.

The *idea* of “race” however, is real. It was constructed over a few hundred years here in the United States as a way of claiming normalcy, advantage and privilege for one group of people, while denying it to others, markedly those with more melanin in their skin. Both Blackness and Whiteness are entirely invented social categories, created, as Dr. King would preach, to establish economic advantages for some, disadvantages for others. The two words are obviously not even the slightest bit descriptive. Even famous liberals like Thomas Jefferson and famous scientists like Louis Agassiz participated in the racializing of the United States, and to read about its origins is simply painful.

But although such academic education about the story of racism is important, today it’s far *more* important that people of whatever melanin count freely begin to tell their own life stories in regards to this issue. However, studies have shown that African Americans, Asian Americans and Native Americans talk about this subject far more than Euro-Americans do. *Far* more. Time for so-called White people, of all ages and ethnicities, to get on the band wagon. The good news is that many already have. The younger members of our Unitarian Universalist congregations, no matter their ancestry, have also led the way and engaged with this subject with studied deliberation at their “cons” (weekend retreats) and other venues. Thus, any movement to create a society where there is no systematic advantages for some, and clear disadvantages for others, must begin with all people, of whatever color, telling their own stories, having their own conversations.

Ever thought about inviting a group of friends over to your house for dinner and conversation about race? Ever thought of helping this congregation to take a course of self-examination and study on these issues? Ever thought of looking at aspects of your life and thought through an anti-racist lens? Ever thought about what to do next? If not, it’s time. Not because any “white person” in this room goes around with a pillow-case on his or her head. But because no matter our color, this issue calls to us all. My 19-year-old self finally grew up and learned that. And no matter that we are, every one of us, flawed creatures. All of us. So was Martin Luther King, as Bumbaugh said. Big deal. That didn’t hold him back. Anyway, you and I know that anyone waiting for the perfect time, the perfect motive, the perfect character, is pretty ridiculous anyway.

For David Bumbaugh is certainly right about this too...when the call goes out to face this issue, to take it seriously, make it central, and really make a difference, it comes to us. Each of us. And I tell you truly, it calls us each by name.

Offertory

No walls without a foundation.
No earth without sky.
No thirst when there is water.
No defeat when there is hope.
No joy without facing reality first.
No church without generosity from
those who agree to be a congregation.
The offering of gifts in support of this congregation will now be received.

Prayer

We shall overcome, Love,
starting with ourselves.
We shall overcome, Love,
starting with ourselves.
We shall overcome, Love,
starting with ourselves.
Oh, may we have the strength
to believe with great confidence
that everything begins
when we start with ourselves.