Accountability to Our Past

October 20, 2013
Rev. Dr. Mark Belletini

Gathering, Greeting, Centering, Kindling, Opening:
We are here,
as autumn leaves slowly claim their color,
to worship, to celebrate life in all of its fullness:
the deeply personal, the social, the ethical.
This we do with fresh awareness, music, silence
and stories, for all of these bear truth along.

And so, bearing witness *both* to our world as it is, *and* as Love can imagine it, we would claim that vision of a just world in our own lives. And because of a growing sense of kinship with all beings, inviting our compassion, we begin in this celebration to engage our mission with our whole lives: body, mind, and heart.

Singing #1018 vs. 1 and 2

Ingathering

Sweet Clara lived 150 years ago in the State of Virginia. She lived at a place called North Farm. She was not part of the family that lived at North Farm, however, she was what was called a slave. The family at North Farm said that they owned her, like you might own a bicycle.

One day, the family at North Farm sent her to a place called Home Plantation, because they needed more people to work in the cotton fields. Clara cried and cried, because her mother still lived back at North Farm. "I'll get back to see momma someday," she would say over and over.

Eventually, another slave, a woman who told Clara to call her Aunt Rachel, taught her to sew in the evenings when they came in from the fields. Clara was hurting all over from the hard work in the sun, and her fingers were crooked from picking the cotton, but aunt Rachel didn't let that be an excuse, and taught her to sew tight and clean. Day after day she taught Clara, until one day she said, "Tomorrow I am going to take you to the Big House, where they can see how good you are at sewing. Clara was scared, but she loved the bright colors in the house. When the missus of the family in the Big House asked to see Clara's work, she said, "Oh, you are very good. From now on, I want you up here every day. There are clothes to repair, and a quilt to make for my daughter's wedding."

So every day from that time on, Clara went up to the Big House. There she would hear about slaves running away. She heard the word Canada for the first time. "You can be free up there," someone told her. "But it's hard to run away, because there are no maps, and the swamp will swallow you."

"What's a map?" Clara asked her friend Jack. "A map is a picture of the ground...the fields, the rivers, the forests, the roads," answered her friend Jack.

For weeks, Clara would hear about what was outside the edge of Home Plantation, the roads, the bridges, the rivers, especially the Ohio River, which was big and wide. On the other side you could get to Canada pretty easy. So she started drawing maps of the area in the sand. Then one day, it occurred to her that rain would wash away the sand, but it would not wash away a quilt. The one she was working on at the Big House as a model for the very big quilt she was going to make for the wedding. So she came up with patterns to represent the river-crossings, the fields, the forests, the hills. And she put them on the quilt. Sewed them tight.

Then one day she and Jack planned to run away to freedom. They left the plantation with the quilt during a thunderstorm, so no one could see them going. They used the map on the quilt to find North Farm, where she visited her mother. They wept together, but her mother said, "I am too sick to travel, Clara, but I am not too sick to dream. And I would be even sicker if you didn't try to run away. No one has the right to own anybody else. I want you to be free!"

So she and Jack left that night, and got away. They went through the fields, crossed the forests, climbed down cliffs, until they got to the Ohio River. The map even told them where the water was shallow and narrow enough to get across. On the other side, they found people to help them, and eventually she got to Columbus Ohio, where we live now, where she was taken in by the Kelton family who lived just outside of town. They were members of the Universalist Church, and had been helping slaves to escape for many years. And she smiled all day when she arrived, because for the first time in her life, no one else owned her. She owned herself.

Welcoming

Affirming
a. **UUSC JAM presentation for October 20 service**

Good morning. I'm Steve Palm-Houser, the chair of the Justice Action Ministry at First UU. We work to further social justice in our community and in the world at large.

Our congregation strongly supports UUSC, the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, our denomination's service organization. Like JAM, UUSC organizes activities that both undertake direct service actions (like helping victims of gender violence in Haiti), and that promote systemic change (like opposing the privatization of water from California to Kenya).

UUSC creates partnerships with small grassroots groups working on different social justice projects around the world. Recently, UUA and UUSC have begun to collaborate to create the new UU College of Social Justice, which is providing internships and justice training for our youth, and organizing congregational trips to UUSC projects around the world.

Today UUSC works in four focus areas, all related to the dignity and worth of human beings.

Civil liberties, Environmental Justice, Economic Justice, Human Rights in Humanitarian Disasters

In short, UUSC is a relatively small organization that upholds all of our UU principles in some of the most unjust places and circumstances in the world.

And UUSC relies heavily on us—on UU congregations, like this one, across the nation. Some 25% of the members of our own congregation belong to UUSC, and our church also makes an annual corporate contribution.

Many of you look forward to UUSC's annual Guest At Your Table membership drive to join or renew your membership or simply make a contribution to UUSC. We will be initiating that drive as always, next month around Thanksgiving. But like pretty much everything else in the world, Guest At Your Table will be changing a bit this year as well.

We will not have the familiar little boxes that sit on the dinner table and ask for contributions. But we will have Stories of Hope that we trust you will all read and share with your children. Nothing helps us better understand another's life than a good story, and this year, our stories are about:

Danielle Neus, who is helping develop urban gardening in Haiti.

Nelson Escobar, who came to the US from El Salvador for political asylum, and is now working to promote labor rights.

Malya Villard-Appolon, who is working to end gender-based violence in Haiti.

George Friday, who is working to build coalitions among grassroots organizations working for justice.

So look for activities between now and the end of the year, including web setup and holiday cards in Fellowship Hall, that are related to the Guest At Your Table membership drive.

The very simplest way to help is to go to uusc.org. Go online, buy a holiday gift or two at the UUSC store, find online actions that you can take, get inspired to take a justice service trip, join or renew your membership, and find out all the truly wonderful things UUSC is doing in the world.

Again, watch for activities here at church, and be sure to check out the UUSC website. It's easy enough to remember-uusc.org.

Thanks. And especially if you aren't familiar with UUSC, be sure to take a look.

b. **The strongest, most effective form of community activism is not complicated. It comes from a sense of family, love and urgency. It comes from a sincere belief that we are in this world together and must take care of each other, as well as ourselves. How different my own activism would be if every time something happened, I asked myself, "What would I do if this was my family?"**

Bushra Rehman 2000

Singing **#1018** *vs 3-4*

Communing

I cannot imagine living my life,
without dreaming while I am awake.
Not day-dreaming.
But real dreams,
the sails I hoist to catch the wind,
spiritus as our ancestors called it,
to help carry me along toward a destination
that is neither a figment of my imagination,
nor a feel-good fantasy to absolve me from reality.
Even if I don't get to that destination in my lifetime.
I'm not afraid to dream about it.
I'm not afraid to dream about a manner of living that some might disparage as impractical, or not likely, or beyond reach; for such thinking, I've noticed, always fulfills its own predictions.
But I am not dreaming of some utopia invented by especially wise and clever people,
or some heaven on earth brought about by
some One more powerful than human brokenness.
No, the destination I dream of is one where people still struggle with all of the difficult issues about life and death and love and loss, as they do now. But they struggle cooperatively, not competitively. The passion for winning and the disgrace of losing are no longer seen as central to culture, but pushed to the edge. The idea of God, or Ultimacy, is no longer worshipped in the form of profit gained at the cost of human lives and health, but will only be revealed in actions of love which embrace every single person without exception. The idea of freedom at my dream destination is not bound up with what I am entitled to, but with possibilities open to all. Who would ever guess that dreaming is a form of waking up? Or that silence is a form of amen?

silence

I dream of a world where family and friends are still family and friends, whom we gather to our hearts as we do right now, those whose love nurtured us enough to get there, those with whom we struggle, those whom we miss or mourn. We are free to open our hearts and name them aloud or in the amen of the silence.

naming

Come, Music, bless our dreams and set us free.

The First Reading *is a letter from Joseph Brant, who lived during the Revolutionary War in this nation. Brant, whose birth name was* Thayendanegea, *was a leader in the Kanien'ke'haka nation, a nation called Mohawks by the colonists. The word Mohawk, sadly, was a cruel insult used by a few Algonquin people about Brant's nation, and means "those cannibals." He wrote this letter in response to a question from Thomas Eddy in 1803.*

In the government you call civilized, the happiness of the people is constantly sacrificed to the splendor of empire. Hence the origin of your codes of criminal and civil laws; hence your dungeons and prisons. We have no prisons; we have no pompous parade of courts; we have no written laws; and yet judges are as highly revered among us as they are among you, and their decisions are as much regarded.

We have among us no exalted villains above the control of our laws. Daring wickedness is here never allowed to triumph over helpless innocence. The estates of widows and orphans are never devoured by enterprising swindlers.

We have no robbery under the pretext of the law.

The Second Reading *comes from the most excellent book, Witnessing Whiteness, written by Shelly Tochluk, for educators, about which I cannot offer high enough praise. It dates from 2008.*

When participating in debates regarding anything even remotely sounding like affirmative action, (some) white folks regularly speak of people of color taking white people's places. Generally assumed is the idea that the person of color (must be) less qualified and less deserving. Within these issues, we see white folks protecting a historically created position of privilege, such that any mandates for the creation of an overall level playing field are seen as personally injurious and unfair to white people. This focuses on the individual instead of the collective, so that white people only see the enactment of imagined race neutrality in the present, instead of witnessing how historical, systemic inequity continues to shape generations of people's lives.

Second, the history of whiteness exists just under the surface of every debate concerning American values, multiculturalism, and diversity. Very often, resistance against the language of "American values" is quickly deemed unpatriotic. But knowing the history helps us understand why the same person can value democracy and freedom, and yet resist calling them "American values" at the same time.

Knowing this history helps us understand why, to many people, "American values" suggests support for individualistic, competitive consumers who privilege objectivity to the detriment of people who value a cooperative, communal lifestyle, a resistance to environmental degradation, and indigenous spiritual belief systems. In short, knowing this history complicates our use of the term "American values" as we recognize that many associate those very values with oppressive and degrading treatment of people considered not white, not Western, or not modern enough to fit within our capitalistic, consumer-driven society.

In our larger community, when we increasingly notice white privilege and employ active responses, it would mean that we really are making great strides. One thing we would have to prepare for, however, is accountability.

Sermon
(clap)
So, my grandfather Nazzareno was born in 1886. When he was alive, the painters Monet and Degas were still working, as was my beloved Van Gogh. Emily Dickinson was still

alive...barely. Albert Einstein was a child of seven. The Apache leader Goyakla, or Geronimo, surrendered to the US Military in that year and was a prisoner of war until he died in 1909. Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, and Booker T. Washington were all going strong. And also in that year, twenty African American teens were massacred in a courthouse in Carollton Mississippi by a group of fifty white vigilantes who just didn't want any black man accusing a white man of murder in a court of law.

But those people and events were not part of my grandfather's culture. He was not a citizen of the world, he was part of a small mountain village in the Appennines. When he first immigrated to this country, my grandfather Nazzareno had never seen a man with African heritage, had no idea who Geronimo was, or Harriet Tubman, had never heard of the state Mississippi, or the river, for that matter. He had never heard the word "race," and would not have understood what it meant. He never did, later in life, in fact. He could not read nor write, not one day in school. He had never seen a train until he first rode on one to leave Italy in 1902 to work in the coal mines here. He sometimes packed a gun. He worked in mines since he was 9 years old.

My grandfather Nazzareno came from a totally different culture than I was born into, even though I am his blood grandson. He was born only 38 years after the Italian Revolution. I was born 173 years after the US Revolution. He had heard the revolutionary names of Garibaldi and Manzini. I knew of Washington and Jefferson. He knew abject poverty in Italy, but had never even heard of the concept of slavery. I knew something about slavery from school, and understood very well that he remained poor in this country.

His life was formed and shaped in *his* culture.
My life was formed and shaped in *mine.*

(clap)
So, over twenty-five years ago, I asked my intern Axel to come with me to the ministers' retreat in Southern California. I thought it important for him to get to know his colleagues early in his career. As we drove through the desert, I got up the courage to ask Axel an impertinent question. You see, Axel was born and raised in Germany. He had not attended a Unitarian Universalist congregation when he was young, but was active the Frei-Religiösen Gemeinde, The Free Religious Community, a progressive, humanistic religious set of congregations in Germany. Axel was 24 when he served as my intern. A mature, skilled, and thoughtful young man. But I can do math well enough, and by doing the math, I figured out that if he was 24, then his parents and grandparents had lived through the Second World war while in Germany. My question to Axel was this, "Do young Germans of your generation ever talk with your families about their experiences in the war years?"

Axel was happy to talk about it, and he told me some moving stories about how the war affected his family. But, he told me something far *more* remarkable, as far as I'm concerned. He told me how Germans of his generation worked on *their own* self-awareness of what transpired during the war. They didn't think it mattered if they were not born yet when it all happened.

Axel spoke of what sounded like a sort of velvet revolution that few knew outside the nation. You see, two Jewish psychologists, Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich wrote a book on

German cultural identities called "*Our Inabilty to Mourn: Principles of Collective Behavior."* It spoke of the whole history of Germany from an analytical perspective having to do with the collective culture and psychology. They made clear that the post war guilt was not dealt with adequately in any way. The whole issue of war crimes and the Shoah, or Holocaust, were completely left out of school history books and conversations, so that generations just once removed from Axel had no idea what a concentration camp was, or who this Hitler guy was. When Axel attended university however, this book *Our Inability to Mourn* was gaining a wide circulation, especially in the schools. Students in those schools studied the book deeply, and discussed its assertions with fellow students. Many of them dared to hand it to their parents and grandparents. Some resisted it, but others formed study groups all over the land. These lasted for a decade. Articles were written, lectures offered...and the pattern of culture which had been so destructive for so long was faced full on. As a result, Germany is a new country.

I saw this new country clearly when I was in Berlin to preach to the Unitarian Universalists there three years ago. In Berlin I noticed 1. the largest Holocaust Memorial I had ever seen any place, right next to the Brandenburg Gate, the center of Berlin, and near their parliament building.

2. I noticed the names of Jews and others etc. who had perished in the Shoah, cast in metal plates, that were screwed into the stoops of the building where they had been taken, or, onto the walls of the buildings that replaced their houses, destroyed in the war. The Germans came to understand that it was individual lives which were destroyed and which were to be commemorated. The numbers 6 million or 11 million overwhelm. The name of Ernst and Anna Bernstein and their two children evokes grief.

3. I spent a whole day in the largest and most architecturally compelling Holocaust museum that I have seen anywhere, including here in the US, where I have visited three. My visit there in Berlin seared my soul.

4. I saw synagogues and schools being restored and rebuilt, as highly respected German Jewish cultural life flourished in all quarters of the city.

All this from folks who were not yet born at the time of the war, but who went through the process of self-study, increasing their self-awareness, dealing with the hard emotions of shame and guilt face on, keeping their careful accountability to, and with, all the individual sovereign lives who had been executed during those days. Lives as important to them as my life is to me, or your life is to you.

(clap)
So, here I am in the United States. A remarkable culture founded on the ideas of freedom for all, where everyone can openly dream of happiness, and live their lives in pursuit of those dreams. And yet, as a fish living in this water, I sometimes don't see the culture. Like water, it's often invisible to me, like it is to a fish in the tank. I sometimes don't remember that the people who lived on this land first, and the people who colonized this land, and the people who were brought over here against their will, often perceive the history of this nation differently.
They more easily see the mud and scum in the water.

I know this: the people who colonized this land did two seminal things to muddy the water...they brought people here who did not want to be here, and then created the word *white* to apply to some of the earlier colonists from several northern European nations, regardless of their nationality or ethnicity. They very well knew the word *black* went back to Roman times, so in order to set up profitable conflict, the contrasting word *white* was invented by people of means, in Virginia, to create an artificial enmity that had not been there before. Around this time also, those who lived here *first* were being identified not as natives, but as *savages*, which meant back then just what it means today. Tens of thousands were killed deliberately, as well as, yes, accidently through disease. Native villages were often burned to the ground, and their religious practices were condemned as superstitious. The slavery period and the theft of native civilization and culture are both disgraces of our American history. Both are tied to the word *white*. And as Sandy Tochluk says in the second reading: "the history of whiteness exists just under the surface of every debate concerning American values."

Often, when these two sad events in the history of this nation are brought up, I've heard people say: "Time to stop bringing this up. The days of slavery are over, and the Indians are depicted more fairly now, so I don't know why you keep raising this issue. It was terrible, sure, and I know things aren't perfect yet, but I wasn't even born when all this happened, so I had nothing to do with it."

Well, look, I wasn't born when the largest mass lynching in American history happened either. 1891. New Orleans. 11 men. All Italian immi-grants. But my grandfather Nazzareno was alive. He was five years old. And when I was born, I was born into a culture where this kind of event had been practiced for decades. Nazzareno immigrated to this nation, and lived in *this* culture, not the one he was born in. But as I said, I *was* born here. Born into this culture. A racialized culture. It's the water I swim in. And this culture, in its present day form, seems to have retained some of the same cultural themes noticed and superbly described by Mohawk author Joseph Brant in 1803.

The happiness of the people is constantly sacrificed to the splendor of empire, he wrote of the American settlers culture in 1803. In 2013, I keep on trying to remember how many years of my life when my nation has not been at war with folks around the world, hot, cold, declared or undeclared. War, the business of empires. *We have no prisons,* and you do, Brant then notices. I wonder if Brant would just faint away if he came back to life to find out that our 21st century prisons are run for profit. Run by private firms. And there are more prisons and prisoners than ever before in American history. Mostly people of African American descent too. The New Jim Crow, as Columbus professor Michelle Alexander puts it, as if the old Jim Crow wasn't shameful enough. Brant then wrote: *We have among us no exalted villains above the control of our laws.* No Wall Street darlings who destroyed lives by their decisions, but still go to work every day. No Madoffs refusing to think he will be caught, and rather surprised when he was. Brant continues: *Daring wickedness is here* (among the Mohawk, he means) ***never** allowed to triumph over helpless innocence. The estates of widows and orphans are never devoured by enterprising swindlers.* But in America they are today. The housing fiasco, mortgage thefts, the different health care systems for different classes, have destroyed whole families, as well as widows and orphans. Brant sums it up in his last sentence. *We have no robbery under the pretext of the law.* 1803, folks. 1803. Those are the American values he witnessed.

(clap)
So, Sherry Tochluk tells us: "Very often, resistance against the language of 'American values' is quickly deemed unpatriotic. People like Brant, I suppose she is talking about, or people like me offering this sermon. Or maybe she means people like Sweet Clara, who resisted being kept as a slave. Who quilted a map and escaped. Maybe she was resisting American values too. Maybe she was unpatriotic for running away. Maybe natives who keep their religious cultures alive, despite their practices being deemed superstitious by both Euro-American believing Christians and secular critics alike, also risk being labeled un-patriotic. Maybe the people at the UU Service Committee that Steve mentioned, who are working with indigenous people, are unpatriotic because they don't drop down aid from on high in American heaven, but work side-by-side with the people of Haiti and Central America to solve problems together which affect us all, them and us. Maybe it's unpatriotic to treat people who are different from me in the way I would treat my family if they were suffering some onslaught of injustice, to quote Bushra Rehman's affirmation.

(clap)
So, here's what I think. I rather think that American values...those dreams of happiness, that freedom...got distorted along the way, but that the distortion is not permanent. I rather think that working together to face the totality of American history honestly, like most Germans of Axel's generation did with German history, is a start. I think for me to mourn for what the cultural distortions of my national culture have done, helps me to begin to make amends, even if I have never shot a gun, or enslaved anyone. I rather think that Euro-Americans like me (and by the 1940s Italians were finally considered *white even* though they were not considered to be white when my grandfather arrived) could take the time to be accountable to people of color. I could ask them to work with me, as together we question the cracks in the overarching culture we have received, and which has hurt so many. I would like my descendants, in blood or in spirit, to be one day shaped by a culture that affirms them for who they are, guarantees freedom and access to everyone, and begins to understand that freedom doesn't really mean anything at all if it applies only to a few, and not everyone. I bet my grandfather Nazzareno, were he to come back to life, would still want to immigrate to a land like that.

Offering

Returning
Oh slowly, slowly, like the autumn trees around us, everything turns and changes, even us, even the cities, even the weather, even the world, even our doubts, even our worries, even our habits, even our fears. O slowly, slowly everyone, yes everyone, even you, even me, can awaken,
and dream their dreams, and be free in ways that deepen the meaning of the word love at last.

Hymn 342 O Slowly Slowly