

Do You Dream in Color?: Anti-racism as a Spiritual Discipline

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Reading

Much of Western European history conditions us to see human difference in simplistic opposition to each other: dominant/subordinate, good/bad, superior/inferior... As a forty-nine-year-old Black lesbian feminist socialist mother of two, including one boy, and a member of an interracial couple, I usually find myself a part of some group defined as other, deviant, inferior, or just plain wrong... Certainly there are very real differences between us of race, age, and sex. But it is not those differences between us that are separating us. It is rather our refusal to recognize those differences, and to examine the distortions which result from our misnaming them and their effects upon human behavior and expectation... It is a lifetime pursuit for each one of us to extract these distortions from our living at the same time as we recognize, reclaim, and define those differences upon which they are imposed. For we have all been raised in a society where those distortions were endemic within our living.

The future of our earth may depend upon the ability of all people to identify and develop new definitions of power and new patterns of relating across difference. The old definitions have not served us, nor the earth that supports us. The old patterns, no matter how cleverly rearranged to imitate progress, still condemn us to cosmetically altered repetitions of the same old exchanges, the same old guilt, hatred, recrimination, lamentation and suspicion... these must be altered at the same time as we alter the living conditions which are a result of those structures. For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.[†]

A couple of years ago at a “Journey Toward Wholeness Anti-racism Workshop,” where we are invited to share our candor and explore our truths, I decided to take a risk and speak from my heart. An African American woman was speaking of concepts of beauty and shared that she loved the color of her skin. I raised my hand and said that I, too, loved the color of her skin and wanted to know what that meant to the folk gathered there. There was an instant air of discomfort and the woman said, “well, I don’t know.” “Why is it,” I asked, “that people find it strange or wrong that my aesthetic sense can include admiring colors of skin, why can’t I agree that black is beautiful?” The question was bypassed until a private conference during lunch,

the tension had gotten a little too thick.

The immediate assumption and so tone of our lunch conversation was to address the “problem” with my point of view. I was advised that I might look at my own self-hatred, at my distaste for my own race. “I like my coloration.” I replied, “I think the color of my skin goes well with the color of my hair. And I also think your coloring is beautiful.” I could tell my colleague found this logic incongruous and perhaps unbelievable. This was exactly what Audre Lourde spoke about. Our culture trains our imaginations toward polarities—right and wrong—one way or the other. We are not trained for multiplicity, for assuming pluralism and celebrating

[†]*Sister Outsider (Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference)*, Audre Lourde:

it. We tend toward either-or positions (one being arbitrarily superior to the other) rather than both-and affirmations (seeing room enough for difference).

Needless to say I remained an irritating presence to several of my colleagues, both white and black at this workshop, for I argued as well the whole language concept of the term “people of color” which was one of the basic premises of the dogma within this particular approach to anti-racism.

The irritation and dismissal is something I am familiar with. I’ve rarely been in a situation where I fit in—for various reasons. In fact, I wouldn’t be surprised if I covet the position of outsider on occasion, which is not always constructive. This learning about not fitting in began at a very young age. I can think of three formative, slow to heal experiences when elementary school teachers—all women, mind you—who were entrusted as part of the village nurturing my growth, did what they considered was their duty, with the best of intentions, to break my “problematic” spirit. This was because I was labeled a tomboy, and I was a bright and energetic redhead. Let alone Unitarian Universalist. Just plain didn’t fit in the mold.

Now before I say another word, I humbly acknowledge that my experience as a white woman is far less systemically disabling and disempowering than if my skin were any other color. But amongst folk who are designated as “white,” I am in the minority. In fact, 6% of all peoples in the world are born with red hair. And, yes, we all look alike. I have been linked with countless sisters through the years. For the record—I have no biological sisters. Sometimes it has been positive, or was meant to be positive. When I guest preach, after pouring out my ideas and experiences to a congregation, I fairly regularly am approached by a man who shares with me that his first girl friend was a redhead. The twinkle in his eye implies he knows me because he’s been with one before. It took years for me to understand that the distrust, dismissal and extra looks that I have experienced throughout my life may have been heightened because of the instant designa-

tion of redheaded woman. In fact, this is the first time I feel confident enough to speak of this particular truth in a sermon.

The labels society gives us are internalized so early that it is hard to dismantle their effect. Just recently I’ve been given a gift through my six year old daughter in seeing an aspect of my past more clearly. Sarah gave me permission to tell you that on a fairly regular basis, and certainly whenever she draws her mother the person has red hair. I have to tell you that as a child I can’t remember ever using a red crayon to draw another person’s hair. It still startles me and feeds my soul when Sarah’s drawings naturally include a redhead.

I was told through television and films as a child that redheads were strange. They were either kooky, downright crazy, morally suspect, tempestuous vixens or witches, never just regular moms. My mother gave me a book when I was three entitled *The Witch Next Door*, a book that talks of mean spirited neighbors who prejudged a kind and quirky witch who lived next door. She wrote in the book flap: to our 3 year old “witch.”

I, the witch was scaring my brothers and neighborhood friends away in fun—it was the role that would keep me included—but let me tell you when that designation turned from witch to “dog,” it was no longer fun. I still cringe psychically when I see the posting on store windows: “no dogs allowed”. That designation lasted through my teenage years from strangers as well (all white, I might add)...in fact, on the back window of Nick and my honeymoon getaway car—I was 33—the ritual mischievous decorations included a sign that read : “Beware of Dog.” Old habits die hard. I tore the sign from the car in full view of the well wishing crowd before getting in. I was finally able to say: No... that’s not funny.

Difference is not an aspect of life that humans embrace easily. Ego driven in our goals for success and need for belonging, we often chart our worth and progress by comparing ourselves to others. Our struggle for right living with one another gets lost when we trigger comparisons in a

search for self worth. Too often we try to conquer our fear of difference by claiming one way of being as more worthy than another. Countless debates end in deadlock and efforts for peace remain unfulfilled because of the historic claim, the false premise found in all aspects of society, that "if you are not like me something must be wrong, either with you or with me." We resist collective understanding of one another. We resist multiplicity. We resist allowing enough room for difference. And by doing this, we discourage healthy humility toward the larger truth. And I do believe, if we don't change this tendency it will defeat our efforts toward world community and probably destroy our species.

We are taught in our symbols, language and assumptions that sameness is the only truth, that conformity is the proper course, that solidarity means strength against your enemy.

My earliest memory of that indoctrination was the time I first saw the Walt Disney movie: "Fantasia." I've shared before that the scene when the unicorns are dancing and frolicking in this beautiful rainbow like world with cloud castles return at the end of the day to their safe homes—separated by color—the greens with the greens, the pinks with the pinks, the purple with the purples and so on...ignited within me deep outrage. My letter to President Johnson stating the worth of all skin color received a two inch packet of civil rights information...none of which told this seven year old that it was ok for me to be different. You see in that fantasy, my gut instinct protested that there was no room for me. Not only because my field was limited in finding another redhead but because I refused to be told that my good friend Krishna and I couldn't be buddies.

"I always wanted to have really dark skin and really red hair," Krishna's mom told us once as we were driving to her house, "I didn't get either." The freedom that this beautiful woman of cinnamon skin and copper hair gave me in that one statement is immeasurable.

I lived a fairly typical white liberal childhood, with parents and a church that spoke and made

efforts toward equal opportunity. Every year my mother and brothers and I with neighborhood friends would change our three story home into a haunted house and charge admission for the Association of Equal Opportunity. I was familiar with head start and marched when Martin Luther King, Jr. was killed. But I wasn't aware that my black friends lived in a designated area in our small town. I didn't have to be. I was white and had run of the place. And I wasn't aware that the affection our maid Minnie gave me for so many years after school—and when I was close enough, running home for lunch to be with her—was the same old historic relationship of Black Mammy and white child. I still have such warm feelings and deep gratitude for what I deemed a friendship. It's only recently that I wonder whether our relationship had any mutuality at all. Minnie died before I was anywhere near this still limited awakening, but I send her a thank you for all that she taught me about kindness and dignity.

Theologian James Cone consistently points out that racism is far more than the Ku Klux Klan, in fact the KKK barely breaks the surface of this plague within the human soul. It's the most dramatic, though, and one that white liberals especially hide behind as behavior far worse than theirs. Racism touches each of our lives in ways that we cannot know, because of its systemic nature which has created structures of opportunity and lack thereof long forgotten in the lives of our ancestors. Survival of the fittest has absolutely no authentic reality because none of us are operating from equal contexts. This does not mean that we should feel guilty about our opportunities, but it does mean we need to be aware of them as best as we can and to create larger and larger systems of opportunity for all peoples. This, of course, means reconfiguring the proverbial pie, most probably having less power if we are of disproportionately high opportunity and more power if we have had less than our share. This reconfiguring is awkward for everyone. It is just as hard to have more power than it is to have less power if you are used to a different way of being. One thing is certain. If the change in

power structures actually occur, the world will be very different than it is now.

When I first realized that fact, that if I truly wanted racism gone the world be something I could not imagine, I was gripped with fear—I remember the moment. Then I knew that anti-racism was a spiritual discipline for it means giving over to a partnership with the unknown. None of us has the vision of that changed world, but I am certain that that world won't materialize until we truly dream in color. "Imagine all the people," John Lennon challenges, "living life in peace."

The only way to overcome fear is through love. My fear subsided a bit when I realized the basic work was to learn to love difference, to expect diversity, to feel incomplete wisdom without it. One of my personal UU mantras is the offering of Rev. William Jones: "Think of diversity as the ingenuity of God."

Henry Hampton, executive producer of the PBS series *Eyes on the Prize* and employee of the Unitarian Universalist Association in the 60's, spoke deeply to me as I was writing my thesis some years ago with this candid critique: "When you dream of something, you can begin to take it upon yourself, make it yours, change it. But you have to dream it first," Hampton added, "And the Unitarian Universalists don't dream... You have to think of the world as you would really have it. I don't mean wish it, I mean dream it. And sometimes I think Unitarian Universalists wish more than they dream."

A Unitarian Universalist musician in a New England church some years back was asked one morning to play an African American spiritual for their choir. He replied simply "I never play anything that wasn't written down." I have no idea what race he was. What I do know is that he was raised with certain class assumptions, certain ways of speaking, certain styles of music, literature, paths of education and standards of culture. Those standards, in all probability, were Euro-American.

In speaking once to a friend about priorities in

my vision of nurturing my children, I realized that it is important to me that they interact and be introduced to different ways of being, different cultural and economic backgrounds. "I want Sarah and Michael to get some culture." I heard myself say, and was pleasantly surprised by what I meant. As a Unitarian Universalist of white upper middle class background, I could have easily meant exposure to museums, classic literature and theatre, post graduate degree, a knowledge of good wine and proper etiquette. All stimulating things to know. But what I meant was exposure to folk of different races, cultures, family styles, abilities and ways of earning a living. Somehow, to me, that sensibility points to openings for more wisdom and joy in living.

Being Unitarian Universalist all my life I experience the tension, the confusion and reorientation of those two priorities. The first, non-verbal assumptions driven by a culture of privilege that willfully sustain unchallenged ways of being, maintaining a stance of tolerance with far less authentic acceptance. The other, a claim of inherent dignity and the drive to co-create a just and compassionate world. Both learned from Unitarian Universalism, both world views struggling to find a balance.

When we look at Unitarian Universalism specifically in terms of racial justice, we are faced, historically, with a lack of institutional response. In these last few years, there has been a reexamination of our institutional priorities and we are, denominationally speaking, in the midst of redefining our identity primarily through the program designated: "A Journey Toward Wholeness." There are a number of factors that point to the historic lack of institutional response by Unitarians and Universalists. Rev. Mark Morrison-Reed points out that we are a class and culture bound denomination. We are also of a religious tradition centered on individualism, a value that is inherently distrustful of institutions and corporate action. This makes it hard to come together for a cause in an organized way. Again, conflicting ideals struggling to find a balance.

How is it, then, that we as a faith wish instead

of dream?

Institutional racism in liberal circles comes primarily from paternalism—a kind of “help the needy” atmosphere, an assumption that the folk in need would not make it without our help. The wish is that others would feel better and like us more—that the complaining would stop and for people to be happy with what we give them. The wish is dashed when folk of other cultures do not respond to efforts of help, do not show up to events, do not follow through on idea sessions. This is because the paternalistic assumption is for conformity to an established way of being—making just enough room, without really losing much of whatever we deem “our own,” and hoping that that will satisfy, or at least nullify the urgency.

If equality were a dream in this scenario, then those in power would seek and follow the desires and directions of those disempowered. If this were a dream, those in power would sustain the discomfort that would come with being in unknown territory. If this were a dream equal dignity would be the goal, not assuaging pain, and dialogue would include intense disagreement and stick-to-itiveness until a new mutually empowering vision was found.

Tokenism is another symptom of wishing. And a real pitfall especially for liberal whites. Finding just enough people of different colors to “prove” diversity. Putting folk of different cultural backgrounds in positions of power way before full training or even examination of character, setting folk up for failure and the inevitable back room comments sustaining racist assumptions of inferiority. The “you see, they can’t handle this, or you see, I tried...” Voting for and hiring people of different races to look good is opportunistic judgement by the color of one’s skin and not for the content of one’s character. Martin Luther King, Jr., I’m sure, would not be impressed.

Then there’s the designation of whites and “people of color.” A political distinction to emphasize white privilege and the distribution of power. However, these are terms that I feel “use the master’s tool” to try and dismantle the house.

I refuse to clump my Asian, African, Hispanic, Indigenous and Native American brothers and sisters in one designation—“people of color.” If we continue to differentiate whites as somehow a different species in the human family we will maintain racist assumptions and keep white now the ultimate reformers and fixers of the problem. I call this wishing, not dreaming. I call this expedient, not down and dirty dialogue. I call this false witness to the ingenuity of God.

“Our words are not without meaning.” Bell Hooks reminds us, “They are an action—a resistance. Language is also a place of struggle.”

It is not enough to be well wishers or to lend a helping hand now and again—which most of us know. It is not enough to appear politically correct or outwardly diverse without an understanding of the changes that still have not occurred. I would like to understand my limitations more—the ones I cannot see, or have denied. I hope for more calls like that of the Rev. Mark Morrison-Reed’s to examine our faith community as class and culture bound. I strive for a readiness to truth that is struggling to be free in the life of our faith so that we can evolve toward a new world view.

The vibrant, challenging context of each of our lives must not be lost or forgotten, nor merely tolerated, but celebrated and shared: given voice, given room, given benefit of doubt, without immediate judgement, without labeling and pigeon-holing; without expedient compromise devised to avoid conflict.

Rev. Reed suggests: “An option for UUists may be to change who we are, not by pursuing blacks for the sake of our image....but by appreciating who we are and what we have already accomplished, while striving to move beyond our present limits.” Striving, I would think, to truly dream in color.

That will not always be easy nor comfortable, and there will be times, still, when we won’t know what we are doing or which way to turn...except, of course, into each other’s embrace, as imperfect beings trying to make sense

of our lives, equal in the fact that we are vulnerable, different, perhaps in the paths we choose, but, ultimately in need of each other... ultimately, a part of each other in the vast, mysterious, gloriously diverse cosmos. May our dreams continue and may they be full of the richness of this world. This I pray. Amen.

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