

“BLACK AND WHITE WORLD VIEWS”

First Universalist Church UU, Auburn, ME, Rev. Glenn Turner, Sept. 11, 2017

This Small Group session plan is based on an article by the Rev. Mark Morrison Reed in the latest issue of the UU World magazine. It would make good background reading for our discussion. <http://www.uuworld.org/articles/black-hole-white-uu-psyche> Being in the world as a black, living in a state of oppression, and being in the world with the advantages of white privilege challenges us to reexamine our theologies.

OPENING WORDS & CHALICE LIGHTING

Human nature is not black and white but black and grey.

Graham Greene

It is human nature to hate the man whom you have hurt.

Tacitus

Man's nature is not essentially evil. Brute nature has been known to yield to the influence of love. You must never despair of human nature.

Mahatma Gandhi

SILENT REFLECTION

CHECK-IN: (40-50 minutes)

GROUP BUSINESS & SCHEDULING & NEW MEMBER/S DISCUSSION

FOCUS: “BLACK AND WHITE WORLD VIEWS”

Here is an excerpt from the Rev. Mark Morrison Reed. I think it raises a significant questions to the Unitarian Universalist belief in "the inherent worth and dignity of every person.”

"Universalism was different because it was difficult for African Americans to embrace. A loving God who saves all is, for most African Americans, a theological non sequitur. Why? In an article entitled “In the Shadow of Charleston,” Reggie Williams writes about a young black Christian who said, during a prayer group following the murder of nine people at Emanuel AME Church in 2015, “that if he were to also acknowledge the historical impact of race on his potential to live a safe and productive life in America, he would be forced to wrestle with the veracity of the existence of a just and loving God who has made him black in America.” This is the question of theodicy: How do we reconcile God’s goodness with the existence of evil? In the context of Charleston, the context of Jim Crow, the context of slavery, what is the meaning of black suffering? Why has such calamity been directed at African Americans? If God is just and loving there must be a reason. If there is no reason, one is led to the conclusion that God is neither just nor loving.

Hosea Ballou’s Ultra-Universalism, the “death and glory school” in which all are saved and brought into God’s embrace upon death, is mute on this. In fact, it trivializes black suffering. What is the meaning of enslavement if the master and slave are both redeemed? The way black theology answers this question is that God is the God of the oppressed; that God through Jesus, who suffered, identifies with the oppressed and will comfort and lift them up. This requires that a distinction be made between the oppressor and the oppressed. What kind of God makes such a

distinction? A righteous, judging God: the God of the Old Testament. Surveys tell us this is the kind of God in which the vast majority of African Americans believe. Such a belief makes sense of their lives because it is concurrent with a nightmarish experience. What slave could look forward to an afterlife shared with the master who owned and raped her, the foreman who whipped him, or the Klansmen who lynched him? None.”

DISCUSSION:

1. The world view of white liberals is viewed through rose-colored glasses, hopeful and benign, full of possibility. The world view of blacks and other oppressed minorities is viewed through dark shades, wary, fearful, and angry. Does the realization of the disparity in world views cause you reevaluate your own?
2. What are your thoughts on “the inherent worth and dignity of every person?” (theoretical and practical)

Note the article by Darrick Johnson below which points out the disparity in worship expectations between whites and blacks.

3. How far are you willing to go in making compromises in order to welcome blacks into your church? (i.e. music, language, theology)

LIKES AND WISHES

CLOSING WORDS:

“It's really a wonder that I haven't dropped all my ideals, because they seem so absurd and impossible to carry out. Yet I keep them, because in spite of everything, I still believe that people are really good at heart.”

— Anne Frank, *The Diary of a Young Girl*

Supplemental Reading. This is another article in the *UU World* which pertains to the divergence in the Black/white worship experience. There are other black voices which theistic, who are uncomfortable with our humanism, our indifference to God-talk, our downplaying the Christian part of our heritage.

Othering and belonging

This faith is my theological home, but it doesn't speak to my black identity.

DARRICK JACKSON | 9/1/2017 | FALL 2017

Ndidi Achebe, left, and Ebonie Ramsey link arms during the 2016 General Assembly closing worship as Glen Thomas Rideout and the Rev. Sekou and the Holy Ghost sing "I need you to survive." (© Nancy Pierce)

“Othering and belonging”, Darrick Jackson *UU World Magazine* Fall 2017.

I was a Universalist before I even knew there was a religious home for my beliefs. And yet, I still go back to the spirit of the African Methodist Episcopal Church within which I was raised. I often ache for the music that makes my heart soar, that brings the divine into the room during worship. I miss ministry that is grounded in and speaks to my black identity. I miss a message of hope that is grounded in an understanding of struggle. I miss all these things, and yet theologically I can be nowhere else than where I am. So I make my home here in Unitarian Universalism, as imperfect as it is, and find ways to stay grounded, to stay connected, and to stay whole.

Growing up in the AME Church, I was presented with images of spirituality grounded in my black identity. The worship service and religious education both referenced black history and black culture. I learned how my cultural struggle and my identity interfaced with the biblical narrative. When I became a Unitarian Universalist, it was clear that my history and my culture were not reflected in the worship and religious education. I could connect on the level of my humanity, but my identity was rarely represented except on special days: Martin Luther King Jr. Day, Black History Month, and Kwanzaa. In those moments, I felt other. I felt that my culture was on display, not an inclusive part of the service.

I also see UUs make assumptions about what would interest me as a black person, without ever asking me. I have preached at several congregations where the music director has chosen spirituals for the music because I was the preacher. The spirituals were often sung without any awareness of what the music means or how to sing it. It requires a lot of energy to sit in front of the congregation and not let your real feelings about the music show on your face, or to figure out how to respond to the eager faces of the choir looking for approval.

As a worship leader, I have had difficulty finding UU resources for my services, particularly when dealing with issues of struggle, despair, grace, and hope. Our hymnal deals with struggle through justice and despair through loss. It briefly engages hope and barely refers to grace at all. Growing up in the black church, these themes were an essential part of my understanding of worship. The service created space to name the truth that life was sometimes hard, unfair, and painful. We sang songs filled with tears as well as joy, and we were offered messages of hope. My black church responded to the unfairness present in our everyday lives and gave us a reason to keep on striving to make things better. When I engage with other Unitarian Universalists, these are themes they want to explore, regardless of their racial identity.

The AME Church has also informed how I think about music for worship. I like to begin the service with reflective music and end with music that is energetic and engaging. But our hymnal does not support that idea. Most of the hymns are medium to slow and tepid in their musical arrangement. I am rarely able to find music that fits the energy I am trying to engender. Often I work with the musician to play hymns and not dirges. And even if the musician gets it, the congregation slows it back down.

Music can evoke a deep spiritual strength in me that helps me transcend the issues and concerns in my life. In worship, it can help me connect with the theme for the service in a visceral way. But most UU hymns feel like vehicles for the words, not for an experience of the holy. Until *Singing the Journey* was published, few hymns popular among UUs could be vehicles for the transcendent, and most of the ones that did came out of the African-American tradition.

This is indicative of the mental focus of UU worship. Words are primary; we think and talk about spirituality but are hesitant to experience it. In the black church I experienced worship that engages body, mind, heart, and soul. But I see many UUs hesitant to engage the heart, the body,

and the soul. They only want to stimulate the mind. They look for sermons that make them think and find sermons that stir the heart lacking. I have had to make peace within myself about my preaching, as I have no interest in the intellectual sermon. I want to touch the heart, to nurture the soul. My sermons are intellectually informed but rarely intellectually focused. In fact, my least favorite sermons are my intellectual ones.

The intellectualism in Unitarian Universalism comes with a culture of stillness. We are expected to sit quietly in our seats, listen intently with no emotion on our faces, no movement in our bodies. We are supposed to wait until after the service to express ourselves. I grew up in a culture of engagement. We had permission to respond to the service, to say “Amen” when we were moved by the words or music, to clap our hands and smile and nod our heads whenever the spirit moved us. We lived the hymn “When the Spirit Says Do” every time we gathered for worship. I have had to learn to restrain myself in UU circles, which distances me from the worship. Sometimes our worship feels more like a lecture to me. The first time I preached at a UU congregation, I was unsure of how my sermon was being received because there was no visible response. It wasn’t until after the service that I learned that people did enjoy the sermon. Even now, I get slightly unnerved by the lack of response. I construct my services with UU stillness in mind; any attempt at a more embodied worship feels experimental and risky instead of one of many ways worship happens. I have always loved youth and young adult worship, as those services are generally more heart- and soul-centered and invite engagement and connection.

Engaging UUs in conversation about these areas where I feel disconnected from the UU culture is hard. I often struggle with how to say something, or if it is worth it. I worry about the other person’s reaction, and I have to decide if I have the energy to deal with it. Often when I engage with someone about these matters, the conversation quickly turns to them (how they feel about it, how they are not to blame, and so on); instead of engaging the issue, I’m engaging their needs. I minister to them pastorally instead of prophetically. Tied into this is my own struggle with wanting to engage in multicultural ministry because it is important, not just because I am a person of color. Because of this, I prefer to engage people I know well, who I know will not respond defensively. I struggle with this because the line between avoiding conflict and self-care feels very narrow in these situations.

My connection with UU people of color has been essential. Through DRUUMM (Diverse Revolutionary Unitarian Universalist Multicultural Ministries), the Finding Our Way Home retreats, and individual friends and colleagues, I have found this community to be a stabilizing force in my life and ministry. Being able to share experiences and not having to explain why they are important or troubling helps normalize what is happening for me. Sometimes I receive great advice, and sometimes I just need to be heard and acknowledged, and that is enough. Either way, I leave these encounters renewed, restored, and ready to reenter the broader UU life.

Gospel music still elicits joy within me and gives me a sense of peace and a reminder of hope. I find myself singing along and smiling, rapt in the power of spirit and the hope that things will get better, just as I did when I was Christian. Gospel music is the place where I can reconnect with my Christian roots in ways that are healing and life engendering, even though I no longer connect to the theology. I have written new words to my favorite songs and have thought about writing UU gospel music. Unitarian Universalism has a gospel message to share, and listening to the music reminds me of the saving power of our faith.

As a minister, I search for ways to create for others what I have found missing in Unitarian Universalism. I incorporate the voices of people of color in worship throughout the year, not just for special occasions or topics. As much as I can, I engage the body and the heart as well as the

mind. I am conscious of creating spaces for connection and engagement in worship, instead of stillness and isolation. I try to be attentive to the experiences of my seminarians of color as they find their ministerial path.

As a community minister, I intentionally sought a worship community that addressed as many of my concerns about the broader UU culture as possible. Having a minister who is also a person of color has been extremely helpful in sustaining me, so that I can be effectively ministered to as I minister to others. We all have to find our resources and supports so that we can minister effectively as people of color. At this point, our needs as people of color are broader than what the faith can fulfill, but I hope that we can live into our stated dreams and be a faith that is open to diversity in both word and deed, and that I am able to bring my full self—my full spiritual, worshipping self—into our faith.

Adapted with permission from *Centering: Navigating Race, Authenticity, and Power in Ministry*, ed. by Mitra Rahnema (Skinner House, 2017).

Darrick Jackson

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