

**Building the Beloved Community:
Anti-racism and Multiculturalism in a Local Congregation**

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Blackmail, blacklist, black mark. Black Monday, black mood, black-hearted. Black plague, black mass, black market.

Good guys wear white, bad guys wear black. We fear black cats, and the Dark Continent. But it's okay to tell a white lie, lily-white hands are coveted, it's great to be pure as the driven snow.

Angels and brides wear white. Devil's food cake is chocolate; angel's food cake is white! We shape language and we are shaped by it. In our culture, white is esteemed. It is heavenly, sunlike, clean, pure, immaculate, innocent, and beautiful. At the same time, black is evil, wicked, gloomy, depressing, angry, sullen. Ascribing negative and positive values to black and white enhances the institutionalization of this culture's racism.

Let us acknowledge the negative connotations of whiteness. White things can be soft, vulnerable, pallid, and ashen. Light can be blinding, bleaching, enervating. Conversely, we must acknowledge that darkness has a redemptive character, that in darkness there is power and beauty. The dark nurtured and protected us before our birth.

Welcome darkness. Don't be afraid of it or deny it. Darkness brings relief from the blinding sun, from scorching heat, from exhausting labor. Night signals permission to rest, to be with our loved ones, to conceive new life, to search our hearts, to remember our dreams. The dark of winter is a time of hibernation. Seeds grow in the dark, fertile earth.

The words black and dark don't need to be destroyed or ignored, only balanced and reclaimed in their wholeness. The words white and light don't need to be destroyed or ignored, only balanced and reclaimed in their wholeness. Imagine a world that had only light—or dark. We need both. Dark and light. Light and dark.

—Jacqui James, “Dark and Light, Light and Dark,”
[Been In the Storm So Long](#)

I can't preach a sermon this morning about anti-racism and multiculturalism without naming that yesterday, less than hour from here, in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, there was a [KKK Rally](#). The good news is that the rally was small, involving only four men, wearing white hooded robes. Although overt racism continues in our county (and may even be on an increase of late), it has thankfully declined since the height of segregation. But that decrease in overt racism has led far too many people to miss the more insidious racism that remains.

This morning's "Spoken Meditation" invites us to notice the ways that language shapes our perceptions of the world and unconsciously contributes to us having positive associations with the color white and negative associations with the color black. Many of these associations reflect an aspect of the systematic racism that remains entrenched in our society. But when we take a step back, it is so obvious that on the archetypal level, the colors white *and* black both represent vital parts of the human condition. And it becomes quickly obvious that we need both: dark and light, yin and yang, and everywhere in between.

Nevertheless, the color bias remains in our vocabulary. And social scientists have developed an "Implicit Association Test" to scientifically document the ways that this bias manifests in our unconscious. (You can take this test yourself free online at <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/>.) To date, studies show that, "75 percent of its takers, including some African Americans, have an implicit preference for white people over black people." The implications of these findings are troubling. As *The Washington Post* has [reported](#): "An automatic white preference has been found to correlate with, for instance, suboptimal treatment of black emergency room patients, unfavorable judgment of black job applicants, [and] laughter at racist jokes."

Relatedly, many of you were here in February when I both preached a [sermon](#) and lead a Congregational Conversation in response to Michelle Alexander's important book [The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness](#). (If you have not read that book, I encourage you to do so; it was the "Common Read" selected last year as a recommendation for all Unitarian Universalists to read, discuss, and action.) For now, I will limit myself to quoting only three statistics from Alexander. The first is about our growing Prison-Industrial Complex: **"In 1972, fewer than 350,000 people were being held in prisons and jails nationwide, compared with more than 2 million people today"** (8). The second and third quotes are about the *racial bias* with which our Prison-Industrial Complex is being built:

"No other country in the world imprisons so many of its racial or ethnic minorities. The United States imprisons a larger percentage of its black population than South Africa did at the height of apartheid" (6). "Today there are more African-American adults under correctional control — in prison or jail, on

probation or parole — than were enslaved in 1850, a decade before the Civil War began.”¹

For this morning, my point is that the shock myself and many other members of this congregation felt when they began to wrestle with the extent of this racial injustice is another indication that there are barriers and biases — both conscious and unconscious — that are inhibiting our work for racial justice.

There is one other important point, I need to make about that February sermon on “The New Jim Crow.” In that sermon, I mentioned that many decades ago this congregation became a lifetime member of the NAACP (“The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People”), and members of this congregation have been involved at various points in working with the Frederick branch of the NAACP. In response to our invitation, some local NAACP members came to our discussion of *The New Jim Crow*, and I said that if this congregation were to become serious about anti-racist work, a strong first step might be for some of us to start attending NAACP meetings to be in ongoing relationship with an organized group of people of color.² Along these lines, UU scholars have noted that **looking at the few Unitarian Universalist congregation that have been more racially integrated, “the most successful [have been] those visibly active in race relations in their communities”** (144).³

¹ “Today there are more African-American adults under correctional control — in prison or jail, on probation or parole — than were enslaved in 1850, a decade before the Civil War began.” — Alexander, quoted in Charles Blow, “Escaping Slavery,” available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/05/opinion/blow-escaping-slavery.html>.

² For more ideas similar to white people partnering with the NAACP, see Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, “Nonviolence for White People,” available at <http://www.redletterchristians.org/nonviolence-for-white-people/>.

³ In *Black Pioneers in a White Denomination*, Mark Morrison-Reed notes that other frequent factors seen in successful racial integration in congregations include “large urban areas,” “a large black middle class,” “intentionality,” and “time.” He continues that, “To distill this still further, it requires opportunity and commitment” (203-205). And on the frequently cited disjunction between liberal theology in UU congregations and more traditional Christian theology in many black churches, Morrison-Reed says that, “Despite the black church’s reputation for other-worldliness, it has met the needs of the present, Child care, food and shelter, funerary matters, the cause of civil rights, and voter registration are all concerns to which the black church has responded” (171).

And in the months since that study of Michelle Alexander's book [*The New Jim Crow*](#), members of this congregation, particularly Phyllis Liddell, have been continuing to work with members of Frederick NAACP. She has recruited at least 38 members of this congregation to pay the annual memberships dues to join and support the NAACP, and she plans to attend the Maryland NAACP [State Conference](#) at the end of this month in Ocean City with the Secretary and President of the Frederick NAACP. If you are interest in joining in with this work, I would encourage you to talk to Phyllis. If you don't know her, I'll be glad to introduce you.

Phyllis shares the anger and sadness that myself and others feel when we read those statistics about the extent of New Jim Crow and our Prison-Industrial Complex. But she and others are taking the all-important next step of asking, "What is the one next concrete action I can take to reverse this injustice?"

I've been reading a lot about the history of racial justice work among Unitarian Universalists, and a related piece of advice that stood out to me is from the black liberation theologian James Cone from 2001, when he was participating in a "three-day invitational consultation on theology and anti-racism at the Unitarian Universalist Association headquarters in Boston" (xiv). You can read the highlights of this conference in an excellent book titled [*Soul Work: Anti-racist Theologies in Dialogue*](#). Knowing how slow progress can be against entrenched inequalities, Cone offered both caution and encouragement: "**Set your pace as if you are going to that work for the rest of your life. There is joy in this work, because it enhances your humanity.**" (14).

And when I look at [charts](#) designed to evaluate progress toward what it would look like to realize Martin Luther King, Jr.'s dream of a Multicultural "Beloved Community," my sense that we're in the messy middle. For example, I feel fairly safe saying that we as a congregation see ourselves as "committed to inclusion." We are comfortable with "official pronouncements regarding diversity." And it's a vital first step to name that **we don't want to be part of perpetuating the problem of 11am being "the most segregated hour in America."** But, as we saw earlier with the spoken meditation, there are ways in which we are "unaware of habits of privilege and paternalism."

Let me say a little more about what I mean. The evidence is clear over the past few

decades, that Unitarian Universalists have made significantly more progress in our congregations related to gender equality and LGBT rights and than we have regarding racial equality. And that is not because we have not been trying. So the question becomes: what are we doing wrong?

Mark Morrison-Reed is a UU minister, who has written extensively both about his experience growing up as an African-American in Unitarian Universalism, which he calls a “White denomination” and about the history of African-Americans in Unitarian Universalism. He invites Unitarian Universalist to consider that we are more of a “tribal,” “ethnic” group than many of us are conscious of. He offers this scenario: if you were walking down the street in a large city and passed congregations that were “Filipino Baptist,” “African Methodist Episcopal,” or “Catholic church with services in Spanish,” we would in each case be able easily to see the tribal/ethnic characteristics of each in turn. And for most of us, if we were to visit one of those congregations, then **it would take significant time and effort to become acclimated to all the cultural differences.**

Morrison-Reed invites us to have “eyes to see” that despite our best intentions, there are significant ways in which much of Unitarian Universalism remains a white, middle-class, professional, Eurocentric monoculture. And those who are not white, liberal European-American Protestants have to do a similar sort of cultural work to fit in that would be required for a white European to fit in to a Filipino Baptist, AME, or Spanish-speaking Catholic service. (If you’re remain unconvinced of the ways that too much of Unitarian Universalism has a white-bias, I invite you to Google “[Stuff White People Like](#),” and consider that website in light of Morrison-Reed’s point.)

To support his point, Morrison-Reed points to how much easier it has been for *white* women and *white* LGBT folk to find a place in our congregations than for people of color. The reason, he says, I think rightly, is that *white* women and *white* LGBT folk already shared the *white* cultural norms of UUism as it currently stands (299ff).

These insights reminds me of a time in seminary when we were focusing on multiculturalism and racial justice work. I remember asking one my African-American classmates if she would tell us more about some of the times that she had experienced unintentional racism in our divinity school. I appreciated the candor of her response. She said,

“Honestly, that sounds exhausting. I can’t save all you white people. You need to figure out a way to save yourselves.” I’ve thought a lot over the years about what she meant. And part of what she was saying relates to what Unitarian Universalists sometimes call “The Journey Toward Wholeness.” Limiting ourselves to a Eurocentric Unitarian Universalism undercuts the very ideals of UUism of radical interdependence, the beauty of diversity, and the centrality of justice for all people. And understanding our Universalism as about all people becoming part of a European monoculture is to recapitulate Europe’s past sins of colonialism and imperialism. Instead, in light of our worlds clear pluralism and diversity, a healthy, mature universalism is necessarily multicultural — and manifests the complex tapestry of what we call the interdependent web of all existence.

Along those lines, let me complicate matters a little more. Decades ago, the struggles for gender equity led us to see that the word “man” is inadequate to refer to both men and women. And at this point, gender inclusive language has become so standard that I can’t imagine returning to the old patriarchal norm. Likewise, many of us have become increasingly skilled at understanding the necessity of spelling out LGBT or [LGBTQIA](#) for “Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Intersex, and Asexual/Ally. And as we look toward becoming more adept and welcoming in regard to multiculturalism, many racial justice activists point out that saying “people of color” masks important distinctions between African-Americans, Latinos and Latinas, American Indians, and Asian Americans — each of which has important sub-groups.⁴

And in particular, many Latinos and Latinas point out that, “Our issues have more to do with culture and language than with race.”⁵ Thus, one UUA General Assembly workshop suggested that perhaps one small first step of becoming more welcoming would be to add “*se habla Español*” to the name tags of members of our congregation who speak Spanish.⁶

⁴ The term “people of color” masks important distinctions — [Soul Work: Anti-Racist Theologies in Dialogue](#), 168.

⁵ “Our issues have more to do with culture and language than with race.” — [The Arc of the Universe Is Long: Unitarian Universalists, Anti-Racism, and the Journey from Calgary](#), 405

⁶ add “*se habla Español*” to the name tags — [The Arc of the Universe Is Long](#), 291

That is just one small step, and the journey to wholeness is long. But the vital part is to stay on the path toward inclusivity, welcoming, and multiculturalism — to keep taking that one, next, concrete action of building bridges and relationships of interdependence across differences.

And, yes, there are other vital issues along with racism: war and violence, classism, and climate change to name a few. And as daunting as each of these issues is alone, we make a mistake if we see them as in competition with one another. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said that “The Triple Evils of poverty, racism and militarism are forms of violence that exist in a vicious cycle. They are interrelated, all-inclusive, and stand as barriers to our living in the Beloved Community.” We need coalitions to face these interlocking oppressions together.

And although we do have a long way to go, and although we must confess that we have stumbled in the past, there is also much in our collective history to encourage us:

- In 1870, Meadville Theological School (one of our major UU seminaries) admitted its first African-American student.
- In 1889, Joseph Jordan was the first African-American ordained as a Universalist minister.
- In 1954, A. Powell Davies, Minister of All Souls UU in Washington, D.C. posted a list of integrated restaurants and requested that members use only these restaurants.
- In 1962, The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was invited to deliver the prestigious Ware Lecture at the annual Unitarian Universalist General Assembly.
- In 1965, James Reeb, a 38-year-old, white UU minister from Boston and member of All Souls UU in D.C., answered the call to march for civil rights in Selma. He was beaten by white segregationists and died two days later. Dr. King preached the [eulogy](#) at his funeral.⁷

Our challenge then becomes not only to know our history and to own our history, but also to take

⁷ The bullet-pointed dates from UU history are drawn from [*Journey Toward Wholeness: The Next Step from Racial and Cultural Diversity to Anti-Oppression and Anti-Racist Multiculturalism*](#), 25-28. Also see Mark Morrison-Reed, [*Darkening the Doorways: Black Trailblazers and Missed Opportunities in Unitarian Universalism*](#).

the next steps of making history for racial justice and multiculturalism in our own day.

For now, I will close with these words from the Peter Morales, the first Latino president of the Unitarian Universalist Association:

The tragedy — and it really is a tragedy — is that there are tens of thousands of Latinos, African-Americans, Asians, and, increasingly, people who come from mixed ethnic and racial backgrounds, who are UUs but do not yet know it. They are isolated, religiously homeless people. These are people who are living in two cultures, often feeling as if they belong to neither. They need the kind of community we provide; and we need them. They are the natural cultural and religious bridges to our more diverse future. But we do not reach these people.... And, especially, we never invite them to church. I am a recent UU, but I would have been a UU 20 or 25 years ago if someone had invited me and welcomed my family. My dream for Unitarian Universalism is that we confess that we do not have all the answers. We need to admit that this is hard work, that [Anti-Racism, Anti-Oppression, Multiculturalism] is as rigorous a spiritual discipline as we will encounter.... We not only have gifts to give each other, we are gifts to each other... Our journey toward wholeness has just begun. We are not sure of the way. We have often lost our way in the past, believing our destination was in sight and easily reached. We were a bit arrogant and a bit naive. We are wiser now. We know we will not get there soon. And we know we need to walk together and walk humbly. Come. Let's us make that journey together. One step at a time; *paso por paso*. Hand in hand; *mano en mano*. Come. Leave no one behind. Together, we can make this journey. Come.⁸

⁸ The final block quote from Peter Morales is from [*The Arc of the Universe Is Long*](#), 405.