

“Was Atticus Finch a Racist?”
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That was it. That was the moment for me, when, as a child, I realized something important had just happened in a film that I stumbled across late at night, on my parents black and white television, after everyone else had gone to bed. That moment, when the people in the colored section of the courthouse stood up to honor Atticus Finch, became seared in my child’s mind, as an important moment about standing up for justice even when the odds are that you will not win or when justice will not prevail.

After seeing that film, it began a childhood obsession with “To Kill a Mockingbird.” For those of you who may not know the story very well, it’s set in the segregated town of Maycomb, Alabama in the 1930’s. The story is told through the eyes of six year old Jean Louise (Scout) Finch. She and her brother Jem are the children of widowed Atticus Finch, an attorney in town who agrees to take a controversial case; representing a black man accused of sexually assaulting a white woman. The story begins in childhood innocence, as Jem, Scout and their friend Dill play games and make up stories about their reclusive neighbor Boo Radley but it takes a darker turn, as the trial and loss and eventual murder of Tom Robbins weaves themes of race, racism, social justice, and innocence lost throughout the book.

This morning, I want to look closely at the iconic novel and how it shaped particularly the white experience of race and racism in America; but more importantly, how Harper Lee’s recently released first novel with the same characters set twenty years later, “Go Set a Watchman” has, primarily for white people, changed the national conversation about race and racism for the better. And finally, I want to put this in the context of the Black Lives Matter movement in our country which is increasingly being viewed by progressives as the Civil rights movement of our day and being demonized by cultural conservatives in the same way that the Civil Rights movement was in the early sixties. With dozens of UU congregations across the country now displaying Black Lives Matter banners and more than a dozen of these banners now defaced or stolen, the power, the possibilities and the peril of being a majority white institution standing firmly on the side of both love and Black Lives Matter is becoming apparent to us. The question for us is – can we embrace both?

When I was growing up, the book had not been adopted as a teaching text in schools; so I had all these feelings about it – that Tom Robinson deserved a fair trial and that prejudice against him was wrong, but I didn’t have a venue to explore those values in any depth. I suspect those values are the reason why it’s been a popular novel to teach about racism. Harper Lee Biographer Charles Shields suggests the reason for the novel’s enduring popularity and importance is that “its lessons of human dignity and respect for others remain fundamental and universal.”

When I encountered Unitarian Universalism and discovered the first principle was to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of all persons, it connected with that earliest

understanding of what it means to be a good human being. When Atticus tells Scout “you never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view – until you climb around in his skin and walk around in it,” it connected with our 2nd principle – “justice, equity and compassion in human relations.”

The beauty and the power of the book as a teaching text is that it combines a number of themes, interwoven with tough questions, about the loss of innocence of childhood and illusion of safety; about segregation, about issues of race and class and about a white person standing up for justice, even when it’s evident that in this town, at this time, it’s a lost cause.

The fictional character of Atticus Finch, based on Harper Lee’s memories of her own father, also an attorney, became for much of my adult life, a model for how to be anti-racist. Certainly there were other civil rights heroes as my awareness grew; beyond Martin Luther King Jr. they included Bayard Rustin, Medger Evers, Chaney, Goodman and Schwerner, James Reeb and many others; but the image of a lone white person, standing up against the injustice of racism – against an entire town in the community in which he lived – left a powerful impression. I wholeheartedly embraced this story of the solitary white person who, standing up for justice, garnered the respect of the African American community because of working for justice on their behalf. I wanted to be like Atticus Finch when I grew up, and it wasn’t just me. Many new law students cite Atticus Finch as one of the reasons they wanted to go into law in the first place.

Where are the Atticus Finch’s in American Society today? Well, they don’t exist, and they never did in the way we want to believe they did. Atticus Finch of course, is a fiction in more ways than one. He became a kind of cipher for white people’s hope to be absolved of the gruesome legacy of racism in this country. Macon D, a white blogger who wrote in 2010 a provocative essay on “To Kill a Mockingbird,” tells us “The novel’s, noble, white-knight hero has no basis in reality, and the common white focus on the heroism of Atticus Finch distracts attention from the pervasiveness of the 1930’s white-supremacist solidarity among ordinary white people.”¹ By this he means that the reality of racism in the pre-civil rights era was that maintaining the status quo of separate and not equal was by far the more dominant narrative than not.

That’s why when Harper Lee’s highly anticipated first novel “Go Set a Watchman” was released this summer, it created a psychological, emotional and spiritual shock among those whom adored and admired “To Kill a Mockingbird,” as Atticus Finch was revealed to be a racist. Like the iconic image of the statue of a dictator being torn down, Atticus Finch’s legacy as a white defender against racism, had crumbled. Where that leaves us today, will be the focus of second half of this sermon. Before we get there, however, I’ve asked Abbey to read an excerpt from the novel “Go Set a Watchman.” It is still unclear as to whether Lee wrote this novel first, and then an editor suggested she shape it into what became “To Kill a Mockingbird” or if this is a complete novel, that she ultimately discarded. Regardless, we have it now.

In the novel, “Go Set a Watchman,” Jean Louise Finch is 26 years old, living in New York City, returns to her childhood home of Maycomb, Alabama to visit her father and her childhood friend and longtime boyfriend, Henry. She is staying with her father and Aunt Alexandria and in this scene, says goodbye to Atticus and Henry, who were heading out for the evening to attend a meeting at the courthouse.

¹ <http://stuffwhitepeople.do.blogspot.com/2010/07/warmly-embrace-racist-novel-to-kill.html>

“When the front door slammed behind her father and Henry, she went to her father’s chair to tidy up the papers he had left on the floor...She picked them up, arranged them in sectional order and put them on the sofa in a neat pile. She crossed the room again to straighten the stack of books on his lamp table, and was doing so when a pamphlet the size of a business envelope caught her eye.

On the cover was a drawing of a Negro; above the drawing was printed “the Black Plague”. She opened the pamphlet, sat down in her father’s chair and began reading. When she had finished, she took the pamphlet by one of its corners, held it like she would hold a dead rat by the tail and held the pamphlet in front of her Aunt Alexandria. “What is this thing?” she said. “It’s something your father brought home from a citizen’s council meeting” her aunt said. “Your father’s on the board of directors and Henry’s one of the staunchest members. That’s where they are this minute.”

Jean Louise Finch gets in the car and heads to the Citizen’s Council meeting, where she realizes that the two men she loves most in her life, her father and her potential fiancé, are members of the Citizen’s Council – the most racist organization in town, who actively oppose the burgeoning civil rights movement, who fear the presence of the NAACP in their town. In Jean Louise’ voice, Harper Lee writes: “The one human being she had ever fully and wholeheartedly trusted had failed her; the only man she had ever known to whom she could point and say with expert knowledge, “In his heart, he is a gentleman,” had betrayed her, publicly, grossly and shamelessly.

Sermon – Part II

One of the reasons I wanted to talk about “To Kill a Mockingbird” and the controversy around “Go Set a Watchman” is because both stories are interwoven with my own – and, if you are a white person listening to me this morning, perhaps yours as well. My story began with naiveté and the well-intended desire of my family to both shield me from the realities of racism and to mouth all the right liberal platitudes. Perhaps your story or family history is different, more like the family story we like to tell about Unitarian Universalism, a story of white people who marched in Selma, worked for racial justice, and sat side by side in protests. Whatever our personal or family histories, well intentioned white people in the past fifteen months have been forced to confront in new and deeper ways the multiple layers of white privilege and supremacy that are enforced by community institutions we support and need and value – the police, the military, legal and justice system and the legislatures. Institutions that for many of us were like Atticus Finch, examples of brave and faithful service operating like Justice with a blindfold to color and class, have turned out to be agents of the citizen’s council.

Our Atticus was a racist! We have to let him go. But it is in the letting go of cherished idols to see them – to see them and ourselves as part of a larger story – is the way we learn and grow and deepen our understanding of justice. When we consider this month’s theme of letting go – we not only let go of old hurts and wounds, we also can let go of pictures we have of ourselves as having all the answers – being certain about how to intervene in issues of social justice – or of ourselves as being separate from the current conversation and struggles around race and racism in this country.

It can be heartbreaking, especially for long time anti-racist white activists to feel uncertain and uninvolved and sometimes uninvited to this new rebellion of young black leaders. It is heartbreaking to pray today for toddlers killed in gang violence in black communities, and to

pray for the police who try to stop that violence and who risk their lives daily for safety and security; and at the same time not have that heartbreak distract us from the ongoing issues of police accountability. There is something we should remember and it is this: to be truly whole hearted about a commitment that's important to your life, you first have to know what it's like to have your heart broken. To feel whole hearted, you must first struggle with betrayal of the half-hearted and the cowardice of the fainthearted, and each of us who care about challenging racism and oppression will have plenty of opportunity for both in the months and years ahead.

One of the hardest things about the Black Lives Matter movement is that it has arisen in a widespread, millennial generation networked fashion. There is no *one leader* for the media to focus on like they do a candidate for office, so there is no head to cut off to try to kill the movement. There is usually no calendar of called actions like in SCLC style community organizing. There are instead reactive protests that keep insisting that the lives of black people who have dealings with law enforcement and civil justice do matter and will not be forgotten. The non-violent actions are witnesses in the truest sense of the word, groups of people testifying that actions that violate black bodies will not be ignored, that we are watching, and we all need to be watchmen.

Both the title of the book "Go Set a Watchman," and the inspiration for Bob Dylan's lyrics in *All Along the Watchtower*, come from the Bible's Book of Isaiah, Chapter 21, which reads:

"For thus hath the Lord said unto me, Go set a watchman, let him declare what he seeth. ... And he answered and said, Babylon is fallen, is fallen; and all the graven images of her gods he hath broken unto the ground."²

The Babylon of our time is white supremacy, and is under siege and falling and it is fighting back and it is scary. It will take whole hearted white allies if we are to watch it fall.

In the Dylan song, amazingly the most-performed of Bob Dylan's songs, and one that Jay will perform as the postlude, the artist sings: "But you and I we've been through that, and this is not our fate, so let us stop talking falsely now, the hour is getting late."

This late hour is a time for whole hearted truth telling and of letting go of comforting falsehoods. As NPR correspondent Errin Whack writes "Truths can be hard, and truths about race in this country are often the hardest – especially when the revelations are about those we love. If racism is helped along not only by cross burners in sheets, but those whom you have loved and emulated, it feels like too much to bear. The urge to look away is powerful... but to do so would be to reject the gift Lee has given all of us with the release of Watchman. "

Across the county some white people who have never done this before are listening and trying to understand, what Ta-Nehisi Coates said in his book "Letter to My Son," that ... *all our phrasing – race relations, racial chasm, racial justice, racial profiling, white privilege, even white supremacy – serves to obscure that racism is a visceral experience, that it dislodges brains, blocks airways, rips muscle, extracts organs, cracks bones and breaks teeth. You must never look away from this...* " Despite all the raw anger that has sometimes tuned to violence, despite the efforts to discredit the message and the movement that Black Lives Matter represents, what has been happening in our nation this past year is that for the first time in many years, for

² Whack, Errin. <http://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2015/07/16/423257877/go-set-a-watchman-is-a-revelation-on-race-not-a-disappointment>

the first time in the “post-racial” Obama Presidency, many more white people are not looking away from racism in all its forms. Hearts are being broken but hearts are also being made whole by renewing and re-discovering the deep spiritual work of being a white ally.

But to do that work, we have to let the Atticus Finch of *Mockingbird* go for more whole-hearted understanding of the complexities and conflicts that co-exist in every human heart. We do this without feeling guilty for the skin color we have, or the awareness we didn’t have. We do this open-heartedly, seeking to understand more than to be understood, and then, we simply continue to do the work.

Knowing that “*Go Set a Watchman*” describes the great white hero Atticus Finch as a racist doesn’t diminish my love of the original book, “*To Kill a Mockingbird*.” Instead, it has made me look more deeply at these difficult issues that are here and now for us to grapple with. The conversations that have arisen from the original book and from “*Go Set a Watchman*,” particularly among white people can, if done with an open heart and open mind, help us inch closer to building the world that we dream about – right here and right now – and that, my friends, is no piece of fiction.

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