

Two Dreams
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Appleton, Wisconsin
www.fvuuf.org

January 17, 2015

READINGS: from his 1963 "I Have a Dream" Speech" - Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

We have... come to this hallowed spot to remind America of the fierce urgency of now. This is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism. Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy. Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice. And so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream. I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal." I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a *dream* today!

from "Between The World and Me" by Ta-Nehisi Coates

... American reunion (after the Civil War) was built on a comfortable narrative that made enslavement into benevolence, white knights of body snatchers and the mass slaughter of the war into a kind of sport in which one could conclude that both sides conducted their affairs with courage, honor and élan. This lie of the Civil War is the lie of innocence, is the Dream. Historians conjured the Dream. Hollywood fortified the Dream. The Dream was gilded by novels and adventure stories... I, like every kid I knew, loved The Dukes of Hazard. But I would have done well to think more about why two outlaws, driving a car named the General Lee, must necessarily be portrayed as "just some good ole boys, never meanin' no harm" a mantra for the Dreamers if there ever was one..."

"To do evil a human being must first of all believe that what he's doing is good or else that it's a well considered act in conformity with natural law. This is the foundation of the Dream - its adherents must not just believe in it but believe that it is just, believe that their possession of the dream is the natural result of grit, honor and good works."

SERMON PART 1:

I'm a white person, and today's sermon is mostly about a white person's experience, because that's all I know. If there are any people of color in the congregation who find what I have to say interesting, it's a bonus. I've been preaching sermons on Martin Luther King weekend for the last thirty years, and most of the time in those sermons, I have used the word "we" and believed I was talking about all the Unitarian Universalists in the room. I'm not so sure about that any more. Questioning my qualifications to presume who "we" includes is one of the changes and the challenges that has happened to me over these thirty years of active engagement with undoing racism. Today I want to talk about these changes and challenges, continuing from the start that Connie gave us about how she looks back at what she believed about racism two decades ago when she lived in Beloit. My sermon today is also framed by two very different uses

of the word “Dream,” expressed by our two readings today. The familiar and inspiring rhetoric of Dr. King describes the ideal that encouraged me to care about racial justice, the aspirational dream that all people in this country should be judged by the content of their character and not the color of their skin. King’s Dream is a vision, inspired by his Christian faith and the possibility of Beloved Community which religion proclaims.

Ta-Nehisi Coates describes The Dream that had an impact on his life in a completely different way. Now in his late thirties, Coates is a journalist and writer for Atlantic magazine, whose recent book *Between The World and Me* has been widely read and critically acclaimed in both black and white communities. Some of you may have heard him speak at Lawrence Chapel this past fall. If what you hear today interests you, FIT Oshkosh is offering a six session monthly discussion of the book starting this Tuesday the 19th, either at Oshkosh Senior Center at 1 PM or the UW Alumni Welcome Center at 6:30. Coates is at the older end of King’s grandchild generation, and Coates’ middle school son is of the great grandchild generation. Despite all that has happened that has changed the legal and economic status of some layers of the African American community, despite Coates’ upbringing in a stable middle class family in Baltimore, the Dream that influenced him the most was not King’s Dream, but the one he saw on television, the dream world of white families living in comfortable suburban settings with problems that could all be solved by the end of the show. As Coates came of age and matriculated at Howard University, he understood that the white world he saw portrayed on television has its roots in the lie of reconciliation after the Civil War, and the fantasy that slavery had been ended by that war, rather than transformed and re-directed and renamed and recycled. In our “Time for all Ages” today, you heard us tell our children that Band-Aids can’t help heal major wounds. The American fantasy wants band-aids to heal all of it – wants the first black news anchor, the first black CEO, the first black president to make it all better, but it’s not happening. The original wounds that were part of the invention of America are still festering.

When I first started thinking and feeling about racism, which I never had to do until my late teens because I lived in an all-white world not unlike the Fox Cities, and because white people only have to think about racism if they choose to, I thought that the original wound of racism had to do with people who were prejudiced. I thought that prejudice was based in ignorance, and that if people just had opportunities to get to know one another better, prejudice could be overcome. That was the reason to change laws and integrate schools and stop redlining neighborhoods. It was to give people a chance to live and work together and get over their prejudices.

As time went on and I got deeper into this work, I learned something new. I learned that prejudice is not racism. Everybody can have prejudices about people they don’t know well. Racism happens when you have the power to enforce your prejudices with the power of law, culture, money, and the military. Racism was something different than I first thought. Then I learned something else that was new to me about the original deep wound of American racism. I learned that racial classifications aren’t biologically significant. In other words, I learned that whiteness didn’t have anything to do with what color your skin was, and neither did blackness. These were political classifications invented by European cultures to be able to control people that they colonized, or that immigrated to their countries. I learned that Irish people used to be black, or at least, not-white. I learned about apartheid in South Africa and the experiences of

many diverse American immigrants who were here before, or who came after the Europeans whose lives were controlled because they were not white. Of course, all of this was a long time ago, and it didn't have anything to do with me, because I certainly wasn't in control of anyone who was not white and I, of course, did everything I could to challenge or change laws or situations I encountered where the opportunities for people of color seemed different than the opportunities I had. Or did I?

I learned something else new about my whiteness from a 1988 essay published by Peggy McIntosh, a feminist scholar. She taught me that there were all sorts of ways that I benefitted from privileges as a white person that I completely took for granted, and did not think about, because they were part of my invisible backpack of privileges that I could use any time I wanted, without noticing them. It has taken twenty-eight years for the concept of "white privilege" to become so widely accepted that it's referred to in mainstream media and raised in town hall meetings in Democratic Party presidential debates. Changing ideas about race and racism move at a glacial pace. I wonder how long it will be before a TV newsmagazine personality or anchor will be able to use the phrase "white supremacy" and not be raked over the coals of political pressure as a result. Most white people are still pretty uncomfortable with the idea of white supremacy, and this is why. When most of us hear the term white supremacy, this is what we think of: (Screen shows a picture of a Ku Klux Klansman.) I certainly do. That's a white supremacist! I've never thought that a white supremacist might look like this.

After all, I've never thought that white people or white culture are inherently superior to any other culture, have I? But here's the thing – what if you don't have to think that way to act that way? What if the assumption that the cultural preferences, values, and rules of white people are the usual and right way to things? What if you avoid going to places or putting yourself in situations where there aren't many white people? What if the laws that you generally approve of because they seem to be common sense laws that protect the public good mostly protect the interests of the public that is white? What if the social systems, and structures, and institutions that are important and necessary, like the institutions of government, or the police, enforce a culture of white supremacy that is never explicitly stated in any constitution or laws any more but that is still there, because the Band-Aids didn't heal the wound?

This whole idea of the pervasiveness of white supremacy was a hard thing for me to wrap my mind around, and maybe you can't. Maybe it's what you'll want to argue with in the Congregational Response after I'm done or later in the Legacy Room. That's OK, but I hope you will consider the possibility that white supremacy is so built into the system in so many subtle ways that it is fair and accurate to say that a Black president can be part of the enforcement system of white supremacy, that a black-led military could be an agent of white supremacy, and that a black police officer killing another black person in the line of duty could be symptom of white supremacy. If you can't consider that possibility, then you will have trouble with one central event that motivated Ta-Nehisi Coates to write his book. He wrote it after one of his classmates at Howard, an unarmed young black man, was killed by a police officer. In the current climate of focused attention on white officers killing black men, I assumed the officer in this story was white, but he was not. Not for a minute does that matter to the direction that the book goes or the power that it has.

I want to ask Connie Kanitz to offer one more short reading from the book that speaks to the cost of living in a world of white supremacy to the personal lives of black people. We both found this passage to be very powerful.

READING: “All my life I heard people tell their black boys and black girls to “be twice as good” which is to say accept half as much. These words would be spoken with a veneer of religious nobility, as though they evidenced some unspoken quality some undetected courage, when in fact all they evidenced was the gun to our head and the hand in our pocket. This is how we lose our softness. This is how they steal our right to smile. No one told those white children, with their tricycles, to be twice as good. I imagined their parents telling them to take twice as much. It seemed to me that our own rules redoubled plunder.

It struck me that perhaps the defining feature of being drafted into the black race was the inescapable robbery of time, because the moments we spent readying the mask, or readying ourselves to accept half as much, could not be recovered. The robbery of time is not measured in lifespans but in moments. It is the last bottle of wine you have just uncorked but do not have time to drink, the kiss that you do not have time to share, before she walks out of your life. It is the raft of second chances for them, and twenty-three-hour days for us.”

SERMON PART 2:

Between the World and Me is in the form of a letter from Ta-Nehisi Coates to his son about his experience of being black in America and constantly fighting The Dream. For Coates The Dream is white supremacy, hidden behind perfect houses with nice lawns, and not Beloved Community. He writes: *for so long, I have wanted to escape into the Dream, to fold my country over my head like a blanket. But this has never been an option because the Dream rests on our backs, the bedding made from our bodies...*

...what I told you is what your grandparents tried to tell me, that this is your country, that this is your world, that this is your body, and you must find some way to live within the all of it. I tell you now that the question of how one should live within a black body, within a country lost in the dream is the question of my life.

As we look back at the first year of the Black Lives Matter movement and look ahead at the last year of the Obama Presidency, Ta-Nehisi Coates represents a new voice in a younger generation of black writers that is being listened to by white people who have reflected on racism for a long time, as well as white people who are relatively new to white anti-racist commitment. The distinctiveness of his voice should be of special interest to Unitarian Universalists. His is the voice of new generation of African Americans unimpressed with and uninvolved in the black church, which has been a center for African American power throughout the 20th century. The spirit of Christian ethics and commitment that influenced King’s civil rights movement is nothing more than a ghost in the Black Lives Matter movement, which has been rightly held up as the civil rights movement of our day. We would call Coates a secular humanist, and at times in his book that means his view of the world seems very bleak. He describes his philosophy of life as he came of age in these words: *“My understanding of the universe was physical and its moral arc bent toward chaos [and] then concluded in a box... Fear ruled everything around me, and I knew, as all black people do, that this fear was connected to the dream out there, to the*

unworried boys, to pie and pot roast, to the white fences and green lawns nightly beamed into our television sets.”

White fences, green lawns, pie and pot roast for everyone is “the American dream,” isn’t it? It’s the dream that makes immigrants want to come here, it’s the dream that politicians promise to make real, it’s the dream that all middle class people worry might slip out of our grasp – but we need to recognize that this American Dream has never been and never will be more than a fantasy to anyone who is not white, even if they have the money to buy it, because of the fear.

What Coates conveys so well in *Between The World and Me* is that for people who are not white, life is a minefield, where a hidden white supremacy explosion could wound, disable, or kill you if you take a misstep, make the wrong move, say the wrong thing. This fear for anyone who is not white is what lies between the world and me. It is a fear I know little about and can only imagine. There is a focus in Coates’ writing on the physical body and the damage that is done day after day to black bodies through stress, disease, violence in neighborhoods and violent encounters with people in authority. The psychological damage that white supremacy inflicts is described vividly but not analytically. It’s well-known, however, that all groups of people are affected by the stereotypes that others have of them and respond unconsciously under stress in ways that live up to the stereotype. As I read Coates’ book, I felt like I was being given a glimpse of a life that shares the same familiar spaces that I live in, but that inhabits a very different country. When I say “we,” most often I am only talking about the people who live in my white country, and I fear that it reinforces white supremacy to pretend that when I say “we” it means everybody.

I am sure that for some of you listening today this contention feels shocking, disappointing or heretical. As a lifelong UU, I grew up to believe that what human beings held in common was much more important than what separated us. I believed that underneath our skins, underneath our cultural differences, we are all the same, and that’s what we should focus on. It’s essentially what we have been teaching our kids in our RE programs all my life. But now, I think that’s a band aid. It’s a belief that’s not doing anything to heal the wound. It’s a belief that actually can be used to enforce and uphold white supremacy. More and more I have come to believe that it is our differences that must unite us. This is where a congregation like this one has a unique mission to white people that we can offer our community. We have experience affirming that differences are an asset and not a liability. We’ve created a religious community built on that belief, and we need to apply it to our understanding of what white anti-racist work can become.

One application of this understanding that many of our congregations have come to is that deep work on noticing white privilege and living with integrity in a culture of white supremacy is work that has to be done by white groups. If choosing to have a Black Lives Matter sign in front of our building means anything, for me the most important thing it means is that it represents the commitment of the white people who are inside this building to do their own work. People of color have their own internal work, and their own issues to deal with of living with the Dream. Multicultural groups are great opportunities for white people’s growth and learning and change, but much more when they are working on projects and tasks and topics of

common interest that are NOT about race and racism. Even better, white UU's need to be more intentional about seeking out contexts for multicultural experience in our area or in larger cities or in our personal travel.

In this Fellowship you affirmed a Racial Justice Action Team at your last annual meeting, and the leadership of this white group is currently working together in-depth to share their understandings of how white racism and white supremacy works in their lives and the lives of those around them, to see if they are on the same page and how their experiences and ideas differ. When they are ready, there will be more public announcements about ways you can become involved if you want to. There is a commitment on their part and on your ministers' part to see ongoing small group opportunities year after year in our Fellowship, both race-specific caucus groups and in multicultural groups, to move this personal work forward.

When I do a sermon like this and tell my own personal story of growth and learning over time in racial justice work, I know it's thick and demanding and isn't necessarily the inspiration you might have come today hoping to find. But it's what's real, in my experience, right now. White supremacy is what the Black Lives Matter movement is challenging, in ways that are often spontaneous and leaderless and aggressive. The generation that elected the first Black President is coming to terms with the fact that this unbelievable accomplishment didn't make a difference in what happens every day on the black street, and so they are going to the street to witness, and make sure that all of us cannot ignore what the black street experiences every day.

Sometimes I feel that the original Dream that Dr. King proclaimed has been shattered by the weight and persistent power of the White Supremacy dream. But Martin Luther King was no stranger to reality... In a sermon entitled "Shattered Dreams" he wrote: "one of the most agonizing problems within our human experience is that few, if any, of us live to see our fondest hopes fulfilled. Is there any one of us who has not faced the agony of blasted hopes and shattered dreams?" ... King then describes what happens to the human spirit when confronting the deferred or denied dream. He writes: "one powerful reaction is to distill all of our frustrations into a core of bitterness and resentment; another common reaction is to withdraw completely and become introverts... giving up the struggle and lifting their minds to a transcendent realm of cold indifference... a third way by which persons respond to disappointment is to adopt a fatalistic philosophy by stipulating that whatever happens must happen and that all events are determined by necessity..."

After describing these responses to frustration and disappointment, King asks: What then, is the answer? You must honestly confront your shattered dream."

I find myself wishing that King and Coates could talk to one another; and perhaps this sermon is my attempt to create that virtual conversation. For King, the antidote to despair is love, as witnessed and experienced in the Christian story of redemption. For Coates, the secular humanist who does not see the world through religious eyes, the antidote is brutal honesty, untempered by a story of salvation and redemption. For King, the goals of the civil rights movement were clear – overturn the laws that permit racism to exist and thrive in a white supremacist society. In large part, those laws have been overturned and each year on this weekend we celebrate those hard-won successes. But the work is not done; far from it, and

Coates's incisive and searing analysis of racism experienced by the black body tears off the lulling comfort of "The Dream," that many white people falsely believe is now possible for all Americans, regardless of the color of their skin. Neither of the two dreams is over, but now it's time for us to wake up and make a new day happen. May it be so.

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