

Why We Can't Wait (And Yet, We Do)

Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship ~ www.buf.org
Rev. Paul Beckel and Elizabeth Skinner
September 4, 2016

Harlem, by Langston Hughes, 1951

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore—
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over—
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

WELCOME

Today we gather to speak about racial justice. As a primarily white congregation in a primarily white denomination, we gather to reflect, and to learn, and, if we have the nerve: to change course.

Is it time for a change? When I thought about what songs we might sing today, looking back at the old freedom songs, I came across *The Times they are a Changing*. This is such fierce song, about dissatisfaction with the way things are, and confidence that it won't be this way much longer.

But I have trouble with that song these days. I know that the times really are a changing, but I can't sing with moral gusto about technological progress. And regarding our natural environment, how much heart can I put into singing "oh the climate it is a changing?"

And in regard to racial justice, unity, and equality: what does it mean that today we find so much relevance in the same songs, the same issues, and the same social divisions from 20, 40, and 60 years ago?

What does it mean for Unitarian Universalists that so much of our identity is wrapped up in the aspirations of the civil rights era—almost to the point where our nostalgia for the past supersedes our relevance for today—and yet we remain pretty homogenous...except, we do have a whole lot of diversity in our views about race.

My views are shaped by my own direct experience, having eight people of color among my in-laws, nieces, and nephews (but that's just a small fraction of my extended family...and we don't talk about race anyway). My views are also shaped by my indirect experience, mediated through movies, music, and Facebook, where I encounter an infinitesimal slice of reality, and lies, filtered according to my own preferences.

So it's not surprising that we have a diversity of views on race, based on our individual choices, plus those personal experiences that we did not choose.

As Unitarian Universalists we seek unity in our diversity. Thank you for gathering together today for this purpose. Elizabeth Skinner will say a few words now about BUF's leadership in promoting unity within diversity in today's intensely divided racial landscape.

At the 2015 UUA General Assembly in Portland, which many of us attended, our denomination as a whole committed to supporting the Black Lives Matter movement. In 2016, a resolution was passed asking us to step up our activism. In response to this, several of us at BUF initiated a Black Lives Matter Ministry Action Team. This year we will be offering opportunities for BUF members to explore the topic of racism and to act for fairness and justice in our community and our country. We kept the word "ministry" in the title because we understand the personal, spiritual, and moral implications of pursuing this work. I would like at this time to invite the founding members of the Black Lives Matter Ministry Action Team to come forward:

Heidi Ohana, Kara Black, Kaitlin Davis, Ro Donelson, Aria Curtis, Deb Cruz, Melissa Wayman, Marian Beddill, Erika Moore, Lauralee Carbone, Tessie Mandeville, Anne Albosta, Becky Curtis, Kay Witter, Christopher Loar, Loren Lundholm, Anastacia Lundholm, Genia Allen-Schmit, and Kate Sovell. If I've missed anyone, please step forward!

The Black Lives Matter Ministry Action Team meets at BUF on the second and fourth Mondays of each month. Please join us in this work.

CHALICE LIGHTING

GATHERING SONG *If Every Woman in the World* #1026

EXERCISE Generations: A Timeline

adapted from a program by Gail Forsyth-Vail, Director of Religious Education at North Parish Church (Unitarian Universalist), North Andover, MA

Seventeen people were invited to line up in the center aisle. Each of them read from a slip of paper, as follows:

I represent the first generation of West African people who came to North America as slaves. We came to Jamestown, Virginia in the year 1619.

I represent the children of those people, born between 1625 and 1650; and I remain enslaved.

I represent the grandchildren of those Jamestown slaves, born between 1650 and 1675, and I remain enslaved.

I represent those Jamestown slaves' grandchildren's children, born between 1675 and 1700. Many of my generation remain enslaved.

I represent their grandchildren's grandchildren, born between 1700 and 1725. Many Europeans have come now, and taken land for towns and cities, but I remain enslaved.

I represent the grandchildren's grandchildren's children, born between 1725 and 1750. The natives who used to live in the area have been driven out to make way for the expanding number of cities and towns in these British colonies, and I remain enslaved.

I represent the great, great, great, great grandchildren, born between 1750 and 1775. These British colonies have begun to clamor for political independence, stating that "all men are created equal." But we remain enslaved.

I represent the great, great, great, great, great grandchildren, born between 1775 and 1800. The British colonies are now a country: The United States of America. Many native people have lost their lands as the United States has become bigger and bigger. The cotton gin has been invented, meaning that the farmers can grow lots more cotton. It takes a lot of people to take care of the cotton. Many white people choose to get the help they need with the cotton crop by buying more slaves. Thousands more West African people, kidnapped from their homes, arrive in chains.

I represent the 9th generation of African slaves, born between 1800 and 1825. This country is twice as big as it was just a few years ago. Many white people are going West, looking for more places to build towns and cities. The cloth mills in the North are hungry for cotton, so farmers in the South grow more and more, needing more and more slaves. As more and more slaves arrive, I too remain enslaved.

I represent the 10th generation, born between 1825 and 1850. The Indian Removal Act of 1830 is pushing Indians from their land. Many Indians are slaughtered. In 1848, the United States takes a huge piece of Mexico and now rules over its Spanish-speaking citizens. There are now groups of people writing and speaking against slavery, but I still remain enslaved.

I represent the grandchildren's grandchildren's grandchildren's grandchildren of the Jamestown slaves, born between 1850 and 1875. The country has fought a civil war. The railroads have

been built by Irish and Chinese workers. The Indian wars continue in the West, as native peoples are forced into small areas of land called reservations. Slavery has been officially outlawed. I am no longer a slave, but people in power are working hard to limit my rights.

I represent the 12th generation, born between 1875 and 1900. There are now laws limiting who may come to this country and who may not. The Supreme Court has declared that whites and non-whites ought to be separated. I am no longer a slave, but the law says that I have fewer rights and privileges than white people.

I represent the children's children's children's
Children's children's children's
Children's children's children's
Children's children's children
born between 1900 and 1925. A world war is fought in this time, and women are finally allowed to vote. I still live and work under laws that separate me from white people.

I represent the following generation, born between 1925 and 1950. The country suffers the Great Depression – when many people lose their jobs – then fights in the Second World War. Just like the rest of society, people of color in the military are kept separate from whites. Whole towns full of new homes are built after the war for the returning soldiers; people of color are not allowed to live in many of those towns.

I represent the children born between 1950 and 1975. This is the time of the Civil Rights Movement and of Martin Luther King, Jr. At long last, the children's children's children's
Children's children's children's
Children's children's children's
Children's children's children's
Children's children
Of Jamestown slaves have achieved equality under the law.

I represent those born after the bicentennial year, 1976, while U.S. cities were raging over school integration, and in smaller cities like Bellingham, significant numbers of non-white citizens began to change our community's self-perception. Also during this period we experienced the racial turbulence following the beating of Rodney King. But as the new millennium dawned, we looked ahead with guarded optimism.

I represent the generation of today, born since September 11, 2001. I was born into an interdependent world where it has become increasingly clear that injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. Two generations have passed since racial discrimination was legally sanctioned, and our first African American president has been elected and re-elected. My generation will continue to tell the stories of our human struggles for freedom. And we will do our part to carry forward the dream.

Before you sit down, let's think quietly for a moment about our own family histories.
What are the stories of your parents and grandparents? What do your family's stories tell

about freedom, about opportunity, about struggle, failure, and triumph? What has the flow of these generations / generated? (pause) So it is.

READING Letter from Birmingham Jail, excerpt

Martin Luther King Jr's book *Why we can't Wait* is an expansion on his 1963 Letter from Birmingham Jail, an open letter addressed to white clergy who were encouraging King to slow down, and asking him to recognize that change takes time. King responds that he and his allies have not by any means rushed into confrontation. He writes: *In any nonviolent campaign there are four basic steps: 1) collection of the facts to determine whether injustices are alive; 2) negotiation; 3) self-purification; and 4) direct action. We have [earnestly, thoughtfully, painstakingly] gone through all of these steps in Birmingham.*

...We were not unmindful of the difficulties involved. ...We [had] workshops on nonviolence and repeatedly asked ourselves the questions, "are you able to accept the blows without retaliating?" "Are you able to endure the ordeals of jail?"

... We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed. Frankly I have never yet engaged in a direct action movement that was "well timed," according to the timetable of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the word "Wait!" It rings in the ear of every Negro with a piercing familiarity. This "wait" has almost always meant "never." ...[and] "justice too long delayed [has been] justice denied." We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God-given rights.

...I guess it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say wait. But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate-filled policemen curse, kick, brutalize, and even kill your black brothers and sisters with impunity; when you see the vast majority of your 20 million Negro brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society;

... There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over, and men are no longer willing to be plunged into an abyss of injustice where they experience the bleakness of corroding despair. I hope, sirs, you can understand our legitimate and unavoidable impatience.

... I must make two honest confessions to you, my Christian and Jewish brothers. First, I must confess that over the last few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not ... the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate who is more devoted to "order" than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says "I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I can't agree with your methods of direct action" who paternistically feels that he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by the myth of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait until a "more convenient season." Shallow understanding

from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection.

INTERLUDE

REFLECTIONS

Elizabeth Skinner

Good morning. My name is Elizabeth Skinner. I have been a member of BUF since 1999, and am a lifelong multi-generational UU. I wear many hats at BUF—I'm a member of the Community Night Dinner team, choir, women's retreat committee, and work on the landscape from time to time. Today I am wearing a new hat—as a member of the Black Lives Matter Ministry Action Team. I'd like to share with you why this ministry is so important to me. In June, 2015, a young man joined a Bible study group at the Emanuel AME church in Charleston, SC. He killed 9 participants in that Bible study class, including a 59-year-old woman named Myra Thompson. Myra Thompson and I were the same age. Like me, Myra was a mother and grandmother. Like me, she was very active in her church. She loved her family, friends, and church family. As this place is for me, Myra's church was her sanctuary—her safe place, her place where her soul could find solace, where her soul could soar. A place where she could let go of the stress and busyness of her week, find deeper meaning for her life, and give and receive on a profound level.

But Myra Thompson and I have differences too; differences in how we are seen by the world and the expectations we have of how we'll be treated. I don't worry about my white son getting pulled over by the police. If he does get pulled over, I expect him to get a pass, or at worst, to get cited for his transgressions in a civil manner. I don't worry about him getting abused or killed for something as simple as a traffic stop. I doubt any mother of a Black man or woman in this country can say they don't worry. I expect to get treated fairly in housing, in employment, and in any area of the service industry. I do not expect that I, or any member of my family, will die by violence because of the color of our skin.

I turned 60 last year. Myra Thompson was denied that birthday. This summer I had a milestone event—my 9 year old grandson was able to fly by himself and come spend a week with me. Myra Thompson and her grandchildren will never have that opportunity. As part of my personal journey to understanding racism in our country, I carry Myra Thompson in my heart and think of her and her family often.

I also understand and empathize with those of us who feel accused of being racist when the subject of racism and white privilege comes up. Last Thursday I was listening to The Record on KUOW during a discussion of the importance of white people confronting racism. The interviewee said that the biggest barrier is people feeling personally attacked and confronted. She said the answer to that is to discuss and understand racism as an institutionalized system; to understand that no one is personally at fault; and to work towards a broader understanding of the ways systemic racism harms us all. I quote from the Open Letter from the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) Regional Leadership to the Church in the United States and Canada posted on September 2, 2016:

“Our experience has shown us that racism is embedded in public policies and systems, favoring some people and discriminating against others. This “institutional racism” creates inequities between the poor and the rich, those with health care and those without, those who are welcome in our country and those who are not, those who face disparity in the criminal justice system and those who do not, those with access to good education and those who lack it. In health care, voting rights, education, criminal justice, immigration policy, and housing, we have a responsibility to name structural inequities, to join with others in the public square who are seeking the good of the whole, and to work for moral policy that roots out racism from our common life.”

Please join us this year as we offer opportunities for deeper exploration into how racism impacts our community and country, and what we can do to create positive change. I often hear in my mind the Sweet Honey in the Rock song: *We who Believe in Freedom Cannot Rest*. After I sing a bit of this now I invite you into a time of silence.

MEDITATION / SILENCE (2:00)

READING

In Nevada Barr's book, *Seeking Enlightenment*, she talks about being a law enforcement officer:

"[I attended a workshop with] a crusty old Wisconsin sheriff as a guest speaker. ...he asked the group what they did when citizens of an unsavory stripe talked back. One young man...said: 'I don't take shit off anybody. They give me shit, I take action.'

...The sheriff looked at this strong outspoken young ranger and said: 'As a law enforcement officer it's your job to take shit. Punks smart mouth you, you take it. Drunks vomit on you, you take it. Ladies spit on you because you wrote 'em a ticket, you take it. Taking shit is what we do. You damn well better get good at it.'

Barr continues: *I found tremendous wisdom in this. Once the concept that I was too good or too strong or too important to 'take shit' from anybody had been stripped away from me, once I had been not only given permission but told it was my sworn duty to 'take shit,' the work I'd chosen took on a different cast. What the sheriff had done was to factor pride and ego out of the mix. I no longer had to defend my image--whatever that was--but could focus on handling any situation that came into my purview: calm those who needed calming, educate those who needed educating, arrest those who needed arresting. To continue with the earthy metaphors, I no longer had to enter into pissing contests that served only to expend energy, waste time, and escalate the situation...."*

Here ends our reading.

REFLECTIONS

Let's not argue, today, about whether the piece I just read is more relevant to those who have sworn to enforce the system, or those who are determined to subvert the system. I speculate that each of us have been in both situations, and we will be again: enforcers, and subversives.

I believe that we can act with restraint *and* effectiveness, both when we are enforcers and when we are subversives. And I believe that we can get it wrong. Whether we're enforcers or subversives we can intentionally and unintentionally cause great harm.

Restraint and effectiveness require patience—the ability to wait and persevere. Skill and training and rules are also required, because in stressful situations we have to overcome our instincts to freeze, fight, or flee. None of these reptilian reactions are compatible with nonviolent action, which is action, alertness, not freezing or blocking out reality.

Still, in the nonviolent movement for racial justice Martin Luther King welcomed and treasured countless supporters who were self-aware enough to say: “No, I could not bear that kind of abuse. Please put me to work in another capacity.”

I want to help but I'm human, I have limits. I would do the movement no good if I put myself into situations in which I might not conduct myself with honor and respect.

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This week I heard that, in 1838, Georgetown University sold their 272 slaves. Prior to this the slaves had been contributing, mightily, with their work on university-owned plantations, but at this point Georgetown desperately needed a large capital infusion to stay afloat. I felt a connection to this story because Georgetown is a Jesuit institution, and not only was I educated by the Jesuits, I'm also suspicious that I may have been liberalized with their guidance.

Many ex-Catholics lack fondness for the Church, but I've always held on to my association with Jesuit education and the radical priests who liberated me from the authoritarian approach to religion that I grew up with.

And even those Georgetown priests of the 1830s were conscientious. They had their slaves attend mass in order to save their souls. And prior to selling the slaves, the priests did debate: would it be better to have the university go under? Or (and this was explicitly addressed) was it better to risk destroying the soul of the university by engaging in the sale?

This story of course led me to check out Harvard, from which Unitarianism sprang back at that same time. And it was pretty simple to find an article from the *Harvard Crimson* [Drew Faust, March 2016] about a similar revelation, made this year, about that University's complicity in the slave trade. This article's author does not suggest that Harvard should feel guilty about its history. Nor does she suggest that we today are morally superior. Rather, she recommends that we come to understand the attitudes and assumptions that made the oppressions of slavery possible—*understand the attitudes and assumptions that made the oppressions of slavery possible*—so that we can overcome what remains of these attitudes and assumptions in our world today.

She writes: *We should approach the past with humility because we too are humans with capacities for self-delusion, for moral failure and blindness, for inhumanity. If we can better understand how oppression and exploitation could seem commonplace to so many of those who*

built Harvard, we may better equip ourselves to combat our own shortcomings and to advance justice and equality in our own time.

Again this call for humility. That was the message of Nevada Barr too. Can we take our ego out of this conversation? Not that this is easy, but to whatever extent we can let go of defending our image, we can focus instead on handling the situation in front of us.

This is so important because whether we are the enforcer or the subversive, we will fail! We will get it wrong and at times we will not get it at all. And when we fail there will be consequences. And when subversives participate in nonviolent civil disobedience the deal is that we do not engage in the action if we cannot accept the consequences.

It's the same deal when we are the enforcers: when we make a mistake or overreach our authority there must be consequences.

This is so important to administer in society at large—and so difficult. Remember the steps mentioned by Dr King: first, in order to determine *if* what we suspect to be injustice is truly injustice, we have to ask questions, respectfully and unapologetically. We have to take the time to do our research.

Today, based on the research (not from my personal experience, or empathy for individuals who I love) but based upon overwhelming evidence, I believe that racial injustice is real, wicked, and entangled in many interdependent systems in the United States: in the prison industrial complex, in our immigration policy, in the war on drugs, in the allocation of public resources, police harassment, and relentless efforts to deny voting rights.

These systemic injustices are important, and difficult—and, *I believe* that they are possible to eradicate in society at large.

But most of us do not live in society at large. We simply bring our aspirations and our failures to our homes and workplaces, our neighborhoods, and our congregation.

And there too—at the speed of Facebook—we may encounter instances of potential injustice. Some of these will be real. Some will not.

And even when they are real, we should be wise about enforcing consequences. In many circumstances I believe we can do the most good by allowing one another to fail, to get things wrong—with the only consequence being a learning experience. And whenever possible, we can help one another to fail gracefully.

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I vaguely remember, some time in my teens, being taught the poem, “A Dream Deferred.” I do not think it was presented with its original name, “Harlem.” I cannot remember being given *any* context through which to interpret the poem. Or maybe *I was told* about the racial background of the author, and the hostile urban environment in which the poem was written...and I was unable

or unwilling to absorb this at the time. All I remember is being encouraged to interpret the poem for myself, based upon my own experience—which in that small Midwestern town was quite limited. So I thought that the poem asked an *intriguing* question, but not an important one. I didn't stop long to wonder: what kind of person would have a dream deferred?

I wonder now: why I knew so little. Were my parents and teachers trying to protect me from harsh realities? Were they too busy making a living to be political? Were they simply inexperienced themselves?

One parent who could not wait for his child to know about some harsh realities is Ta-Nehisi Coates who in his book, *Between the World and Me*, shared this letter that he wrote to his 15 year old son:

That was the week you learned that the killers of Michael Brown would go free. The men who had left his body in the street would never be punished. It was not my expectation that anyone would ever be punished. But you were young and still believed. You stayed up till 11 p.m. that night, waiting for the announcement of an indictment, and when instead it was announced that there was none you said, "I've got to go," and you went into your room, and I heard you crying. I came in five minutes after, and I didn't hug you, and I didn't comfort you, because I thought it would be wrong to comfort you. I did not tell you that it would be okay, because I have never believed it would be okay. 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.

Rev. Bill Sinkford, our first African American president of the Unitarian Universalist Association, now senior minister of our congregation in Portland, Oregon, shared this letter in an address to our national General Assembly this past June. Bill continued: "This is our country and this is *our faith*, and we must find some way to live within the all of it."

Then he talked about being at General Assembly in 1966, 50 years ago, when Martin Luther King came to address the Unitarian Universalists, and called upon us to lead as the moral guardians of society; he called us to be maladjusted to institutionalized oppressions perpetuated from generation to generation. And King received thunderous applause.

Because that is who we wanted to be. I believe that that is who we still want to be. It's central to our self-image that two UU white activists died in Selma: Rev. James Reeb and Violet Liuzzo.

Less central to our image is what has become known in UU history as the Black Empowerment Controversy. Back in the '60s, there was significant black participation in UU General Assemblies. And a variety of groups (some groups explicitly black-led and some explicitly multi-racial) a variety of groups formed to confront racism within and beyond our movement. But year after year as the various groups vied with one another to assert the priority of *their* mission and *their* methods, outrage and division ensued. And then when the UUA had a financial crisis and cut these groups' funds, the bulk of our black leadership felt disrespected and gave up on Unitarian Universalism, along with many white allies.

In the decades since then, we have instituted program after program related to healing racial divisions, diversity training, anti-racism anti-oppression and multiculturalism, and now support for Black Lives Matter. This has been important work, but at every step we've continued to snipe with one another about our methods, about who is using the correct language, and about our lack of results.

Progress has been slow, but each generation has produced tenacious new UU leaders, both Caucasians and people of color. Affirmative institutional support of ministers of color has led to growth in this area. We have maybe 100 ministers of color, out of about 1500.

In the intervening decades significant progress has been made within Unitarian Universalism, and society at large, empowering women, the disabled, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people. UUs have reflected internally, we've negotiated among ourselves, and we've taken to the streets to change ourselves and to change the system.

So why have we been less successful regarding racial inclusion and relevance?

In the UU World Magazine this month an article highlighted a newish congregation in the San Francisco Bay area which is thriving with young families and creative programs. But almost everyone in the congregation is white, in a community that is over 50% Asian, 15% Latino, and with the largest group of Afghani Americans in the US.

At the Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship, our most conspicuous Social and Environmental Justice efforts have been in developing relationships with our Native American neighbors, and with our partner, C2C, a farmworker/immigrants' rights group whose people are racially rooted in Mexico and Central America. But on Sundays you might look around and never guess that this is true.

Why is this?

- Do we not take racial injustice personally? (And when I say "we" please understand that I'm talking about the "collective we." I know that many, most, or maybe even all of us take racial injustice personally to some degree. But there is a thing called "us," a living breathing presence—an evolving identity that is US. So as I ask these questions please try to let down any defensiveness, leave the ego out of it, along with any speculation about who is to blame.)
- Do we not see the world as it is? And do we not then confront what is wrong in the world because we fail to recognize the power of our principles. Or do we shy away from using our power because we associate power with evil?
- Do we lack confidence in the typical activist methods: protest, resolutions, petitions, and posting on Facebook? Do we even lack confidence in voting? Do we lack imagination to do things differently?
- Are we short on time and energy, too busy just getting by?

- Do we get caught up for years at a time in fake problems? Distractions that we create for ourselves and between ourselves... or distractions we're lured into by insidious forces within our larger socio-economic system?

Rev. Peter Morales, our current and first Hispanic UUA president, wrote about UU social action in the UU World Magazine this month. He said: "I worry that we will fall victim to the progressive habit of declaring victory too early." [end quote] Is this because as a largely empowered group of middle class whites we're not willing to wait? Not willing to stick it out until it's over? So we prematurely declare victory and move on?

[Back to Peter Morales now:] "My hope is tempered by a tendency I have experienced among us in antiracism, anti-oppression, multicultural work in the last 20 years: we tend to confuse catharsis with progress." We tend to confuse catharsis with progress.

Morales, of course, is also using "we" to refer not to each and every UU, but to US, this sprawling, evolving, inspired and imperfect, increasingly multiracial body of which you and I are a part. I can hardly wait for us to learn new ways to live within the all of it.