

“A Dream Deferred”
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Unity Church-Unitarian

Worship Leader: Rob Eller-Isaacs
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READING: Harlem — Langston Hughes

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 just explode?

READING: from Teaching Community: Pedagogy of Hope — bell hooks

...The movement from talk to action is often a perilous journey. Yet like all great adventures, it positively transforms us. We become more fully ourselves at the journey's end — made whole. Parker Palmer speaks of moving through fear as we begin to learn new ideas, new ways of seeing the world, as we confront differences with no need to annihilate them, confessing: “I am fearful. I have fear. But I don't need to be my fear as I speak to you. I can approach you from a different place in me — a place of hope, a place of fellow feeling, of journeying together in a mystery I know we share.” Dominator culture has tried to keep us all afraid, to make us choose safety instead of risk, sameness instead of diversity. Moving through that fear, finding out what connects us, reveling in our differences; this is the process that brings us closer, that gives us a world of shared values, of meaningful community.

READING: Sister Outsider — Audre Lorde

We were born in a poor time
never touching
each other's hunger
never
sharing our crusts
in fear
the bread became enemy.

Now we raise our children
to respect themselves
as well as each other.

Now you have made loneliness
holy and useful
and no longer needed

now
the light shines very brightly
but I want you
to know
your darkness also
rich
and beyond fear.

SERMON: A Dream Deferred — Rob Eller-Isaacs

I don't even know where to begin. This subject of this morning's sermon is so personal, so significant, and so potentially divisive that I hesitate to speak of it. What worries me most is the possibility that cynicism and complacency have set in. What worries me most is, that having tried and tried again to root out racism and having failed and failed again to do so we have given up. Knowing my own deep reticence to thrust my hand again into the wound how can I ask you to put aside your doubts and hope again?

I started school the same year the Chicago Public Schools were ordered by the courts to move toward integration. Five year-olds like me except that they were black, were bused across the Midway to attend Miss Dickey's kindergarten class. We were fearful. We were proud. We were the first of a new generation of Americans who would "end the racial nightmare, achieve our country and change the history of the world." Miss Dickey had taught kindergarten at Ray School for 40 years. She knew her business. Children are children, she must have told herself, robins are robins, skipping is skipping and spring will always be spring. She felt no need to change a thing. They'll learn, she thought, they'll learn.

This sermon was announced as an overview of the history of the response of the Unitarian Universalist Association to racism and an appraisal of where we stand today. I've tried to avoid the topic. It would be some much easier to allow the myths to stand. Most of us believe we have always been at the forefront of progressive social change. But for every activist there has been a shirker, for every abolitionist there has been slaveholder, for every organizer against a war there has been an advocate supporting it. History is always subjective and as May Sarton says, "memory makes kings and queens of us." We want our stories to reflect the best we've been but we often learn more from the ways that we've failed.

In 1956 a young Unitarian minister, a recent graduate of the Divinity School at Harvard came west to Chicago. He had sung with the Glee Club and spent time in Vienna with Herman Grossman and famed Vienna Choirboys and he had an idea. He wanted to establish a children's choir, which would be intentionally integrated, exceptionally well-disciplined and which would sing in many languages and styles. His intention was to create a choir, which would be both a literal and figurative expression of interracial harmony. And he did just that.

At first it was only an unusually good children's choir over at the Unitarian Church. But Christopher Moore had a vision and he had the focus and the energy to make that vision real. Within a few short years that little group became the Chicago Children's Choir. Now almost 50 years later it has become the largest choral music program in the country serving more than 2300 children and operating what has been called "the very best charter school in America."

It all began because the church was integrated. In 1946 the Women's Alliance had taken out an ad in the Chicago Daily News. In it they expressed their exasperation with segregation and extended an invitation to people-of-color that would like to consider becoming involved with a liberal church. It was utterly naïve and it was extremely effective. It's important to note that they did far more than extend the invitation. They extended themselves as well. They opened their homes and their hearts as well as the doors to the church. They integrated not only the pews but their dining room tables as well.

I can't imagine that they weren't afraid. But their fear was overcome by their devotion to the gospel of freedom and conscience that ran in their veins. Ten years later Chris Moore came to town. And soon thereafter children's singing brought new life, new hope, new strength and yes, new vision to the church, to the neighborhood and to the city. I grew up singing in that choir. I grew up in a closely-knit extended family that included children from every neighborhood and every walk of life. Rich and poor, black and white and every other color you can imagine all held together by the music and the dream of true community. That experience, that visceral experience of harmony is at the very heart of everything I do.

On the evening of March 9, 1965, three young Unitarian Universalist ministers came out of Walker's Café in Selma, Alabama. Within moments they were attacked by racist thugs, who called them "niggers" and beat them with baseball bats. Two days later, James Reeb was dead. The board of the Unitarian Universalist Association had been scheduled to meet the day after James Reeb died. They met and hurried through their business. They then recessed the meeting having decided to reconvene in Selma the following day. More than a hundred of our ministers and another hundred lay leaders joined them down in Alabama. Linking arms and singing with thousands of others who had come to Martin's call, they made their way across the Pettus Bridge and headed for Montgomery.

Chris Moore went down to Selma. I begged him to let me go with him. I wept when he insisted Selma was no place to take a child. I was 13 at the time, almost old enough to understand, still too young to be much use. Those who went to Selma speak of it as a pivotal moment in their lives. I want to believe it was a defining moment for our free faith and for America.

In that hard March of 1965 the agenda seemed clear. Racism was acknowledged as the Nation's original wound. There finally seemed to be consensus that legislation, integration, affirmative action and economic development would heal the original wound. Three years later Martin King, Malcolm X and Bobby Kennedy were dead and that consensus had begun to come apart.

The Unitarian Universalist Association was not immune to the disillusionment and despair that set in 1968. We tried integration and we failed. Now the black pioneers in our traditionally white Association, a tiny minority, divided between the integrationists and the separatists. Each side had its reasons. Each side had its allies. I was aligned with the separatists; the Black Caucus. We were utterly disdainful of those who didn't share our views. "Can you explain this separatism," my ancient, wizened Grandmother Sophie asked. "I don't understand why people who care about each other and want to change the world would feel the need to work apart." "Only equals can ever really meet on level ground," I told her. "So black people need to be off on their own to develop their own strength. Then, maybe there's a chance we'll find ways we can be together." She just shook her head and looked at me with pale-green, all-knowing eyes as if to say, "it seems too simple."

And it was. Both sides had good intentions but when I look back on how our little church approached those heady, agonizing days I feel nothing but dismay. We were so convinced that we were right. We wanted so to make a difference that we set aside the first and most important lesson those who hope to change the world must learn. Everything depends on who comes to the table. "A world of shared values, of meaningful community" can never be achieved when people are excluded because of ideology.

I admit that I have flung the label "liberal" as an epithet. I thought of myself as a radical then. Liberals were people willing to compromise in the interest of their own comfort. I was young and impassioned. I wanted to be willing to risk it all. A racist world was not a world worth living in. I admired the Panthers who said they were willing to lay down their lives for the community. Malcolm's straightforward dictum, "by any means necessary," made good sense to me. I acted out of adolescent righteousness. I thought that I was acting out of solidarity and love. I know now I was driven then by grief and by frustration. Grief at losing that sustaining sense of harmony I'd experienced as a child. And frustration that racial justice, which once had once seemed close at hand, was still a dream deferred.

In 1969 the Black Caucus established the Black Affairs Council. The Council in turn asked the Association to allocate \$1 million over four years to help fund economic development in poor black communities. Though the General Assembly voted yes to the request, the Board of the Association soon discovered we would be unable to fund the initiative. A powerful sense of betrayal set in. Many of the key leaders of the Council left Unitarian Universalism convinced that once again black people had been left out in the cold. And many of their white allies felt doubly betrayed, first by the Association and then by friends we thought had shared our faith.

After the little agony of what has come to be known as "the empowerment controversy," Unitarian Universalism shied away from a concerted attempt to confront institutional racism. Individual congregations still fought the good fight. But as an association we stood back from the brink of radical change.

Now more than 30 years have passed and Sunday morning is still the most segregated time of the week in America. In the past few years Unitarian Universalism has begun to try again. This time we are starting with ourselves. We're taking time to understand the failures of our history. This time we have begun with a confession of our own impoverishment and an acknowledgment that we have at least as much to gain as we have to give by confronting racism. This time we recognize the ways that privilege plays into the racial equation. And this time we're far too wise to imagine we can buy our way out of centuries of complicity.

Now I know what I want to say to you. When I was a child I was caught up in a dream. I want to say caught up in the dream. That dream still has a hold on me. It just won't let me go. Hard as it is to be held to the obligations of that dream I humbly and with a chastened heart want you to know I will not let it go. Easy as it is to fill up every hour with far less daunting work, you and I are called by history and by the faith we claim to serve to dedicate ourselves to help to heal the Nation's original wound.

May it be so and amen