

Black Lives Matter—March 6, 2016

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I want you to know that until around 2000, I was not only an optimistic person but also a rather cheerful soul. At the end of April, I will be hosting poetry Sunday as a celebration of UUFDC's 20th anniversary, and I hope it will be a joyful occasion, but today, I am bringing to you the grim reminder, affirmed last summer by the Unitarian Universalist Association, that **black lives matter**. This should not be a controversial statement given the principles that are outlined in the movement's web site—justice, equality and empathy foremost among them-- but it has been made controversial for various political purposes. I want us to look at it through other prisms this morning—the prism of our values as UUs and a prism of concern for black women.

This topic may seem to be an odd choice for the Sunday closest to International Women's Day, since the media has focused on the movement as a protest against the incarceration of black men and the odds of their being beaten or shot by police. Today, however, I want us to think about it as a movement that *finally* expresses the hopes and fears of black women better than any movement since anti-lynching or abolition. Likewise, Door County with its infinitesimal population of black citizens may seem to be an odd place to draw attention to this movement, but I want us to think about it as a manageable laboratory for making a difference. And I may seem to be an odd messenger. Indeed, I am not a paragon of virtue in this regard, but I do have a long history of concern for black people and particularly black women

I'll begin with my own history. I was born in 1940 in the Dixie hospital in Hampton, VA—perhaps the only southern hospital at that time to train black nurses and to hire black doctors. I was almost certainly delivered by a black doctor and my mother was tended by black nurses. I never learned how she felt about that as a northerner who had been raised on a farm in upstate New York. My father, from a similar background, was a study in contradictions on the subject of increased rights for black people. As a teacher, he was happy to support bright black students in his classes but he was not tolerant of cultural differences or

sympathetic with the effects of poverty—although he himself was poor. As a child I lived for a year in Hampton, four years in Baltimore, a year in southern Georgia and half a year in Tallahassee, Florida without learning *anything* about black culture or about civil rights. I had a lovely African American biology teacher at the New England boarding school I attended, and in my senior year I was assigned a black girl--Ernestine Brazil--as my little sister. I went to the university of Rochester in a part of New York State where Frederick Douglass had been active during abolition, but I knew nothing about that movement and declined to participate in the sit-ins at Woolworths, to my shame.

My education concerning the lives of black people did not begin until I joined Chuck at Wesleyan University in 1964, where faculty members had participated in the freedom rides and in marches led by Martin Luther King, Junior. It was a rude awakening to learn what I had missed, and in 1966, I began to tutor three black high school girls with other faculty wives. In 1968, I had the opportunity to attend a weekend retreat led by the poet June Jordan—who later wrote for the Nation magazine-- as part of an urban redevelopment project, and I began to read black women poets along with Denise Levertov and Adrienne Rich. Thank heaven for feminist publishers.

After we moved to Appleton in 1969, Chuck and I became close to a brilliant male student—call him Gilbert-- who was in my freshman studies class at Lawrence and later lived with us to save room and board. Gilbert introduced me to the Harlem renaissance writers and to jazz—my favorite music. At UW-GB in the 70s, I began to introduce texts by black writers into my classes wherever I could, and in the 80s, I began to teach whole courses devoted to African American literature and culture—several of them focused on black women. I eventually published a long essay on Audre Lorde, whose litany for survival we heard in the reading. My strongest connection with the current movement, however, occurred in the context of friendships with three women in the 80s and 90s—a candidate for the M.A. degree at UW-GB, a colleague at UW Milwaukee's center for twentieth century studies, and a faculty wife at Lawrence.

What I learned from these friendships in the context of my reading and the experiences I have just described was the depth of pain that still existed in the lives of black women despite the supposed gains of the civil rights movement.

My student—call her Sheila-- was a woman in her thirties whose husband had an excellent job at one of the big paper companies. She had two teenage sons, and despite the family's middle class status and the prestige of Green Bay Packers in the community, she lived in constant fear that one or both of her sons would be stopped by a cop for some innocuous reason, would reach in his pocket for identification and be shot. I had no idea that such things could happen in the law-abiding cities of the Fox Valley, but her fears were grounded in a harsher reality than I had ever experienced.

My colleague at UW-Milwaukee, call her Cheryl-- was a joy. She was much younger than I, but we talked about everything. I was sorry when the year ended and sorrier still when she took a job far away. But when she came to Appleton for the jazz weekend at Lawrence University and we went downtown to look in some shops, the normally reserved storeowners followed us around and felt entitled to ask about her history. The same thing happened in Fish Creek when she visited us in Door County. She had a boyfriend, but it was clear that she had no intention to marry or have a family. Too risky. Too much to lose.

At Lawrence, my friend Pat was the wife of a man Chuck had hired in the Dean's office, and I introduced her to everyone I knew, but I think I was her only real friend on site that year. It was an awful year for her. Her oldest daughter was a freshman at Harvard, but her second daughter and her son were under constant scrutiny at the Catholic school in Menasha. The daughter was a leader who did not shy away from addressing the problems they encountered there, and the head priest was a frequent visitor at their home, but the younger brother could not cope with the constant reminders of his race. If they had stayed in Appleton, he would have been a basket case. Pat woke up every morning wondering what insult her kids would have to cope with today.

So I knew from these women, and from Gilbert's experience of walking down College Avenue followed by a car of men shouting obscenities, that the civil rights

movement had not been successful in creating a civil society that regarded African American people as equals—not only *de jure* but in fact, in daily life. Because I was in a university setting, however, I believed that we would make progress. I had no idea until around the turn of the century how far from that goal we were, and the revelations of the past three-five years make me first embarrassed and then disconsolate.

The experiences of my friends in the 80s and 90s are powerfully documented in a book titled *citizen: An American Lyric* by Claudia Rankine that was a finalist for the national book award for poetry in 2014. Rankine asked 22 of her African American friends to tell her about their experiences, and she wove their stories together with her own, including her take on Serena Williams' career in tennis, Katrina and the recent police shootings, into a book-length prose poem with some disturbing visual illustrations. In one poem, she stands in line at a bakery and a man steps in front of her. The person at the counter points out that she was next, and the man swears he didn't see her! She realizes that she was *literally* invisible to him. In another poem, however, she hears the cultural theorist Judith Butler say that human beings suffer from the condition of being addressable. Racist language renders one hyper visible. It demands, even conjures, the presence of the condition it describes. That is why it can hurt so much. In yet another piece, she recalls the phenomenon called John Henryism, where the person at-risk overachieves to the point of death to make up for feeling invisible or denigrated. It is a powerful book that defies both literary and social conventions, but it doesn't change the grim statistics we now have to face.

African American people make up 12-13% of the U.S. population, but black men make up 60% of the male prison population. One million black people are in jail—half of all imprisoned people in the U.S. One point two million black children have a parent in prison. The rate of incarceration is six times higher for black men than for whites. 33% of all black men can expect to be imprisoned in their lifetime. On top of those grizzly facts, in the first eight months of 2015, there were 700 cases of cops shooting or killing unarmed black men—most of whom were under 30 years old. In almost all of these cases, the cops have gone back to their jobs

without punishment. Only the most blatant cases have made the evening news. [www.killed by police.com quoted by Roger Kuhns in *The Last Move*.]

This situation is intolerable—not only because of the manpower and talent we are wasting but for the pain it causes for black women and their children and for the violation of our founding principles of justice and equality. A society so fearful or resentful that it allows small children to think they are superior to a whole race of human beings is a society in serious trouble. The kinds of things that have been happening to black men are so similar to what happened during slavery and the Jim Crow period of our national history as to send chills up my spine.

Since black women were in the forefront of the movements for abolition and against lynching, it is not surprising to me that the movement called Black Lives Matter was started by three women—Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi, who met through a national organization (BOLD) that trains community organizers. They discussed how to respond to the devaluation of black lives after Zimmerman was acquitted in the shooting of Travon Martin, and Garza wrote a Facebook post titled *a love note to black people* in which she said *our lives matter. Black lives matter*. Cullors replied hashtag BLM, Tometi added her support and the movement began.

Black lives matter has taken a very different form from SNCC or the Black Panthers, although it does not disavow any previous movement for black liberation. The most important difference is that it is not top-down. Chapters or groups using the name may form anywhere in response to incidents that violate the principles stated on the BLM web site. Garza, who has emerged as an articulate spokesperson for the movement asks only that organizers give credit to the creative work of the founders by not altering the name and that we preserve the focus on black liberation. She makes no apology for this focus—which includes women, LGBT and disabled folk, undocumented workers, those with prison records and those who have been denied the right to vote, in addition to those who have experienced discrimination on the basis of gender or any other preference or experience. The movement has 23 chapters and has spread abroad. Actions since 2014 number in the thousands.

There have been outraged critiques of the movement. The loudest has been the righteous claim that all lives matter—as if the society regularly included black people in *all lives*. But this claim misses the point that all lives are NOT under siege to the extent that black lives have been since the 1980s—not to mention the 350 years of slavery and Jim Crow.

Next we hear that much of the crime that results in incarceration is black on black, or some of the cops involved in shootings were black, so the problem cannot be racism. This misses the point that racism has affected black people's self-esteem, their living conditions and material well-being, their hopes and dreams and every conceivable aspect of their lives. It is the water they swim in, the air they breathe. As one journalist commented recently, if you don't believe that you will survive beyond 20, you will want to grab whatever you can before then. You won't want to be told not to wear baggy jeans and hoodies to school, not to play loud music in the street, not to smoke pot or deal marijuana, not to value the life of the street or the neighborhood. This is apparently what older black civil rights leaders have not yet understood. In the 60s, they could still hope to achieve civil rights non-violently. But the degree of state violence that has been marshaled against young black men since then makes that hope look like an impossible dream.

Further, even if you are a wealthy, well-educated, religious, upstanding member of a black, or white, community, you are vulnerable to atrocities from the society.

One of the most compelling stories in Ta-Nehisi Coates' brilliant book *Between The World And Me* concerns the death of a friend, Prince Jones, whose background and behavior would never have predicted his demise at the hands of any officer of the law. He was a graduate of Howard University, a well-dressed, well-spoken, upper-middle-class man on his way to visit his fiancée and her parents in an upscale suburb of Washington DC when he was ambushed by an undercover black cop with shaky credentials. The official story was that the cop mistook this young man for another whom he had been assigned to follow, but there was absolutely no resemblance (not even skin color) between his target and Prince Jones. The cop was not even charged with manslaughter. Coates reports

his interview with Prince's mother, Mabel Jones—a well known, highly respected doctor and university professor. She says, *"I spent years developing a career, acquiring assets, engaging responsibilities. And one racist act. It's all it takes. It was unlike anything I had felt before. It was extremely physically painful. So much so that whenever a thought of him would come to mind, all I could do was pray and ask for mercy. I thought I was going to lose my mind and go crazy. I felt sick. I felt like I was dying."* Coates says, 'She spoke like an American with the same expectation of fairness she took into medical school all those years ago, and she spoke like a black woman with all the pain that undercuts those exact feelings.'

The greatest irony may be that the people who believe they are defending white civilization against black degradation by upholding law and order might go on ancestry.com next week and find that they have a black slave in their heritage. Race is an unscientific construct at best, and it is calculated inconsistently and foolishly in the United States. Although one has to be 1/8 Native American to receive recognition as a member of a tribe or nation, throughout our history, one needed to have only a DROP of African American blood to be considered black! Some people have refused transfusions from donors who were said to have Negro blood, although there is no such thing. Given the mobility of our population and the degree of miscegenation that occurred on plantations right up to the Civil War as the deep South raced to harvest more and more cotton, it seems likely that quite a few of us have that drop of black blood. That is why Coates refers in his book to *people who think they are white*.

White privilege, stemming from bad science and poor education, has done enough damage to black people. It is way past time for this to stop. I wish I knew how to stop it. What I do know is that it will take many forms of action on the part of African Americans AND those who think we are white. The country tried to do reconstruction for 10-15 years after the civil war and then gave up—allowing the sharecropping system to take hold along with Jim Crow laws and separate but equal—which was anything but equal. After the civil rights laws were passed in the sixties, governments moved black people out of the center of American cities into housing projects built on the cheap while whites moved to well-funded suburban developments, and then we wondered why the separate schools were

not equal, blaming black fathers for their inability to find work in the gutted cities and for their diminished role in raising their families, for the poor performance of black children. Programs like Head Start were only a fraction of what was needed. Affirmative action was another fraction. Aid for Dependent Children another. It would have taken the whole village to rebuild the country so that all African Americans—not just the talented tenth--could have decent lives. But we were not that village. And it will take no less now to rebuild the lives of those black men who have been sentenced for nonviolent offenses because of our failure to curb the market for illegal drugs, or imprisoned for three strikes no matter how minor the offences, or now in the South, entrapped by fines and sent to what amounts to debtor's prison!

Last year on Justice Sunday, Chuck read a sermon by Rev. Breeden from the UU Church in Minneapolis that pointed out how much our current economic system depends on the theft of a whole hemisphere and the unpaid labor of more than four million slaves. It is time we came to terms with that debt, which is every bit as important as the ones we have run up in the more recent past through militarism or financial mismanagement.

So what can we do in the face of such rank injustice--such violations of our UU principles? Some of you are on Facebook. You might join in one of the many discussions on the side of Black Lives Matter. We might create a BLM action in Door County if an occasion arises. We might encourage our businesses to put a small sign in their windows to welcome customers regardless of their race or religion—as was done in Appleton around 2000. We could invite black people to speak here; I believe the last was the man from Madison who spoke about imprisonment. We could at least smile warmly as we pass black people on the street in Fish Creek or Sister Bay. People who do not feel welcome in their own land are not likely to thrive. If all lives really do matter, then we all owe it to the groups under attack to help everyone to feel welcome in this human community.

I have brought a handout from the Unitarian Universalist Association that you may want to discuss after the service or take with you as you leave. It includes books we could read together and actions we could take in conjunction with

other congregations. African American people have taken the leadership in this new civil rights movement. The least we can do is to follow their lead as our own lives permit.

USE AS CHILDREN'S STORY IF SMALL CHILDREN ARE PRESENT. There is a long tradition of cautionary tales in every known culture, and this is a modern example. It is a true story. I once had an African American friend named pat who came to live in Appleton with her husband and children. Pat and I used to walk together for exercise two or three times a week, and one day when we met half-way between our houses, she was quite shaken by something that had just happened on her way. A little girl—not yet in school--had called out to pat from her porch, I'm glad I'm not you! Because pat was a mom who loved kids, she stopped, walked part way up the sidewalk toward the porch, and gently asked why. The answer came quickly in a spiteful voice. Because my mama HATES people who look like you. And the little girl scampered into the house. Pat had heard such things before, but never from one so young or from one with so little reason to speak to her at all. It brought tears to her eyes. I wish I could tell you that there was a happy ending to this story but there wasn't. I consoled pat as best I could with a hug, but neither one of us could think why a such a young person would say something so hurtful or what to do to prevent it from happening again. We did not know the parents of this child. She had not broken any law. But the pain she had caused did not go away. The child's words did not break pat's bones like sticks and stones, as the nursery rhyme says, but they hurt none the less because there was absolutely no reason for the little to feel or call out her mother's bad feelings for a person whom neither one had ever seen before. I hope that none of you will ever have a reason to hate another person and that you will think twice before you use that word. Maybe it is ok to say you hate vegetables as our granddaughters do—beans and turnips probably don't mind—but please don't say you hate other people. Ok?