

The Patriotism of Cornel West

Sermon by Rev. Hannah Petrie

July 7, 2009

When I learned of Michael Jackson's death, I was sad, but really I was in a bit of shock. The next morning when I clicked on the radio right after waking up, knowing he was dead, but hearing fresh reports of it, I began to weep. I had a good cry over the loss of Michael Jackson, the loss of a great artist, and a great human being.

While it's easy to home in on the foibles of Michael's life, Cornel West defends Michael's struggles as part of a tradition of great artistry. The other night on the Tavis Smiley show, Cornel said, "Any great artist is wrestling with their sadness and loneliness, their fears, anxieties, and securities, and they're transfiguring those into complicated forms of expression that affect our minds, hearts, and souls, and remind us of who we are as human beings – the fragility of our human status, and the inevitability of our death."

I'm not surprised Cornel said this about Michael because one of the cornerstones of Cornel's brilliant thought is to embrace and speak to the dark side of our human existence. We are especially not good at looking at what Cornel calls the 'night side of America', and yet it's key to our healing and to becoming a great nation. For Cornel, it is actually patriotic to despair. He says:

"Those who have never despaired have neither lived nor loved. Hope is inseparable from despair. Those of us who truly hope make despair a constant companion whom we outwrestle every day owing to our commitment to justice, love, and hope. It is impossible to look honestly at our catastrophic conditions and not have some despair – it is a healthy sign of how deeply we care. It is also a mark of maturity – a rejection of cheap American optimism."

I love what Cornel is getting at here, because it gives me hope. I want to reject cheap American optimism as much as I want to reject cheap liberal religious optimism. Today, in honor of Independence Day, I want to be patriotic like Cornel, AND, I want to challenge you religiously.

First, let us set the stage for our current manifestation of potentially dangerous optimism. We are living in Barack Obama times. And like many, I have enjoyed the honeymoon of our new president. But the honeymoon may be over for Barack Obama. I love my president, and I love that Cornel West is one of the only black people who has enthusiastically taken on the role of being Obama's critic, even before he was elected. Critical thinking is part of the bedrock of democracy for Cornel; we are patriotic when we think critically – it's the kind of thinking that takes gumption. He says, "It takes courage to ask – how did I become so well-adjusted to injustice?"

In Cornel's view, while it's obviously progress for America to have a black president, Obama's presidency also sets the stage for complacency. Here is a paragraph from the wonderful article about Cornel West in the May 28th issue of Rolling Stone:

"[West sees the American Dream] as a menace to actual democracy, since it carries within it the idea that Americans are special, maybe even better than the rest of the world. West hears that narcissistic tone in Obama's insistence that 'in no other country on Earth' is his personal story possible and that his story is proof that America is getting better all the time. 'Every generation, the union is being perfected,' West paraphrases Obama. 'But that's a lie. There's retreat, setbacks, moving backward. The history of race in America is not a history of progress.' West thinks Obama's presidency may become one of those setbacks. 'Because you end up with a selective appropriation of Obama and people like him. And his cousins on the street, Jamal and Latisha and Shaquille and all of them, they're not a part of that. Their suffering is rendered invisible, as people are preoccupied with Obama and Co., who make whites more comfortable, lessen their fears and anxieties, and allow them to embrace him while still demonizing, marginalizing Latisha there!'"

In today's Obama times, it does feel harder to me to bring up some unpleasant truths about the poor, and the black poor especially. With all the focus on the economy, foreign policy, and climate change, who

wants to think about the plight of the black poor? We have a black man in the White House – isn't that base, like, covered?

But I want *to be willing to live the truth*. Cornel inspires me to try to love the truth, even when it's a hard truth. I want to love the truth so much that I'm able to think critically, and can speak the truth, so I can point it out and ask you even as I ask myself, *are you willing to keep track of the humanity?*

This question, *are you willing to keep track of the humanity*, is the UU version of the Christian question, are you willing to carry the cross – to carry the cross is no longer at home in our tradition, but it has been our tradition for centuries to fight for human rights, to answer these kinds of prophetic questions that Cornel asks: "What kind of human being do you want to be? What kind of legacy do you want to leave behind? What kind of witness do you want to bear? The prophetic question remains: *Are you willing to be in solidarity with those whose tears are flowing?*" Cornel West asks us, "I want to know: How deep is your love for the people? What kind of courage have you demonstrated in the stances that you've taken? What are you willing to sacrifice for? These are the fundamental questions. I don't care what color you are."

These are questions that are especially meaningful to me right now, I assume because I'm about to become a mother, and I'm thinking, well, who do I want to be to my child? Because who I am will play a big role in whom my child becomes. And while I struggle with knowing what it means or how it can happen, I do want to be in solidarity with those whose tears are flowing. It matters to me that people get stopped for driving while black on a regular basis in Pasadena. The failure of our public schools and the flourishing of our prison industrial complex disturbs me. The neglect of our children and youth and the reality of gangs pains me. We can't continue to ignore these problems anymore than we could before Obama became our president.

I wish I knew how, and it's part of my spiritual journey to *learn how to be in solidarity with those whose tears are flowing*. As you are well aware, many kinds of people's tears are flowing right now, and you may be drawn to tears other than those of the black poor. If you knew how, with whom would you be in solidarity with, whose tears are flowing? What humanity do you wish to keep track of? There is no shortage of suffering groups to choose from: illegal immigrants, the disabled veterans, the mentally ill, the addicts, the elders, the animals? And let me be clear that these are not groups of victims for whom we may be tempted to have the audacity to believe we can save; these are groups of survivors and warriors *with* whom we may be in solidarity.

With enough love, courage and most importantly, faith, we can learn how to be in solidarity.

For, *to keep track of the humanity* is a religious call on many counts. First, it rejects cheap optimism because it has to – to acknowledge there is a dire need to keep track of the humanity is to admit that there are great problems of mass neglect in our culture. You have to reject the passive, laissez-faire attitude of how you participate in the world. We cannot stand apart from the suffering, and see if things will get better. We have to get in the muck of it, and it takes a great deal of faith to be willing to do this. The function of that strong faith is that you are part of a tradition, you have the support of a religious community to give you strength and courage.

Cornel sites the activists being part of traditions in those readings I read earlier, the black church and black civil rights tradition. We may be tempted to think, yeah, but the black church tradition is a lot more potent and cohesive than the liberal white church tradition. I am tempted to believe that. But it's not true, because we saw it last Fall when we all came together to try to defeat Proposition 8. That was just one episode in a long line of justice-seeking episodes in the religious liberal tradition. Beginning in Europe we have fought for religious freedom, for abolition in this country, for children's rights, for suffrage, for compassion for any number of causes for those who suffer. Unitarian Universalists do have a religious tradition of keeping track of the humanity. If and when we decide we have to take a strong stand on abolishing state-sanctioned torture for good, we will be so driven because we are keeping track of the humanity.

This is one of those sermons that afflicts the comfortable, that tries to inspire you to comfort the afflicted. It is timely, because in these times of economic free-fall, we have to be careful to not become too self-absorbed with our own anxieties. At its worst, an economically anxious society tends to blame a group of people, as occurred in Nazi Germany. Rather than wallow in self-centered fear, or find someone to blame, be it bankers or immigrants or a political party, this is an opportunity to look at ourselves, and reject what Cornel calls the 'hotel-civilization.' It's time to discern what is more meaningful.

"There's something about American folk," Cornel says. "They're so obsessed with comfort, convenience, and contentment. It's just like living in a hotel where the lights are always on. That's why the great novelist Henry James called America a 'hotel-civilization.'"

The hotel-civilization revolves around consumption. This is dangerous, Cornel says, because commodification dominates more and more spheres of human life. He says, "The marketplace culture of consumption undermines community, undermines links to history and tradition, and undermines relationships. The very notion of commitment becomes more and more contested."

When we reject the hotel-civilization, we also reject our anxiety about maintaining our piece of the hotel-civilization. Our energy is freed up for far worthier commitments. I like comfort, convenience, and contentment as much as the next American, especially as I'm trying to get settled in my first house. I've got a lot riding on me and mine, and I am aware of this as I see every detail, left and right, in my new-to-me old house that needs to be fixed up. I crave aesthetic perfection. But man, I long for the comfort of commitment, a commitment to compassion and community.

This longing is patriotic, and is the universal longing for real democracy that is character building. Cornel says,

"Democracies are predicated not simply on . . . critical engagement, and examination of dogmas, but also on trying to shape a person's character in such a way that whether one is Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, secular, agnostic, or atheistic, *you must have compassion for something bigger than your own egocentric predicament.* You must be able to make connections across difficult boundaries."

In Barack Obama's Summer of Service, I suggest we all try to make some of those connections. If it's going to be summer until December like it was last year, I say the summer is quite young. There is plenty of time to stop, to take a good look at ourselves, and to patriotically start asking questions. As Cornel says, "It takes courage to interrogate yourself. It takes courage to look in the mirror and see past your reflection to who you really are when you take off the mask, when you're not performing the same old routines and social roles . . . it takes courage to wake up and stay awake instead of engaging in complacent slumber."

Let us not be complacent in these Obama times. If we really love Obama, then let us heed his call to serve our communities, let us heed the call of Cornel West to find our courage through our faith and religious tradition. Let us heed the call of Michael Jackson, in the best of his legacy, which in one place can be found in his song from the early 90's *Man in the Mirror*.

*I'm looking at the man in the mirror,
I'm asking him to change his ways,
And no message could have been any clearer:
If you want to make the world a better place,
Take a look at yourself,
And make that change.*

Now it's your turn to sing: please rise in body or in spirit to sing hymn # 159, (a song from the very white tradition), *This is My Song*.