



**NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN  
UNIVERSALIST CHURCH**

**Risky Business**

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September 27, 2009

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I begin with this poem by Langston Hughes:

THEME FOR ENGLISH B

*The instructor said,*

*Go home and write  
a page tonight.  
And let that page come out of you---  
Then, it will be true.*

*I wonder if it's that simple?  
I am twenty-two, colored, born in Winston-Salem.  
I went to school there, then Durham, then here  
to this college on the hill above Harlem.  
I am the only colored student in my class.  
The steps from the hill lead down into Harlem  
through a park, then I cross St. Nicholas,  
Eighth Avenue, Seventh, and I come to the Y,  
the Harlem Branch Y, where I take the elevator  
up to my room, sit down, and write this page:*

*It's not easy to know what is true for you or me  
at twenty-two, my age. But I guess I'm what  
I feel and see and hear, Harlem, I hear you:  
hear you, hear me---we two---you, me, talk on this page.  
(I hear New York too.) Me---who?  
Well, I like to eat, sleep, drink, and be in love.  
I like to work, read, learn, and understand life.  
I like a pipe for a Christmas present,  
or records---Bessie, bop, or Bach.  
I guess being colored doesn't make me NOT like  
the same things other folks like who are other races.  
So will my page be colored that I write?  
Being me, it will not be white.  
But it will be  
a part of you, instructor.  
You are white---  
yet a part of me, as I am a part of you.  
That's American.  
Sometimes perhaps you don't want to be a part of me.  
Nor do I often want to be a part of you.  
But we are, that's true!  
As I learn from you,  
I guess you learn from me---  
although you're older---and white---  
and somewhat more free.*

Some many years ago, now, after my one year in seminary, where I had gone mostly to avoid the draft, I was moving from Rochester, NY to Iowa City, IA to begin graduate school. It was the summer of 1970. I had spent the year in Rochester taking classes and working as a community organizer in an impoverished section of Rochester, a mostly African American neighborhood that backed up to the Penn Central rail yards. We worked on issues like street lighting and garbage pick up, hazardous waste stored in rail cars close by to homes, better policing that was sensitive to the community. We had some successes and some failures.

I would go house to house getting petitions signed and hearing concerns. It was an eye opener, mostly at how gracious and kind people were who had so little. Race tensions were high in Rochester. The city had had a race riot in 1964 – the first in the nation, I believe, of a series of riots in the mid to late 1960s. If you remember them, it was terrible – the 1960s, from riots in the north to marches in the south, it was if the whole history of racism had finally come to a boil and had exploded.

We watched buildings burn and people being hosed with fire hoses and chased down by dogs. We read of three little girls bombed to death in a church basement, of civil rights workers beaten to death. We watched children walking to school under the protection of armed troops and by-standers yelling and spitting at them. We witnessed the hatred of a Bull Connor or George Wallace, saw the courage of Medgar Evers or Stokely Carmichael, John Lewis and Martin Luther King Jr. – the whole range of human behavior – from noble to ignoble was there.

I was above it, in a way. Having grown up middle class and white and male, and even protestant, I had never experienced prejudice, or hatred for who I was. I guess you call that being privileged. I finished the year in Rochester, got a high lottery number, was sure that seminary and the ministry were not for me [ha ha] and was admitted in graduate school at the University of Iowa. I moved there via a trip to Mexico.

At that time, I had hair down to the middle of my back, a full and bushy beard, and was driving an MGB [a sports car for those of you who don't know – oh how I loved my MGB!] The car had New York plates. Outside of Baton Rouge, LA, I pulled into a gas station for gas. This was before the era when stations became almost all self-serve.

An attendant came out – I had worked in gas stations in high school so knew what that was like – and he leaned down to ask what I wanted. Fill 'er up was that typical question. He looked at me, stood up, then leaned back down, and said 'You better get out of here, boy.' And walked away. I left.

Just having come from Rochester, where I worked with a number of African Americans and where there were a number of African Americans in the school, and being in the deep south, I had some small sense of what it was to be on the other side of where I had been my whole life. It felt like racism in an odd way.

Racism – it is risky business. This summer Henry Louis Gates was arrested at his own home in Cambridge, MA; the president called the police response 'stupid' and remarked that if he were caught lurking outside his own home – i.e. the White House, he could be shot. Was it racism, was it not?

Recently, former president Jimmy Carter suggested that the resistance to health care reform, and Rep Joe Wilson's outburst during Obama's speech to a Joint Session of Congress were racist. Maureen Dowd said much the same – that the word not spoken by Wilson was 'boy' as in 'You lie, boy.' The Senate hearings for Sonya Sotomayor were riddled with racist innuendo. Obama has been caricatured as a monkey, Michelle Obama as belonging in a zoo. The Fox News website contained a report that the health reform attempt was really an attempt at reparations – for slavery – that whites would be taxed more and denied health care so that black Americans could get a disproportionate share of health care.

Of course we have been assured that this is not racist, that Wilson's comments were not racist – assured by white men mostly that this is not the case. Yes, Obama has denied it too, but what else would he say?

Yet the perception in this country is pretty much divided along racial lines – a majority of white people think that racial matters are mostly resolved; a majority of people of color do not. The economics are clear – Black Americans,

though great strides have been made, are still behind white Americans. Homicide is still the leading cause of death for young Black males and our prisons are disproportionately filled with black men.

All you have to do is drive through any major city and see a country partly divided by race, and by opportunity and lack of opportunity. Visit any of our high schools and see our children divided by race. Read any newspaper and learn how divided we are by race – the gangs of our cities, the foreclosures, the predatory lending. Visit an emergency room and notice the color of those seeking medical care.

Watch the US Senate, or the California legislature and count the number of black or brown or yellow faces. It is not that progress has not been made – it certainly has, but there is still a long ways to go.

But what about us? What about UUs? We have, from our beginning preached tolerance and justice, equality and freedom. It is true that many UUs were central in the abolitionist movement; it is true that we were deeply involved in the civil rights movements of the 1960s. Rev James Reeb was murdered during the march on Selma, Viola Liuzzo, a UU from Michigan was slain in 1965 working for racial justice. Our denomination was the first traditionally white religious organization to have an African American lead it – Bill Sinkford, our former president, and now Peter Morales, an Hispanic American is our new president.

We have made a commitment to racial justice, offered courses and programs to understand and deal with race and racism. Stories of courage and justice.

Of course, that is not the whole story.

Bill Sinkford wrote:

The difficulty is not claiming these stories as part of our history, our identity, our definition of who we are as a religious people. Since the stories are true, we should know them and even allow ourselves to be proud. The difficulty is that there are so many other stories about our faith's engagement with race that we do not claim:

Unitarian involvement and profit from the transatlantic slave trade.

Widespread Unitarian and Universalist opposition to the abolition of slavery.

The refusal of the UU Church of Atlanta to admit Black members in the 1950s, ultimately leading the American Unitarian Association to close the church.

Beginning in the 1950s, the flight of UUs to (often legally) segregated suburbs, resulting in the closing of many center city churches.

In the late 1980s and '90s, the failed attempt to launch new biracial congregations. Only one survives as an autonomous faith community.

The resistance among key leadership groups to including anti-racism as a key mission-based priority in the 1990's, as the Journey Toward Wholeness program was developed.

The rejection of ministers of color and the difficulty that ministers of color have had finding successful parish settlements, which is still an issue today. [The refusal of denominational support in the 1920s for an African American Unitarian minister who wanted to begin a church in Harlem.]

And of all the stories we have incorporating into our identity as a people, perhaps the most important is the Black Empowerment Controversy that began in 1968. Here are the bare bones as I know them:

Following Martin Luther King's assassination in 1968 (just three years after the events in Selma), Black communities in American cities erupt in violence; national broadcasters bring the "riots" into the nation's living rooms. At a conference

convened by the UUA to imagine a response to this violence, a caucus of Black Unitarian Universalists forms and makes demands of the Association.

The 1968 UUA General Assembly passes the caucus's demand for \$1,000,000 in reparations for Black economic development, to be administered by Black UUs. The tumultuous process leading up to the vote includes a walkout by many Black UUs, White allies, and youth. Not all Blacks join the walkout. In response, an integrated group (Black and White Action) forms and demands funding. Congregations and families ... are torn between the "separatist" and "integrationist" approaches.

But a financial crisis ensues and just more than half of the promised \$1,000,000 is ever paid. Many Black UUs – [like Bill Sinkford himself] - leave the faith feeling deeply betrayed. Unitarian Universalism, in most material respects, withdraws from engagement with racial justice.

Feelings ran very high throughout the Black Empowerment Controversy. Dana Greeley literally pushed his way to the front of the line at a microphone so that he could speak against the reparations. People spat at one another. This was not who we thought we were. People on both sides of the controversy were so embittered that some individuals on both sides refused to enter 25 Beacon St. again until I became President in 2001.'

So where are we now? This is no easy question. I want to leave, for a moment, the issue of race in our culture, except to say that while our country is better now than 50 years ago, the journey is not over. More blatant forms of racism have disappeared; we do have an African American as President. But subtle forms persist and may be the most difficult to excise. Wendell Berry wrote a book called 'The Hidden Wound' suggesting that racism is the hidden wound of America and the deeper the wound is hidden, the harder it is to heal and the more dangerous it can be.

Five years ago, some members of the church and I started what has become to be called Neighborhood People of Color. We meet monthly; we sponsor the Juneteenth barbecue after our Annual Meetings, have had a booth at Jackie Robinson Park during the Black History festival in February. We have had adult learning classes, and are partly sponsoring our intern, Mari Caballero, who joins us in October. We are having a potluck sometime soon – we are having a devil of a time scheduling this, so look for news - everyone is invited. We will have some music, a chance to talk more with Mari and with each other. Do come – kids are very welcome!

We are a relatively diverse UU congregation – there are no reliable statistics in our movement because we don't ask for that information – nowhere in our database to we record race or ethnicity. But we here at Neighborhood should be diverse. We live in a fairly diverse community.

But do we – I mean us here – want to become more diverse? I bet the answer is overwhelmingly 'yes.' But assuming that, let me ask the follow-up question: why? Why and how do we want to be diverse? Do we mean more diverse racially or ethnically but not theologically or culturally? Do we want to stay the same but just look different? Do we want to change our worship style – and this includes the music you know – to appeal to a more diverse population? Is hip-hop welcome here or North African percussive music or Indonesian gamelan music? As Langston Hughes put it – Bessie or bop or Bach – or all three?

What do we mean by diversity and, again, why? I have the feeling that for some for many years in our movement that we wanted to be more diverse mostly to prove how liberal and tolerant we are. I know this is true because it has been one of the motivating factors in me.

But this is just a shadow side of racism.

There are three elements to this: the first is social. We are dedicated, as individuals and as a congregation to expanding justice and freedom in our communities, those communities close by and worldwide. Listening to people of color here can help all of us understand the effects of racism in the world and so better counter them in society. This is anti-racism work as a part of our dedication to justice.

The second part is within these walls. Our world is changing and the world of our children is changing. I went to an all-white high school – there were not even any Jews. There was no internet, no global community then. Our children now go to very diverse schools – especially public schools - and are exposed to the whole world. If we – I mean us here – are to have our doors open to a new generation of UUs, we must be open to diversity, and all that comes with that.

This is no small task and no small deal.

The third part is our individual selves. This weekend, Jews are celebrating Yom Kippur – the Day of Atonement. I will talk about that in two weeks – it is our theological theme for October. But it fits for today as well. I am sure we all – regardless of the color of our skin – could atone for treating some people as ‘other’ as somehow less, as not as fully human, as we are. It is part of the human condition.

I mentioned at the beginning of the service that Rev Forrest Church died on Thursday. He was one of our giants and I plan on doing a sermon soon about him and his thoughts. He was fond of telling his congregation that just about everything he had learned about theology and religion, and ministry, he had learned from his congregation. I know just what he meant.

The congregations I have served, and especially this one, have given me many gifts in my life, mostly the gift of helping me see myself for who I am. I have always believed that we come here to this liberal faith because we want to be more free, that we seek to let go of what keeps us back and keeps our souls from growing. We come here to loosen the bonds of our spirits. Roots hold me close, wings set me free. We look for those wings.

In these five years, the conversations we have had in the People of Color group have helped me grow more free. I have heard voices I had never really heard before - - of prejudice and isolation, of courage and determination and love. I have faced where my prejudices lie, where the wound of racism is in me. I am indebted to them for their companionship on this journey in my life. I grew up isolated from race – in Minneapolis we considered the Irish, or Catholics another race – but that is not the world, at least not the world I want to inhabit.

It is risky business – to open yourself up to your failings, your prejudices and to open your heart to growth and change. Risky, but then anything worth doing involves some risk.