

To Be An Ally

Readings: 'i am accused of tending to the past' by Lucille Clifton
from *Killers of the Dream* by Lillian Smith
from *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates

The weekend that we remember Martin Luther King, Jr. is ripe for storytelling. There are so many powerful stories about race, racism, and the civil rights movements of yesterday and today. Today, I will share just a few of those stories.

The first story is from the 1950s. It is a story I learned through Rosemary Bray McNatt, a black Unitarian Universalist minister who is the president of Starr King School for the Ministry, one of our denominational seminaries. Before that, she was my minister in New York when I was in seminary. Before that, before she was a minister, she was a journalist employed by *The New York Times Review of Books*. She tells the following story.

'[I]n the middle of my seminary education, my literary agent called with an intriguing proposition. "Would I be willing to be considered as co-writer of Coretta Scott King's autobiography?" she wanted to know. I was one of several people being considered, but the book's prospective editor was said to be partial to me. I was more than willing to talk about it, and a meeting between Mrs. King and myself was arranged at the editor's office.

I didn't make the final cut of writers under consideration, but that is not why I tell this story. During an hour of wide-ranging conversation, I mentioned to Mrs. King that I was in seminary to become a Unitarian Universalist minister. What frankly surprised me was the look she gave me, one of respect and delight.

"Oh, I went to Unitarian churches for years, even before I met Martin," she told me, explaining that she had been, since college, a member of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, which was popular among Unitarian Universalists. "And Martin and I went to Unitarian churches when we were in Boston."

What surprised and saddened me most was what she said next, and though I am paraphrasing, the gist of it was this: "We gave a lot of thought to becoming Unitarian at one time, but Martin and I realized we could never build a mass movement of black people if we were Unitarian."¹

"Martin and I realized we could never build a mass movement of black people if we were Unitarian." was the decision they made in the 1950s. What does that statement stir in you? When I first read it, I felt surprise and then shame. Upon reflection I know that whatever it makes me feel, it is truth. It reflects the reality of our world. Martin Luther King Jr. would not have been as effective a leader for civil rights if he was serving a Unitarian Universalist congregation than he was serving a Black Baptist

¹ McNatt, Rosemary Bray. 'The Problem of Theology in the Work of Anti-racism: A Meditation.' in *Soul Work: Anti-Racist Theologies in Dialogue*. Eds. Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley and Nancy Palmer Jones. Boston: Skinner House Books, 2003. Page 27

congregation. If would not have been as effective a leader for civil rights serving our predominantly white, predominantly northern denomination.

This is about social location. Social location is the combination of social identities and social roles that shape how we view the world—and how the world views us. In seminary, when I wrote an interpretive paper – describing the way to interpret a passage of scripture or a way of doing theology – I was usually required to include a short paragraph about my social location. I would write that my perspective is shaped by my white racial identity, my American citizenship, being raised by parents who were both social workers, being Unitarian Universalist, being female, and particular life experiences. It's a powerful and humbling exercise to remember that what we know as truth is shaped by one's identities, roles, and relationships. It's powerful and humbling to remember that had the circumstances of one's birth or the systematic oppressions of our culture been different, the truth as we understand it would be different.

There are times that I wish that explicitly naming social location was not just a seminary exercise, but happened more widely in our world. Could you imagine what our presidential debates would look like if this was part of how we communicated? "As someone who inherited great wealth, my opinion about poverty is..." "As someone is male, this is what I think about women who have experienced sexual assault..." The tone of our political discourse would be radically different.

Now, another story, about a person from a different social location, also committed to racial justice. This is a story from the 1960s.

Viola Liuzzo was a white woman, a student at Wayne State University, an activist, and a spiritual seeker. She was not raised in a spiritual tradition and converted to Roman Catholicism when she married her second husband. She was a mystic who sought a personal relationship with God. She was an activist who wanted to make the world more just and more loving. In her 40s, she began attending the First Unitarian Universalist Church in Detroit. She had found a place where she could be fully herself. She became a member in March 1964.

Nearly a year later, the voting rights campaign began in Selma, Alabama. Jimmie Lee Jackson, a black activist was killed in late February 1965. Marches were organized and Martin Luther King called on clergy to attend. Dozens of Unitarian Universalist ministers came. The Rev. James Reeb was among them. He was attacked on March 9 and died two days later. Viola Liuzzo said she wanted to be a part of this movement for justice and so made the long drive from Detroit to Selma.

Her role in Selma was to welcome and register volunteers and to make airport runs in her car. She also participated in parts of the voting rights march from Selma to Montgomery. When that march ended, she and civil rights worker Leroy Moton drove five passengers back to Selma. Viola then drove Moton back to Montgomery.

Four member of the Klu Klux Klan saw Liuzzo and Moton stopped at a traffic light in Selma. They followed the car. Liuzzo attempted to driver away from the men pursuing her; she was unsuccessful. She began singing freedom songs, like the "We Shall Overcome," we sang earlier. Halfway between Selma

and Montgomery, the Klu Klux Klan member pulled up alongside Liuzzo's car and shot her. She died instantly. Moton, her traveling companion, was not injured.

Liuzzo's death brought even more national attention to the civil rights struggle. Reflecting entrenched attitudes about race, the nation responded to the deaths of Rev. James Reeb and Viola Liuzzo, the white Unitarian Universalist civil rights martyrs, in ways they didn't when black activist Jimmie Lee Jackson was killed days earlier. Perhaps it was because as the deaths accumulated, outrage grew. Perhaps the deaths of white people called the public and leaders to action in new ways. President Johnson called Liuzzo's widower Jim to offer condolences. He said, "I don't think she died in vain, because this is going to be a battle, all out as far as I'm concerned." Jim responded, "My wife died for a sacred battle, the rights of humanity. She had one concern and only one in mind... all men are created equal, that what she believed."²

Our next story is from 2014.

Just over a year ago, I sat with Tasha, a member of the congregation I served in Nashville, making costumes for the church's Christmas pageant. As we made haloes and crowns, Tasha told me about what she had been teaching her preschool-aged son. Tasha is the black mother of a black son and I share this conversation with her permission.

Tasha told me that she had been teaching her enthusiastic, energetic four year old son to muffle that part of himself when he's in public. In the grocery store, she tells him he can't grab his favorite foods and beg to put them in the cart. He can't jump and yell and run as much as his little body wants to. "But why, mom?" This little boy asks – and points out the white children are doing all the things that he's been told he can't.

That was a hard conversation and the questions it raised linger with me. How do you explain racism to a four year old? How do you tell this boy that because he has a black body, he will be perceived as older, less innocent, and guiltier his whole life? That his opportunities will be limited and people will not always see him for the playful kid that he is?

Tasha tries to explain the unexplainable by talking about what she calls "stinkin' thinkin'." "It isn't right," she says, 'but some people think that people with dark skin like ours are not as good as people with light skin. That means we have to be extra careful to be good and follow the rules. It isn't right. It isn't fair. It just is.'

This story calls me to action.

Perhaps the stories I've told this morning call you to action. Perhaps you are called to create a world where a black four year old can be his exuberant self in the grocery store. Perhaps you want to work for a church where the heirs of Martin Luther King Jr. could worship with us and build a mass movement of

² My source for the Viola Liuzzo Story is Giannino, Joanne. 'Viola Liuzzo: A Civil Rights Martyr.' *Michigan History*. September/October 2015. Pages 49-54.

black people. Perhaps you feel inspired by Viola Liuzzo to devote yourself body and soul to our collective liberation. Perhaps the two thoughtful reflections on whiteness, heartbreakingly similar though there were written 65 years apart, compel you to further explore how whiteness is a dream or a steel-like twisting frame, a distortion of ourselves and our souls. Perhaps they compel you to help awaken and free our white siblings.

One of the good things – perhaps the only good things – about a problem as complicated and intractable as the systemic racism that undergirds our country and our culture – is that there are so many ways to work to dismantle it.

Tenzin Gyatso, the 14th Dalai Lama in Tibetan Buddhism writes, “It is not enough to be compassionate. You must act. There are two aspects to action. One is to overcome the distortions and afflictions of your own mind... This is action out of compassion. The other is more social, more public. When something needs to be done in the world to rectify the wrongs, if one is really concerned with benefitting others, one needs to be engaged, involved.”

So we started by overcoming the distortions and afflictions of our own minds. We listen. We learn. We read Ta-Nehisi Coates and others writing thoughtfully about race. We follow Black Twitter to learn what black activists are writing and thinking about. We seek out news written by and for people of color. When people in our lives tell us about their experiences of racism, we listen. If we haven't yet, attend an Understanding and Analyzing Systemic Racism workshop put on by ERACCE – Eliminating Racism and Claiming/Celebrating Equality. I know many in this church have done that already. If you haven't, you can join me at the training in February.

There is a refrain in Black Lives Matter Movement – the modern racial justice movement started by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi, black queer feminist activists after Trayvon Martin was killed by a neighborhood watch volunteer in Florida. This movement has grown and brought more attention to black people who have been killed by police, vigilantes, and while in police custody. The refrain is “stay woke.” Stay woke. That is, stay awake. Keep paying attention. Those of us who live with privilege can drift back into the dream, can stop paying attention, in ways that are impossible for people who face oppression daily. In our day to day lives, we can so easily drift back into that dream, the dream of “perfect houses with nice lawns.” The dream of “Memorial Day cookouts, block association, and driveways.” The dream that smells like peppermint but tastes like strawberry shortcake.” But we need to stay woke. We are being asked to stay woke to the realities that so many live with. Can we do this?

Of course, learning and listening and staying woke are important, but they are not enough. The Dalai Lama reminds us, “When something needs to be done in the world to rectify the wrongs, if one is really concerned with benefitting others, one needs to be engaged, involved.” Again, since systemic racism is such a big, thorny problem there are so many ways to act.

For those of you who have been to an ERACCE training, please come to the gathering at 12:30 today in room 19. We will be talking about paths forward in transforming our congregation into an anti-racist institution. And if you can't come to the event this afternoon, please keep your listen and look for the plans that emerge from the conversations we'll have this afternoon. ISAAC, the congregation based

community organizing group that People's Church is deeply involved in, has decided to make racism one of its areas of focus for the next several years. There will be opportunities to become involved in dismantling racism in our community.

There are many other actions we can take, individually and collectively, to dismantle the systemic racism that lives in our culture and in us – to stay woke and help others awaken. We can become allies, followers, and supporters of the #blacklivesmatter movement. We can speak up when people—especially people we love and respect— say things that reflect the racism that we all live with. And when someone lets us know that we are the ones giving voice to that racism, we can respond with humility and curiosity.

We Unitarian Universalists and so so many others are committed to dismantling and unlearn a system of racial hierarchy that has been centuries in the making. It is hard, important, and painful work, work that will take generations. As we commit and recommit to our vision of the Beloved Community, the reign of love and justice, we need to offer as much forgiveness and grace as we can muster along the way. Courage, grace, and forgiveness are the only way through.

So on the Martin Luther King Jr. weekend, may we revere the holy stories and challenging stories of the past – and let them inspire our future action.

May we stay woke to the world around us in all its pain and all its promise.

May we offer one another—and ourselves—grace, courage, and forgiveness.

And may we do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly.

May it be so. May we make it so. Amen.