

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York  
“Respecting Black Bodies”

Samuel A Trumbore January 24, 2016

### Call to Celebration

Some of you who have been following me on Facebook will know that Philomena and I are just back from a delightful trip to Panama to celebrate our 25 years of marriage. We had a great time and I recommend Panama as a reasonably priced place to warm up if the winter blues show up in February or March and you can get away.

This is the third tropical destination I've visited, including Sri Lanka and Thailand, all of them not far from the equator. Our family spent six years in Southwestern Florida where I served the UU Fellowship of Charlotte County before moving to Albany. I've come to the conclusion that I have a disability when visiting places where the sun is very intense. I'm melanin challenged. Being deficient in brown skin coloring makes me very vulnerable to burning. As we traveled around Panama City, I usually was the only person I saw wearing a hat to protect my nose and ears from getting burned by the sun.

I'm reminded of a story I read in [the Sun Magazine](#) while we were away about another very light skinned, freckled boy who grew up in Hawaii. He found his lack of natural protection from the sun a great disadvantage too. He wanted to stay out all day on the beach swimming and surfing just like the other Hawaiian kids. But his skin wouldn't let him do it. And for trying to be a Hawaiian beach boy rather than a How-lee, as they called him, he has suffered greatly later in life with skin cancer.

I mention all this to say that there is nothing inherently better or worse about having light colored skin rather than a darker shade of skin color. They are just different kinds of evolutionary adaptations to our environment.

May we constantly be aware of and resist the stereotypes and prejudices that might give us a different message as we join together in the celebration of life.

### Reading

In his book *Between the World and Me*, author Ta-Nehisi Coates writes to his son, in part, these words:

...race is the child of racism, not the father. And the process of naming “the people” has never been a matter of genealogy and physiognomy so much as one of hierarchy. Difference in hue and hair is old. But the belief in the preeminence of hue and hair, the notion that these factors can correctly organize a society and that they signify deeper attributes, which are indelible—this is a new idea at the heart of these new [American] people who have been brought up hopelessly, tragically, deceitfully, to believe they are white.

These new people are, like us, a modern invention. But unlike us, their new name has no real meaning divorced from the machinery of criminal power. The new people were something else before they were white—Catholic, Corsican, Welsh, Mennonite, Jewish—and if all our national hopes have any fulfillment, then they will have to be something else again. Perhaps they will truly become American and create a nobler basis for their myths. I cannot call it. As for now, it must be said that the process of washing the disparate tribes white, the elevation of the belief in being white, was not achieved through wine-tastings and ice cream socials, but rather through the flaying of backs; the chaining of limbs; the strangling of dissidents; the destruction of families; the rape of mothers; the sale of children; and various other acts meant, first and foremost, to deny you and me the right to secure and govern our own bodies.

## **Sermon**

Ta-Nehisi Coates and his son, Samori, who was almost five at the time, were visiting New York City’s wealthy Upper West Side of Manhattan. They were inside a crowded theater to see the show *Howl’s Moving Castle*. At the end of the show, the two of them rode an escalator down to the ground floor of the theater together. Samori wasn’t moving quickly, dawdling a little as he exited the moving staircase. A white woman pushed him and said, in an angry tone, “Come on!” Coates took offense at the woman’s treatment of his son and lashed out verbally in anger at the violation of this presumptive, privileged woman pushing his vulnerable child out of her way. He immediately recognized the racial overtones of the moment. She most likely wouldn’t have done such a thing in the part of Flatbush where he lived. On the Upper West Side

however, she felt entitled to treat his son as an obstacle to be removed rather than a small bewildered child in an unfamiliar setting.

The woman shrank back in response to his harsh words, only to be supported by white man who rallied to her defense against this uppity Negro. The man crowded into Coates personal space with hostile accusations and Coates pushed him back. The man angrily said, "I could have you arrested." Returning subconsciously to the fury of the streets of West Baltimore where he grew up poor and vulnerable, Coates felt hot rage in his throat ... then restrained himself as he looked down at his son witnessing the encounter. (page 93-94)

The words, "I could have you arrested," expressed raw white privilege and dominance. From a lifetime of direct personal experience, both the white man and Coates knew the police would assume Coates was in the wrong, see him as a threat and potentially take his life, take his body from him, and make his child an orphan. This wasn't a hypothetical threat as we see again and again throughout America. If you are identified by an officer as non-white, frequently you are assumed to be guilty until proven innocent from the first moment of contact. Just ask Tamir Rice's family and friends.

Coates makes a powerful case for the physicality of racism in America in his recent book, *Between the World and Me*. From the time of slavery until today, the manifestation of racism is violence against Black bodies. Whether it is overt, through police violence, or covert, through the violence of Black parents disciplining their children with the belt to teach them they must submit to authority or die, the manifestation of institutional racism eventually lands on the backs of people of color.

Anyone deemed non-white usually figures out that the American Dream wasn't originally conceived with them in mind. Many have responded with protest because the language of the Dream, equality, liberty, justice and freedom for all, seems to include them. But as that dream is deconstructed, it becomes more and more clear that that Dream was designed first to serve the interests of the ruling moneyed classes and marginalize everyone else. That Dream uses racism as a tool to divide those of Northern European descent from everyone else. The goal of that division is to create conflict between the invented class of people who are deemed "white" with the other invented class of people called "black." The goal is to get them to fight over a few crumbs and not look at the ones sprinkling the crumbs on the ground for them to fight over.

Coates claims both categories “white” and “black” are complete illusions of systemic oppression that manifests as violence against black bodies.

You don’t feel the full force of this until you encounter someone who violates the stereotypes. Prince Jones was one such person whose death at the hands of an undercover police officer has deeply influenced Coates and embedded in him a lifetime commitment to resist institutional racism.

Coates met him at Howard University and was immediately attracted to his winning personality. Jones had enjoyed growing up in gated community style privilege. An excellent student attending private schools, his mother, the director of a hospital’s radiology department, gave him and his sister every reward of being part of the upper middle class world. Unlike Coates who had to survive by being street smart growing up with fear as a defensive shield, Jones enjoyed easy, rewarding, and safe relationships with those deemed white as well as black. He was religious and participated in the Christian church. His family traveled to Europe, and took nice vacations. The world was Jones’ oyster. He could have gone to Harvard, Princeton, Yale or Columbia. He chose to attend Howard University.

The police were looking for a five foot four drug dealer. Jones is over six feet tall. The undercover police officer dressed like a drug dealer followed him through Maryland, DC and into Virginia where an altercation happened and Jones was shot and killed blocks away from his fiancé’s house. The officer who killed him said he tried to run him over with his expensive Jeep, bought by his mother as a present. The officer may not have been credible because of the cases of his that had to be thrown out in the past because of the lies he told. At the end of the day, Jones was dead and the officer is still on the streets. That officer is Black.

At the memorial service held for Jones in Howard University’s chapel, many tears were shed and a few asked for the forgiveness of the police officer who killed him, calling on Christian charity. Coates offers no forgiveness, and rejects the Christian concept of redemptive violence. He rejects a God that sacrifices his son to save people. For him, when violence ends the life of a person, that’s it. There is no heavenly reward waiting in the wings.

This makes honoring those who survived violence or gave their lives during the Civil Rights Era that happens during Black History Month each year in February ... not make

sense to Coates. For him, there is no glory for Black people in enduring violence by fire hoses and dogs and tear gas. He does not accept the idea that the arc of the moral universe bends toward justice. He doesn't accept there is any divine plan being acted out with blacks playing the part of slaves in Egypt yearning for freedom. He doesn't embrace any narrative that sees himself as a chosen person. For him, Christianity is as much a tool of the Dreamers as the violence they use to elicit compliance.

The one place Coates experienced hope and the possibility of a redemptive vision in his life was at Howard University. He calls it The Mecca, a place apart from the world of the Dreamers. It is a place that celebrates not one way of being but an explosion of diversity where no one way dominates. The diversity of people from all over the world, the best and brightest of the African American community, come together to learn and explore how to be together forged in a culture of resistance. The common identity they share is recognizing the experience of exclusion by the Dreamers, of being identified as non-normative. And in that community, Coates experienced a liberating freedom from fear and rejection that filled his heart and spirit.

It is here that he put his inquisitive mind to work. Fired up by Malcolm X, he brought his attention to the excavation of a cultural identity he didn't get in school. The library was his refuge to seek truth and meaning in the archives and dusty back shelves, filling out his education, discovering the treasures of knowledge that helped him form a new identity, and a new vision.

And one of his discoveries was a painful one. Much as there is a common critique of the illusions of the American Dream, there is not a common narrative or vision that serves to bring unity to the diaspora of diversity. Scholars of African descent have been in conflict with each other from the beginning. Nor has there been a shared vision of how to attack and dismantle racism that has brought everyone together. And some, like the affluent Blacks who live in Prince Georges County, have segregated themselves from the ghettos of DC with Black police officers who are every bit as brutal against Black bodies as any white police force.

What I took away from reading Coates was a kind of resignation that there is little if anything those who are not identified as white can do to dismantle the powerful systems of oppression that subjects Black bodies to violence. The Civil War could reshape that oppression and lighten the burden a little. Having a Black President of the

United States could again modify some small corners. But the system is so strong and so powerful, those who oppose it are ground up and destroyed.

Coates takes some small comfort in the expectation that the Dreamers will ultimately not get away with it. The exploitation of Black bodies to grow cotton and corn, and harvest sugarcane has turned to the exploitation of black oil to run their machines, the machines that allowed them to reshape American society, to segregate non-whites in the cities and escape to the suburbs. Mother Earth, he expects, will not be gentle with whites as they disrupt her climate and pillage her resources.

Ultimately, Coates believes, the people who have the best chance of stopping violence against Black bodies are those who identify today as white. Those who enjoy the privileges of being identified as white are the ones with the power to begin to change the system. Many of those people are sitting in this room right now.

As the eleventh cousin of George Washington, as the descendant of slave owning farmers of an Eastern Shore Maryland seventeenth century land grant from England, that is definitely me.

The critical people to renounce the illusions of the American Dream are the Dreamers themselves.

Because of the predominance of people who identify as white in Unitarian Universalism;

because of our deep commitment to inclusion, welcoming and justice;

because of our history of resistance to the system of slavery;

because of the shedding of Unitarian and Universalist blood during the Civil War to preserve a Union without slavery;

because we have often been less than skillful and aware in our abilities to be a diverse community that welcomes people of diverse backgrounds, languages, appearance, sexual orientation and culture;

because we hold a vision of theological diversity that doesn't privilege one belief over another;

I believe Unitarian Universalism can be a home for those who are ready to envision and enact a society and a world that isn't based on the fiction of race but embraces a pluralism of identity. You have heard me talk about this again and again. Each time I come back to this vision it gets clearer.

As I read the glowing, reverent words Coates has for Howard University, I sensed an appreciation for what I've heard discussed by some of my ministerial colleagues of color. They too hold a vision of a potential for Unitarian Universalism. They hold a vision of a kind of pluralism that has parallels with the diversity in the yard at Howard on a warm spring day. They celebrate a willingness to embrace difference that infuses people with life rather than closes them down into a conformity with doctrine, etiquette and class boundaries.

Some of you heard some of this vision last Saturday when the Rev. Julie Taylor was here. On the streets of Ferguson, activists were tasting and experimenting with forming this kind of community within the purpose of resisting oppression. And by engaging in that process, they were awaking up from the dream of white privilege.

So here is my challenge for you, if you aren't challenged enough by everything I've been saying.

Are you willing?

Are you willing to reject the category of "white" as a defining principle for your identity?

Are you willing to begin to deconstruct, then reconstruct a new identity and purpose without the backstop of white privilege? Without the assumption of white dominance?

Are you willing enact that identity and purpose here and beyond American borders, rejecting the projection of an American Dream bound to oppression of non-white bodies?

I am. I invite you to join me in this effort.

## **Benediction**

Final words from Coates to his son at the end of his book to close:

The American Dreamers have forgotten the scale of the theft that enriched them in slavery; the terror that allowed them, for a century to pilfer the vote; the segregationist policy that gave them their suburbs. They have forgotten, because to remember would tumble them out of the beautiful Dream and force them to live down here with us,

down here in the world. I am convinced that the Dreamers, at least the Dreamers of today, would rather live white than live free...

I do not believe we can stop them, Samori, because they must ultimately stop themselves. And still I urge you to struggle. Struggle for the memory of your ancestors. Struggle for wisdom. Struggle for the warmth of The Mecca. Struggle for your grandmother and grandfather, for your name. But do not struggle for the Dreamers. Hope for them. Pray for them, if you are so moved. But do not pin your struggle on their conversion. The Dreamers will have to learn to struggle themselves, to understand that the field for their Dream, the stage where they have painted themselves white, is the deathbed of us all.

May we take these challenging words to heart and find a way to respond.