

Martin Luther King Sunday: The Face of Racism
 A sermon offered at Countryside Church, Unitarian Universalist
 Palatine, Illinois
 By the Reverend Hilary Landau Krivchenia
 Sunday, January 17, 2010

Readings

From Matthew Yglesias, progressive blogger and author.

...Was there a pact with the devil? I ... note that the Haitian Revolution began in 1791, years before Napoleon took over France as Consul. Napoleon III didn't come to power until 1848. So clearly Robertson is confused on the basic history. But I believe that Robertson is referring to the Bois Caïman Ceremony that in Haitian national story initiated the revolution. This was a Vodou ceremony and the following text is normally attributed to its leader, Boukman:

The God who created the earth,
 who created the sun that gives us light.
 The God who holds up the ocean,
 who makes the thunder roar.
 Our God who has ears to hear.
 You who are hidden in the clouds,
 who watch us from where you are.
 You see all that the white has made us suffer.
 The white man's god asks him to commit crimes.
 But the God within us wants to do good.
 Our God, who is so good, so just,
 He orders us to avenge our wrongs.
 It's He who will direct our arms and bring us the victory.
 It's He who will assist us.
 We all should throw away the image of the white man's god
 who is so pitiless.
 Listen to the voice for liberty that sings in all our hearts.

-- this was offered at the Bwa Kayiman Vodun ceremony, the August 14, 1791. The Haitian Revolution, started on August 22, 1791.

If you were a white, Catholic French person or Haitian plantation owner, I can see why you would characterize this as a prayer offered "to the devil." The black Haitians are postulating the existence of two Gods, one for the whites and one for the blacks. The whites regard the God they pray to as the one true God. So if the blacks are praying to some second god, and doing it with a Vodou ceremony, it stands to reason that they're engaged in a satanic ritual of some sort.

But there's no reason for 21st century Americans to accept this interpretation of the story. From the Haitian perspective, I think you'd say they were just praying to God for his assistance and asserting the justice of their cause. This is what pretty much everyone does before heading into battle.

From the I have a Dream Speech of the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King Jr.

... one hundred years later, the Negro still is not free. One hundred years later, the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity. When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

... Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked "insufficient funds." But we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation. So we have come to cash this check — a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice. We have also come to this hallowed spot to remind America of the fierce urgency of now.

We cannot walk alone. As we walk, we must make the pledge that we shall always march ahead. We cannot turn back. There are those who are asking the devotees of civil rights, "When will you be satisfied?" ...we will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.

...

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

I have a dream today.

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.

This is our hope. With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood.

Sermon

When Barack Obama was elected president of the United States, it was an historic day – a day for rejoicing and celebration -- a man of color had been elected to the, theoretically, most powerful office in the world. Pundits around the country wondered -- is racism over, then? But racism is not a momentary cultural aberration that one election will change – it's not something that we can check off our list of things to worry about and it's not something that we can check off our list of things to work on. It eats away at our society and our world. Like many progressives I'd like to bypass this work – and take my own good intentions on faith. I'd like to think that I'm beyond the need for examining racism in my society and even more in myself. After all – my own father marched on Washington DC when the Reverend Doctor gave his famous speech on the steps of the Lincoln memorial. But – racism haunts me – it haunts us all whether we see its shadow behind and within us or not. And there is a spiritual, a religious reason for

facing this matter – because it is central to the way in which the world – the modern world in particular – has been torn to pieces and these pieces have fallen to us. Our spirits are weighted down by this – our moral and spiritual imaginations and our moral, spiritual and political freedom is limited by this reality. On this Martin Luther King Sunday I am going to talk with you about racism because it touches us all and because we are far from the end of racism.

We saw its face as Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans – in the lack of infrastructure to protect a city with a large black and poor population. We saw its face as the federal government failed to respond to our own people as though they were an ocean away and in another country.

We saw its face as reactionary mouthpiece, Glenn Beck, whined that he thought that President Obama was a racist and hated white culture. And we have seen it again as Pat Robertson was willing to say that Haiti had made a pact with the devil and, therefore, had called its suffering down upon its own head.

These are only dramatic examples. What I want to do is to go a little deeper into my own mind and to invite us all to go deeper – so that we can become more aware – as we – mostly white folk who sit here – long to live up to our own best hopes. We are all folk who desire a world of equality and even of healing, where the suffering of the past can be salved and the future can be built on new trust. But that will take considerable work.

If you think of the word racist – it may conjure up certain images. For me growing up – a racist was someone – probably with a southern twang, a piece of straw hanging out of his mouth, little education, and a gun strapped across the back of his pick up truck -- a person I could pick out of a crowd. I remember sitting in at the Pittsburgh Board of Public Education to support bussing to integrate the schools. The room was large and crowded. There was excitement in the air – we were sitting in to change history and to make justice roll down like waters.

But civil rights and school integration didn't erase racism and all the minor and major advances leading to the election of President Barack Obama haven't erased racism. It is deep in our society.

It is hard to talk about without causing anxiety and yet the anxiety lives within us – whether we are conscious of it or not.

As I grew older I remember noticing things I was uncomfortable with in my own mind. I was “progressive, unbigoted.” Still, if I was walking down a lonely street and there was a black man or black men on my side of the street I felt discomfort. Sometimes I'd gloss it over as though it wasn't real. But, I knew that it was cultural training that made me uneasy. I'd stay on the same side of the street breathing into my awareness of the gulf between the races. Sometimes it would make me painfully aware that there was a place within me where race was an issue – a place where there was a sharp recognition of the importance of race and of the divide in our society and the ways in which I had, without my own permission, internalized that divide.

We are creatures of duality – it's taught to us – black and white – from an early age. In part the way we divide the world up is simply about learning to see ourselves – self from other. We come into the world without boundaries and we need some, to know and protect ourselves. Sometimes I read the beginning chapters of Genesis and know that

these words are meant to help us know that there are differences. But I also know the survival mindset out of which those words came –

“1 In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. 2 Now the earth was unformed and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters. 3 And God said: 'Let there be light.' And there was light. 4 And God saw the light, that it was good; and God divided the light from the darkness. “(JPS translation)

Day and night, form and void – we are used from our most primal to draw lines and distinctions. Some are helpful and allow us to know ourselves, celebrate differences, remember what we enjoy and find kindred spirits. But this distinction between self and other can easily be taken to diseased extremes where the other becomes that Other with a capital O. Different – even evil. It was easier for slaveholders to feel at home with ownership of other human beings because they were Other – not quite human. Other lines and distinctions cut us off from our selves as well as from other people.

We each know that there is a dominant culture in America and around the world - - even in places where white people seldom walk there is this same dominant culture. You can see it on a bottle of coke – even when it’s offered with a smile. It’s what made it easy for infant formula companies to sell formula to developing nations – they carried the added credibility of the dominant culture and could get women who had for free the best nutrition a baby can get – breast milk – and convince them to purchase a less healthy alternative with the meager money that they had. There is a dominant culture and to survive we are each taught early how to get by in it. The lessons can be subtle. We want to survive. And we do what we have to, to survive – or what we think we have to do...

Each one of us comes from a unique ethnic blend. Perhaps Eastern European, Roumanian, Irish, Indian, Japanese, African. For some of us – those ethnic roots are generations back – for some – they are fresh and living. But all of us have learned in subtle and not so subtle ways that we have to trade away the bulk of that ethnicity to belong – to succeed here in the melting pot – or in the larger world. There is a dominant culture and it is considered the norm – the right way. Its clothing, literature, schedule, calendar, manner of speech, demeanor and restraint – are the standard – and the color and special earmarks of our ethnicities are matters for humor at best. Celebrated, when we are lucky – but mostly kept pretty quiet. Otherwise it may unleash the anxiety of that dominant culture – that the balance could shift – that it might not be the norm – that there might be a spectrum – a rainbow of possibilities – of equally valid paths. It’s easy to see it when that xenophobia arises in a Foreign culture – some Islamic leader points to our western culture and criticizes it. We know it is that cleric’s lack of understanding – “if they only knew us...” At home – the ways our ethnicities are judged is, sometimes subtler – but as we sacrifice them to fit in we find ourselves bereft of something real and nourishing -- something that grounds us and helps us to know ourselves and our own strengths, woes, histories, and common stories. We are severed from the past. We may eagerly eat the stuffed cabbage, pirogis, samosas, matzoh ball soup – but we are often left with a hunger for something deeper.

It’s not just about skin color – it’s about monolithic and homogenous culture. A culture that asks our conforming in order to survive. Conforming is the price of belonging. It begins with skin color because that’s where the line was drawn in the 18th century. It was in the 18th century that the conditions of enslaved white skinned people,

native Americans, and Blacks were so miserably alike that they began to work together to achieve fairer working conditions. And it was, then, that skin color and the rule of one drop of African blood came to be used to define the line between those simply exploited and abused for their labor and those enslaved not only for life – but for the lives of their children and their children’s children. It wasn’t only that laws were passed that created lines of race and privilege – but a new consciousness arose that separated people of color from white folk of all classes

Separation by race has been so complete that each race and ethnic group has lived in separately and seen the shared world through such separate lenses that the structures that sustain the separation are only apparent when they block our movements. In the Middle East there is a 24 foot wall isolating the West Bank from Israel. On the Israeli side it looks like highway walls you might see here – only twice as tall – it may even, as I saw at one check point, have a large tourist painting showing the many things to be enjoyed in Israel. The same wall on the Palestinian side is cluttered with the rubble of demolished buildings, curled razor wire and the signs of fires of protest. Here we used to see signs that said colored fountain or no colored at this pool. Yet here the signs are no less real... You may remember the research done by Jane Elliot back in the 1960’s when she divided a third grade class into the blue eyes and brown eyes. She had the blue eyes be superior to the brown eyes and put a felt collar on the brown eyes for the time they were marked as inferior. Then she had them do simple class projects. In every case the children performed better when they were the blue eyed group. They took longer and had less energy in the brown eyed group. The children said it was harder to think about what they were doing. She asked them why and they all agreed – they just kept thinking about the collars they were wearing. It’s true today. We knew that when Barack Obama was elected it was in spite of that collar – in spite of the low expectations placed on Black persons in America. There were tears of hope that somehow those expectations would lift – barriers would fall – the separation might be bridged. Mr. Obama’s first act of office was to sign a declaration of reconciliation and cooperation for our nation. But we are far from fulfilling that. Even as we struggle to shape our system of public education – the foundation of a strong democracy – we have also to recognize those teachers and schools– that have to function – you might say – in brown eyed classrooms all the time – where students don’t get to take off the collar but carry with them the memory of history and the inheritance of an unequal society on an unequal planet.

How many of you remember the controversy after Hurricane Katrina as people were starving and in need of both food and medical supplies. Photographs were published that showed people wading through the deep water with bags of food from flooded stores. Somehow the photographs of white persons had captions that read like: “hungry residents find food and soda from local grocery store” and the photos of black person had captions like “Looters carry bags of groceries away from damaged convenience stores”.

Our eyes can see things so differently and when we see the suffering of others our sight can be colored by what we have been taught to see. It may flicker across the screen of our minds only briefly or it may make it onto a caption. It was shocking this week to see how one person’s mind can be deformed by prejudice. When Pat Robertson made his outrageously hard hearted comments about Haiti, it was a perfect example of one way that long held, racist ideas can distort perceptions of reality. He was wrong about the

timeline of history and his understanding of the events of 1791 were the inheritance of xenophobia and racism. The Haitians planned a revolt – and before they went to struggle they held a prayer service in the vudou tradition – their own religious tradition. The prayer we heard earlier was the one shared at that event. And, as Matthew Iglesias pointed out – it's not unlike prayers made the world over as people go into battle. But there's a difference – the people praying find it incomprehensible that the God of their oppressors would be a good god – so it is impossible that it is the same god as their own. They can only imagine that the god of the white people is some sort of devil – what else could they think of a god who would enslave whole islands of other human beings, kidnap and abuse men, women, and children. In an interesting reversal Pat Robertson has made his own god look evil. But he was right that Haiti has suffered since that time. France demanded and was granted 9 million gold francs as war reparations from Haiti – a debt that crushed Haiti until the mid 20th century. A debt – by the way – sold to the United States by France just before the first world war. Haiti's woes have had everything to do with the evil of slavery and the struggle against it by the powerless. Just as New Orleans woes had everything to do with a politics of race and powerlessness – not in one generation or one politician but over generations.

Robertson's hard heart is grounded in a theology of exclusion – nothing like the inclusiveness of Universalism – a theology where we welcome many expressions of God – and those who do not believe in God. A theology that asks that any God worth his or her or its salt will not favor some over others – will not play favorites. This summer Colleen Vahey and I attended a workshop offered by Ysaye Barnwell of Sweet Honey in The Rock. Ms. Barnwell was trying to teach us to sing with some soul – trying to help us break out of the training of our mostly white culture to sing with that freedom and that longing for freedom that you can hear in gospel music and in African American music. She told stories and then had us sing. And one song stuck with me – because it expressed the sort of bafflement that we of good heart so often experience when faced with tragedy – you know -- there but for the grace of God... You know I remember my father telling me that he lost the remainder of his faith in foxhole as he heard the men around him praying. He found himself thinking – how could a god look down on this fear and suffering and not save every man there? How could a god that you pray to, huddled in a trench, allow such a thing as war? And the spiritual Ms Barnwell let us in asked that same basic question: Didn't my lord deliver Daniel, Daniel, Daniel, (*Jeff Hamrick sings*)

Didn't my lord deliver Daniel, Daniel, Daniel, -- then why not everyone?

Well – the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King Jr knew that it was not up to God to deliver everyone – or anyone. God is not that kind of deity. Instead, if you want to call it God you might say that God is in our hands and hearts and can only work through our power and will. The Reverend Doctor might say that you cannot wait for miracles you have to march forward and seize them. He might say that the kingdom is here as soon as we open our eyes and truly see one another. Not colorblind – but seeing the many hues and the real challenges. Not glossing over history but seeing the pain of our ancestors and hearing the suffering of others as well. Not in that place where all are melted in a pot -- where all is formless and void – but where our stories are valued and our wounds are healed by knowing and listening. Where we know and respect our differences and make possible the highest expectations for humanity. Where our shadows are seen and our light is clear and thus we can clearly see the world of history – of pain and wonder and

beauty in which we live. Where each of us know our selves to elected – not to the highest office in the land – but to the work of liberating all who live – beginning in the modest places of our longing souls and always reaching out – with our words, our actions, our love and our hands – to all souls – to all souls. Thus are we made whole again – thus will the world be made whole again and all her people one.