

Anti-Racism, Anti-Oppression, and Multiculturalism
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I am ready to meet the monsters. In Long Beach, at the Queen Mary Dome, from now through February 17, there will be an exhibit of Star Trek memorabilia from all five television shows and from each of the 10 Star Trek movies. The exhibit will include some of the monsters against which the crew members of the Star Trek Enterprise battled so valiantly and with sensitivity and smarts. Speaking of popular culture, this weekend the movie “Cloverfield” opened. I have not seen it yet, but I probably will because it is a PG-13 rated old-fashioned monster movie. (The only monster movies I watch are those rated PG-13.)

Good monster movies are thought-provoking besides being entertaining. Where does the monster come from? Is there anything that we human beings did to lay out the welcome mat? Why do so many monsters look so much like the way we look? How come we can be so easily fooled about who is on our side and who is not? Just when we think we have a handle on what is scary about a situation, why is it that something even scarier finds us? Why is it that to survive, we have to work with people who we do not like very much?

The last thing I want to do is to trivialize racism and other forms of oppression by comparing them to movie monsters. The last thing I want to do is to dishonor the memory of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. by my remarks. My intention is to honor him and to honor all those who work to counter racism and all kinds of oppression. This morning, I will make some possibly controversial points about a complicated set of interrelated issues, and I will use monster imagery to make my points. As in those old Star Trek episodes on television: What is the threat? Where is the threat? How can we overcome or manage the threat?

Racism and oppression of all kinds are threats to the human spirit. They cramp, limit, stifle, and distort the aspirations of individuals and groups. Racism and oppression of all kinds can lead to injury, death, even genocide. I have a choice about whether to go to a monster movie, and I can choose to view only monster movies rated PG-13. However, there are real monsters in the world – individuals and social systems -- that do great damage to the body, the spirit, society, and culture.

Keeping in mind the monsters of racism and oppression of all kinds, where is the greatest threat?

Clarence R. Skinner was born in 1881 and died in 1949. He was a minister, teacher, writer, and social

activist. He is widely regarded as the most influential Universalist of the first half of the twentieth century.¹ In times of war, he preached and taught peace. His message was simple: “The line of good and evil runs not between us, but through us.”² Though it is tempting to see the monster as the “Other,” when pressed, many of us acknowledge that there can be something monstrous within our own heart.

Actually, I would say that there are four monsters within our own heart: fear, greed, ignorance, and delusion. These monsters reinforce each other, but each of them is a distinct source of danger. I believe that the relative threat posed by each of them varies over time and is specific to cultural context. As in the scary TV episodes where valuable time is lost as the crew battles one threat while a more significant threat bears down upon them, I believe that within politically progressive and religiously liberal circles today, our focus is often upon fighting the monsters of fear and ignorance. We are not paying adequate attention to the monsters of greed and delusion. By focusing intensely upon matters of racial, ethnic, and cultural *identity*, we may be too tired and too distracted to adequately appreciate the monster of exploitive *economic relationships* which may pose a greater threat in the United States today.

A recession may be coming, jobs are being outsourced before they are eliminated, corporate executives should be ashamed of themselves for their compensation packages, while millions of people go without health insurance or are a couple of paychecks away from homelessness. Something is haywire about the relationship of work to income, the relationship of earned income to family wealth, and the integrity of the social safety net regardless of ability to work. In the book *The Trouble with Diversity: How We Learned to Love Identity and Ignore Equality*, Walter Benn Michaels says that it is economic neoliberalism, not racism, that is often the bigger problem.³ Michaels is an English professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago. He faults economic neo-liberals on the right and economic neo-liberals on the left for shifting their focus away from the grave danger posed to all of us by the fact that the rich are getting richer, and the poor getting poorer. It is a danger to all of us that the rich, regardless of race, ethnicity, and/or cultural identity are getting richer, and the poor, regardless of race, ethnicity, and/or cultural identity, are getting poorer.

If I catch his drift, Michaels believes that some forms of anti-racism and anti-oppression play into the hands of economic neo-liberalism (a “free” market for which a social safety net in shreds and tatters is a

¹ See <http://www25.uua.org/uuhs/duub/articles/clarencerrussellskinner.html>.

² See “Just War,” Mathew Cockrum, <http://www.buuf2.org/Just-War-Matthew-Cockrum-022303.pdf>.

³ *The Trouble with Diversity: How We Learned to Love Identity and Ignore Inequality*, Walter Benn Michaels, Metropolitan Books, Henry Holt and Company, New York, 2006, p. 229. This reference pertains to health care issues, in particular, but he makes the more general point throughout the book.

small price to pay to allow the rich a chance to get richer). In case you are wondering, I say *economic* neo-liberals” and “*economic* neo-liberalism” to distinguish today’s economic liberalism from today’s religious liberalism. Michaels cares about the social safety net, about the lives of workers, about the lives of those who cannot work, about the lives who do not work, about how work is structured inside the household and beyond it, up to and including the global economy, and about the impact of wealth – especially *family* wealth, the accumulated wealth of the prior generations of each family.

In many of his concerns and perspectives, Walter Benn Michaels speaks for me. At times, I have felt like the odd person out or as someone in need of rehabilitation when anti-racism, anti-oppression, and multiculturalism are discussed. I wonder why are we focus so intensely on the monsters of fear and ignorance (fear of the “Other” and ignorance of the “Other”), when at least as dangerous are the monsters of greed (as in coveting what the “Other” has) and delusion (as in thinking that a “free” market gives us the right to take it). Sometimes I think that we human beings have an unlimited number of ways to keep the focus upon ourselves; consequently, we overestimate the value of relinquishing “privilege,” whereas what we really need to do is to relinquish some hard-earned dollars in our quest for a more just world.

Scientists say that there is one human race; there are not multiple human races. Humans evolved as dark-skinned people in Africa. People who migrated to colder climates survived better if they were lighter skinned because the sun’s rays could penetrate lighter skin more easily and be turned into vitamin D more easily. If multiple human races do not exist, then what is *racism* based upon? Racism exists, it is morally bankrupt, it should be challenged, and it deserves to disappear! According to Walter Benn Michaels, *identity* is forced to stand in for race. He says, “Suppose, for example, that in my American literature class, I teach both Ralph Waldo Emerson’s *Nature* and Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. Suppose that sitting in the front row are a black student and a white one. Neither of them . . . has ever read either of these books. Here’s one way we could describe what’s about to happen. Each student is about to be given the opportunity to do two things: learn about her own heritage and learn about someone else’s heritage as well.

When we read the Emerson, the white student will be learning about her heritage; when we read the Douglass, she’ll be learning about someone else’s. And the black student will be doing the same thing in reverse. But why should this be? Why is it that some books we’ve never read are supposed to count as part of our cultural heritage while other books we’ve also never read count as part of someone else’s heritage (even though they’ve never read them either)? And what about if they *have* read them? We can imagine a black student raised by ex-hippie parents, forced as a child to listen to the Jefferson Airplane

and the Grateful Dead and read to sleep with Thoreau and Emerson (which send her right off). It can't really make sense to say that when she reads Emerson in my class, she's learning about someone else's heritage. To think that, we'd have to think that your cultural heritage has nothing to do with the books you actually read and has only to do instead with books that are somehow imagined as genetically appropriate for you to read. But, as successful as the Human Genome Project has been, nobody has yet located – nobody is even bothering to look for – the Emerson gene.”⁴

Michaels is trying to make a serious point, not an easy joke. We can reflect upon identity – our own identity and the identities of others – until the cows come home, with ever increasing sophistication and consciousness. Meanwhile, the rich are getting richer, and the poor are getting poorer. Let us focus upon the way society is economically structured at least as often as we focus on the way we understand “race” and culture. For many of us, ignorance about economics may do more harm than ignorance about race, ethnicity, and cultural identity. We need to bring sophistication, and consciousness to understanding how society is economically structured.

Politically progressive and religiously liberal people agree that oppressions are interlocking – Classism bolsters racism, which bolsters sexism, which bolsters heterosexism, which bolsters ageism, which bolsters able-ism, and so on. Thankfully, not all the monsters come at us precisely at the same time. The monsters of fear, ignorance, greed, and delusion are not that coordinated! By strategically focusing upon the greatest threat at a particular time and in a particular place, we have a chance of surviving and thriving, at least until the next monster rises up.

Unitarian Universalists pledge to support each other in the free and responsible search for truth and meaning. We should challenge each other to articulate what we come to believe, recognizing that it may change. These things I believe: I believe that all people have the potential to oppress and to be oppressed. I believe that identities are complex, fluid amalgamations which are lumpy, not smooth and seamless. I believe that racism may reasonably accurately be understood as “prejudice plus power,” that is, not only as prejudice but as prejudice plus the power to act upon that prejudice. I also believe that racism may be overt or subtle and that power is fluid and situational. Therefore, I believe that it is possible for people of color to be racist, if they have requisite power in the situation.

I believe in affirmative action for people of color and for poor people, regardless of race, ethnicity, or cultural identity. I believe that it is important to open space within a congregation to talk freely and to

⁴ Page 44.

organize effectively around possibly controversial issues. I believe in the importance of keeping anti-racism, anti-oppression, and multiculturalism in the forefront of our attention. To that end, I have taken a small step at home and a small step here. On the wall of my office and on the door of my refrigerator this question now appears: “Anti-racism, anti-oppression, and multiculturalism: What have you done lately?”

In the free and responsible search for truth and meaning, may we open space for an ever more comprehensive understanding and ever more effective actions to counter racism and oppression of all kinds, and to promote appreciation for multiple cultures. May we help each other to help the rich get poorer and to help the poor get richer. May it be so!