

“In Between”

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“The wayward wind is a restless wind, a restless wind that yearns to wander, and I was born the next of kin, the next of kin to the wayward wind.” That is the refrain of a country song written by Stanley Lebowsky and Herb Newman. Gogi Grant, Patsy Cline, and others recorded the song. The melody snuck into my mind and stayed there as I began turning the pages of Mark Morrison-Reed’s *In Between: Memoir of an Integration Baby*. “This spiritual quest for integration, this process of incorporation, is me taking responsibility for my own life,” he wrote. “This is the story of my wayward journey toward wholeness.”¹

Two years ago Mark Morrison-Reed was profiled in the *UU World* magazine. “Ordained in 1979, he became only the eighteenth black person to receive ministerial fellowship in the history of the UUA or its predecessor denominations; he was also only the second Afro-American raised in Unitarian Universalism to become a UU minister. Morrison-Reed came of age at a moment in our nation’s and our denomination’s history that has given him a unique window onto our pain around race.”² On this weekend as we remember Dr. King, it is fitting to pay attention to how race, color, and racism have shaped the life of a distinguished African American (now African Canadian) Unitarian Universalist minister.

Ministry is difficult under the best of circumstances. What was it like for him? Curiosity drew me to the sanctuary of the Unitarian Society of Santa Barbara last spring, when he spoke to a gathering of ministers about his life, about his “wayward journey toward wholeness.” I

¹ *In Between: Memoir of an Integration Baby* by Mark Morrison-Reed, Skinner House Books, Boston, 2009, page xvi.

² See <http://www.uuworld.org/life/articles/128965.shtml>.

remember a few things about that afternoon. I remember the setting -- how different the Santa Barbara sanctuary architecture is compared with Unitarian Universalist sanctuaries that are most familiar. Outside and inside, the Santa Barbara sanctuary reminded me of a Spanish mission. It has high ceilings. There was a timeless feeling as the light passed through high windows and touched the floor near him.

I remember Mark Morrison-Reed's honesty (can a minister really say *that*, even to other ministers?). I remember the occasion of his tears (can a minister shed tears, even in front of other ministers?). There was a timeless feeling as he shared experiences from his life. The intent was not to impress us or to admonish us, though he has standing to do both. Rather, it seemed to me, he spoke from a place beyond ego yet without disowning ego. He spoke from his center, which moved outward and greeted the centers of his listeners. It felt like a transcendent moment.

To be wayward is to follow one's own capricious, wanton, or depraved inclinations; to be ungovernable. To be wayward is to follow no clear principle or law; to be unpredictable. A wayward journey is the opposite of a desired or expected journey. Mark Morrison-Reed's wayward journey began on June 16, 1949, when he was born in Chicago to George and Selina Reed. Mark was the eldest of three children. His brother Philip was a year younger, and his sister Carole was four years younger than Mark.

Their father George was a scientist, a nuclear chemist to be precise. Their mother Selina was a social worker. Relatives on both sides of the family valued education and achievement. A life of accomplishment was expected; to excel was expected. One of Mark's great-grandfathers was called "Captain." One of Mark's great-grandmothers was called "the General" for her strength of character and powers of persuasion. Mark's family tree includes people born of 400 years of racial mixing.

George Reed's scientific expertise led to a two-year stint working in Bern, Switzerland beginning 1962. Mark writes, "My family landed in Switzerland because the Captain had built a one-room schoolhouse, the General had insisted that all her children graduate from high school, and my father dared to dream of becoming a scientist. Our success came from taking advantage of unusual opportunities, matching great expectations with high achievement, persistent effort across generations, and a faith in education that made school a necessity rather than an option."³

It is difficult for any child, especially for a first-born child, to live up to parental expectations, the expectations of extended family members, and society's expectations. The impact of race and racism complicated his growing up years. Mark ended up dropping out of college twice. He was admitted to Meadville Lombard, a Unitarian Universalist seminary in Chicago without having an undergraduate degree. He married a white Canadian seminarian, Donna Morrison. Their relationship began with Mark asking Donna, "Would you like to teach Sunday school with me?" Her parents strongly disapproved of the marriage. There were painful periods of struggle and other periods of frosty distance between the Morrison-Reeds and the Morrises. With grandchildren came the thaw.

Mark and Donna served congregations in New York and Canada as co-ministers for 26 years.

Mark Morrison-Reed came from an economically privileged background. That made his life easier in some ways. For example, economic privilege insulated him from experiencing racism as a child and youth in Chicago. But family dynamics were difficult. His intrusive mother was diagnosed with manic depression. She lived with cancer for about 20 years before her death. His father's work was fulfilling and important. As a black scientist, he stood out in every workplace, and he rose to one important position after another. Mark's younger brother was as fearless and outgoing as Mark was timid and socially anxious. Mark's walk home from high school through gang territory was a hazardous passage.

³ *In Between*, page 66

Growing up, one place that Mark felt safe and comfortable was the First Unitarian Church in Chicago. The family's 1962 stay in Switzerland led Mark to discover another such place – the Ecole d' Humanite, a small boarding school in a drop dead beautiful Alpine setting near the Wetterhorn mountain and the town of Meiringen. If you are a foodie, you might know that Meiringen is where merang was invented. Students from many countries attended the Ecole d' Humanite. Mark was a student there and later a teacher, before he was asked to leave after an incident of poor judgment.

I was startled to see a quote from Max Knight's *Return to the Alps* in the memoir: "I abandoned myself to the view and to the crisp air, trying to assimilate the sight of this magic mountain, the Wetterhorn, as it generously gave its beauty to all." I have that book! [show book] It is a small world. The Ecole d' Humanite was 35 miles as the crow flies from Adelboden, the hometown of my Schranz ancestors. Given mountainous Swiss terrain, however, even the crows cannot fly as the crow flies. It probably takes the crows the same 50 miles as it takes the humans to go from Adelboden to the Ecole d' Humanite.

At least humans have Mapquest. These are the final 15 of 28 steps in the journey according to Mapquest: Staldi becomes Unterblami. Unterblami becomes Sattel. Sattel becomes Dorf. Dorf becomes Hostet. Turn right onto Weidli. Weidli becomes Laueli. Laueli becomes Haslibergstrasse. Haslibergstrasse becomes Schlatti, also known as Wesstanne. Schlatti / Weisstanne becomes Balmiweid. Balmiweid becomes unnamed road. Turn slight left onto Twing. Twing becomes Urseni. Urseni becomes Weidli. Weidli becomes Dorf. Welcome to Hasliberg Goldern, Bern. [pause] If you reach Gassli, you've gone a little too far.

Have you ever been to Adelboden? I emailed Mark. He responded with “The question is actually how many time have I been to Adelboden? I have hiked over the Hahnenmoss Pass and skied the ski run, one time each I think. I have a copy of "Return to the Alps" met Max Knight and know his sons. I am going again in Marz.” He is traveling to Switzerland again in part to begin a new Unitarian Universalist congregation in Basel.

By April 1968, when Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was killed, Mark was back in the States, at Beloit College in southeastern Wisconsin. Before reading his memoir, I had planned to use Mark’s response to Dr. King’s death as the organizing principle for this homily. Afterward, I second thoughts. Mark was not close to other black students at Beloit College. After Dr. King’s death, he reluctantly makes himself go to a meeting of black students. In relating this exchange, I am going to use the word “jerk” in place of a derogatory word that starts with the letter “n.”

“At the Black Student Union, a “big man on campus” began talking and pounding his fist into his hand. “You know the revolution is coming (smack) . . . We gotta rise up against these honkies (smack) . . . Time to get the Man off our back (smack) . . . Time to arm ourselves (smack) . . . Prepare for war (smack) . . . Use any means necessary (smack) . . . First we gotta take care of business (smack) . . . Root out them vanilla lovers (smack) . . . Cuz we got some Uncle Toms right here (smack) . . . Got some Oreos (smack) . . Black on the outside but white on the inside (smack) . . . “We got some [jerks] with processed minds (smack) . . . And Reed here is one of ‘em.” . . . Why don’t you get out of here, [jerk]?”

“Then from behind one lone voice said, “Man, let the brother loose.” “You . . . know where I stand,” I stuttered, eyes locked on the floor and knees shaking inside my patch-covered

bellbottoms . . . I d- d- don't hold with th- this violence stuff," I stammered on. "Love is the answer an' and the white man ain't the enemy."⁴

Can you see why I am ill at ease highlighting that confrontation this morning? Lifting up this exchange might reinforce stereotypes about black anger. It might reinforce stereotypes about friendly blacks and scary blacks (echoes of Malcom X and Martin Luther King). Other events related to race, color, and racism detailed in *In Between* are less dramatic but more important for white readers to take in. As someone who has tended to prioritize class over race as determining quality of life, *In Between* helped me understand that financial wealth cannot ensure emotional or spiritual health.

That tense confrontation in 1968 in the Beloit College Black Student Union was a key moment for Mark Morrison-Reed. He is now 61 years old. In middle age, he came to "own" his rage and what he calls the "common Negro" parts of himself. In that process, he became integrated on the inside. He may have begun life as an integration baby, but he now blesses us as an integrated man, rage and all. He challenges us to befriend the parts of ourselves that we hold at a distance, the parts that we turn our back on, the parts that tag along with us wherever we go, as conscious or unconscious reminders that we are not done growing yet.

"We ministers are haunted by fears," he writes. "Our lives are chaotic, the demands overwhelming, and we simply are not and never will be prepared for this weighty calling. We worry that the sermon won't be finished on time, or that suddenly in the middle of preaching we'll find that a page is missing, or that something unexpected will disrupt the service or, worst of all, everyone will walk out. For me, however, that anxiety overlays something deeper. I work in a largely white religious movement and when my Common-Negro-Self, the black minstrel hidden inside me, tries to get through to me, I throw him out. I have spent a lifetime struggling

⁴ *In Between*, page 129.

with the ‘common Negro,’ for that scorned being my mother forbade me to act like has simply tagged along as my shadow.”⁵

Each and every one of us attends an Ecole d’Humanite, a School of Humanity. For some, the school is the Ecole d’ Humanite in the Alps. For the rest of us, the school is life on the planet earth itself and the frustrating, kind, mean, deluded, scared, loving, lonely, struggling, learning souls on it. It matters not whether the journey to integration is wayward or straightforward. It matters that we take the journey.

Psychological and spiritual authenticity are not all that we must tackle in life. We must work to make the world a better place and to make ourselves better people whether or not we are coming from a place of authenticity. But working to making the world a better place and to make ourselves better people is not sustainable over the long run without a concurrent care for our own authenticity.

Many of us have known times of self doubt and even self loathing. When we manage to find a way through that thicket, it is tempting to forget the thicket and its pain. The mature ones, however, are willing to share their story as a means of encouragement. In that way, Mark shares this early part of his wayward journey:

“I embraced any means to put my problems off to another day, anything to keep me from living in the present painful moment, anything to help me avoid the anguish. That’s the way I had always dealt with pain – by fleeing from it. Retreat into closets and comic books, into drink, drugs, and depression; retreat from clouds of tear gas to the safety of home; retreat from the

⁵ *In Between*, page 242.

black community and hide out overseas . . . until I found the courage to face my demons, I'd just keep dying a little each day.”⁶

We are all capable of acting courageously. “[But] true integration entails genuine change: the bringing together of our cultural parts – and our lives – to form a new whole, a melding rather than the subjugation of one by another. Understood this way, integration transcends the legal battles of the civil rights era and is relocated in the commonplace and mundane. In its ordinary everyday context, integration requires courage, for our relatedness can be fraught with apprehension and awkward moments. But these moments – these ‘oopses’ and ‘ah-hahs’ – foster growth and new creation. A static culture is a dying one. The rough-and-tumble synthesis of integration is the lifeblood of tomorrow’s culture, which will emerge from unforeseen relations and fusions . . . ”⁷

The congregation is a prime setting for the rough and tumble synthesis of integration. The congregation’s mission in the world can emerge from unforeseen relations and fusions. May we face our demons, individually and collectively. May we nurture authenticity in ourselves and others. May we organize in response to racism. May it be so!

⁶ *In Between*, page 172.

⁷ *In Between*, page 187