

Reflections on “Letter from a Birmingham Jail”

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In April of 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr. had time on his hands. There was not a lot to do in jail. He had come to Birmingham, Alabama to protest for civil rights. He and others were arrested. Eight Alabama ministers jointly issued a statement calling for an end to the civil rights demonstrations in Birmingham.

Martin Luther King began his long, eloquent response to the ministers this way: “While confined here in the Birmingham City Jail, I came across your recent statement calling our present activities ‘unwise and untimely.’ Seldom, if ever, do I pause to answer criticism of my work and ideas. If I sought to answer all of the criticisms that cross my desk, my secretaries would be engaged in little else in the course of the day, and I would have no time for constructive work. But since I feel that you are men of genuine goodwill and your criticisms are sincerely set forth, I would like to answer your statement in what I hope will be patient and reasonable terms . . .”¹

This paragraph seems as fresh today as in 1963: “First, I must confess that over the last few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro’s great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen’s Council-er or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate who is more devoted to ‘order’ than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says ‘I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I can’t agree with your methods of direct action’”; who paternalistically feels that he can set the timetable for another man’s freedom; who lives by the myth of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait until a ‘more convenient season.’ *Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill*

¹ Go to http://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html for the letter.

will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection.” [emphasis added]

Martin Luther King, Jr. concluded the letter this way: “Never before have I written a letter this long (or should I say a book?). I’m afraid that it is much too long to take your precious time. I can assure you that it would have been much shorter if I had been writing from a comfortable desk, but what else is there to do when you are alone for days in the full monotony of a narrow jail cell other than write long letters, think strange thoughts, and pray long prayers.”

Several years ago, when current Unitarian Universalist minister Rev. Rosemary Bray McNatt was in seminary, she had the opportunity to talk with Coretta Scott King, the widow of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Rosemary Bray McNatt tells of the experience: “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 . . . 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.’”²

As someone born into a middle class Wisconsin family in 1956, for me the civil rights movement was something that other people did, not something that directly affected my life. I would have just turned seven when Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.” Each generation has a responsibility to counter (or act against) the racism of *its* times. The racism of the civil rights era is not ours to act against. The racism of today *is* ours to counter, but what

² “The Problem of Theology in the Work of Anti-racism: A Meditation” by Rosemary Bray McNatt in *Soul Work: Anti-racist Theologies in Dialogue*, edited by Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley and Nancy Palmer Jones, Skinner House Books, Boston, 2003, p. 27.

does racism look like today? How does it move in the world? How does it move in me? How does it move in us?

Racism evolves, so the way we counter racism must also evolve. That is one message I took away from this 150-page Master of Divinity thesis by Joseph Santos-Lyons. Its title is “25 to 1: People of Color Experiences in Unitarian Universalism, 1980 to 2005.”³ The odds against meeting a Person of Color in a Unitarian Universalist congregation are 25 to 1. Joseph Santos-Lyons is a lifelong Unitarian Universalist who identifies as a Person of Color of mixed Chinese and White descent. He is an anti-racism/anti-oppression activist. He understands racism as racial prejudice and the misuse of power by systems and institutions. He believes that all people are affected by racism, and that people have different but interconnected powers to create a culture of liberty [through] anti-racist strategies.⁴

I do not know whether Unitarian Universalism would have lived down to Mrs. King’s expectations. Whatever our racial or ethnic identities, we disappoint each other on a regular basis. One aspect of maturity is having a well grounded philosophical or theological response to the disappointments of life, whether the disappointments are caused by evil people and institutions, misguided people and institutions, or clueless, ignorant people and institutions.

It takes courage to be the one to say “Wait a minute . . . What did you just say?” or “Wait a minute . . . What did you just do?” It takes organizing skill to place pressure on people and institutions so that change is possible. It is not easy for people of good will to move beyond a shallow understanding of racism and move toward becoming actively anti-racist. It is not up to People of Color to educate white people about racism. On the other hand, it can be difficult for white people to appreciate subtle racism unless People of Color point it out. These tensions make burnout a real possibility for Unitarian Universalist People of Color.

In my opinion, reasonable people can differ on whether something is or is not racist. For example, a few years ago at a General Assembly, members of a commission were presenting a

³ You may email Joseph Santos-Lyons and ask to receive a copy of his paper: http://radicalhapa.typepad.com/my_weblog/2006/05/25_to_1_people.html

⁴ “25 to 1: People of Color Experiences in Unitarian Universalism, 1980 to 2005” by Joseph Santos-Lyons, page 11.

skit. I believe that the gist of the skit was to illustrate competition to be heard, competition to reach the microphone. A person of color was shoved out of the way by a colleague on the commission. I was there. I saw it. I did not consider the shoving to be a racist act, yet others did see it as racist.

Reasonable people can differ as to goals and strategies regarding justice.

In November, shortly after the election in which Barak Obama was elected and Proposition 8 passed, 10 students at UC-Davis engaged in queer and trans activist and academic work published a statement in the school paper, the California Aggie.⁵ I am going to quote from the statement at length because the students make their point so well.

“It's not just homophobia that enabled the recent passage of California's Proposition 8, which eliminates marital rights for same-sex couples. In fact, as thousands of LGBT people and their allies protest Prop 8, it is race and racism that come bubbling to the surface . . .”

“Ads in multiple languages, featuring people of color opposing same- sex marriage, worked on the assumption that all people of color are both straight and inherently homophobic. Gay rights were made to seem irrelevant and even damaging to these communities, pitting race against sexuality by linking queerness with whiteness.”

“But the No on 8 campaign also implied that gay rights are white rights, with ads consisting primarily of white, middle-class people. Ads that did include images of people of color - including one that drew connections to earlier laws prohibiting interracial marriage - failed to indicate how marital rights might have material benefits for queer communities struggling against racism, poverty, and anti- immigrant policies . . . “

⁵ The statement was signed by Toby Beauchamp, Abigail Boggs, Cynthia Degnan, Benjamin D'Harlingue, Cathy Hannabach, Tristan Josephson, Liz Montegary, Judy Sanchez, Kara Thompson, and Mark Yanez. I understand that their statement was published on November 18, 2008, but I cannot find a link to it on the California Aggie website: <http://theaggie.org/>

“While we strongly condemn the homophobia that Prop 8 represents and institutionalizes, we believe this is an important moment for the mainstream LGBT movement to reconsider its goals and strategies. Instead of last-minute attempts to win votes from communities of color without actually addressing their needs, long-term coalitions must be built that work against broader forms of oppression. Despite the basic similarities between bans against interracial and same-sex marriages, interracial marriage was never a major priority for the black civil rights movement of the 1960s. Most organizers were more concerned with police violence, access to education and housing, and voter rights.”

“What would the current LGBT movement look like if it instead prioritized struggles against poverty, inadequate healthcare and police brutality? These goals would necessarily address racism, classism and state violence in ways that the current marriage movement does not. For example, the movement ignores how marriage may be experienced as a form of violence (rather than an act of love) by communities of color and poor communities coerced into marriage by U.S. welfare reform and healthcare policies. While sometimes strategically useful, marriage should not be the primary way to access these basic resources and protections.”

“The LGBT movement recently demonstrated the ability to organize on an enormous level, yet remains focused on a goal that benefits only the most normative gay family and relationship structures. In the wake of Prop 8, we hope that queer communities and their allies will think beyond marriage as the primary gateway to liberation.”

Reasonable people may differ on what is and what is not racist. Reasonable people may differ on how to counter racism, as well. However, to merit the term “reasonable,” we must engage with each other, talk with each other, and argue with each other. We must risk exposing our own wounds and vulnerabilities. Loneliness is part of the human condition, though by being outnumbered 25 to 1, People of Color in Unitarian Universalism can be especially lonely. Joseph Santos-Lyons notes, “This loneliness can undermined and demoralize even the most independent, strong-willed and proud Person of Color who seeks to sustain their spiritual life in a Unitarian Universalist congregation. The UUA in general still struggles with overconfidence in

the area of race relations, taking one step forward and two steps backward in the dance of working towards racial justice . . . There is a deep need among People of Color for community, political action, mentorship, pastoral care. In essence, a People of Color ministry is sincerely needed in the UUA, and if anything comes of this thesis, it is my hope that more persons, White and People of Color, will take up the responsibility and vision for this ministry.”⁶

May we look for ways to support a People of Color ministry in the Unitarian Universalist Association. Racism evolves, and our responses to racism must evolve, as well. In the words of the 19th century Unitarian and Universalist minister Theodore Parker, “The moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” Let us work together to bend that arc. May it be so!

⁶ “25 to 1: People of Color Experiences in Unitarian Universalism, 1980 to 2005” by Joseph Santos-Lyons, p. 123.