

Middle Passages
by the Rev. Ann Schranz
Monte Vista Unitarian Universalist Congregation
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I begin with an extended excerpt from the book by James T. Campbell entitled *Middle Passages: African American Journeys to Africa, 1787 – 2005*: “In 1923, a then little-known twenty-one year old poet named Langston Hughes set sail for Africa . . . He signed on as a messmate on a steamer, the *West Hesseltine*, bound from Brooklyn to West Africa. As the ship cleared Sandy Hook, he went belowdecks and collected the crate of books that he had brought along for the voyage. Standing alone on the fantail, he tossed the books, one by one, into the sea, symbolically jettisoning his book-bound Western identity. In his biography, *The Big Sea*, the poet recalled one of his first encounters with Africans, a group of Kru men who had signed on as deckhands when the ship reached the Windward Coast . . .” [I read the account of Langston Hughes regarding his conversation with the Kru men.]

James T. Campbell writes, “This ‘comedy of misrecognition’ contains a host of lessons. Hughes’s voyage, indeed his entire career, attests to Africa’s persistent hold on the African American imagination. George’s anxious disavowal reminds us that, historically, the majority of black Americans have not shared the poet’s Pan-African sensibility. And the Kru man’s matter-of-fact explanation provides perhaps the most important lesson of all: that Africans have ideas and experiences of their own, which sometimes have little to do with the preconceptions of western visitors, white or black.”¹

Between the end of the 18th century and the present, thousands of African Americans have traveled to Africa, retracing in the opposite direction the earlier passage of millions of African slaves to the New World. The first African profiled in *Middle Passages* who returned to Africa after a time in this country is Ayuba Suleiman Diallo, born in 1703 and enslaved in 1730. He was Muslim, as were an estimated 10% of all enslaved Africans.²

¹ *Middle Passages: African American Journeys to Africa, 1787 – 2005*, James T. Campbell, Penguin Books, New York, 2006, p. xix.

² Page 2.

Ayuba survived the Middle Passage, which typically killed 10% to 20% of captives en route.³ Ayuba was sold to a man in Maryland. He ran away, was captured, and was held in a county jail, where he startled bystanders by grabbing a pen and writing a few lines in Arabic. In a life more improbable than you could possibly imagine, he was freed and spent a year as the toast of high society in England before returning to Africa in 1734. “Unlike millions of other captives, Ayuba Suleiman Diallo made it home. He entered his village in style, galloping on the back of a charger, clad in the silk robes fashioned for him by [a] London tailor . . . His wives and children all survived to welcome him.”⁴

After his return to Africa, Ayuba worked part-time for the Royal Africa Company, which had a monopoly on the British slave trade. He worked for the company that paid the people who had enslaved him. While enslavement of Africans by Africans predated the transatlantic slave trade, the scale, brutality, and “rationale” for the transatlantic slave trade were infinitely more devastating to its victims and to their descendants. The transatlantic slave trade was also infinitely more enriching to its beneficiaries and to their descendants. Even those of us whose ancestors never personally owned slaves *benefit* to this day from the ripple effects of that economic system. That system in this country lasted for 200 years (give or take). In the years when it was not explicitly based on slave labor, it was often based on post-“Emancipation” segregation and degradation.

The first pages in *Middle Passages* focus on Ayuba Suleiman Diallo. The last pages focus on a 10-year-old girl who was assigned the name Priscilla in 1756 by Elias Ball, who purchased her, another girl, and three boys for 460 British pounds.⁵ In the year 2005, Priscilla’s great-great-great-great-great granddaughter, Thomalind Martin Polite, visited Sierra Leone, Africa. Langston Hughes roams the middle pages of *Middle Passages*. Though he was a preeminent voice of the Harlem Renaissance, he was in many ways an outsider looking into African American life here. During his travels in Africa, he remained an outsider, looking into African

³ Page 4.

⁴ Page 8.

⁵ Page 407.

life there. What did Langston Hughes do with his feelings of alienation? James T. Campbell writes that “Hughes responded, characteristically, by translating alienation into art.”⁶

My question for you this morning is this: What do you do with *your* alienation? Not one of us has experienced the alienation of enslaved Africans. I doubt that any of us has experienced the alienation of Langston Hughes. Yet each one of us has known alienation. What do we do with our alienation? Langston Hughes turned his alienation into art. One of the most powerful ways to transform alienation is to make art. If we cannot make art or even if we *can* make art, we need to know about another powerful way to transform alienation: make religion.

Unitarian Universalists are called to make religion. If you are uneasy with this “call” language, then I will put it this way: Our job is to make religion. We do not inherit a readymade religion. Unitarian Universalist congregations covenant to affirm and promote the free and responsible search for truth and meaning. Gravitating toward freedom is easy. No one can tell us what to think or what to do. Responsibility does not have the same allure, but freedom is not possible without responsibility. Responsibility involves working and playing in community, a place where our rough edges irritate others, and where their rough edges irritate us.

The question about what to do with feelings of alienation came to mind earlier in the week. I attended the “Neuroscience & Spiritual Practices” conference at the Claremont School of Theology. Rick Hanson’s presentation was particularly intriguing. It was called “Forming Your Spirit: Practical Ways to Use Brain Science to Cultivate Wholesome States of Mind.” His website is <http://www.WiseBrain.org>. He said that the brain has a hard wired “slant.” The brain is not neutral. The brain is hard wired to be negative.

Way back -- way, *way* back, back in the day when our human ancestors were more often prey than predator, the people most likely to survive were constantly on edge, vigilant, afraid. The one thing that our lackadaisical ancestors lacked most often was . . . tomorrow.

This “negative bias” in the brain means that we humans have a hard wired tendency to feel alienated, even if we do not have a good reason to feel alienated. Rick Hanson put it this way:

⁶ Page 210.

“The brain is ‘Velcro’ for negative experiences and ‘Teflon’ for positive experiences.” I will be talking more about this topic on the Sunday after Thanksgiving.

People who believe in God feel alienated at times, and people who do not believe in God feel alienated at times. When these feelings arise, my counsel is to do two things: 1) Further develop your capacity for contemplation, and 2) Further develop your capacity for activism. That is how religion is made. How might someone in this congregation further develop contemplation and activism? There is a Buddhist meditation group, which is open to those of any persuasion who appreciate a time for sitting meditation. Also, in the coming months, this congregation will be starting a small group ministry program. Groups of 8 to 10 people will meet to share their reflections with each other. The small group ministry facilitator training will take place on November 1. Please let me know if you would like to attend.

The meditation group and the new small group ministry program offer opportunities for contemplation. Where are the opportunities for activism in this congregation? Beginning in January, this congregation will take a turn cooking and serving one meal at Sumner Elementary School every other month. About 120 low income people benefit from this interfaith “Community Meal” program, which has been in existence for over a year. This congregation has been paired with the Claremont Friends Meeting (the Quakers). Our love made visible is combined with their love made visible. Most of the people served reside in the trailer parks along Foothill Boulevard.

Feeding the hungry is not the only way to be an activist here, but it is a good place to start. This congregation already has a solid track record of raising money for worthwhile projects. There is the “Last Sunday of the month” collection, which will be given to Unicef this month. There is the weekly donation to the Beta Center. Last week, members donated over \$400 to Inland Valley Hope Partners in the annual “Walk for the Hungry.” Also, last week this congregation donated over \$400 to the Unitarian Universalist Association of congregations to support spiritual development for lay people and to support excellence in ministry for clergy. Earlier this month, the congregation raised around \$2,500 to improve the sound system in the sanctuary. Earlier this

year, the congregation raised over \$10,000 to build an accessible restroom in its “Fairness in Flushing” initiative.

It can be argued that feeding the hungry and donating to worthwhile causes (even such “internal” worthwhile causes such as “Fairness in Flushing”) does little to change systemic structures of oppression. I am not going to join that argument. There is not enough money in the world to single handedly change systemic structures of oppression, not even money that is (or was) in the pockets of Warren Buffett, Bill Gates, or Melinda Gates. No one has figured out the magical formula for dismantling systemic structures of oppression because there is no magic formula.

All that we can do . . . no, wait, scratch that . . . *what we are privileged to do* (privileged in both senses of the word) is to become more effective at activism so that we have something to contemplate . . . so that we become more effective at activism . . . so that we have something to contemplate . . . and so on . . . We transform alienation into religion through contemplation and activism. In the free and responsible search for truth and meaning which, above all else, is the hallmark of Unitarian Universalism, we can “hold” multiple truths in a squirming, wriggling “whole” that is more life-giving than the either/or dichotomies of religion in days gone by.

May we transform alienation into art, and may we transform alienation into religion. May it be so!