

February 7, 2010

### “Think for Yourself”

It is the right time to remember and name each person of color you have admired and respected, both famous and not so famous. I count myself fortunate to know the beauty created by diversity in our human community.

Susan Morrisson, intern minister.

#### Ritual of remembering and naming

We know that we are not isolated beings. We are part of a great creation of human beings. In the story Mark read this morning, we are reminded how a young woman of courage was committed to seeing her brothers and sisters, families and singles freed from the slavery in the South. She could not have done that alone. Many people of other skin tones helped her along the way and believed in the rightness of her mission. It was underground and it was connected ---community by community.

Jacob Lawrence, “Harriet and the Promised Land” Simon and Schuster for Young Readers, 1993.

#### Think for yourself

When I was growing up in white middle class Los Angeles, we thought we had diversity, if we thought about it at all. There was one Jewish girl in my Brownie troop. Her name was Ina Schmidt. She was smaller than the rest of us; her name was different; but we accepted her. She was still part of our community, our Girl Scout community. She was the only Jewish person I knew then. This was diversity!!

Later, when I went to Junior High, I met another Jewish girl. I felt comfortable approaching her as my friend, because I had already had a Jewish friend before! That Jewish girl from Junior High is still a dear friend. We are very fond of each other, and know each other’s families well because we have kept our bond over many years. Our diversity makes our friendship richer.

SO WHAT’S THE PROBLEM? I realize now that there are millions of people I am disconnected from. I don’t know their stories, where they came from, or what their life experiences have been. I don’t know the way are we the same or different? **I do** know my Jewish friend from Jr. High. So that’s a beginning, but it just isn’t enough any more.

For me, our Unitarian Universalist interdependent web of all existence is my most sacred symbol. To me, it means that what happens to another affects **my** existence also. I know I cannot be connected with millions of people around the world, so what difference does it make? This idea of the interdependent web is something that is in my head. I can see TV pictures of other people. I can read books about other lives. But, I still feel disconnected. Their lives are all very interesting but not intimate with mine. I must think to myself: What can I do to connect my head and my heart? I want the content of my life to include as much of the interdependent web as possible!! How much of the rainbow can I touch? “The human race is a vast rainbow, white, black, red, yellow, and

brown bursting into view. Yet for all, blood is red, the sky is blue, the earth brown, the night dark.“ Richard Gilbert, *Day of Promise*

I want to live my life in a way that relishes in the diversity, while feeling and embracing our unity...we are all one created life, influencing each other's lives.

I am aware that February is Black History month and so I am thinking specifically about the Black Americans I have known and admired. Some are strangers in the sense that I know **of** them. With some, I have come to know them personally – mind to mind and heart to heart.

A few years ago, I had the privilege of inviting a man from Bellingham, Washington to speak from our pulpit at East Shore. His name is Clyde Ford. He is a man who thinks for himself and as an African American, does not let cultural bias prevent him from pursuing his values. At age 16 Ford traveled to Africa in the wake of Martin Luther King's assassination, attempting to adjust himself to the tragedy. A Cleveland *newspaper* reported, "The young man traveled alone that summer to the Elmina slave portal, on the continent's west coast, and heard voices in a mystical experience that permanently marked him." Looking back on that event more than 20 years later, Ford told the *newspaper*, "The meaning of my own life is based in the meaning of those who have gone before. The ancestors are there, still informing, still influencing us." "In families, I hope parents will not treat race and racism like they do sex: Don't talk about it, and hope our children end up with the right answers." I know in my own family history, I don't have to journey to a slave portal to find my ancestors. But my family can think about it and talk about it. Ford argued that individuals **can** make a difference. "If we believe change is possible, then we can take the steps--however small they might be--toward making that change happen."

Clyde W. Ford, *We Can All Get Along*. 50 Steps you can take to end Racism. Dell Publishing, 1994

My reaction to his words...yes, these small steps are about reconnecting to those who feel like a stranger. I had a role on the Worship committee that allowed me to expand my boundaries and invite Clyde Ford to our church. I felt good about taking this small step. I recognized this as an opportunity to bring a Black African American to our pulpit, to honor his life experience so that I could connect a little better.

I must think for myself: **what do I hold as sacred?** – the interdependent web of all existence. If I really believe this, then how can I put my belief into action? I really wanted a connection that was longer than a one-time worship service. I wanted to participate in creating acceptance and justice for all. In Ford's book, *We Can All Get along*, we find this sentiment "We begin in the heart to end racism. His vision in writing this book was to help unify America into a vibrant, multicultural sister- and brotherhood --and thereby help to heal the world." I believe my heart was in the right place, but this step was just a beginning for me.

Ford emphasizes taking small steps to end racism. We have done some today: to recognize, include, honor and celebrate the diversity of human beings. We do not need to be Color-blind. Our differences detract from no one; instead they benefit us all. These acts are an opportunity to affirm "unity in diversity." We are one rainbow with many colors.

I ask again, what is the problem? The problem is disconnection. The web is disconnected in many places. My own experience has been so limited, because I am a

privileged white middle class woman. I am part of the dominant culture!! It is so easy to be unaware of situations that dishonor others. Recently, I was talking to a friend, as we both attended a memorial service for a black man who had married a white woman. In the service it was pointed out that marriage to a person of another ethnic background was against the law in the 1960s. I was shocked to hear this. I said to my friend "I didn't know there was such a law." And then almost simultaneously we both said, "Because the law did not affect you...you are white." I had never known what challenges this couple had to overcome. And in that way, I was also disconnected to my own higher values. So what can I do now, now that I have increased my awareness?

I can "think for myself" What am I doing or saying that keeps the injustice of racism alive? What could I, as one person, change in myself?

Ford has some suggestions: Avoid using the word, "race". Race, as we commonly use the term, is more a mythological creation than a scientific fact. By definition, the word race is divisive. The term attempts to classify subspecies of human beings according to physical characteristics such as skin color, hair texture, and size of bodies. The more researchers investigate the origins of humankind the more they find we are all brothers and sisters under the skin: more similar than different; more related than separate.

Replace the word race in your vocabulary with another term like ethnic group, ethnicity, cultural background, or nationality when speaking of differences.

I can do that. With some practice....

I have read books, known about racial injustices. This is the head part. But I still want to do more, to put myself in a position where I might be with people of many skin tones and different ethnic groups. I want to connect my head and my heart. In my neighborhood and in my church, there is little opportunity. I don't really want to move, or give up my beloved church community. So how can I make a plan to increase my participation in the whole human family? I took a little time to think it over.

One of the reasons I chose to go to Seattle University was because it is in the heart of the city, a central place where many are likely to attend. I had hoped to find some diversity. This turned out to be a good plan. There was more diversity of all kinds than I had in my neighborhood. And I had an opportunity to get to know more people outside my typical friend pool. One person I met along the way was Jerry. He was very bright; he knew a lot about the Bible from his AME (African Methodist Episcopal church) background. The knowledge he brought with him of other religious thinkers was pretty limited when he began. But he worked hard to learn from everyone. He was clearly an extrovert and didn't hesitate to speak out in class, so everyone knew what he was thinking or asking. I was not as smart or brave as Jerry!! My tendency was to keep my mouth shut until I was pretty sure I was safe with the strangers in my class. One day, as the lecture proceeded, Jerry started talking about the atrocity of slavery. He had come from the south himself. He and his family knew well the violence and oppression brought about by slavery. To him, the infliction of slavery on Blacks was as atrocious as the holocaust was to Jews. As he was getting going about this crime against humanity, he said, "I know those slave owners will be in Hell today. They have done such a bad thing that surely they have been punished for what they have done." A poignant pause followed. The professor kindly, but firmly responded, "Jerry, there is no hell." He could

not believe that the God he believed in would not punish those who had sinned against humanity to this extent.

Jerry's fervent wish that some would be punished for their wrongdoing is a voice that has stayed with me. My family has no history of being enslaved. I know no one who was separated from parents, or spouse and sold as if they were a bag of flour. I had never been exposed so clearly to the pain of another's history as I was in hearing Jerry speak. I have read in the newspaper about persecution of others, but now I was face to face with someone's real life story. I had the opportunity to open my heart and connect. The stranger within myself, the one who did not know because I am white and privileged, was freed. I felt myself moved a little closer to a friendship with Jerry. We trusted each other.

It is so easy to get distracted by our own history--- our own assumptions about the way things are. Did you know? 61% of whites think blacks are naturally athletic.

32% of whites feel blacks are more likely to be poor.

30% of whites see blacks as dangerous.

On the other side: 49% of blacks feel all whites are racist.

29% of blacks believe whites are wealthy.

14% of blacks view whites as intelligent.

another 14% of blacks feel whites are dangerous!!

These are stereotypes that don't help us be truly understanding of the other.

*We can all get along:* by Clyde W.Ford

I feel I need to be pushed and shoved into another's story in order to wake up to my own assumptions. I am a big fan of jazz singers, and one of my favorites has been Nina Simone. The first time I heard her sing, "I loves you Porgy" from the light opera, "Porgy and Bess," I was transported. The beauty of her sultry voice – the deep love that was present in her tone and pauses – opened my heart completely to the people on Catfish Row. I couldn't get enough of her singing and unsurpassed piano playing. One of my other favorites she sang was "I Wish I knew How". We sang that earlier. UU Hymnal #151 I wish I knew how it feels to be free. By Billy Taylor and Dick Dallas. Although she sang it from the viewpoint of a black African woman, we can all find a message in the words to that song. "I wish I could break all the chains holding me"... songwriters tell the story in ways I can remember really well.

So when I was in the library the other day and passed the rack of recently released books, I had to stop when I saw, "Biography of Nina Simone." I had found another's story that opened my eyes to what it means to be Black in a predominantly white culture. Nina was a child prodigy when it came to playing the piano. If you can believe this, she started playing when she was two. As she got a little older, she practiced her piano every day, as well as going to school, a good two-mile walk, then she played for church on Sunday. Her entire small town recognized her talent. One of the white members of the community paid for her piano lessons and gave her what she needed when it was time to apply to the prestigious classical music school of the day. In her own head, rang the words of her black and white community, "Nina Simone" will be the first professional classical music piano player who is Black. There was no doubt. But alas, she was not accepted. That dream died, but not her remembrance of the rejection –not even giving her a chance to compete!!

David Brun-Lambert, *Nina Simone, the Biography*, Aurum Press Ltd., Great Britain, 2009

As a young adult, she became involved with Dr. King's movement and sang and played in support of the right to vote for all people. As I read of her involvement and passion to participate with the non-violent leadership of Martin Luther King, Jr. I came across a sentence in her biography that really jolted me. I have heard these events and times reported and know the crimes committed against our brothers and sisters of color, but this way of reporting the incident presented a different viewpoint: It began, "**White terrorism** appeared at the very beginning of 1957. During the night, a series of attacks had wrecked Montgomery's black neighborhoods and four black churches had been damaged. On the morning of January 27<sup>th</sup>, twelve sticks of dynamite were found in front of Kings' front door in Montgomery.

**White terrorism**...a terrible description. I have to think...Do I want to be part of this? This blatant racism has wounded us all. I have never experienced such violence directed at my family or me. I don't know the fear of "what might happen next." Hearing these descriptions of what has happened to my Black sisters and brothers, I am filled with gratitude that they chose to follow the non-violent leadership within their ranks. They did not join together in a war to annihilate us, the white establishment. Thank goodness, they chose to vote, to participate, and to insist on educational opportunities – to free themselves from the caste system imposed on them. I give thanks for those who gave up their position on the margin, and chose to join the center in creating a more just world.

**What is the good news?** There has always existed an alternative community which calls to question the cultural order of things. A new vision is born. **Think for yourself:** what is your vision for the highest, most valuable community you want to participate in? I want to keep trying – to learn the history of those who may be strangers to me. I want to expand my personal community and break down the stranger that exists in me, the one who does not know the other.

Do you remember when Mark Morrison-Reed came to our church a month or so ago? He is one of a few **Black Americans** serving as a UU minister. I read the book he wrote, "Black Pioneers in a White Denomination" Here is a step he thinks is important: "Remembering the past with regret can strengthen the resolve to do the only thing we can do together to shape a more just tomorrow," "For in that moment when the one person feels hurt and the other feels sympathy, a bond is established. That connection can be built upon. And as the relationship grows, we can move beyond avoidance, guilt, and self-hatred, and let go of the anger and recrimination to embrace the only things that can sustain us over the long haul –gratitude for the loving spirit which we find in one another, and our shared vision of tomorrow. For alone our vision is too narrow to see all that must be seen, and our strength too limited to do all that must be done, but together our vision widens and our strength is renewed, and that is cause to celebrate and recommit our souls."

Our minds, our hearts, our souls are the means to reconnect what has been disconnected.