



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

Black Lives, What Matters?

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I know that God exists. This really baffles my atheist wife, Michelle, who considers me, in other ways, rational. But before you crucify me on the Unitarian cross of rationalism, please understand, that I make no claims to be capable of proving my assertion publicly nor will I attempt to indoctrinate you in any way. To me God is 14 billion years old, was born with the Big Bang, and creates in some of us the strange quirk of believing we are separate. As a white eco-justice, anti-racist activist I have been asking myself, "How can I integrate the worlds of eco and social justice in my life?"

I'd like to begin by grieving two deaths in my life. The first death is The Holocene extinction, otherwise referred to as the Sixth extinction. Because it is an ongoing event there are no precise dates for birth and death but please take this moment to mourn the ongoing extinction event of species during the end of the Holocene epoch which began 11,700 years before our present time and whose cause of death is due mainly to human activity. The second death I'd like to mourn is my childhood dream of America. I used to believe that when there were important problems in this country that important people were taking care of them. It was the belief that things worked, that the people in charge knew what they were doing and that if I would simply follow the rules and vote responsibly things would get progressively better.

Each of these deaths is very real and personal to me. This is my moment to recognize with you, my tribe, the passing of these beloved. In the foreseeable centuries we will not have a return of the loving Holocene Epoch which nourished us to our present state. We are left to love the broken world which our actions have created leaving behind the irrecoverable loss. Although the storybook America never existed it is nonetheless a real loss. My heart believed. But in order to love and create justice in the world before us today, the fairytale America, must be laid to rest. How can we love the small "A" america and inspire a revolution in social justice?

People grieve in strange and sometimes mysterious ways. Here I want to lift George W. Bush up. For those of you who may have missed this on the internet, on the occasion of the Memorial Service for the police officers who were shamefully ambushed in Dallas by Micah Johnson, George W. Bush trended on YouTube. There was a very somber service with soldiers in full military dress and he was standing between his wife Laura Bush and the Obamas. The band was playing "Battle Hymn of the Republic" and George Jr. decided to Boogie to it. He was an easy target to ridicule but it makes a good point. There isn't a right way to grieve. Outrage and sadness can take turns with joy and laughter and all can be healing.

Police officers do a job which includes putting their lives at risk "to protect and serve" . . . others. Those who do their job honorably are worth their weight in gold. On one recent occasion a young black man with a gun told officers he wanted to die. He refused to comply with the lawful command to put down his gun and lay on the ground. As a result, he was shot multiple times and died.

In the eyes of the law this was what they call “awful but lawful” as the officer had “no malice of intent.” I wonder in these many encounters I see on the internet, if there aren’t ways of using our ingenuity and force in less routinely lethal ways. The shooter in Dallas was an Afghan war veteran who was so alienated and had so dehumanized the individual officers on the ground to nothing more than the abstraction of their uniforms, that he treated them the way racists treat their prey, stripping them to the level which hunters treat the animal population. The Dallas police having cornered Micah, sent in a robot and blew him up. Couldn’t a robot incapacitate or subdue in some way?

Just as speech is protected by our constitution even when it is vile, so is due process of law and the presumption of innocence even when the perpetrator is clearly deranged. It is these most difficult situations that test the strength of our democracy. Others responded to the crisis in different ways. Snoop Dogg and rapper “the Game” marched to LAPD headquarters with the statement “that from today forward, we will be UNIFIED as minorities & we will no longer allow them to hunt us or be hunted by us!!!” He said, “Do not: bring any weapons or anything illegal. Do not come high (Just an aside but when Snoop Dogg says “don’t come high” we have a whole new level of seriousness.). But he said don’t be, “belligerent . . . We don’t need any HOT HEADS or anyone there for the wrong reasons. We will stand as we are, UNIFIED. I’m calling ALL GANGS, ALL RACES, ALL GROWN MEN affiliated or not and we will stand UNIFIED.”

Or, in Texas, Black Lives Matter activists paused their march to engage with anti-BLM white protestors holding signs saying ALL LIVES MATTER, and flying a Confederate Flag. All Lives Matter has been the counterclaim to Black Lives Matter across the nation. The BLM marchers, rather than making them the enemy, engaged. In an open carry state like Texas these activists risked their lives to engage. They explained that of course all lives matter, but that wasn’t the point. Blacks are being beaten, maimed and killed without any presumption of innocence or due process of law. The restraint officers show in encounters with whites is absent and officers take an oath to “preserve and protect” others’ lives, even, sometimes, at the risk of their own. All the elements for a riot were present but none happened. Instead these grown men and women embraced and heard one another. There was connection and understanding. This is how people learn to love the America they have instead of the dream America they imagine.

Not all police officers are the same. In Cleveland Ohio, Officer Nakia Jones, the only black female officer in Warrensville Heights, Ohio said she became an officer to make a difference in people’s lives. Her impassioned and outraged YouTube video went viral. She said in the video, “If you are white and you’re working in a black community and you are racist, you need to be ashamed of yourself. You stood up there and took an oath. If this is not where you want to work, then you need to take your behind somewhere else.”

The other aspect of George W’s dance I find instructive is that it is in communities which are strange to us where true healing and change can take place. How can we engage with these communities whose habits may be foreign to our own? The look on the Obamas’ faces went from quizzical to disturbed to somewhat shocked to amused to resigned . . . that’s crazy

George. We UU's should be low hanging fruit for Social Justice organizers seeking allies. George reminds me that we are not the only ones who dance, however strangely or inappropriately. Where and how can we engage with unlikely partners?

In my eco-justice work with CCL, part of our primary mission is to engage with people who other organizations treat as enemies - but engaging with these folks where they are. Even if they deny Climate Change entirely, we find the greatest hope for lasting change. Former Republican Congressman from South Carolina, Bob Ingliss, a man with a 100% rating from the conservative coalition has taught me a lot about finding common ground with conservatives. He told me, "You know what they call environmentalists in my state?" I said, "No" and he said, "Watermelons....green on the outside, red on the inside." I told him, "I'll wear that proudly." And then I told him, "Do you want to hear a watermelon joke?" and he said, "Sure." So I told him the joke among watermelons (environmentalists) is this, "Do you know the difference between a Republican and a Democrat? A Republican thinks they can throw their garbage anywhere. A Democrat thinks if they get it near the trash can, at least that's better than the Republican." That's traditional thinking. So . . . near is close enough because it is better than the other guys and you get elected.

So, is almost equal enough? Is a reduction in the incarceration rate or body cameras enough when the brutality they capture doesn't change anything? Is almost protecting our atmosphere for future generations enough? Traditional thinking has left millions in our country disaffected, disappointed and mistrustful of our institutions and their ability to face the task at hand. John F. Kennedy said we choose to go to the moon not because it is easy but because it is hard. We are in crisis and the solutions will be hard. Throughout the civil rights era in the 60's JFK, RFK and LBJ all at various times federalized state troopers throughout the south to protect the Freedom Riders and the Marchers in Selma. Because the crisis we face is no longer confined to geographic regions but spread across our nation we need to demand federal standards for policing. There needs to be accountability beyond local police forces and police unions. The demands are varied. In Los Angeles BLM is asking Chief Beck to step down. As BLM numbers increase the LA Times has written an article claiming the movement dead, discredited they say by the shooting of police officers in Dallas.

One of the difficulties which Climate Justice folks share with Social Justice activists is that our grief is rooted in the clarity of seeing ongoing patterns of harm and destruction which others overlook or willfully ignore. How do you know that this or that event was racism or climate change? Climate scientists tell us that although we cannot say with certainty any individual event is climate change related, it is the ongoing pattern of the frequency and intensity of wildfires, floods, droughts and hurricanes which reveals the reality. We see a similar rise in frequency and intensity of violence, incarceration and destruction of Black Lives. It is difficult to say which individual officer is acting on racist impulses but the overall pattern is clearly racist.

When expressing outrage, grief or regret about an event which is part of an ongoing pattern rather than a single event I find myself open to being judged as Chicken Little. But the science

reveals that the world is far more like Humpty Dumpty. *All the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't put Humpty together again* . . . The Holocene is ended. Black Lives Matter folk and we who are their allies find ourselves being judged similarly. But when Black Lives express outrage at events they witness, they are threatened with incarceration and violence. Sometimes open threats and sometimes silent judgement as if they're acting on emotional impulse rather than accurate observation of an increasingly frightening problem in the community. I greatly prefer the deniers who tell me they think I'm full of it. There is far greater opportunity in engaging the open racist than the sideline observer who harbors bigotry. At least there is communication. There is a chance to engage. But most people don't want to acknowledge the patterns, the evidence, the death of a geological epoch or their fantasy of America with a capital A.

Social Justice and Eco-Justice advocates are constantly at risk of becoming background noise. I am reminded of a Saturday Night Live piece called "Deep Thoughts" by Jack Handy. It was in the form of a Hallmark Card moment on television. A beautiful and serene shot of a forest with birds chirping and a slow scroll of calligraphy words with a calm narrator's voice saying, "If trees could scream, would we be so cavalier about cutting them down? We might, if they screamed all the time, for no good reason." This is how many in America view activists. But too often they won't tell us how annoying we are. That would take too long. Climate Change and the rise of racism are part of an ongoing pattern which is alarming, dangerous and emotionally and psychologically scarring. It is evidence of an empire in moral decline. This pattern of inhumanity and reckless disregard for living things is even more horrifying in many developing countries around the world. But I hope that today we can commit to go beyond sentimentality and passive hope and engage with the constructive work of becoming hope, embodying the hope for communities who are perhaps beset, besieged and bedraggled as I sometimes feel when faced by the enormity of facing down the fossil fuel industry.

Still, my work for Climate Justice has enriched my life immeasurably. I have gained many of my dearest friends and found my greatest heroes as well. As a climate activist I have certainly been attuned to the horrors of global suffering from droughts and floods and wildfires and the murderous lack of regard by the industrialized world for the consequences brought about by their/our way of life. But I have also witnessed and been part of actions which are having an impact on streams, lakes, rivers and skies. Fragile and sometimes entirely defenseless birds and bears, tribes and communities, locally and globally, rely on our actions. We are fond of saying the children are our future. But it is far more accurate to say that we are theirs. Our action or inaction creates what they inherit. If we decide that close to the trash can is good enough, that fracked gas might be better than coal, then we continue the game of high stakes poker with their fields, rivers, mountains and oceans at a table with gangsters and cheats.

What should I do about the profound violence, inequity and injustice I witness on a daily basis? I think it begins with conversations and relationships. Bring a racist a cookie! Build a bridge not a wall. Or rebuild a bridge burnt by others. We as a community are called upon by our heritage to answer the call of righteousness and justice. We sing, "Move in the hand giving life the shape of justice." We need to engage and live our values. We need to acknowledge the full

legacy and brutality of our history on race in America including slavery and the Native American genocide.

I don't think it's going to be simple or neat. It's going to be messy and filled with mistakes, misunderstandings and even angry, confused and hurt feelings. But when we bring our best intentions these can be overcome.

I am involved with an organization called the Citizens Climate Lobby, or CCL for short. We seek to create the political will in the US, and globally really, for a livable planet. It is strange that you would need to ask people to commit to that, but apparently you do because there seems to be some opposition to it. Unwilling to await the electoral process to become rational we seek to use massive action to turn political enemies into allies using creativity, intelligence and what Ghandi called Soul Force. The hard dividing wall we see ourselves facing is between those who will and won't admit there is a problem which needs to be addressed. Racism and Climate Change simply don't exist in their eyes. If we are to change the circumstances in the world, if we are to love the world we have, not just the world we want, then these are the hard heads and hard hearts we must engage. In order to be successful we're working on helping ourselves and others to make breakthroughs in their own political and personal power.

Creativity, intelligence and Soul Force. How can we proceed in ways to ensure that the power of our Black brothers and sisters with respect to the routine living of their daily lives and their individual creativity, intelligence and Soul Force is protected, sanctified and celebrated? It will be our collective action, Soul Force, together through our connection with allies and foes. I believe we can do this because in point of fact all our separate identities, parties, countries and definitions which divide us are in fact an illusion. Our natural state is connectedness. The dream of separation and alienation is at the heart of our perceived powerlessness and most of our suffering.

The shooter in the tower, the officer on a traffic stop or the soldier on the battlefield, dreams himself separate, but his bullet proves him otherwise. We need to rapidly recognize our kinship, and our fundamental connectedness before the next shot is fired.

JFK said, "Those who make peaceful revolution impossible will make violent revolution inevitable."

Langston Hughes wrote:

What happens to a dream deferred?
Does it dry up
Like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore--
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over--

like a syrupy sweet?
Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.
Or does it explode?

Let us not defer our dreams of creating unity in our community. Let us make peaceful revolution inevitable, by planting the seeds of Soul Force, in our hearts and lives today.