

“We Who Believe in Freedom Cannot Rest Until It Comes”
Arlington Street Church, Unitarian Universalist
Sunday, February 21, 2010
Rev. Yvonne Schumacher Strejcek, Acting Associate Minister

One of my favorite singing groups is Sweet Honey in the Rock. And one of my favorites among the many songs they have recorded is “Ella’s Song.” Ella refers to Ella Baker, the tireless civil rights worker who was born in 1903, the granddaughter of a slave. Ella Baker became fired up about human rights listening to her grandmother tell stories of slave revolts. She became active in the NAACP in the 1940s, and later organized the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Still later she helped to organize the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the 1961 Freedom Rides and 1964 Freedom Summer, aimed at registering black voters in the deep south, working to overcome deeply entrenched racism in this country.

“[Ella] Baker continued to be a respected and influential leader in the fight for human and civil rights [right up] until her death on December 13, 1986, [which was] her 83rd birthday.”¹ In her honor, Van Jones, a passionate and articulate urban activist and environmental justice advocate in Oakland, California, founded there the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights² in the mid-1990s. He was the prestigious Ware Lecturer at the General Assembly of Unitarian Universalist Congregations in 2008.

I recently learned that another organization evoking Ms Baker’s memory as it does righteous work closer to home is right here in Dorchester: The Ella J Baker House, aimed at “transforming inner city neighborhoods one child at a time.” Their mission is mentoring, monitoring, and ministering to high risk youth in Boston’s inner city. The lives of these children are held as sacred; the ability to help them to feel less neglected, seen as a blessing and a privilege. I look forward to learning more about opportunities like this one and similar projects in the city that have already drawn the engagement of Arlington Street Church, including our own UU Urban Ministry and its Renewal House, helping in any way I can with them, building relationships, I hope. I am so happy to know that urban engagement is part of the ministry of this church.

“Ella’s Song,” which I referred to earlier, goes like this:

*We who believe in freedom cannot rest
We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes*

*Until the killing of Black men, Black mothers’ sons,
Is as important as the killing of white men, white mothers’ sons,
We who believe in freedom cannot rest
We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes*

*That which touches me most is that I had a chance to work with people
Passing on to others that which was passed on to me
We who believe in freedom cannot rest*

¹ www.ellabakercenter.org

² *ibid*

We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes...

The pain and suffering caused by racism are beyond measure, although there are plenty of statistics easily available by Googling,³ revealing the historic and ongoing injustices. I'm sure you've heard some offer an opinion that President Obama's election may have marked the turning of our society into a "post-racial" era, but I don't see that yet, not at all, not by a long shot. In pretty much *all areas of life* there are race-based disparities still very much evident today – in housing, home ownership, education, healthcare including provision of life saving medications, in police practices, in our system of criminal justice and corrections, the imposition of the death penalty, in infant mortality rates, life expectancy, employment opportunities, actual income and earnings potential, taxation, voting practices, access to various forms of insurance, and more. And even though public policies and laws may have changed to affirm equality in the mid-20th century, there are still many present disparities that are present effects of past intentional discrimination.

That list of disparities, all that pain and suffering, all the ways in which lives are harmed – those injustices hurt all of us – even those of us who are privileged and seemingly spared, in certain ways – because ultimately there can be no peace, no love in the deepest, truest sense, without justice. Stopping to pay attention, and to teach each other, and to find ways we might effectively address the underlying systems and ways we might provide needed direct service are all a part of our calling as a liberal religious community.

We know that we can make a difference, and we DO make a difference in meaningful ways. We get it that our religious values must be lived; they are not just words, and I celebrate our faith in action. This congregation has done great work in New Orleans following the Katrina disaster, visiting several times to help with clean-up and rebuilding, and is getting ready to send a team to go again this spring, hooray. Marvelous. And we are gearing up to find more ways to help alleviate some of the destruction and suffering in Haiti, too, following the devastating earthquake there just a few weeks ago. I am looking forward to supporting those efforts and the entire Jubilee program in any way I can. This is not just a matter of engaging in social service work; it is a faith-filled effort, profoundly grounded in our religious values, our calling to make Beloved Community real. Many of us feel a deep yearning in our souls that summons us, not just individually but as a community, and we respond together with a profoundly heartfelt YES.

This can become very courageous and important work, something potentially transformative beyond the immediate tangible relief and service provided. It can lead to the deeper work of confronting the racial identities that each of us has learned; we can explore together our racialized experiences, and our race-based assumptions, and the great racial divide that separates people in this community and our country. While on this journey, we can cultivate greater honesty and understanding among us here, to learn new ways of being in authentic and accountable relationship with one another, to share the stories of our lives, to know, respect, and dare I say it *love each other better* -- and to do all that we can to build the world we dream about. We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes.

Here we are, Unitarian Universalists, with a proud track record, an important historical legacy when it comes to social justice and civil rights, right here in Arlington Street Church and in our

³ Try Googling "racial disparity." See also www.tolerance.org/teach/activities/activity.jsp?ar=796

wider Association. We are UUs who proclaim principles and values that affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every single person, *and* the inescapable interdependent web of existence of which each of us is a part, *and* justice, equity, and compassion in human relationships, *all* human relationships, *and* the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process throughout *all* human endeavor, *and* the goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice *for all*, let me repeat that *FOR ALL*, *and* the call to a free, *FREE*, and responsible, which means *accountable*, search for truth and meaning, *and* acceptance of one another, *ALL OF US*, encouraging each other towards a deepened faith and heightened spiritual growth. These are the foundational principles of our faith, calling us imperatively towards a less racist, less sexist, less homophobic, less oppressive way of being in the world, confronting the unfair systems and attitudes that exist throughout our society, here in Boston and even, yes, here in this church. Some of this is deeply ingrained in our systems, our own beings, our own souls, all of us having been carefully taught, just like that song from South Pacific says. “You’ve got to be taught to hate and fear, you’ve got to be taught from year to year, it’s got to be drummed in your dear little ear, you’ve got to be carefully taught.” I have been working most of my life to unlearn some of the stuff I was carefully taught and to see the systemic problems more clearly. And I know that many of you are doing the same, *and* that we all have some distance still to go to put oppressive ways to rest for good.

We aspire to a wider inclusivity than we have achieved. It is a work in progress; we are still learning and growing.

You may have seen the recent story in the Boston Globe in which it was reported that Rev. Fred Small, my colleague in Cambridge, spoke of being embarrassed by racism.⁴ “I’m embarrassed that white people have not done more for justice and to break down barriers of race, class, and culture,” he is reported as having said. “But,” he went on, “embarrassment is helpful if it spurs action.” A follow-up letter to the paper from him provided more about that church’s efforts to become a multiracial, multicultural, justice-making congregation. Diversity isn’t just about numbers or political correctness, he said. It’s about transforming our culture to embrace people of a wide variety of races, cultures, backgrounds, and abilities. It is a continuing spiritual practice of hospitality, humility, curiosity, and willingness to change, he said.

Yes. We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes.

This work is not easy. Rebuilding New Orleans is very, very hard work, and Haiti will be too. The spiritual work is even harder. There will be feelings that get stirred up on the road towards overcoming oppressions and creating sustainable community. Sometimes there are hurtful things said. In our quest to become more diverse, the folks of color among us carry a huge burden on this journey, and they may reasonably find it quite painful and difficult. Some of us white folks are unwittingly ignorant and/or defensive, but we want to feel safe and forgiven when we blunder. I don’t exclude myself from that. In the exchanges we have as such learning unfolds, tears may come; anger may come; for some our own brokenness and sense of inadequacy will come up. I hope and pray that I myself and all of us will cultivate sufficient character and heart to stay at the table nonetheless as we learn a more sophisticated analysis. In many of the programs that have been tried in Unitarian Universalist congregations, a part of the learning involves the creation of

⁴ Irons, Meghan, in the Boston Globe, Feb 10, 2010; www.boston.com/news/local/massachusetts/articles/2010/02/10/in_cambridge_concerns_that_diversity_is_now_just_a_word/

an explicit covenant by which we promise to be patient with one another as we learn and grow, as we express our ideas and feelings – so I’m fervently hoping we *will* all stay at the table and achieve a deeper understanding of where we’ve come from with respect to racism and all forms of oppression, and what’s been the experience of the people of color who are with us in this congregation and others who have experienced discrimination and oppression. Together we might grapple with the question of what impediments (systems and attitudes) may be in place that keep us from more effectively welcoming, including, empowering and appreciating Unitarian Universalists from groups frequently marginalized. And why should we do this? Because we are *all* called – you and you and me – to pay attention to the yearning, the suffering, the inequities, and to lift up the gifts and talents of all. The principles of our free faith demand it of us. The Spirit of Life demands it of us. We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes.

Make no mistake – we are being tested. Our commitment to ourselves and each other, our willingness to be generous and to be self disclosing, the truth of what we say we believe in and our willingness to make it so, our willingness to do whatever we have to do to overcome racist and other forms of unfair privilege inside ourselves and in our society’s systems, all of this is being tested. And I do not by any means put myself above this process of being tested.

At the General Assembly of our Unitarian Universalist Association a year and a half ago in Fort Lauderdale, the most powerful speaker of all, in my opinion, was Van Jones, who I previously mentioned, of the Ella Baker Center in Oakland. He reminded us that Martin Luther King didn’t say “I have a complaint!” or “I have a critique!” He challenged us to be our best selves reaching for a dream, and we *can* yet be that. Jones called for a “Green New Deal,” greening the ghetto first, saying to a whole new generation “we *do* have a future for you.” We Unitarian Universalists can help lead the way towards countering what he terms “eco-apartheid.” I think his work is brilliant – addressing the combination of economic, environmental, and urban issues, with a powerful hopefulness.

In discussing these issues, someone recently said to me, “I am so tired of this race stuff. I just want to forget about it for a while and simply live my life.” Or words to that effect. Gently, as gently but as clearly as I could find words to express, I said “do you understand how your feeling that comes from a place of privilege?” Maybe some would rather not see it, but I think it is *such* good news that so many of us are openly addressing racist systems and our own internalized racism instead of avoiding it or denying it. Our world won’t change until *we* risk change, openly, authentically, courageously, faithfully, and with maximally open hearts. As long as anyone is oppressed we are all oppressed and we all pay the price. If we want harmony in our community and our wider world we must achieve greater justice, and to do that we have to understand the ways in which we collude with injustice. Then we might become agents of change and goodwill instead of complicit with evil. This is healing work, and it is to be celebrated, not dreaded. I am so looking forward to doing this work here in ministry with you.

We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes. May we steadfastly persist. Will you please join me in a spirit of prayer or meditation? Spirit of Life and Love, help us to understand that the lives and gifts of all are holy, and that the future is in our hands. May we have strength and wisdom to use our own short lives well, pointed towards love and justice. May we each become living proof that we all have an unlimited capacity to decide what kind of human being we want to be and then grow into that person. There is no limit to the amount of happiness, peace,

contentment, love, compassion, kindness, and generosity of spirit available to us for giving and receiving at any moment in our lives. May we know your abiding presence, O Love, tenderly embracing us as we build beloved community together. Let us continue to help each other to build the world we dream about and may we know in our hearts, our guts, our bones that new ways *are* achievable. For our own sakes and that of our children and our children's children, may it be so, this and no less. Amen, blessed be, Namasté, and again I say amen.

Selected Resources for Further Reading

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Wise, Tim. *Speaking Treason Fluently: Anti-Racist Reflections from an Angry White Male*. Berkeley CA: Soft Skull Press, 2008. This author has several other published books that are on point, plus a thought-provoking blog found here: www.TimWise.org and www.redroom.com.