



UU Women's Federation Sermon Award 2021

Winner

"Voices That Most Need to Be Heard"

By Rev. Anthony Makar

Sermon delivered to the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Atlanta, GA

February 25, 2018

and update later to reflect current events

Voices that Most Need to be Heard

In 1975, a professor of English at Wellesley College published a book intending to articulate “the female imagination” at play in women’s literature. Not one female person of color writer was mentioned.

Alice Walker, for one, was distressed. How possibly could the Wellesley professor, a feminist by the name of Patricia Meyer Spacks, think that the voices of white, middle-class women were representative of all women of all colors and all classes and all other possible markers of identity?

To devalue the voices of women of color like this is wrong. But Patricia Meyer Spacks had her supporters. One of them justified her exclusion of women of color authors by saying that she didn’t want to theorize about women whose experiences were so very different from hers. To this, Alice Walker said, “Spacks never lived in 19th century Yorkshire, England, so why theorize about the Brontes?”

It’s a great question. The life circumstances of the authors of such classics as *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* are completely different from that of 20th century American women! Yet I guess since they all share whiteness, well....

There is a reason why Alice Walker, just a couple years later, in 1983, would coin the term “Womanism” and develop a corresponding theory and movement. It was past time. The feminism of the 19th and 20th centuries was really about the survival of white, relatively well-off women; issues of race and class were ignored. But when you are a black woman, your survival can’t ignore any form of oppression, since practically every form is aimed at you, all at once.

From the very beginning of your life, the world is swinging at you, from multiple directions.

Which gives the voices of women of color true profundity. You/we know how deeply oppression can cut. You know how sharp the hunger for healing and wholeness can be. You know, first hand, how to stay resilient and feisty, to thrive despite all.

Your voice, which is the one most likely to be silenced, is the one that most needs to be heard.

I so want our shared spiritual tradition of Unitarian Universalism to hear more and more of the voices of women of color, so our faith can better embody and en flesh the Womanist spirit.

You know, as I was thinking about Alice Walker and her outrage at discovering no women of color authors represented in that book by the feminist Wellesley

professor, I couldn't help but connect the dots and see something completely analogous with how people of color, men and women alike, might find something vital missing when they read the "book" of Unitarian Universalist history. Where are the people of color? How can a religious tradition that preaches faith in the inherent worth and dignity of EVERY person be so ... middle class white?

The Rev. Mark Morrison-Reed calls it "The black hole in the white UU psyche."

When there is a hole, you don't have true wholeness.

The hole is a lack, a vacuum, an absence, a poverty. It's being schooled in ignorance about all that is not white middle class. It's being taught to be afraid to go beyond the information you already know and the people you already know.

That's not freedom. That's unfreedom.

We are needing to build a new way. We are needing to hear voices that we have never heard before.

We are needing to fill in the hole so we can achieve wholeness.

So we Unitarian Universalists want to hear these voices. They come from among us, and they come from beyond us, too.

We hear Alice Walker when she speaks that word, "Womanism," and when she defines it. A "Womanist" is "A woman who loves another woman, sexually and/or non-sexually. She appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility... [she] is committed to the survival and wholeness of an entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically for health... loves the spirit.... loves struggle. Loves herself. Regardless."

Note especially the part where she says that the Womanist is committed to the survival of an entire people. Some feminists have argued differently, saying that men are the enemy. But the Womanist refuses to polarize like this. The Womanist affirms women's relationships with men and the health of the family, and wants men to be well.

How precious and necessary in this moment when masculinity can take toxic forms, and again and again it's a white male shooting up yet another school, or attempting to overrun our Capitol.

More about all this another time.

For now, let's bring things back to the beautiful voices of the Womanists in this space, and beyond. The commitment to the survival and wholeness of all, starting with oneself.

What might this look like?

One of the members of our congregation has said, “As a Womanist, I am compelled to resist that which tries to shrink me. I have learned to demand that others see me how I see myself: awoke, nuanced, and of course, whole.”

That is a revolutionary standpoint. You want to be whole, says this Womanist? Know that there are so many systems out there that want to create you in their own image. Know this, read the signs of this, and then snatch yourself back from every one, as best as you can. Even the system of one’s skin color, which is a system that racism imposes, and which, for people of color, is felt inside as a painful double-consciousness. “Shedding my skin,” says this Womanist, “did not imply that I rejected my Blackness, but it did require me to be more than ‘Black.’ Being ‘Black’ could not be my most important feature. We are not merely the color of our skin or the tragedy of our pasts. It can’t be or we’ll miss this planet in all of its glory.”

This is so because we are beings with inherent worth and dignity, who possess a wholeness that transcends every smaller part that makes us up. Our race, our gender, our sexual orientation, our class, our ability are undeniably significant parts of who we are, but to identify who we are with any one of them completely and exclusively is to participate in our own oppression. Each of us is all our parts, together, and even then, we are more than that.

We are ourselves. We are individual. We are whole.

But so much wants to shrink us down to some smaller part. And so, as our sister Womanist congregant says, we feel the “constant hunger pangs of needing more than what we’ve been given.”

But though some aspects of the world are so deeply wounding to us, can we trust that there are other aspects that will somehow feed us and help us into our wholeness?

Despite all, can we still hope?

Hope was on my mind, several years ago, when I stepped up to this pulpit and quoted American writer E.B. White, who said, very famously, “I arise in the morning torn between a desire to improve the world and a desire to enjoy the world. This makes it hard to plan the day.” I remember laughter after I said this. And then I said that an essential part of being a hopeful Unitarian Universalist was cultivating a way of life that balanced saving the world with savoring the world.

All these years later, after having encountered Womanism, I am singing a different tune.

Because, what if your world is constantly throwing things your way that aren't enjoyable, that can't be savored?

What if you are Rishawna Myricks and your 15-year-old son Darius has been killed by police and suddenly you find yourself living that horrible cycle of a black child killed, a cry for justice, your child slandered and discredited in the press, a funeral is held, and justice is denied—and then, it's another mother's son, another mother's anguish, another community's outrage, and another round of a cruel cycle that seems to never end....

Or what if you are Brittany Packnett watching the events unfolding in Charlottesville, Virginia, when the white supremacists gathered to rally against the removal of a Confederate statue, and your humanity as a person of color is being denied, the supremacists brandish their burning torches and they cry out "You will not replace us!" and they slur their racial slurs and you can feel the bloody history of racial terrorism entering into the present, you can feel that...

What if your world is constantly throwing things like this your way?

What if you are Ruby Bridges, and you are six years old, and everyday, to enter into your elementary school, you have to go through large crowds of white people who are shouting and screaming horrible things, and you feel how they want to tear you apart, and you have to go through that, everyday, for months and months on end, to get to your classroom where you, a six-year-old, will learn reading and writing and 'rithmetic....

If your world is like this—relentlessly chaotic, relentlessly cruel because of the color of your skin or some other aspect of your identity that arouses contempt—enjoying it is not going to come easy. Savoring is not going to come easy. You're going to feel emotionally flattened every day. Exhausted and extinguished. PTSD of some form or fashion will be a static that is buzzing in the background constantly, easily set-off by the next affront to your dignity, whether intended or not.

A recent book by Mary-Frances Winters summarizes it so well: *Black Fatigue: How Racism Erodes the Mind, Body, and Spirit*.

So, what happens when we get to the other part of the E. B. White equation: the saving the world part? Despair is going to drain you dry. No passion, no energy available to improve anything. Downward spiral of despair....

Unless...

Unless we stop seeing savoring and saving as entirely different things. When they are seen as entirely different things, then, when you're savoring, that's all

you're doing, and when you're saving, you're just saving—which explains all my talk, several years ago, about balancing them.

But now, after encountering Womanism, the different tune I'm singing is: We have to stop seeing them as completely different!

Don't balance them: blend them!

That is how, despite all, there can still be hope!

The beautiful Womanist Audre Lorde says, "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare."

At her son Darius' funeral, when the organist played "Jesus is my help," Rishawna Myricks cared for herself by dancing. Despite the lead weight of her sadness, she got up and she danced. Later, at the cemetery, when her son's bullet-ridden body was being lowered into the ground, they cranked up the stereo playing all his favorite songs and everyone danced their hearts right out and they could feel Darius there with them, and one witness to all this said, "I witnessed the joy of a community that, even in mourning, knew that it had access to one of the most powerful tools of resistance to a system of state sponsored violence and oppression that seeks to crush the joyful spirits of vibrant communities like these." [Delonte Gholston]

The world did not hand Rishawna Myricks joy on a plate. She dug down deep to find a homegrown joy within, and she relied on a community of resistance to join her in that joy.

And what about Brittany Packett, in the face of the white supremacists of Charlottesville? She wanted to go and protest, but she was already committed to attending a work-related leadership seminar in Aspen, Colorado. At first she was full of guilt and grief—what was she doing in Aspen when she needed to show up with her terrorized community against evil? But she thought about those words from Audre Lorde—they became a mantra in her mind—and she realized that joy sustains her for the larger work of justice. So here's what she did, beside attend the conference. She went on a seven-mile bike ride, along a stream and through lush, gorgeous scenery. And then she went to Aspen's favorite burger joint, Woody Creek Tavern, a place so authentic that people park their horses right next to other patrons' cars. She says, "So I rode, like a child, on my bike, to go get a burger. I might as well have been riding that bike back to myself." "Joy is not indulgent. Joy is defiant. Joy is a break from a news cycle that will discombobulate me if I let it. Joy is a middle finger to a bigot with a torch who wants to see me cower. Joy is a moral victory against extremism and a political win, fueling us to persist and resist. Joy is resistance to the hate that fills the front page."

Listen to that!

And, as for what sweet six-year-old Ruby Bridges did to care for herself, to create joy-as-resistance in her life?

She went to church and she learned about a man long ago who loved people even though they were cruel to him, and in her heart, through prayer, she stayed close to that man, she invoked that man, she wrapped that man around her as her protection and her strength and she did something that is nothing like the disgusting “thoughts and prayers” that our politicians perversely invoke to distract people from dealing with the real issues. With a joy that feels like supreme self-protection and serenity in the midst of chaos, she stopped in the midst of the crowd of white people shouting and screaming evil at her and she prayed for these people. It’s all she could do. She said,

*Please, God, try to forgive those people.
Because even if they say those bad things,
They don’t know what they’re doing.
So You could forgive them,
Just like You did those folks a long time ago
When they said terrible things about You.*

The world has enough chaos and fear and anger in it to last 100, 100,000 lifetimes. That’s the world we’ve got to live in, and find a way through, to the good and the beautiful and the true that is also in the world.

So, care for yourself.

This is self-care and it is political warfare and it’s all one and the same.

It is joy-as-resistance, and I don’t see how we can continue on, as individuals and as a movement, unless we follow the lead of Womanism and learn the *how* of joy-as-resistance down to our bones.

The times you and I have been living in! A world-wide pandemic. Climate change. Economic crisis. A President impeached twice. The Big Lie that Trump and his enablers and followers continue to feed: that the election was stolen. The fragile state of our democracy, and ongoing voter suppression. And more.

We need to be strong to face this. Passionate. On point.

We Unitarian Universalists: all of us, whatever our collection of social identities happens to be.

The voices of Black women will bless all of us.

Womanism has something precious to say to all of us.

We've got to dance like Rishawna Myricks when events threaten to crush us. Our communities need to be dancing communities, even when times are crushing.

Don't you dare feel guilty if you can't show up to the protest. Just like Brittany Packett, take that bike ride and enjoy that burger because it's going to feed you and make you strong when you do show up. It's going to fuel you to persist and resist.

And let us find a way to stay close to the religious heroes in all times and all lands. Learn deeply the story of one or two or more. Meditate on their compassion. Pray them into our lives, so when we are faced with adversity, we can be like Ruby Bridges and feel wrapped around by their strength, and inspired by their courage.

The past is what it was, but now, you and me: we stand upon the threshold of something new. Unitarian Universalism can achieve a wholeness it has never had before, if it learns to hear voices unheard before—voices that most need to be heard.

Rishawna Myricks

Brittany Packett

Ruby Bridges

Audre Lorde who says, "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare."

Alice Walker

And our sister Womanist congregant, who wants for herself and for us all to witness the planet in all its glory--in ALL its glory--and not to miss that.

We dare not miss that.