

Courage to Make Black Lives Matter

By Jim Coakley

Stevens Point Unitarian Universalist Fellowship – February 15, 2015



*Enter, rejoice and come in, Enter rejoice and come in,
Today will be a joyful day, Enter rejoice and come in.*

Gathering...

Welcome and Announcements

Call to Gather and Chalice Lighting

*Opening Hymn # 1007: *There's a River Flowin' in My Soul*

New Member Joining

Sharing...

Story For All Ages

Of thee I Sing - A Letter to my Daughters

Barak Obama

Children's Sharing of Joys and Concerns

Singing the Children on Their Way

May peace surround you,

May love surround you,

As you go as you go,

As you go on your way.

Continued Sharing of Joys and Concerns (*Silent Meditation Following*)

Offering: The continued projects and operations of SPUUF

From you I receive,

To you I give,

Together we share,

And from this we live.

Searching...

1st Reading #584

A Network of Mutuality

Second Reading

from [Look at Race from the Other Side](#)

Horace Davis

Special Music:

[Ella's Song](#)

Sweet Honey In the Rock

Message:

Courage to Make Black Lives Matter

Jim Coakley

Closing...

*Closing Hymn #149

Lift Every Voice and Sing

(Please remain standing following the hymn.)

Closing Words (Said in a circle. All join hands):

May we grow in oneness with all living things and in oneness with ourselves.

May we be gentle, accepting and loving with ourselves and with others.

** You are invited to stand in body or spirit.*

Ella's Song

Composed by Bernice Johnson Reagon, copyright: Songtalk Publishing Co.

Refrain:

We who believe in freedom cannot rest

We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes

Verses

Until the killing of Black men, Black mothers' sons

Is as important as the killing of White men, White mothers' sons

And 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

To me young people come first, they have the courage where we fail

And if I can shed some light as they carry us through the gale

The older I get the better I know that the secret of my going on

Is when the reins are in the hand of the young who dare to run against the storm

Not needing to clutch for power, not needing the light just to shine on me

I need to be just one in the number as we stand against tyranny

Struggling myself don't mean a whole lot I come to realize

That teaching others to stand up and fight is the only way my struggle survive

I'm a woman who speaks in a voice and I must be heard

At time I can be quite difficult, I'll bow to no man's word

Sermon

Heart, head and hands; those three are metaphors for how we enter our faith. How we find deeper meaning in life and an orientation to the universe.

Some of us enter the world of the transcendent through our hearts and emotions. We are deeply moved by beauty, by ritual, by a very empathetic relationship with others. It conjures up images of mystics, monks, and maybe even magic.

Others of us enter faith through our heads. We find deeper meaning through reason, understanding the relationships across our universe, and searching for new ways of making sense of the mystery. We are deeply moved by those “ah ha” moments in which something suddenly becomes clearer and we feel drawn closer to the divine order of things. The head metaphor conjures up images of the scholar, the theologian, the classic archetype of the Unitarian or Universalist minister who can illuminate the finer points of doctrine or the human experience.

Yet many of us enter faith through our hands. We find that service to others makes us spiritually whole. I’m using the term service in a very broad sense. It may mean we are involved in acts of charity with those most vulnerable in our world. It may mean we work consistently day after day behind the scenes by bringing order to chaos; building a better world one brick at a time. But it could also mean we are called to social justice, to use our gifts to make injustice visible with the hope that others who approach faith more with their hearts or heads will take notice and be moved to help make it right.

In reality, very few of us support our faith just through heart, head or hands; we probably all use all three, but are likely more comfortable with one over the other. For me, and I’m going to make a big assumption about most people in this room, and for most of you, I believe it is this last one that requires courage. It takes courage to live into our belief and its sacred tenant that everyone has inherent worth and dignity and deserves a fair chance in life. It takes courage to witness against injustice. Today I’m going to challenge us to use all three but I will highlight those who have had the courage to use their hands to help make black lives matter.

Oprah Winfrey appears in one of the first scenes of the movie *Selma*. She plays the real life character Annie Lee Cooper. The viewer is drawn to her hands as she very meticulously fills out a voter registration card. At the time I thought this was just a clever way to introduce the name of the character in the film and therefore it needed to be very legible. We soon discover that her focus on perfect legibility was just part of her greater effort to not give the county clerk even the tiniest thing upon which to deny her the right to register to vote. Cooper was dressed in her finest church-going attire and had done her homework to answer the likely questions the clerk might ask – such as reciting the preamble to the constitution or the number of counties in Alabama. Ultimately she is denied the right to register because she doesn’t know the names of all the counties. Cooper’s character appears over and over again in the movie as we witness her horrible beatings at the hands of the police. I was struck by her character and courage. Cooper was not a young firebrand like most of the protestors. She was a middle aged mild

mannered woman who spent her days caring for white patients in a nursing home. She could have stayed out of trouble and left such dangerous work to others.

The real Annie Lee Cooper was raised in Selma but moved away after she dropped out of school in seventh grade. She returned in 1962 to take care of her elderly mother. She joined the civil rights movement when she discovered she was not allowed to vote as she had done previously in Pennsylvania and Ohio. Her first attempt to register got her fired from her nursing home job. As depicted in the movie, in January 1965 she stood in line for hours outside the Dallas County Courthouse to register to vote until the sheriff ordered the crowd to disperse. After being prodded in the neck by the sheriff's billy club, she turned around and used her hands to clock the sheriff in the jaw. Deputies wrestled this middle aged woman to the ground while the sheriff repeatedly beat her with his club. She spent the following 11 hours in jail singing spirituals like our gathering hymn today before she was allowed to leave. Cooper's courage lifted up the seriousness of the injustice and was one act that pushed the ever widening awareness of the Selma civil rights efforts.

The movie recounts the main events of the Selma March, so I won't go into all the details today, but I will highlight the images of hands in the movie. As I said, it started with Annie's hands filling out the voter registration form, but there were repeated images of protestors lifting their hands in prayer, holding hands in solidarity, or in self-defense to the brutal beatings. Hands were a central image of the spiritual community; as an act of worship and solidarity to summon the courage as a community to continue to witness as well as an act of community defiance and protection to carry out the most violent examples of witness. I was reminded over and over of not only the courage of the small group of local black residents like Annie Cooper who were seeking their constitutional rights, and those of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and their leader Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., but also the thousands of white allies who answered the call to add their hands to the struggle to make the world believe that black lives matter – many of which were Unitarian Universalist.

And now let us shift to our heads and ask a key question: What does the slogan Black Lives Matter mean to us here in a part of Wisconsin where we rarely come in contact with African Americans? I'll give you a hint. The answer has something to do with Horace Davis' admonition that we know black history. Last month the Rev. Roger Bertschausen, the senior minister of the Fox Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship in Appleton asked this question and came to the same conclusion. I have his permission to share the key points of his sermon with you today.¹ He references a recent exhibit at the local history museum titled "A Stone of Hope: Black Experiences in the Fox Cities"² and states "with historical facts that have long been suppressed and/or ignored, "Stone of Hope" blows the fiction that race is not an issue here right out of the water."

¹ Rev. Roger Bertschausen, "BLACK LIVES MATTER—IN FERGUSON, STATEN ISLAND, AND THE FOX VALLEY", Fox Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, Appleton, Wisconsin, January 17-18, 2015.

² <http://www.myhistorymuseum.org/a-stone-of-hope.html>.

Bertschausen, like so many whites in this part of the country believed that racism wasn't an issue because there had never been a significant black population. I think we all believed the Great Migration of African Americans from the South after the Civil War had never travelled this far north. The exhibit proved what a lie this was. The Fox Cities had a thriving middle class black population in the decades after the Civil War through the turn of the twentieth century, but it suddenly disappeared. The exhibit documents that Klan activity, police harassment and segregation caused there not to be a single black person left by 1920. As Bertschausen says, "This was an astonishing transformation. You don't lose a whole minority population within a few decades without vicious racism being at the center of the story."

To continue the quote: "And then in a sleight of hand worthy of Houdini, the memory of the thriving black population that once lived here disappeared from white consciousness. The erasure was so complete that a well-meaning white like me, a person who has tried to work on race issues for twenty-five years, was completely unaware of this history.....But many blacks here and well beyond know and have always known this history. This place and its history is thick with the stench of racism and segregation and hate. Our area continues to struggle with a bad reputation among blacks because of this history. And activist whites like me have been completely oblivious to this."

The extent of Bertschausen's obliviousness hit him when a slide of a *Post-Crescent* advertisement for a Klu Klux Klan rally in the early 1900s was shown. He noticed that the address of the Methodist church where the rally was being held was that of the Fellowship's old building! Their congregation had unknowingly occupied a building where KKK rallies once took place!

So intellectually, you can see that the Fox Cities are as steeped in racism and racial strife as much as all the other more famous places like Selma and Ferguson. However, in my opinion it's even worse because the history of such racism was systematically removed from white consciousness. Spiritually this is one of those "ah ha" moments in which the pieces fall into place. If our knowledge was purposely incomplete, then our spiritual journey is incomplete. The strongly negative reaction of blacks to excessive police brutality now makes more sense. The absence of the black story from our story reinforces that those black lives never mattered. It makes me wonder what we don't know about black history in North Central Wisconsin and if we have the courage to find out or accept it.

And now let us turn to matters of the heart and Tulsa, Oklahoma. Like the Fox Cities, Tulsa had a thriving African American community after the Civil War that was decimated in the 1920s, but unlike the Fox Cities story, it was much more violent and heart wrenching.

In the early part of the 20th century, Tulsa's African American community covered roughly 20 square blocks just north of downtown and was nicknamed "Black Wall Street" because of its prosperity. Jim Crow laws had forced strict segregation between blacks and whites, but this had caused the black community to become very self-sufficient. They had their own banks, restaurants, hotels and shops.

However in the spring of 1921, based on an unsubstantiated rumor of a young black man assaulting a young white woman, the worst race riot in American history was unleashed. White mobs stormed into the black neighborhood, set it ablaze and shot anyone they could find. At one point even military planes from WW 1 were used. The local police did secretly hide the accused young man, but they did nothing to stop the violence. In one night the entire neighborhood was burned to the ground and hundreds of people were murdered. No one was ever convicted or held accountable for the tragedy and no reparations were ever made to the African American community. Eventually, like in the Fox Cities, this part of the city's history was ignored and many hoped forgotten. It certainly wasn't in any of my US history books.

Only in recent decades has the city begun to come to grips with its past. It built a reconciliation park and cultural center to tell the true history of the massacre. I only learned this history last fall as part of a class I took in Tulsa. As I read accounts of the tragedy and walked through the cultural center reading and hearing the stories of the survivors, I became enraged and once again became very aware of my white privilege. These people had no recourse. No one was going to listen to them or come to their aid. They could do nothing but bury their dead and start over. They had no expectations of anything better. I of course have been raised to consider this an outrage, to call the media, to get a lawyer, to sue somebody until I get compensated. I can do that because I'm white and my culture tells me that my life matters. The contrast between our circumstances broke my heart and my deep feelings of empathy beckoned me to summon the courage to make these black lives matter.

We have an unexpected connection to this story. At the time of the massacre, one of the most influential men in Tulsa was writing articles for the newspaper condoning the lynchings and violence against African Americans that had been occurring more frequently throughout the South. He was the president of All Souls Unitarian Church. Another arrow into the heart of my spirituality. I would have hoped that the Unitarians with their abolitionist history would never have been involved with something so abhorrent. They of all people should have had the courage to try and prevent or stop it, but unfortunately that's just my revisionist history looking back from a 21st century perspective.

Fortunately, due to a bizarre turn of events, All Souls today is one of the leading organizations to have the courage to raise their hand in making black lives matter in Tulsa. Less than a decade ago, a predominantly African American Pentecostal congregation merged with All Souls after their bishop shifted his theology to Universalism. It made the previously all white congregation do some deep thinking about white privilege and whether they had the courage to become a very multi-cultural congregation. The road hasn't always been easy, but today they are a thriving congregation, the largest in our association. They have the courage to raise their hands very publically in support of making black lives matter to the wider Tulsa community. This year, their participation in the annual MLK day parade included a float and scores of congregants making a very bold political yet spiritual statement. I have a number of slides to show you.

First let me show you the church building.



As you can see, this church was fashioned after its New England Unitarian heritage and pay particular attention to the steeple because it will come up again. I have to admit that when this building was built, it was not a stretch to say that the faces inside the building appeared as white as the outside. On the surface, it doesn't appear to be the type of place with enough courage to try and make black lives matter.

Here is the wardrobe for the parade being modelled by the senior minister Marlin Lavanhar.



On the front are the words "Got Soul" and the back reads "Don't Shoot – Seek the Truth in Love" allsoulschurch.org. You can get a closer look at mine after the service.

This slide is from the back of the float.



Notice the pronounced steeple and the banner denouncing the new Jim Crow. It's a little hard to read because the words are written on the hands of someone in handcuffs. That by the way is the front side of Rev. Lavanhar.

Here's a shot from the side.



The girl on the float trying to hold her poster with her chin is a member's daughter and the man on the left with his back to the camera is their student minister.

And now the parade begins.



A lot of great singing, especially spirituals and upbeat praise songs about love and reconciliation. With scores of supporters following.



And then all of a sudden the music and the float stop. Hands are raised in the air in the now familiar “don’t shoot” stance and a hush comes over the crowd.



Many in the parade felt that those moments of silence with hands raised in the air were some of the most spiritual moments they had ever encountered.

Here was a congregation with a dubious past in race relations presenting itself as a vibrant multi-cultural faith community with the courage to raise their hands in solidarity to help make black lives matter – in Tulsa, in Oklahoma, and in America. They believe black lives matter in their heads, they feel back lives matter in their hearts and they are showing that black lives matter with their hands.



I know we believe black lives matter here in North Central Wisconsin, but do we have the courage to make that statement with our hands as publically has All Souls Tulsa. I hope so.

I leave you with this encouragement from my heart.

(Jim sings the first verse and refrain from *Ella's Song* with hood up and arms raised)

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

Amen