

“Trust the Dawning Future More”
Rev. Susanne Intriligator
Preached at Follen Church
July 30, 2017

A month ago now, I went to New Orleans, to the annual General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association. About 3,000 UUs were there – 9 of us from Follen.

As you may have heard, it’s been a tumultuous time in our denomination. After a dispute about racism in the hiring process, the UUA president resigned in April. The board appointed three interim co-presidents, all African-Americans, to serve the remaining three months of his term. And this GA felt remarkably different, with UUs of color leading or co-leading just about every event and shining a critical anti-racism lens on every interaction. It was challenging and energizing.

Among many other things, I went to a workshop called Courage for Racial Justice. I chose it because it was led by Criss Crass, a well-known white antiracism organizer and author whose work I admire. I had high hopes.

There were about 200 people in a large conference room. Soon after he welcomed us, Crass asked the crowd, “Why do you – each of you as individuals -- want to do racial justice work? Who would like to come up here and tell the crowd why this work is important to you?”

Ick, I thought, *this* is what we’re doing? I’ve come here to listen to an expert talk about his experience, and instead he’s making me *listen* to all these other *random* people, these know-nothings? What a waste of my time!

Maybe others were having the same thoughts, because the room was quiet and tense. “Come on now,” Crass reiterated. “Who can come up here and tell us, from the heart, why this work is important to you?”

My stomach churned. It flipped over. I was annoyed – and yet something inside me was stirred. It occurred to me that I really *needed* to formulate my own answer to Crass’s question, there and then, in front of the crowd. So I got up to speak.

And I realized in the moment, **that’s** how we grow courage for racial justice – by connecting deep down with why it matters to us and then telling the world. We grow courage by ***practicing courage***.

And, since then, yes, I have felt more courageous.

So today, and over these four Sundays in a row, I want to practice courage by sharing that experience with you, by telling you about my answer – and my further questions. Maybe this en-couragement process will help you to formulate your own answers -- and maybe you'll even share them too!

Because . . . in this moment, as individuals, as Follenites, as UUs and as citizens, we need all the courage we can get. If we are to survive, to raise and sustain a movement of resistance, if we are to envision a better world for us and our children, with racial justice at its center, we will need **ALL** the courage we can find.

I was thinking about this last week, when I realized it was a big anniversary.

50 years ago last week, In July of 1967, something happened that fundamentally changed the lives of 2 million people, including mine.

In July of 1967, I was 21 months old, a toddler. Learning to walk and run and talk, learning how to learn. Trying to make sense of my world.

Five miles from our family home, in that July week, Detroit police raided an illegal bar and arrested everyone there. Outside a crowd gathered and watched the police – who were known for their brutality – push and shove some young women, twisting their arms. A young man climbed up on a car and shouted, “Are we going to let them push us around?” He threw a bottle at a sargent. It missed, but then the crowd picked up sticks and stones. The rest is history.

Call it a rebellion, call it a riot. For five days that summer, Detroit went up in flames. One of the largest urban disturbances in US history. 150 square blocks burned to the ground. Thousands of businesses destroyed, snipers and shoot-outs across the city. National Guard tanks rolled in the streets. After 5 days of unrest, 43 people were dead, thousands more injured, \$150 million in damages.

The riots shook my white world to its core. Before that, to most white people, Detroit was a model city – the 4th largest in the country. A beacon of productivity and peaceful coexistence. A glorious melting pot of peasants drawn from all over Europe, now making middle-class money, buying up new houses and living the American dream.

We didn't know about the other side of things, the black side. We didn't **want** to know about the powder keg next door, built of decades of police brutality and harassment, decades of housing and job discrimination. We didn't want to know.

. . .

James Johnson Jr. was born in Starkville, Mississippi, in 1934. His family were Sharecroppers, living and farming on the land of a former Confederate officer, earning almost nothing, suffering grinding poverty.

When James was 9, he saw a white mob lynch his cousin. From that event, he developed a life-long fear of white people and a debilitating nervous condition. He had nightmares and often woke up screaming.

When James Jr was still young, his father went north, to Detroit, in search of a better life, but he couldn't get work. No one would hire him. He gave up and came back south, took a job as a janitor, and his marriage dissolved. In 1953, James Jr took his own shot at the Great Migration. He also moved to Detroit, looking for steady work in the auto industry. He moved in with his aunt and uncle there and paid them rent from by piecing together part-time jobs as a cook and a gardener.

Finally, after 12 years in Detroit, James Johnson Jr landed a job in the auto industry. Like other blacks, however, he was assigned one of the plant's most dangerous and difficult jobs. Using specially lined gloves, Johnson loaded six brake shoes a minute into a searing hot oven.

In her book "Whose Detroit?" historian Heather Thompson tells the story of James Johnson. She documents how black workers in the auto plants faced constant discrimination, first in hiring and then in job assignments. Then, *after* work, African Americans in Detroit faced infamous police harassment and brutality, and redlining – an elaborate system that kept them in expensive but substandard rentals, denied them mortgages, and forced them to stay in underperforming, segregated public schools.

What happened in July 1967 was not a surprise to African Americans; it was the logical result of decades of abuse.

I was struck by the Johnson family story when I compared it to my own. In the same time period when Johnson's father was rejected by the auto industry, my white grandfather, an immigrant from Poland, was already working in the Ford steel foundry – despite the fact that he never learned to speak English. Twenty years later, when James Johnson Jr was being turned away, that grandfather was able to get his son, my father, a summer job in the plant, so Dad could work his way through college and then buy a house in an all-white suburb with good schools.

For my family, Detroit and the auto industry proved a conduit, a tool to rise from poverty to the educated middle class in two generations. For the Johnson family, however, it proved to be another just another stage for oppression, a new urban backdrop for an enforced poverty.

Even as a small child, I knew that something was fundamentally wrong with my segregated world -- with white flight, with a black city that continued to implode and collapse and white suburbs that turned their backs. Like all children in dysfunctional situations, I could FEEL the elephant in the room. The fear, the anger, between us and among us, was palpable -- in family gatherings, in supermarkets and in Sears. White adults offered their explanations and theories about race, which even then rang false. They didn't make sense, and so I didn't know who to

trust. Like a generation of my peers, I vowed to just move away. I did, and I lost a lot of myself along the way.

For me and 2 million other metro Detroiters, that week 50 years ago last week changed my life irrevocably. It left a hole in my city, in my family, in my sense of home, in my sense of reality.

Racism is a spiritual disease. It warps people, limits their perception, inhibits their experiences. It leaves holes in us. Even more damaging than this is the widespread and dysfunctional **denial**, the refusal to see the institutional oppression that has been built into American capitalism – discrimination in housing, employment, education that keeps families like the Johnsons from rising.

If we live in denial, we tacitly accept this in-built inequality, even as it escalates. We are complicit, and it eats at us from the inside. How can we live our faith if we are not working to make things right? Human liberation is all bound together – until everyone is free, no one is.

For the past 8 months, I've been working with Moral Revival Massachusetts, which is our state's chapter of the Moral Mondays movement that started in North Carolina in 2013. Led by Rev. Dr. William Barber, the Moral Revival is a clergy-led, interfaith coalition that brings a moral voice – one that prioritizes human need over corporate greed – back to the state house.

Through organizing and civil disobedience, the movement has overturned immoral public policy on issues like voting rights, immigration, minimum wage, health care, LGBTQ protections, and women's rights. Now as it's spreading, going national, and building strength across difference – I can see a new future dawning.

In the next year, Rev. Barber and the Moral Revival plans to re-boot Martin Luther King's Poor People's Campaign from the 1960s. We will be building a national platform so that poor people can speak for themselves, can tell the world about how 40 years of extremist politics have denied them a living wage, accessible health care, good schools and safe housing.

Barber's approach dovetails nicely with that of Bryan Stevenson, the criminal justice advocate, who gave the keynote address at the GA in New Orleans. Stevenson challenged UUs to "get proximate" – that is, get closer to the issues we are trying to address and the people we are trying to empower.

Like Barber, like the new UUA, Stephenson challenges us to listen closely to marginalized people, to build long-term relationship, to center their voices and their solutions. It's a new and different paradigm of collaborative leadership that I'll be examining in my next three sermons.

In our reading this morning ("[For Strong Women](#)"), Detroitier Marge Piercy describes another paradigm shift, a new way to think about strength and courage. She praises *not* the traditional idea of strength -- individual, self-oriented, physical, dominating – but the long-haul, hard-

working, often invisible but connective strength of women. A strength that needs others, that needs love, that comes from weakness.

“She is strong not as an individual, as a stone,” writes Piercy, “but as a wolf suckling her young. Strength is not *in* her, she *enacts* it as the wind fills a sail. . . . Strong is what we make each other.”

Strong is what we make each other. Is that not the purpose of church -- to hold us in our human weakness, fragility, and need, to connect us through that weakness with one another and with our higher moral purpose?

Strong is what we make each other.

May you be strong for the journey. May we **make each other** strong for the journey.

May we fill each other’s sails with the breath of love, with the strength of weakness, with the courage to listen closely, to see the truth and to speak the truth, so that justice may manifest on this earth.

Amen.

Let’s join in our closing hymn, 168 "One More Step"

Benediction

May you go forth in peace now,
to love and serve the world.