

## **Broken Hearted and Wide Open — Reflections on Race**

Rev. Mary Margaret Earl, UU Urban Minister and executive director

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This summer I met a dear colleague at a Providence RI coffee shop for croissant and catching up. We have a lot in common, including a shared commitment to social justice and a deep faith.

One difference is plain: I am white. She is African American.

This day, we talked about our different work to confront racism. We talked about what's broken, and what needs to be healed. And she told me she has a particular task for herself in the year ahead: To try to open herself to trusting more people who are white.

And here, we entered a moment that was both sacred, and hard.

Sacred, in her naming an intimate struggle. In her sharing this with me.

And hard, to face the reality of the space between us.

She is a woman whom I know to be widely revered and loved by many people across race, culture and class, and there is no one kinder, warmer, more generous to all than she.

But, there is a place in her heart that is wary.

And that breaks mine.

I am not surprised, nor should I be. If there is a particular issue that has surfaced in 2015, it is the gulf in perception and experience between African Americans and whites across the United States. Perceptions and experiences about power structures like police and courts and the reality of racism.

As the Black Lives Matter movement has risen from the deaths of men like Eric Garner and Michael Brown, so has opposition.

My morning Facebook feed scrolls through comments on the Black Lives Matter movement, giving me a glimpse of the divide. My FB friends include classmates from the all-white farming community where I grew up. Their frustrated comments about Blue Lives Matter show frustration with a movement they don't really understand.

But comments from progressive UUs highlight the divide, too. Our Unitarian Universalist Association stands in support of the Black Lives Matter movement. And I see white UUs struggle to understand - UUs who say of course they oppose racism, but shouldn't church banners say All Lives Matter – because our faith embraces the inherent dignity of all of us?

In such resistance lies not ill-will but a failure to feel, see and hear what African Americans are expressing about their lived experience.

An experience that is different from mine, from that of other white people.

That resistance to listening is a barrier to building relationships, to building trust and working side by side across our differences to make the world more just.

That resistance is a barrier to healing racism.

I cannot imagine that African Americans want to spend time persuading white people of the reality of racism any more than I want to spend time persuading men on my lived experience of sexism. Or a gay person wants to persuade straight people on the reality of homophobia. Or someone with a disability wants to convince the able-bodied that the world really is harder when you are in a wheelchair.

African American writer John Metta in June preached at an all-white church about racism – reluctantly. He wrote:

***You see, I don't talk about race with White people. To illustrate why, I'll tell a story: It was probably about 15 years ago when a conversation took place between my aunt, who is White and lives in New York State, and my sister, who is Black and lives in North Carolina. This conversation can be distilled to a single sentence, said by my Black sister:***

***"The only difference between people in The North and people in The South is that down here, at least people are honest about being racist."***

***.... Over a decade later .... My aunt is still hurt by the suggestion that people in New York, that she, a northerner, a liberal, a good person who has Black family members, is a racist.***

***He wrote: To my aunt, the suggestion that "people in The North are racist" is an attack on her as a racist. She is unable to differentiate her participation within a racist system ...from an accusation that she, individually, is a racist. Without being able to make that differentiation, White people in general decide to***

***vigorously defend their own personal non-racism, or point out that it doesn't exist because they don't see it.***

And so John Metta tries not to talk about race – a defining aspect of his identity – with white people.

***There is a wall between us.***

I felt this wall most keenly 20 years ago, during my career in journalism. I worked at the Syracuse NY paper and the reporter in the next cubicle was an African American woman writer. Our proximity meant we talked daily. And talking led to cooperating on stories, to humor and sharing, and the day-to-day-ness of our relationship made us close. Or, pretty close.

Our proximity brought me into the orbit of the other African American journalists who were her friends. Our proximity meant I was gifted with being part of a conversation that I might otherwise not have heard. And it taught me, at least a little, about differences in perception based on our experiences.

It was during this period that I had a spiritual conversion that transformed my agnosticism into a Panentheism in which I perceived God in everything and everything within the body of God. All people, the earth, and animals, too. My awareness of the suffering of animals led to becoming a vegan and animal rights activist.

And for this I was almost fired.

I was assigned a cooking story about ... preparing veal. I asked the editors to be assigned to another story. I suggested alternative stories. My African American colleague offered to write the story instead.

Finally, a managing editor, white, called me into his office and said: Enough. You either say yes, you'll write the story. This story. Or it's No and you'll be fired, or we'll begin laying the path to fire you.

I looked him in the eyes. And said: No.

It was terrifying and freeing and fascinating, too, in what I learned about myself and my newsroom colleagues.

I had many newsroom friends. But, this is what I remember:

As top editors stewed over my fate, nearly all my white colleagues quietly stepped away. I do not recall a peep of support, save one woman who really loved dogs.

But three African American women – none of whom related to my animal rights cause, at all – approached me ready to stand with me. They became my support system in those hard days.

I saw firsthand the difference in the way my white colleagues and African American colleagues viewed the newspaper authorities.

These three women didn't assume that because those in power found me at fault, that it meant I was wrong.

They knew, firsthand, that power is not inherently just. And their inclination was for the underdog.

I wasn't fired. I was relegated to a suburban bureau, where I worked till leaving for seminary. My friendship with these strong women remained.

But, much as they supported me and welcomed me, much as I loved them, they ultimately had a bond with one another that I couldn't share.

Perhaps because their mothers and fathers and brothers had experienced the pain of racism that I could not know. Perhaps they were not certain that I could listen to their experience of racism without justifying or defending or disbelieving. Perhaps they couldn't talk freely about their anger.

They connected with one another, and were intimate, in ways I knew I was outside of. I was always a step outside that inner circle of sisterhood.

And my love and respect for them, and the knowledge that it is racism – the racism into which we all were born - that kept us separate breaks my heart, still.

The guarded heart of my new colleague in Providence, breaks my heart, still.

And it is the love I have for these women, and the pain of the separation between me and brothers and sisters who are African American, this love and pain that opens me up to the task before us at the UU Urban Ministry.

The Greater Boston area, like many urban areas, is divided by race, class and faith. According to the US 2010 Census Project, among the nation's large cities – Boston

ranks 11<sup>th</sup> most segregated between blacks and whites. And fourth in Hispanic-white segregation.

The consequence of segregation is injustice. Minorities living in Boston's segregated neighborhoods make less money, suffer poorer health, lack access to jobs, quality housing and education, and experience greater violence compared with peers living in whiter neighborhoods.

The impact of segregation also results in harder-to-measure damage between groups: estrangement, mistrust and fear. Which leads to more entrenched segregation.

And here is where the UU Urban Ministry stands.

After a decade of ministry in Providence RI, within the homeless community, I arrived at the UU Urban Ministry nearly a year ago.

The Urban Ministry is one of the country's oldest social services agencies, comprised of 50 UU churches, grounded in UU values, and positioned in the heart of Boston's historic African American community. Over the 185 years of its existence, it has provided heating fuel to the poor, created elderly housing, built a child care center and opened an Asian American food pantry. The goal always has been serving, but also bringing people together across the divide.

In 2015, our core programs include our Renewal House domestic violence shelter – which supports male and GLBT survivors too; **The Roxbury Youth Program**, which tutors, nurtures and feeds young people after school; our **Bethany housing program**, and our Jericho Road capacity building program.

But we also seek to create a diverse community through social events like jazz concerts and ice cream socials for UUs and Roxbury neighbors.

We are transforming our campus – our historic First Church, education center, chapel and grounds – into a community hub that welcomes neighborhood and social justice groups for meetings, retreats, worship and celebration.

We are planning and hosting lectures and performances that highlight the social challenges of our times:

- On Nov. 8, Debby Irving – author of *Waking Up White* – and Shay Stewart Bouley, the African American director of the Community Change anti-racism group, offer a lecture titled: *Tell Me the Truth; Getting to the heart of cross racial conversation.*

What ties all this together is an acknowledgement of the importance of relationships as catalyst for change.

What ties our work together is the desire to create relationships grounded in respect – a desire not to be a UU charity in Roxbury – but an agency built on UU values and committed to social engagement as a way of working for justice.

We are striving to build mutuality across the difference of races, class, and experience in our committees, staff and board.

We are striving to build up trust, and bring down the walls between us.

This is not a simple agenda, and not accomplished in a straight march toward progress.



Recently, as I prepared to preach, I spoke with a longtime UU volunteer, who tutors in our youth program. As a child, she attended an all-white school, lives in a white suburb, witnesses the segregation of her life.

Over her time at the Urban Ministry she has come to see her work not as some kind of noblesse oblige, but as a call to be in relationship with people who are different from her and to learn: “I am receiving more than I am helping,” she said.

Sometimes, her learning has been awkward and uncomfortable. Her engagement with people across difference has taught her she needs to step back and let others lead. She has learned she needs to keep listening.

And she has been cracked open by her experience: cracked open to the educational injustice in Boston. Cracked open to the reality of the lives of young people in Roxbury. She sees headlines about shootings in Roxbury differently, now.

“I’m angry. I’m a little guilty. There are a lot of things I don’t know. It’s not sorted out. But I think it’s the right thing to be there,” she said.

It is messy and imperfect work. And we haven’t arrived. But we are trying.

The Jewish mystical tradition the Kabbalah describes creation this way: god poured godself into a vessel too small to contain him. The vessel shattered into a million pieces. Our role is to repair what is broken.

The human family has been shattered too. By slavery and war and greed and fear. By racism and sexism.

Our task as a religious people is to heal what is broken. To find ways of weaving all us back into one human family. To commit to our UU principals of seeking justice, equity and compassion in human relations; the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all.

In the great paradox of life, our task is to be willing to be broken, in order to heal our brokenness.

We must be willing to be broken open by the pain of racism and injustice, to really begin healing it. To heal it within ourselves, and within our social, educational, economic, housing and legal systems.

To be heartbroken by love and by grief, to be cracked open to the reality of prisons and poverty and violence and trauma.

To be heartbroken by the walls that divide us. In order to bring them tumbling down.

It is not easy work. It is not comfortable work. Its success is not assured.

I am not inviting you to join the work of the UU Urban Ministry because we have the answer. Or because we have a shortcut to the answer.

I am not inviting you to come because it will feel good. Because sometimes, it won't. Working across difference isn't simple.

But I am inviting you to a place where we are trying. To build bridges. To learn. To witness. To stand in hope.

I am inviting you to be, like me, broken wide open.

To let real love in.

God bless you on your work. God bless us in ours.

May our paths cross again.

Amen.