

Thinking About Ferguson: Responding with Love and Compassion
by Rev. Michelle Collins, delivered November 30, 2014

I struggled with what to do for today, for what to say today. I struggled because I didn't particularly want to talk about Ferguson and the events of this week – I still get upset nearly every time I think about it. But I knew that I had to, that we had to. It has been deeply troubling, as the events this week have unfolded, and ever since Michael Brown was killed, and ever since Trayvon Martin was killed, and ever since racial profiling and racial prejudice in our criminal justice system has been cast into clear light. This past Tuesday night there were protests and riots in Baltimore, and in Philadelphia, and these brought it even closer to home. We have to talk about Ferguson because we can't not talk about Ferguson and the continuing failures in our system. As Unitarian Universalists and as compassionate human beings, we have to.

We have to, but my eyes well up with tears as I'm thinking about it, as I think about the horrible violent act that sparked all of it this time. That it happened makes me sad, for Michael and his family, for everyone in his neighborhood, and for everyone in Fergusons across our country. Because there are Fergusons everywhere. And I'm often confused as I try to figure out how I am supposed to feel.

But then the responses confuse me even more. Why were National Guardsmen assigned to Ferguson on Monday, well before a decision was made? And even as Michael's family plead for peaceful responses, why were they so much the opposite? How does the looting and rioting help anyone, anyone at all? And what happens to the store owners whose shops were looted and destroyed – what about their future??

How does any of this help anyone? What makes this time even harder is that it is a terribly complex case – virtually nothing about it is clear-cut. Why the grand jury played out the way it did; why Michael approached the police car; and what really happened on that street in Ferguson that day. It's a complex case without easy answers, and this leads to complex emotions about it. It's not easy to know what to think about it, as much as I'd love to have any easy answer and a clear path ahead. In cases like that of Trayvon Martin or of Oscar Grant, it seemed easier to me, that I could assign my feelings of blame a little more easily.

But amid all of my questions and confusions, some things are clear to me. What has happened to and around Michael Brown is yet another point on a trajectory that is deeply troubling. While things about it aren't clear-cut, the trajectory is. It's a trajectory of continuing racial and economic inequities and gaps of power and the continuing criminalization of people of color in this country.

It is difficult for me to find ways to cope with the differences in perceptions versus realities. Along our historic trajectory, one can point out progress in terms of racial justice. Desegregation, the right to vote, even the election of our first ever African American president, and many others. It's all progress – right?

As legal scholar Michelle Alexander argues in her seminal work on the New Jim Crow:

The fact that some African Americans have experienced great success in recent years does not mean that something akin to a racial caste system no longer exists. ...Any candid observer of American racial history must acknowledge that racism is highly adaptable. The rules and reasons the political system employs to enforce status relations of any kind evolve and change as they are challenged. The valiant efforts to abolish slavery and Jim Crow and to achieve greater racial equality have brought about significant changes and “new rules of the game,” so to speak. These new rules have been justified by a new rhetoric, new language, and a new social consensus, while producing many of the same results... The adoption of a new system of control is never inevitable, but to date it has never been avoided... As systems of control have evolved, they have become perfected, arguable more resilient to challenge, thus capable of enduring for generations to come.¹

Alexander goes on to describe in detail the creation and make-up of the current racial caste system in our country, defended by laws separating the treatment of powder cocaine and crack cocaine and their related sentencing laws, racial profiling throughout the system, and greater uses of violence in responses.

Could we have avoided this? Or even more, what does it take to challenge this system, in this evolved form that Alexander names as even more perfected and resilient to challenge?

I saw this system along with its brother, economic inequities, every day I taught at a school in inner city Baltimore. Our student population was virtually all African American, and every one of our students qualified for free breakfasts and lunches. I cared a lot about all of the students, whether they were in my class or not. Sometimes they'd be late and miss breakfast at the school, and I'd hide them in the back corner of my classroom and give them something to eat. I knew they wouldn't have gotten anything at home. After observing one of my students who kept having trouble reading and held the book a little too close to her eyes, I had the school nurse check out her vision. We'd clean up our student's clothes – you could see the accumulation of the week building up, since they only had one or two outfits to wear. But I saw that we could only do so much – the challenges they faced were so many. I heard them talking about how many were living in their small homes. I knew which ones had seen someone killed or had a close family member who had been. I wonder now how many are still living in that neighborhood. And I wonder how many, especially the boys, have done time since then.

Now the things I did for my students were good things, but I struggle with what I could have done, or how any larger scale difference could be made for them. The systemic inequities were so great. The school had no extra money, and they were on the verge of being taken over by

¹ Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, 21-22.

the state as a low performing school. While there were some social services for their families, the underlying system and underlying inequities weren't being challenged, not really.

What does it take then? This past week in the aftermath since the grand jury's decision was announced, reactions have been sparked across the country. It included both peaceful protests and vigils and not-so-peaceful reactions. One group of them has confused me a great deal. A new grassroots organization called Blackout for Human Rights was formed and called for Blackout Black Friday protests, largely commercial protests. And linked to this was a demonstration at a key commuter train station in the San Francisco Bay Area – a station that I went through every time I travelled to school from home while I was studying for the ministry there.

Looking at the goals of Blackout for Human Rights, I struggle to find the connections in what they are doing right now. Their goals are quite admirable ones – to raise awareness about publicly funded human rights violations; to find lasting solutions to the root causes of this issue; and to empower those most at risk.² How does chaining yourselves to commuter trains accomplish these? How does avoiding shopping for a day do this, when it is the government and legal system the protests are aimed at, not retailers? Does this even make a single bit of a difference? Now, far be it for me to go too far criticizing any protests at consumerism – I've got some opinions in that matter after all – and the ever deepening commercialization of the holidays is just another highlight of the ever deepening gap of wealth in our country and its intimate ties with race. But I struggle to find the connection here, and I struggle to find what our best responses might be.

Part of it is that it all feels quite raw for me still. I've been talking with folks about it, and we run around in circles with our opinions and feelings. I stare out the window at trees – something I do a good bit of when I'm uncertain – and no conclusions come to me.

What are some ways for us to respond then?

First, we have to care for ourselves. Compassion for self, self-care, making space to let ourselves cry or scream or just time to stare out the window at the trees. Giving ourselves the care and space we need as we process what we're hearing, as we try and talk to our children about it, to our friends about it, to our relatives about it. I wonder how many Thanksgiving tables this past week saw discussions about some aspect of this case and its current aftermath. Mine sure did. Then after some of the guests left we had to have a discussion after the discussion just to discuss what had just happened.

We need to have spaces where we can talk about it, too. Spaces that are safe to name our feelings, to ask our questions, fully formed or not, spaces where we can also trust the reactions

² <http://www.blackoutforhumanrights.com/about-blackout.html>

of those around us to be coming from a place of love and compassion, too. I hope we have spaces and groups and conversations like that around here at the church.

Another response, once that I suspect we know fairly well, is gathering information and different points of view, finding the facts about the situations, at least as well as they can be established. As UU's, we're actually pretty good at this one. I've been reading much of what I could find this week about it. But I don't want us to stop there, as we often do. Information and understanding are necessary, but only useful when they ground action.

I don't think I've shared here yet about the moment when I realized I would stick with Unitarian Universalism no matter what. I had just moved to San Francisco to be starting seminary in Berkeley, and I was just starting to attend the one UU congregation in San Francisco. There are a bunch outside of town and on the other side of the bay, but only one on the side where I lived. So that was the one for me. On one of my first couple of Sundays there, I found myself sitting in a worship service – I have no idea what it was about – I was sitting there and observing the person in front of me. This person had taken their outer coat and flipped it so that the lining was showing prominently and artfully draped it over the pew back. I found myself sitting there, in my thrift store clothes, wondering how we'd make ends meet to get me through seminary, staring at the expensive designer Burberry coat in front of me. The economic disparity in my religion of choice had never felt so great. In that moment, two thoughts ran through my head at the same time. "Why on earth am I here," and "Because this is my home." In that moment I realized something else – we as Unitarian Universalists are well positioned to be allies. This is actually what undergirds movements like Standing on the Side of Love. That's a statement of allies and those whose action are in solidarity with people and populations facing these ever mounting injustices.

During this past week and before, many congregations and many UU's have responded with love and compassion as allies with Michael Brown, Ferguson, St. Louis, and people everywhere who are understandably upset. Many UU congregations opened their doors and held vigils and safe spaces, including Church of the Restoration in Philadelphia. Many have worked tirelessly on their responses, like my predecessor Rev. Barbara Gadon who's currently serving in St. Louis, and her leadership and presence at rallies, protests, and a "die-in" and many, many vigils as she's really put her heart and soul into the issue.

I love our hymn Gentle Angry People. In it, we sing, "We are a gentle angry people, and we are singing, singing for our lives." We are gentle and loving, but we are angry, too. This anger is important, and no doubt you can hear my hurt and anger in what I've shared with you today. For me the hurt comes from a place of anger as well as sadness. This anger is important because it can fuel what we do.

But as we reach out with love and gentleness and anger, I want to challenge us to open our hearts a little further today. I want to challenge us to come from a place of compassion too. Compassion is a statement of empathy; it's literally to suffer with. I've found myself brought

back here again and again this past week. As I've struggled to imagine what might have happened between Officer Wilson and Michael Brown that day, I've found myself imagining myself through each of their eyes, particularly Officer Wilson's. It's not necessarily a comfortable place to be, because I so want to find someone to blame for it all. I also try to see through the eyes and hearts of the looters, trying to understand their frustration, their pain, how it touches their fear and anger. This is another part of compassion, bearing witness to the pain of others, seeking to acknowledge it and to understand it. Seeking to connect with it as we seek to feel for our common humanity.

Now, I admit that this can muddy the waters of conclusions even more. Having easier answers, clear-cut conclusions, someone to blame, a tangible identifiable enemy and clear reactions against them – these are easier responses. But I think we're called to try and go further than that. Our responses can be from places of love – like the many congregations that held vigils. Our responses can be from places of anger and solidarity – advocating for justice and challenging the system where we can. And our responses can be compassionate – suffering and feeling with those we can relate to more easily but especially with those who are more difficult to relate to.

I still don't know what to feel about what should happen with this particular trial, and I still don't know what the best responses and protests would be. I'd bet I'm not alone in that. And it's okay for it to still hurt and be confusing. Let's keep the conversations going. Let's keep our work here in Wilmington going, especially with our involvement against gun violence in Wilmington this fall and with our hosting of the Heeding God's Call Memorial to the Lost starting next week. Let's keep it going. But let's also remember to hold each other and care for each other as we do it. May it be so.

In that vein, let's sing together, Lean on Me, number 1021 in the teal hymnal. Please rise in body or in spirit.