

Walking the Talk
Rev. Dr. Richard Speck
August 5, 2012

I grew up in Memphis, Tennessee. Some of you might have picked up that I don't speak like a Delawarean. The south of my youth was strictly segregated. Black and white didn't mix in everyday life very much. My school was all white, my neighborhood was all white, and my church was all white. The only black people I encountered were the domestic servants who would come into our homes to clean, wash, and cook for us. My father made a decent living working for Sears, Roebuck, and Company and my mother worked as a clerk at Walgreens. I would not put us very high on the scale of wealth but we had Queenie who came several times a week to take care of us. Up until I went to college, she was the main source for my understanding a person of color.

I still remember as a 15 year old youth sitting in church when a well-dressed older couple came up the steps from the street to enter the back of the sanctuary. I was a member of the Berclair Baptist Church on Summer Avenue, a church with a membership of over 1,500 people. The man was carrying a Bible in his right hand. The ushers stopped them in the vestibule. Although I could not hear what was said, I could see that the ushers were not letting the couple continue into the church. There were several moments of conversation between the ushers and the couple. The couple turned around and left by the same route they had entered. The only reason that I could formulate for the actions of the ushers was that the couple was African American. They couldn't worship with us because of the color of their skin. That image has stuck with me for almost fifty years and was one of the reasons that I left the faith of my youth.

What do you think we might do if a well-dressed couple came to our church with a Bible under one arm? What if the person was decorated with tattoos? What if they had a strong foreign accent? How would we react? Would we be welcoming to the stranger who doesn't look like us, speak like us, act like us?

The world around us is changing. The United States has become ever more diverse over the past two decades. Spanish is the second most spoken language in our country. Within New Castle County there are new Hispanic restaurants and other ethnic food vendors that would not have existed even twenty years ago.

Andrew Zolli, who describes himself as a "foresight strategist" wrote recently: "Demographics is destiny. ... It is not just an age split we have to look forward to, but the rise of a true multi-ethnic and international culture. ... By the middle of this century, the US will move to a society with no ethnic majority."

As Unitarian Universalists we espouse that we believe in a multicultural world. We claim that we are open to all people from every cultural background. Yet, when I look around at our congregations, I don't see much of a rainbow of faces. The number of people of color is less now than when we were actively involved with the Civil Rights Movement. What is holding us back from creating a congregation that is actively working toward building the world that we dream about? What will it take for us to move toward a multicultural faith?

VISIONS is a consulting firm working in the area of diversity and inclusion in the business world. They define multiculturalism as a "process of change by which we learn to recognize, understand and appreciate our own cultural identities, as well as the similarities and differences of people from other cultural groups. These cultural groups can be based upon

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several characteristics and can include race, ethnicity, gender, age, sexual orientation, physical abilities, class, job status, religion, immigrant status, language and nationality.”

This past year a small group of First Unitarian Church members started meeting with members of Mother Africa Union Church in Wilmington. Led by Rev. Paula Maiorano and Rev. Dr. Lawrence Livingston, minister of Mother Africa Union Church, we have read and discussed the book *The New Jim Crow* and are now working to identify some critical needs for reducing the incarceration of large numbers of African American men in Delaware. We have alternated meeting at First Unitarian and Mother Africa Union as a way to share the responsibility of hosting. I have noticed that there have never been more than a dozen members of our church and most time much smaller while there has always been close to twenty people from their community. Do we not see this as our justice work, too?

I have benefitted from these interactions as we have shared our reactions to the book and began to develop joint actions that will improve the African American population in Wilmington. Through this dialogue I have a deeper understanding of what it means to be a Euro-American male with all the privileges that have accumulated to me in our society. I also better understand what it means to be a person of color in Wilmington and what they have endured over the decades.

When I entered Meadville/Lombard Theological School in 1986, I came with a broader experience of living in a multicultural world. I spent two years in Miami with a multi-ethnic staff in a hospital. I had led a multi-ethnic staff in Birmingham, Alabama for ten years. I knew what it was like to have close friends from different cultural backgrounds. But I still hadn't explored my own cultural baggage.

Shortly after I started in theological school I also started coursework at the Humanist Institute, a training program for humanist leaders from Unitarian Universalist, Ethical Culture, Humanistic Judaism, and American Humanism. The mentor for my class was the Rev. Dr. William R. Jones. Bill was an African American UU minister who was ordained in 1958. He was one of the first dozen ministers of color granted fellowship as a Unitarian or Universalist before merger. I liked him as a mentor so much I asked him to preach my ordination sermon in 1990. We had kept in touch over the years. His work has shaped my ministry for over twenty years. Bill just died two weeks ago in Florida.

Bill had written his Ph.D. thesis on a black humanist theology called *Is God a White Racist?* As he led my class in understanding the various forms of humanist thought he also imparted his understanding of how oppression worked in human society and especially in the American context. His approach has been widely adopted within Unitarian Universalist thought on antiracism and oppression. Oppression occurs when one group of people have a surplus of economic, social, and political power and use that to dominate and cause suffering to those with a deficit of power. If we are to become a multicultural faith, we must address oppression in our world.

In these brief minutes I cannot do justice to Bill's philosophy. But I will lift up two key concepts. First is that diagnosis determines therapy. He called this DDT for short. Whatever you believe is the reason for the illness will cause you to decide on a corrective action. If I have what I think is a simple headache, then the treatment might be taking an aspirin. But I might have meningitis and I need much more than aspirin. The diagnosis will determine the subsequent way of addressing the cause of the illness. The same goes for social policy. If the diagnosis is that large numbers of African Americans are dealing drugs on the street, then the therapy is to arrest and lock them up. If the diagnosis is that there are not adequate employment

opportunities for people of color, then the therapy is job training, education, and apprenticeships. DDT.

The second concept is binary logic. Binary logic states that there are two and only two reactions to any given context. According to Bill, when we understand how the context of oppression works in our society and we learn to realize it when we see it, then we are faced with two and only two logical choices. There is no neutrality. We can choose to continue the current context if we believe that things are okay and no change is necessary; if we believe that change is impossible; or if we think the change will make matters worse. This leads to quietism. Or we can choose to change the current context when we feel things are not okay; when we feel change is possible; and when we feel that the change is appropriate. This leads us to protest the context. Where are we with multiculturalism?

I believe that we Unitarian Universalists face a choice: we can sit back and not work to build a multicultural world. I believe that this way leads to our destruction through quietism. We will become irrelevant to America. Or, we can embrace a future that engages people from a rich diversity of cultures. We can grow and learn what it takes to be truly multicultural in our worship, religious education, hospitality, social justice, and other aspects of church life. This congregation has made some steps in that direction. We celebrate Day of the Dead with its Hispanic culture. We honor Loving Day and participate in Dr. Martin Luther King Day of Service. There is still more we can do.

Rev. Rosemary Bray McNatt reminds us: “Why are we still talking about inclusivity and diversity when we have done so little to make them real? Why are we still looking pained about the lack of diversity in the denomination? Because diversity, inclusivity, is terribly hard, terribly uncomfortable, definitely unsettling, and often quite frustrating.” I don’t believe we can just give up and walk away from multiculturalism.

Here are some suggestions on how we can be more involved in building a multicultural world. Find allies in the work. We have the Allies for Racial Justice Committee here. Join us in deepening our understanding of oppression and how to work for a more just, multicultural world. Talk to Jenn Phillips or Anna Hamilton, co-chairs. Build on existing anti-oppression work in our community. The efforts at addressing the criminal justice inequities are still forming. Come be a part of the solution with members from this church and Mother Africa Union Church. Talk to Rev. Paula Maiorano about how to get active. The next joint meeting is September 17 here at First Unitarian Church.

We can create opportunities for cross-cultural experiences. We will have to shift our comfort zone and our practices of worship. Our music today is an example of that with selections from an African American spiritual, a Caribbean influenced alleluia, and a Canadian. I would love for us to have a regular rhythm section of drums and bass to support our hymn singing. I also want us to purchase the new Spanish language UU hymnal so we can learn to sing better in that language.

People can become active with the Joseph Priestley District Journey Toward Wholeness team. There is ongoing training in multicultural work. We have a Racial Justice Conference each year. The next one is October 19-20, 2012 in Annapolis, Maryland. Talk to me if you are interested in coming.

There is a new resource created by the Unitarian Universalist Association called *Multicultural Welcome: A Resource for Greeters in Unitarian Universalist Congregations*. This allows us new ways to welcome newcomers and engage them in the congregation in a meaningful way.

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I have offered to lead a film series and discussion using *Race: The Power of an Illusion* as part of our ongoing education about our cultural issues. There are many other films that would give us new understanding about building a multicultural congregation and society.

There will be a handout available in the social hall with more ideas on multiculturalism. But all of these ideas will be just words in this sermon if you, the people listening to me, are not motivated to do something with them. We are at the dawn of a new way of being as people of faith. It's time that we walked the talk of Unitarian Universalism that calls us to embrace all people in the fullness of our being. I invite you to come and go with me into that new world that we dream about. May we journey on together. Amen.