

First Unitarian Church of Wilmington
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An Integral Vision of Racial Justice

America is an old house. We can never declare the work over. Wind, flood, drought and human upheavals batter a structure that is fighting whatever flaws were left unattended in the original foundation.

When you live in an old house, you may not want to go into the basement after a storm to see what the rains have wrought. Choose not to look however, at your own peril.

The owner of an old house knows that whatever you are ignoring will never go away. Whatever is lurking will fester whether you choose to look or not.

Ignorance is no protection from the consequences of inaction. Whatever you are wishing away will gnaw at you until you gather the courage to face what you would rather not see.

We in the developed world are like homeowners who inherited a house on a piece of land that is beautiful on the outside, but whose soil is unstable loam and rock, heaving and contracting over generations, cracks patched but the deeper ruptures waved away for decades, centuries even.

We are the heirs to whatever is right or wrong with it. We did not erect the uneven pillars or joists, but they are ours to deal with right now and any further deterioration is, in fact, on our hands.”

A reading from Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents by Isabel Wilkerson

An Integral Vision of Racial Justice

This house that Isabel Wilkerson talks about is America. Her metaphors pointedly describe this country’s founding architecture and its uneven relationship to responding to racism.

We’ve inherited this “old house,” America, with all of its beauty, flaws, charm, and need for attention.

It is not our neighbor’s house. It is our house. It is not a rental house.

We are responsible for the upkeep of this house—and “we can never declare that the work is over.”

It is not a vacation home that we visit now and then. It is the house where we live day to day.

We’ve become so accustomed to it that we don’t always see or respond to what needs attention. The floorboards creak under feet. The plaster is crumbling before our eyes. The windows stick sometimes. The basement is often kept out of view with things we’d rather not see or check up on.

Sure, we can have all kinds of dispositions about the shape of this “house”, America. We can have multiple opinions about who is responsible for this “house” that we are in. But the fact of the matter is, as Isabel Wilkerson declares:

“We are the heirs to whatever is right or wrong with it. We did not erect the uneven pillars or joists, but they are ours to deal with right now.

“And any further deterioration is, in fact, on our hands.”

The uneven pillars are a fact. The foundation of this house points to a troublesome history. For as Wilkerson says, we’ve inherited:

“...a house on a piece of land that is beautiful on the outside, but whose soil is unstable loam and rock, heaving and contracting over generations, cracks patched but the deeper ruptures waved away for decades, centuries even.”

Indeed, when we really dare to consider it, it was centuries ago that the foundation of this house — America — was established.

There is no healing from racial injustice until we acknowledge, painful and shameful as it is, that the architecture of this house is what we’ve been unraveling since its beginning.

When the European colonizers could not do all the hard labor that was needed to clear the land and plant and build, with the indentured Europeans it brought over, they turned to the indigenous people. When the indigenous people became too susceptible to the diseases of the Europeans, the European colonizers went to Africa and enslaved Africans. They were first brought to this country in 1619, a little over 400 years ago...which somehow doesn’t seem that long ago.

Those enslaved Africans were not “freed”, so to speak, until 1865.

That means that for almost 250 years, most of the enslaved African people in this country had their human dignity and worth denied, their rights extinguished, and their own agency removed.

That is two and a half centuries of enslavement. That is the founding, the foundation of this country. Yes, as Wilkerson puts it:

“...the soil is unstable loam and rock, heaving and contracting over generations, cracks patched, but the deeper ruptures waved away for decades, centuries even...”

Yes, centuries.

Then, in 1865, after those almost 250 years of enslavement and an economy built on enslavement, in 1866, those Africans were “freed.”

This freedom required enforcement by federal troops sent to the south from 1865 until 1877.

It was during that brief time, 1865 — 1877, those 12 years of what we call the Reconstruction, that formerly enslaved Africans built their own homes, schools, farms, and businesses — and that African Americans were elected to public office.

Then, when the federal troops left in 1877, businesses owned by African-Americans were burned down. Then, a series of Black Code laws to limit the freedoms of these African-

American people were passed in the South. These Black Code laws became what is called the Jim Crow laws that were in place until 1964.

That is, for almost 100 years after “emancipation”, these restrictions on African Americans persisted in some form.

Yes, the *“cracks [were] patched, but the deeper ruptures waved away for decades.”*

It was during this time of enslavement that, in order to justify this brutal treatment, enslaved Africans were assigned a [quote] “Black” racial identity and considered inferior, less than human. This socially constructed inferiority was upheld by laws and structures that normalized their suffering and their mistreatment.

Over time, a caste system was reinforced that labeled non-blacks as “better than” others, and a “White” identity was constructed and reconstructed.

Folklore about so-called “white supremacy” was then established. This narrative that was often unconscious and unquestioned became the blueprint of this house we call America.

With the rise of the Civil Rights movement, some of the cracks in the house were exposed and attended to.

Through a series of protests and retaliations against protesters, through coalitions and alliances across identities and backgrounds, the Civil Rights Act (1964) and the Voting Rights Act (1965) were passed.

One of those leaders, who we are celebrating this weekend, was Martin Luther King, Jr. King helped to focus the country on the legacy of enslavement and of the Jim Crow Laws and worked to overturn them, promoting policies and structural efforts through non-violent resistance, as his teacher Gandhi had taught him and as his Christian social Gospel had motivated him.

King worked at many levels with many women and men to draw attention to the impact of racism and the folklore of white supremacy. He invited everyone, no matter with what race they identified, into a possibility of a world without racism.

The immediate leverage that these Civil Rights advocates had was legislation to begin the processes of change toward racial justice.

King declared:

“It may be true that you can’t legislate integration, but you can legislate desegregation. It may be true that morality cannot be legislated, but behavior can be regulated. It may be true that the law cannot change the heart, but it can restrain the heartless. It may be true that the law can’t make a man love me, but it can restrain him from lynching me, and I think that’s pretty important also.

“So while the law may not change the hearts of men, it does change the habits of men. And when you change the habits of men, pretty soon the attitudes and the hearts will be changed. And so there is a need for strong legislation constantly to grapple with the problems we face.”

Progress has been made. I understand that in the 1960s more than 70% of African Americans lived below the poverty line. Today, that percentage is closer to 30%. Yet, inequities still persist, and efforts to abandon the Voting Rights Act and to impede or erode some of the equal opportunities for African Americans have held sway.

Perhaps Martin Luther King, Jr. was both practical and idealistic in imagining that legislation could change people's habits and their attitudes.

We know however that all the laws and policies in the world will not in themselves heal us from all the reverberating impact and long legacy of racism and the folklore of white supremacy.

We have come to understand that the work of racial healing is outward, through laws and policies, and also inward through personal and interpersonal work that questions and defies the hold that racism has had and still has in this country in insidious ways.

A contemporary rap group called Blue Scholars includes this lyric in one of their songs:

*And they say desegregation was a big step forward
But integration only covered up a rotten core
The surface might've changed but the cauldron is still hot
Now we are politically correct with less real talk*

We are faced with the “real talk” that we need about racism. We now have the possibility of real practices to engage in healing collectively, culturally and personally, from the legacy of racism in this country—a legacy built into the foundation of this house we call America.

For Unitarian Universalists, racial justice work is not just political or social justice work only. In our guiding principles and in our history, again and again, we have called ourselves to see the interconnectedness of the political and the personal— and the necessary interrelationship between social justice and spirituality. Our faith calls us into the midst of the ongoing co-creation of this world. Our faith calls us to the eradication of all that limits the human spirit. Our faith calls us to create a heaven in this world, in the here and now. For as we remind each other in song:

*Here on the paths of every day —
here on the common human way —
is all the stuff the gods would take
to build a heaven, to mold and make
New Edens. Ours the task sublime
to build eternity in time.
(Singing the Living Tradition, Hymn #312)*

We need this kind of integral vision in our efforts for racial justice. We are not served in this human and sacred task by compartmentalizing. We need a vision that incorporates changes and healing in the institutional, the interpersonal, the personal, and the embodied trauma — not just some of these, but all of these.

Realizing our vision of racial justice is not going to happen *only* by changing some laws, and implementing some policies, although that is one manifestation and demonstration of our inner work of racial healing.

Realizing our vision of racial justice is not going to happen *only* by changing our understanding of racism.

Realizing our vision of racial justice is not going to happen *only* by each of us dealing with our own internal oppression or by confronting our unconscious biases.

All of these, each of these, is important but more is needed.

Most critically, we are beginning to understand more and more that race-related trauma — embedded in our bodies — is cross-generational and impacts people of different identities differently.

As Ta-Nehisi Coates writes: “Racism is a visceral experience, that...dislodges brains, blocks airways, rips muscle...”

Resma Menakem, an African American somatic psychotherapist and consultant, gives us a gripping example of this from his own life. He writes:

“When I was a boy, I used to watch television with my grandmother. I would sit in the middle of the sofa and she would stretch out over two seats, resting her legs on my lap. She often felt pain in her hands, and she’d ask me to rub them in mine. When I did, her fingers would relax and she’d smile. Sometimes, she’d start to hum melodically, and her voice would make a vibration that reminded me of a cat’s purr.

She wasn’t a large woman, but her hands were surprisingly stout with broad fingers and thick pads below each thumb. One day I asked her, “Grandma, why are your hands like that? They ain’t the same as mine.”

My grandmother turned from the television and looked at me. “Boy,” she said slowly, “That’s from picking cotton. They been that way since long before I was you age. I started working in the fields sharecroppin’ when I was four.”

I didn’t understand. I’d helped plant things in the garden a few times, but my own hands were bony and my fingers narrow. I held up my hands next to hers and stared at the difference.

“Umm hmm,” she said. “The cotton plant has pointed burrs in it. When you reach your hand in, the burrs rip it up. When I first started picking, my hands were all torn and bloody. When I got older, they got thicker and thicker, until I could reach in and pull out the cotton without bleeding.”

In Menakem’s book, *My Grandmother’s Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies*, we are invited into the deeper work of understanding that the work of racial justice certainly includes the institutional and legislative changes that we can bring about. Racial justice certainly includes interpersonal work in understanding the varied experiences of people of different racial identities in this country and finding ways to

connect in meaningful and liberatory ways. Racial justice certainly includes the personal work that any of us can do to recognize our unconscious biases and/or to heal our internalized oppression or become more mindful in our recognition of the subtle and not-so-subtle impact of racism on all of us.

What Menakem and others are helping us to understand is the way that the very “houses” of our own bodies can hold racial-related trauma that we may not have realized or been conscious of across generations. Individually, whether we have nominally white-identified bodies or nominally black-identified bodies, we have individual and collective healing work to do.

Menakem says, “What we call ‘the racial divide’ is not an obstacle to be conquered; it is a wound that lives inside our bodies — a wound we can heal.” His book provides insights and somatic practices that can facilitate that healing.

I am sketching out in this conversation with you today that our work for racial justice includes structural and legislative changes. And, the work toward racial justice, in our time, has also expanded and deepened in recent years — beyond some of the initial personal and interpersonal work that many of us have come to know in earlier decades.

As Menakem writes:

‘Recent studies and discoveries increasingly point out that we heal primarily in and through the body, not just through the rational brain. We can all create more room, and more opportunities for growth, in our nervous systems. But we do this primarily through what our bodies experience and do—not through what we think or realize or cognitively figure out.’

If there ever was a need for an integral vision — one that focuses on the institutional and the interpersonal and the personal and the somatic — it is the vision for racial justice.

Yes, racial justice requires inner and outer work. It requires personal and political work. It requires spiritual and somatic work — for us to truly attend to this healing from racism and the folklore of white supremacy that has been ingrained in this country’s consciousness.

In recent decades, we have also come to understand and to see the collective, and spiritual power of those who have endured and transmuted the impact of racism in their own lives. We have increasingly recognized that the dignity, resiliency, artistry, and spiritual power of the black-identified community is also a testimony and a resource to the whole human community. Together, we can engage in this integral path of racial justice and learn from these personal, collective, and spiritual testimonies. Oftentimes, African Americans and others marginalized in this country have shown us that they have made a “way” out of “no way.”

We have a lot to explore and a lot to talk about together. Martin Luther King Jr. reminds us that “Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.”

Benediction from the words of Martin Luther King, Jr.

“When our days become dreary with low-hovering clouds of despair, and when our nights become darker than a thousand midnights, let us remember that there is a creative force in this universe, working to pull down the gigantic mountains of evil, a power that is able to make a way out of no way and transform dark yesterdays into bright tomorrows.”

So may it be, Amen.
