

**Sunday October 4, 2009**

**Thought to ponder at the beginning:**

*But you and I need wait no longer.*

*We can build the Beloved Community right here in this church.*

- the Reverend Fred Small

**Sermon**      *Stepping Toward Reconciliation*      © Rev. Sylvia A. Stocker

*Note: Towards the end of this sermon, a reference is made to Jester Hairston, composer of the song, "Amen." The children's story that morning was one about Hairston – about how, as he traveled around the country to perform, he would contact anyone with the name "Hairston" that he could find in the telephone book. Over time, he discovered a very large family of black and white people. Occasionally he would organize family reunions that gathered all of them together to celebrate their mutual connections.*

My name is Sylvia, and I am a recovering WASP. It's the truth. I am a recovering white Anglo-Saxon Protestant.

There is a Stocker castle in Scotland – in recent times made famous – or perhaps infamous – in the movie *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. Although I suspect my own family probably had a much more humble family seat, I wouldn't be surprised if there is a slim connection between my Stockers and the lord and ladies of that dark, damp, dreary place. So, on my dad's side I am Scottish. My Irish grandmother on my mother's side provided a little spice to the mixture, though my Canadian grandfather's roots were English.

I used to think my heritage made me one of the most boring people on the planet. But when I came to realize my heritage made me privileged, not boring, I entered into recovery. I have been in recovery ever since.

Born to middle class parents, raised in a town that was mostly white, and in a church that was mostly white I have had a lot of recovering to do in my lifetime. If it weren't for the fact that I was a girl, my own visceral experience of oppression would have been extremely limited. So I have sought to understand and to experience other cultures, whenever and wherever possible. Befriending people from other sectors of American society and cultures, listening to their stories, reading their accounts, singing their songs, reading their history and literature – all of those things have helped.

Perhaps the biggest gift in my recovery was one that came to me unbidden. Through the miracles of marriage and adoption, the Stocker family now includes people with Northern European, black, Mexican, Jewish, and Native American ancestry. English is the first language for some of us; Spanish is the first language for others of us.

My seminary education promoted more recovery. There I developed a passion for liberation theology, a theology produced by people at the margins of society. The genesis of liberation theology came in the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when female, black, and Hispanic seminary students noticed the theologians they were studying were all white academic men, living ivory towers, whose life experience bore no resemblance to that of their students. Liberation theology insisted the theologian's life experience influenced reflection and analysis and directly affected the resulting theology.

In short order Latin American theology appeared, and black theology, and feminist theology. Then theology produced by gays, lesbians, and transgender people. Even eco-theology – one of my favorites – which examines theology from the viewpoint of the abused planet Earth. And so on. I found myself starving for those correctives. Painful as it sometimes was to confront my own privilege, facing what was broken in me felt infinitely better than leading an unconscious life.

My seminary, Andover Newton Theological School, attracted students from at least 30 different religions, and from all over the world. The majority of the students there were women – an interesting reversal in the population of seminaries in the not-too-distant past. Many gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people studied there, too. There were occasional Native American, Hispanic, and Asian students there.

And there were black students, too, but far fewer than I imagined would be enrolled. One day I asked my friend Anthony, a black Baptist student, why there were not more black students there.

He answered, “You know I’ve thought about that a lot. And the truth is, that’s your question to answer, not mine.”

Thank you, Anthony. That one answer unlocked a door to the truth that was longing to swing open. Anthony issued an invitation to me to take full responsibility for my own whiteness – to be as honest as I possibly can be about the effects, often unintended, of my words and actions; and to ask my white brothers and sisters to join me in accountability and honesty. I had a sense then – I have the sense now – that accountability and honesty would eventually mend my broken heart. *For me, the barriers, real or imagined, between me and other people, break my heart.*

Well, then I moved to Maine. Maine has an awful lot of people who *look* white living here. Do you know what I have heard people say over and over again here?

“Maine is a white state.” That’s what I hear people say.

I have even heard people say, “This is a white church.”

Now I know people are mostly innocently describing what they see around them. I look around at people on the streets or here in this room and I see mostly white faces. But I wonder how my black nieces would feel to hear this is a white state or a white church? How would my Mexican-African great nephews feel?

The truth is there is no such thing as a white state, even in Maine. Saying so locates any person of color on the outside, implies they don't belong, and makes their location here in the Northeast Kingdom invisible. And this is not a white church, either. I know that, because regardless of anything else that happens here, when I walk in, my entire family comes with me in my heart and mind.

Perhaps we should be asking *why* Maine is so predominantly white, *why* most UU churches, including this one, are so predominantly white? I imagine the beauty I find here in Maine would appeal to all people – not just white people. I imagine the meaning and inspiration I find in my congregation could touch the hearts of all people, not just people who look more or less like me.

Perhaps we should be pondering the ways we could change the prevailing culture – in our state, in our community, in our congregation. Because people of color are so relatively absent from our surroundings here in Maine, it is easy for white people like me to forget oppression exists. White people like me have to work even harder to gain understanding and to bring about changes within themselves and their communities. So I, a recovering WASP, and perhaps you – perhaps many of us – have a lot of work to do.

Fortunately help is on the way. Today, Association Sunday, we take a special collection for the Unitarian Universalist Association. This year, as in past years, the funds our congregations collect, will be earmarked for special programs to help Unitarian Universalism to grow in heart, in wisdom, in openness, and perhaps even in numbers.

This year the funds are earmarked specifically to help Unitarian Universalism grow in diversity. Diversity, of course, is measured at all levels – not just racial or ethnic diversity – but diversity in every sector: socio-economic, sexual orientation, gender, age, body type and ability, and so on. The goal is to become the people our best vision statements say we want to be. The goal is to set a seat at the table for everyone so that our UU family reunions will be a feast of the intricacy and beauty of the vast variety of human experience. The goal is to heal as a *whole* people, *all* of us, whoever we are, and however we have been hurt, so that the illusion that we are separate from one another will fall away. So the diversity programs that result from the Association Sunday collections this year will address all arenas of diversity.

Today, though, my personal focus is on race and ethnicity for three reasons. First, UUs have made great strides in other areas – especially growing their diversity in the arenas of gender and sexual orientation.

I remember the day my father, Nominating Committee Chair of the church of my youth, made the phone call to invite the first woman to be President there. I was in high school at the time. Asking a woman to be President of the congregation was a Big Deal – and so normal, all wrapped up together. Of course Virginia would make a good Board chair; it was written all over her. How many Virginias had the church passed by through the centuries?

I remember when my home church of Stow and Acton Massachusetts called its first gay minister. The same year we called him, we hired a new Director of Religious Education, a lesbian. Two events that would have rocked that church only a few years earlier, were greeted with open pride and excitement – and then quickly everything returned to normal, as the business of “doing church” together commenced. Of course Tom would be a good minister and Meg a good DRE; they had it written all over them. How many Toms and Megs through the centuries had kept their orientation carefully hidden?

But it’s considerably harder for Unitarian Universalists to elevate people of color to leadership positions. We have few people of color among us to fill those positions. We might have more, I suppose, if we had more ministers of color – but our ministers of color, as talented, compassionate, and creative as they are, have a much harder time finding pulpits in our churches. Unitarian Universalists have a lot of work to do in the arena of race and ethnicity.

The second reason I find my attention drawn to race and ethnicity today is that our nation is currently struggling with the issue in a whole new way. With our first black president has come a marked increase in hate crimes, a climate of denial as well as charges and counter-charges of racism, and a culture of fear regarding the president’s safety.

Nowadays, when our president comes to town, people strap their guns on to go demonstrate. When has that happened before? When our president addresses a joint session of Congress, he is heckled and called a liar. When has that happened before? Our president is consistently baited to enter the fray of what passes for “discussion” about race in our country – in a way I cannot ever recall our previous white presidents being baited.

Our current national climate produces concern and anxiety in many, including me. Yet, for me, the discomfort of the charged climate in which I live also invites reflection and growth. I want to learn from what is happening, and even affect the outcome if I can.

The last reason I focus on race and ethnicity today is that I believe healing and transformation are possible – accessible to us, even here in Maine, where it may seem easy to feel remote from the real action. We can heal and grow; we can create those experiences for ourselves.

Last summer I had one such experience. In June I took a course at USM called “The Power of Song.” The course was taught by Ysaye Barnwell, a Unitarian Universalist who sings with the black women’s *a cappella* group, Sweet Honey in the Rock. That course affected me profoundly. Ysaye taught us music in the African and African American tradition, tracing the roots of that music to Africa, the slave trade, slave times here in this country, the Civil War, Reconstruction, and the Civil Rights movement.

We learned in the black way – no sheet music, no paper at all. Ysaye even encouraged us not to take notes, but to enter fully into the music. She taught us by singing our parts *to* us, then singing our parts *with* us until we knew them, then combining the parts together.

All week long I was surrounded by the most beautiful sound. Often I was moved to tears. I spent the first day of the course wishing our entire choir could be there. I spent the rest of the week wishing our entire congregation could be there.

As I listened to the stories behind the songs, then sang them, my heart cracked open even more. Ysaye made it safe to explore the music; she made it safe to explore the inner landscape of the feelings the music aroused in us. And feelings did come up, you can be sure – feelings of pain, confusion... and yearning to make a difference.

Ysaye, the only person who appeared to be black in a room of over 40 people, did this without losing her own authenticity or compromising her own connection to either the music or the pain of racism. Ysaye, with astounding grace and wisdom, knew when to speak her truth, when to let the white folks engage in their process, and when to step in with a song. It is a kind of ministry she does. Her work is all in the aid of healing whoever shows up – regardless of their backgrounds and lived experiences. Singing with her was a healing.

As the week unfolded, I hoped more and more to bring that healing here, to us. So I have been in conversation with Ysaye, working to schedule a workshop here, on a Saturday, followed by her helping to lead the service the next day. You will love her, I know. The trickiest part is finding a date that works, but we are both trying to find a time in the spring.

In the meantime, I hope to offer opportunities for study and reflection so that when we join together for the singing, we will have already done some of the inner work together. I have confidence that we can do that work in ways that are interesting and safe...and, ultimately and most importantly, transformational. I welcome your engagement in this work with me; and I welcome your help, as well, in bringing it about. No, I *ask* for your help in bringing it about. If I have learned one thing in this life, it is that I cannot do this work alone. The work of recovery is best and most successfully engaged in community.

Most of the time, the world is changed by taking one small step after another. When Jester Hairston called the first Hairston cold out of an unfamiliar phone book, he couldn’t

have predicted the bridge he would end up building. When Ysaye Barnwell first joined Sweet Honey in the Rock, she couldn't know the ultimate power of healing she would bring about in her performing and teaching. When we take a step forward, we cannot ever know the outcome. But we can take the step with faith that all the steps will add up to something.

Will you join me, as we step into the future, seeking healing and transformation? We you join me, as we step into the future, walking, one step at a time, toward a transformed world?