

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany
“Silence of Good People”

Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore January 20, 2008

Sermon

Do you remember 1963? That February I turned six years old. I was in Mrs. Logan's first grade class at West Park Elementary, so my memory was about half as tall as I am now. Let me refresh our collective memory of what race relations were like back then.

January 14th, George Wallace became governor of Alabama. In his inaugural speech, he defiantly proclaimed "segregation now, segregation tomorrow, and segregation forever!" January 28th, African American student Harvey Gantt entered Clemson University in South Carolina, the last U.S. state to hold out against racial integration. February 11th, The CIA's Domestic Operations Division was created. March 18th, The U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Gideon v. Wainwright* that the poor must have lawyers. And April 12th, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Ralph Abernathy and others were arrested in a Birmingham protest for "parading without a permit."

Abernathy and King were separated from the rest of the protesters and locked in solitary confinement. Steward Burns writes:

King's cramped cell was completely dark. He had a cold metal cot without mattress, sheet or blanket, and a filthy seatless toilet. Terror trumped his shock and disgust.

"Those were the longest, most frustrating and bewildering hours" of his life, he wrote later. "You will never know the meaning of utter darkness until you have lain in such a dungeon, knowing that sunlight is streaming overhead and still seeing only darkness below." He feared that this might be his tomb, no bigger than Jesus' stone tomb in Jerusalem that he had once prayed within.

From: *To the Mountaintop* by Steward Burns, p. 170

The first two days had been a "dark night of the soul" for King as he reflected on recent failures after the successful bus boycott. A fizzled Southern Christian Leadership Conference voting rights drive, criticism of not joining the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee freedom rides and the defeat in Albany, Georgia.

One of Dr. King's lawyers visited him several days later. He brought with him news and a copy of the Birmingham daily. Time Magazine that week criticized King's march as a "Poorly Timed Protest." Newsweek called King an extremist, equally extreme as "Bull" Conner. Dr. King's spirit sank as he read a statement from the Birmingham newspaper by eight prominent Alabama clergymen, liberal leaders of the Protestant, Catholic and Jewish faiths, who wrote "We recognize the natural impatience of [Negroes] who feel that their hopes are slow in being realized. But we are convinced that these demonstrations are unwise and untimely." They had denounced Wallace's segregation pledge but were not ready to stand with Dr. King. This had happened before. During the Montgomery bus boycott, the white clergy had let Dr. King down. They had not applied any pressure to politicians nor roused their members to action.

It was in this context, that Dr. King responded with these words from his famous Birmingham Jail letter:

I had ... hoped that the white moderate would reject the myth concerning time in relation to the struggle for freedom. I have just received a letter from a white brother in Texas. he writes: "All Christians know that the colored people will receive equal rights eventually, but it is possible that you are in too great a religious hurry. It has taken Christianity almost two thousand years to accomplish what it has. The teachings of Christ take time to come to earth." Such an attitude stems from a tragic misconception of time, from the strangely irrational notion that there is something in the very flow of time that will inevitably cure all ills. Actually, time itself is neutral; it can be used either destructively or constructively. More and more I feel that people of ill will have used time much more effectively than have the people of good will. We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the hateful words and actions of bad people but for the appalling silence of good people.

There are so many beautifully agitating words in this inspiring letter. I commend it to you for reading and rereading, particularly if and when your spirit flags as you wrestle with the inner and outer demons of this world.

This morning, I'd like to hone in on "the appalling silence of good people." This phrase stings my ears when I hear it. It brings back painful memories of times in my life I have been silent in the face of injustice. Times when I have not spoken up, written a letter of condemnation or support, or not even clicked the button on an email from moveon.org to respond to some urgent vote before Congress. Surely, there are times when I do speak up, write those letters and click the email buttons. Those I remember too. But the missed opportunities haunt me and drive the question, why? What keeps us quiet?

One reason I'm sure we all recognize is overload. In today's world, it seems these moments are almost unavoidable. Television, radio, newspapers, web sites and email present us hourly, even minute by minute, with the latest crisis or world tragedy unfolding someplace on the globe. Genocide continues in Darfur. Right now, Kenya is falling apart. I just sent money to help the UUSC deal with the human cost of that situation. Every day people die violently in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan. The oppression in Burma continues. Famine plagues northeast Ugandan region called Karamoja. Every week there is a powerful storm, tornado or earthquake someplace on our planet.

Without dishonoring the many crises around the world that deserve our attention, the American experience of race relations is special and calls for special attention. The remnants of systemic racism embedded in our minds and hearts continue to poison our society and sabotage social transformation. Systemic racism in Albany is our problem because we are the First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany.

Another reason for our silence is discomfort. Confronting systemic racism brings up uncomfortable feelings however you racially identify yourself. Some of us had ancestors who owned slaves and some who were slaves. Some of our relatives profited from the slave trade while others suffered. Some people may have inherited wealth from these sources while others were deprived of the fruit of their ancestor's labor. I know of a UU minister, Ken Collier, who just gave \$100,000 to Starr King School for the Ministry to assist aspiring African American UU ministers in memory of a slave owned by someone in his family tree.

The insidious effects of systemic racism affect all of us. All of us have stereotypes floating around in our heads. Those of us with white privilege live with often unrealized shame and guilt. Those of us without white privilege live with often unrealized anger and resentment, too often inwardly turned as self hatred. Everyone lives with fear that the violence of the 1960's will resurface and tear our country apart.

This fear, shame, guilt, anger and resentment living inside us can conspire to drive people toward passive silence and away from outspoken action.

What to do. I've got two paths for you this morning, that I encourage you to take to help free yourself from this spiritually damaging silence. The first path moves through personal relationships that cross racial boundaries, cross educational boundaries, income boundaries and cultural boundaries.

People tend to feel most safe and secure with people just like them. This tribal tendency is most visible in the school cafeteria and in Sunday morning worship. Immigrant groups love to cluster together for mutual support. We need to accept this human reality, and learn to move beyond it for there is an important spiritual benefit to be gained.

People grow bigger hearts when they discover the humanity of people they formerly might have objectified as “them.” Over the years, I’ve had transforming dialogues on race issues with my African American and Latino ministerial colleagues. They have helped me realize that we don’t share the same social reality. I’ve been gradually sensitized to the blindness of my privilege as a white male. Merchants, real estate agents and bank tellers treat me differently, on average, than they treat African American teenage boys. Many poor Latino high school students growing up in urban schools look at the world very differently than I did growing up in a college town where all my friends went to Ivy League schools. My conversations with the young African American man named Jhamon Washington I supervised last year as an Americorps Volunteer gave me a new way to see the streets of West Hill through his eyes, just a few streets away from us across Central Avenue.

When we start knowing people as authentic human beings and not as categories bounded by stereotypes, a sense of affinity can arise. The same affinity I spoke of last week as connecting with the authentic self, the common identity of consciousness that we all share. We all share the same basic needs for connection, honesty, play, peace, physical well-being, meaning and autonomy identified by Marshall Rosenberg’s theory of non-violent communication. From this seat of empathetic connection arises the second response, social action.

One of the axioms of political organizing is to never do anything by yourself. It is the ignorance of the power of organized people that keep many of us silent. Just a few people can move political mountains but only if the many quiet people are willing to respond to their challenge to act for the sake of justice.

We are very fortunate to have two powerful leaders and two transformational organizations represented in our congregation, one working at the local level and the other working at the state level. Dick Dana is President of ARISE and Robb Smith is Executive Director of Interfaith Impact. I’m going to ask them to both speak to you VERY briefly about how they are crossing boundaries and working for systemic change, providing ways for our members to multiply the effectiveness of their voices to speak truth to power.

(Dick Dana and Robb Smith speak – recorded on the mp3 version)

Our congregation has a proud history of local community organizing and legislative issue advocacy. We started working on race issues in the spring of 1928, helping give birth to the Albany Inter-Racial Council. In 1970 the right to terminate a pregnancy was won in New York State three years before *Roe v. Wade* with the aid of the Committee for Progressive Legislation that had strong support from FUUSA. We sheltered Nicaraguan refugees in the 1980's. I served as President of ARISE and helped the organization hold its first public action meeting. (There is much more I don't have time to mention.)

If there are good people here today who feel they've been silent too long and want to be part of a congregation that speaks out regularly, you have come to the right place. May this congregation help us find our voices, speak out, and take action collectively to bring healing and wholeness to this troubled world.

Benediction

I conclude with the words that ended the paragraph from the Birmingham letter of Dr. King that I quoted earlier.

Human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability; it comes through the tireless efforts of men [and women] willing to be co workers with God, and without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation. We must use time creatively, in the knowledge that the time is always ripe to do right. Now is the time to make real the promise of democracy and transform our pending national elegy into a creative psalm of brotherhood. Now is the time to lift our national policy from the quicksand of racial injustice to the solid rock of human dignity.

To those great words I add:

Now is the time for all of us to make our voices heard!

Copyright © 2008 by Samuel A. Trumbore. All Rights Reserved.