

We are Jazz

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This is quite simply the most exciting moment of all of my careers. This church holds so much history of this city and this country. The people who have spoken from this pulpit in this space. The leaders who have come from and been associated with this congregation. And where the work of this church is headed. Honestly, it is overwhelming to think that I'm here, let alone here as the candidate to be your next settled minister. So you will forgive me if this message is a little long; I want to enjoy this moment of newness for a while...

But the excitement is tempered with a couple of important responsibilities. For those of you who are new here or don't begin every day with an email blast from the Unitarian Universalist Association, a group of incredible religious educators of color, including Kenny Wiley, has asked Unitarian Universalists across the country to deepen our understanding of white supremacy. Not in an effort to be better at it (just to be clear) but rather to work more proactively to address some of the more subtle, insidious and for some surprising ways in which white supremacy shows up in the way even our liberal organization works. It's a tough position for me because I don't want you to think race is the only thing I preach about. But when the call was put out to embrace a "white supremacy teach in" on April 30 and May 7, the same dates as my candidating week, the search committee and I all were immediately on the same page saying "hell yes!" So here we are.

The more important responsibility I have, though, is to enter this space with love. When I was a cruise director, the theme music I used to enter and exit the stage was not "The Love Boat Theme", but the Kenny Loggins song "I Believe In Love". And its true, I do believe in love. Its also true that after leaving ships, I had to get used to not hearing music play every time I entered a room...but that's another story.

But seriously, I believe that my greatest responsibility is to approach ministry from a place of expansive and all-encompassing love regardless of the situation, setting or subject matter. I do not know you personally yet, but I want you to know that I love you. I believe in you and I believe in a future.

So lets talk about something today that I also love very much...jazz.

In 1956 Langston Hughes delivered an essay at the Newport Jazz Festival in which he said:

*“To me jazz is a montage of a dream deferred. A great big dream—yet to come—
and always yet—to become ultimately and finally true.”¹*

If you know Hughes’ work, you understand the incredible influence jazz had on him and how jazz often functioned in his writing as a metaphor for navigating the sea of life. He knew that jazz is not always easy or smooth or accessible. It is often sudden and unexpected and raw...even dangerous...but it is always “ultimately and finally true”. Jazz is the musical place of interpretation, spontaneity, innovation and *acceptance*. It is not music that is beautiful despite dissonance and syncopation, it is music that is beautiful because of dissonance and syncopation. How fitting that it comes from the black experience in America. A musical legacy of racial resilience in the face of adversity.

There are other examples of how people of color live the experience of jazz...making a way out of no way. I think of childhood friends from Puerto Rico who spoke a unique blend of English and Spanish. Japanese Americans reclaiming and rebuilding lives after WWII. Even today, Muslim women athletes advocating for religiously appropriate gear and proceeding to win Olympic medals. This is the improvised music of resilience that is born in the dark shadows of the systems of racial and cultural oppression.

Beauty *because* of dissonance...

But dissonance is problematic for some people. The discomfort some people experience with the words “white supremacy” is a great example. There is fear of being associated with neo-Nazis and racial terrorists. The feeling is that no good can come from using these words to describe the white role in racism. But what else do you call it? What else do you call the fuel in the engine of white privilege? How can we have real progress or real understanding unless we are honest about the problems? In this country, we are all the products of a context where whiteness was established as an invisible standard, and a scale for measuring social worth where value is based entirely on the assumption that white is better than non-white. How is that not white supremacy?

I am deeply sympathetic to how looking at our troubled relationship with racism is uncharted and unpredictable territory for many white people. Unfortunately, this anxiety also makes too many of us soften our language in the conversation on race and back away from working with the real discord of our very real social failures. But, *maintaining a polite status quo that is designed to*

¹ “Jazz as Communication”, Langston Hughes, 1956 -
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/resources/learning/essays/detail/69394>

create safety primarily for white sensibilities is a privilege that rests on white supremacy. This may not be an easy analysis to hear without wanting to jump in and challenge me. But I'm well aware of this because it is even more difficult to deliver this message as a black man standing in front of you for the first time asking you to call me as your minister.

Nevertheless...he persisted

In the spirit of getting real with this and not softening our language of race, and in the spirit of love, I'm going to ask you to stay with me on a tough journey today. I would like to share another quote, this time from Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn:

"So I got a piece of paper and a pencil, all glad and excited, and set down and wrote:

Miss Watson, your runaway nigger Jim is down here two mile below Pikesville, and Mr. Phelps has got him and he will give him up for the reward if you send.

HUCK FINN."²

219. 219 times the word nigger appears in Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn. 219 times I read that word when I was 12 years old.

Consider the fact that Huckleberry Finn by Mark Twain is lauded as a great piece of literature not despite the use of this word but because of it. This book is hailed as the dawning of the use of vernacular language in the novel form. Twain takes every day speech and doesn't gussie it up. At the time, this was a literary breakthrough in its ability to capture the mundane. Twain, through his yarn about a white youth running away with a black slave trying to escape along the Mississippi River, paints a simple picture of these people in their real and unvarnished language.

219 times.

Over the years, the excuse I have been given for this word being so prominent in only 366 pages of prose is that "it was a different era". I have also been told that the end justifies the means because ultimately Huck is redeemed when he decides instead of mailing the letter, to tear it up and let Jim go:

I was a-trembling, because I'd got to decide, forever, betwixt two things, and I knowed it. I studied a minute, sort of holding my breath, and then says to myself:

² The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, Mark Twain, 1884

*"All right, then, I'll GO to hell"--and tore it up."*³

There it is...the big payoff...1884 style. The white man is redeemed by learning to see humanity...even in a black runaway slave. Everything is fine.

The word nigger has been used at me, around me and about me countless times, but sharing those stories does not serve my goal today. I am also aware of the psychological "pearl clutching" that happens every time I say the word. Writing this piece, I thought to myself that maybe I should substitute with "the N-word". But then I realized, not only would this be enormously cumbersome, but redacting myself would undercut the spiritual goal of what I'm trying to get at...the simple fact that the *real* work we have to do on race means that we can't just politely turn away.

I also had to ask myself if softening my language was fair to you all. You have been engaged in a sometimes painful journey into what it means to be anti-racist and multi-cultural for many years prior to my appearance here. This is a lifetime investment for you individually and as a community and you are rightfully proud of how far you have come and what this church stands for in the fight for justice. Regardless of income, median I-Q or academic pedigree, you are people who actually care. I wouldn't be here if I didn't know for certain that you care so much that it hurts sometimes. I want to respect your passion and commitment.

So let me give you some more context from Dr. David Pilgrim, at Ferris State University in Big Rapids, MI. Dr. Pilgrim is one of this country's leading experts on issues relating to multiculturalism, diversity, and race relations and he curates the Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia. It is a phenomenal resource. I highly encourage everyone young and old to check it out. On this site, Dr. Pilgrim explains how this one word:

*"...carries with it much of the hatred and repulsion directed toward Africans and African Americans. Historically, nigger defined, limited, and mocked African Americans. It was a term of exclusion, a verbal justification for discrimination. Whether used as a noun, verb, or adjective, it reinforced the stereotype of the lazy, stupid, dirty, worthless parasite. No other American [word] carried so much purposeful venom"*⁴

Dr. Pilgrim goes on:

"Americans created a racial hierarchy with whites at the top and blacks at the bottom. ... Every major societal institution offered legitimacy to the racial

³ Ibid.

⁴ Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia - <http://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/caricature/>

hierarchy. Ministers preached that God had condemned blacks to be servants. Scientists measured black heads, brains, faces, and genitalia, seeking to prove that whites were genetically superior to blacks. White teachers, teaching only white students, taught that blacks were less evolved cognitively, psychologically, and socially. The entertainment media, from vaudeville to television, portrayed blacks as docile servants, happy-go-lucky idiots, and dangerous thugs.⁵

And all of that is contained in one 6 letter word.

As a black person in America, the most difficult thing I've ever had to do is ask myself "is this word somehow true?" Is this what I am? When I hear someone use it in jest, or use it as a weapon, do I actually own some part of what they are saying? Will I always be less than, or somehow submissive to the rest of the human race just because I am black?

If you've never been the target of this word, it is easy to assume that my doubts were unfounded. But it is not so simple as any person of color living in a context where everything that isn't white is presented as "almost" or "not enough" or "different" or just plain "alien". That is the non-white dilemma in America. Whether you are Korean American born in Brookline being asked "where are you *from*?" or any person of color seeing Jeff Sessions confirmed as Attorney General, you have to question the reality created by racism.

But I can tell you unequivocally that despite creative attempts by modern black culture to "reclaim" it in music and slang, the word nigger can never be truly repurposed because black people did not create its tragic meaning or its violence. It was the canvas painfully stretched across black bodies on which the entire myth of white supremacy was painted. Even though some may deny it, and even though it is most certainly not true, even though it is just a ghastly caricature, the damage that this word accomplishes is not going away any time soon. The moment this word was born, it established a measure for just how low human beings can truly sink in their efforts to deny one another dignity and worth.

I can never unhear the word nigger. None of us can.

...and some folks don't want to talk about white supremacy?

Our great challenge here is that although the overt racists are obvious agents for the survival of words that frame racialized hatred, responsibility also falls on the well meaning liberal who out of a need for polite safety avoids all of the systems that empower those words. Avoidance creates a dangerous vacuum of denial and fear for some and frustration and anger for others.

⁵ Ibid.

This peculiar entitlement that allows some to be able to look past the worst racialized damage of our society and dismiss it as simple, far-removed ignorance and a lack of intellectual understanding; this tendency to politely turn away, and assume a posture of non-culpability; this assumption of enlightened superiority...these are the most insidious manifestations of white supremacy and they are at the root of the lack of diversity in Unitarian Universalism today.

But you know what? We have a chance. Not a low bar Huck Finn redeemed by letting Jim go (which shouldn't even be a question) kind of chance but a lofty, eloquent, well crafted and sustainable Langston Hughes "dream deferred..." kind of chance. And that's where jazz comes in. The kind of jazz that is not always easy or smooth or accessible. The jazz that is often sudden and unexpected and raw...even dangerous...but the jazz that is always "ultimately and finally true".

We are all being asked to learn a whole new way to play this tune called race in America. But while people of color are saying, "bring it on...we've been making music out of other people's noise for generations", white folks are wondering "where do we even begin?" Well, as I see it, in this moment, white Unitarian Universalists are being asked to learn how to improvise...how to play jazz. Remember, the jazz musician does not play a wrong note and hear a mistake. She hears a cadence on which to improvise or riff as we say, and she modulates into a whole new key.

That riff takes the off note, the off key and explores it from every angle, fearlessly and unapologetically. Your jazz might begin by asking if you ever act like or believe that white supremacy is true? Ask yourself if on some deep down level, you have ever thought that white people are somehow just better, easier to be around, more comfortable; is white preferable in your life and tastes to the point of not seeing others. Then ask yourself why or why not. People of color have to ask and answer these kinds of tough questions every day, and it is the improvisation that answers these questions that allows us to thrive and succeed with assurance, not despite oppression but because of it. You can only riff on the wrong note of white supremacy if you're willing to hear it first.

The spiritual part of this journey means you can't worry about being right, you've got to focus on being real. We all do. Surely learning to improvise this way bring tears and turning stomachs and searching hearts. That is why we do it together and hold one another with love through our moments of fear and insecurity. But even Bill Evans, Jerry Mulligan, Stan Getz and Chet Baker all had to practice before anyone would buy their records. Truly seeing the ugly representation

of how we have hurt one another through race can make us question our ability to actually birth the beloved community; but these are not wrong notes. They are openings to new and stunning harmonies.

We Are Jazz (*Love Beyond God*, 2016)

