

Dreams of a Post-Racial World

A Sermon Delivered on January 17, 2010

by

The Reverend Axel H. Gehrmann

*“Judge of your natural character
by what you do in your dreams.”*

-- Emerson

Unitarian Universalist Church
of Urbana-Champaign
309 West Green Street
Urbana, Illinois 61801-3221
(217) 384-8862
uucuc.org

Reading: by the white author Tim Wise from *Speaking Treason Fluently - Anti-Racist Reflections from an Angry White Male*, from an essay written in May of 2008 (p. 16)

Obama's undeniable charisma, savvy political instincts, passion for his work, and ability to connect especially with young voters is unparalleled in recent decades. The fact that as a black man (or, as some may prefer, a man of biracial background) he has been able to catapult to the position in which he now finds himself makes the accomplishment even more significant. It does indeed mean something.

Of course, this is where things become considerably more complicated: the point at which one is forced to determine what, exactly, his success means (and doesn't mean) when it comes to race, race relations, and racism in the United States. And it is at this point that so-called mainstream commentary has, once again, dropped the ball.

...Many a voice has suggested that Obama's success signifies something akin to the end of racism in the United States, if not entirely, then surely as a potent political or social force. After all, if a black man actually stands a better-than-decent shot at becoming president, then how much of a barrier could racism really be?

Reading: by white journalists Jeff Zeleny and Joseph Berger from an article which appeared in the *New York Times*, January 11, 2010 ("G.O.P. Chairman Urges Reid to Step Down Over Remarks")

Michael Steele, the Republican Party chairman, called Sunday for Harry Reid to step down as U.S. Senate majority leader in the wake of revelations of Mr. Reid's remarks in 2008 about Barack Obama's skin color and dialect.

A new book about the 2008 campaign quotes Mr. Reid as predicting that Mr. Obama could become the country's first black president because he was "light-skinned" and had "no Negro dialect, unless he wanted to have one." On Saturday, the senator issued a public statement apologizing for the remark. He also expressed his regret for the comment in a phone call to Mr. Obama, who accepted his apology. But Mr. Steele, who is black, said on NBC's "Meet the Press" that an apology was not enough and "there has to be a consequence" for "anachronistic language that harkens back to the 1950's and 1960's." Asked... whether an appropriate consequence is Mr. Reid's resignation as majority leader, Mr. Steele said, "I believe it is."

Reading: by the white educator Ronald David Glass from an essay entitled "Staying Hopeful" (*Everyday Antiracism*, edited by Mica Pollock, p. 337)

Despair often overtakes [those of us] who realize the enormity of the task of overcoming racism, which is embedded throughout the fabric and culture and reaches into the most intimate domains of everyday life. Despair overtakes all [of us] who feel that they can never make a difference that will make fundamental changes, that they cannot bear the weight of a racist history in each moment of the day and in every interaction. Despair

leads us to wonder if perhaps we should devote ourselves to some more obtainable goal in striving to make the world a better place.

Antiracist work is not something you do for part of the day and then go home; it is a way of life and has to permeate every aspect of what you do. There is no beginning and no end in the struggle for justice. Yes, it is hard and difficult work, morally challenging and emotionally draining.

But we cannot employ the privilege of giving in to this despair...

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That morning last week, when I sat at our kitchen table skimming the News-Gazette, and came across the news that Harry Reid was in serious political trouble because he once said Obama could be elected the first black president, because of his particular skin color and speaking skills, my first response was to laugh.

I had to laugh, because it seemed to me Harry Reid stated an obvious fact. Ever since Obama stepped into the national political limelight, and throughout his presidential campaign, and even now in the course of his first year in office, I have been fascinated by how carefully Obama has shaped his public persona and conveyed his racial identity.

The fact that Obama's family story, of being child of a mother from Kansas and a father from Kenya rather than a child of American slavery, clearly made a difference in terms of how he was portrayed and perceived by the American public. The fact that he was raised in a largely white community and overseas, rather than in a predominantly African American community, made a difference.

I remember the questions debated during the campaign, among both blacks and whites: Is Obama black enough to appeal to African Americans? Is he too black for European American voters?

And having watched enough stand-up comedy routines by the likes of Eddie Murphy and Chris Rock poking fun at marked differences between African American styles of speech and white dialects, I couldn't help but notice that much of Obama's tone and rhetoric was clearly geared toward white culture. As would be expected given his multi-cultural background, Obama was obviously multi-lingual in various forms of English idiom.

I had to laugh, because Harry Reid stated the obvious, and because in our present culture and political landscape, doing so can be hazardous to your political health. Now, of course, Reid's choice of words was unfortunate. The use of the term "Negro" is dated, and today clearly carries negative connotations. Reid's comments also raised questions

about the power of racial stereotypes, without being clear to what extent he either supports or opposes them, or even understands them.

Most politicians choose to cultivate a stance of color-blindness and tone-deafness, belittling issues of racism whenever possible. And as Harry Reid's case would seem to prove, they are wise to do so. Reid's experience clearly shows that race continues to be a complex and powerful issue, invariably volatile in the polarizing arena of party politics. Sadly, it would seem simply talking about race is racist.

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So here we are, on Martin Luther King, Jr. weekend, one year into the presidency of Barack Obama, a black man in this nation's highest office. This is an auspicious time to reflect on whether Obama's success signifies something akin to the end of racism in the United States. Surely the Obama phenomenon says something significant about the state of racism today. But what, exactly, does it say?

Though the fact of President Obama's racial identity is significant, it is also telling that Obama himself has carefully avoided making race an issue during his campaign and presidency.

Tim Wise, writing months before the election, observes that Obama's success was "largely contingent on his studious avoidance of the issue of race." He rarely mentioned racism until he was forced to do so in the wake of white reaction to the remarks of his pastor, Jeremiah Wright. Wise writes, "The extent to which Obama's white support has been directly related to his downplaying of race issues simply cannot be overstated."

What does it say, Wise wonders, that throughout his campaign Obama was unable or unwilling to address that fact "that 2006 saw the largest number of race-based housing discrimination complaints on record, and according to government and private studies, there are between two and three million cases of housing discrimination each year against people of color?"

What does it say, Wise wonders, that Obama never mentioned "the massive national study by legal scholars Alfred and Ruth Blumrosen, which found that at least a third of all businesses in the nation engage in substantial discrimination against people of color."

What does it say, that Obama failed to mention "that whites are over 70 percent of drug users, but only 10 percent of persons incarcerated for a drug possession offense, while blacks and Latinos combined are about 25 percent of users, but compose roughly 90 percent of persons locked up for a possession offense?"

Tim Wise writes,

"Obama's rise has owed almost everything to his ability... to "transcend" race, which is really a way of saying his ability to carve out an exception for himself in the minds of whites. But this notion of Obama "transcending race" (by which we really mean

transcending his blackness) is a patently offensive and even racist notion in that it serves to reinforce generally negative feelings about blacks as a whole... If whites view Obama as having transcended his blackness - and if this is why we like him so much - we are saying, in effect, that the millions of blacks who haven't transcended theirs will remain a problem. To praise the transcending of blackness, after all, is to imply that blackness is something negative, something from which one...ought to seek to escape, and quickly." (p. 21)

The fact that Obama was elected president is not so much evidence that we have solved the problem of racism, but rather evidence of how effectively we have learned to side-step it.

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Racism continues to be a potent force in American society today. The fact that its face has changed over the generations, the fact that we have learned to overlook and deny manifestations of racism, does not diminish but actually serves to deepen its power.

Racism in America is very real. It is the consequence of specific historical events, many of which were orchestrated by wealthy European Americans seeking to create a stable social order that would provide safety and support for their positions of power. Racism is not a biological fact, it is social construction. And it was constructed for a reason. The notion of blackness was designed for the single purpose of elevating whiteness.

The historian W. E. B. DuBois has pointed out that "the discovery of personal whiteness among the world's peoples is a very modern thing... The ancient world would have laughed at such a distinction." DuBois observes that in the Middle Ages skin color would have provoked nothing more than "mild curiosity."

David Roediger, a historian here at the U of I, points to 17th century Virginia, to the first permanent colonial settlement in 1607 to show how the idea of "whiteness" was created. At the time African laborers worked side by side with similarly indentured servants from Europe. Blacks and whites shared alcohol, marriage, death and escapes long before the creation of a "color line." (*How Race Survived U.S. History*)

Bacon's Rebellion in 1676 changed all this. In 1676 European and African servants and ex-servants joined together and rose up to challenge their masters. After rebels burned the capital to the ground, the Virginia governor finally - with support from the British Navy - defeated the rebellion.

In order to prevent similar uprisings in the future, English and Virginian elites created a labor system designed to separate and antagonize European and African laborers, declaring the prior servants and the latter slaves. By systematizing the distinctions between them, the modern notion of "race" was created.

New laws were created that served to deepen the divide between poor whites and blacks. New laws required public, often naked whippings of black slaves, but set limits on penal violence against indentured whites. New laws restricted the movement of slaves, while poor whites were paid to enforce the laws. It was against the law for black Virginians to carry arms. White servants, however, received a gun when their terms of indentured servitude ended. The servitude of slaves, of course, had no end.

The social divisions and the psychological scars that were created over the following centuries, as this nation grew up around the institution of slavery, these divisions did not disappear once the institution of slavery was officially outlawed. Though the letters of the law were amended, the social and economic order defined by race persisted.

And while the civil rights movement of the sixties did lead to additional legal amendments, they were ineffective in healing the deep divisions of racism and the history of slavery.

David Roediger tells us, today we have developed “new forms of state-centered race-making processes around incarceration and deportation.” He writes, “With whites today having on average more than nine times the household wealth of African Americans and Latinos, and with white male incarceration rates at less than one-seventh those of African American males, desires to claim white identity and to defend the relative advantages attached to it will persist unless dramatic changes occur.” (p. 212) Those who benefit from white identity will try to hold onto those benefits as long as they can. Roediger knows Frederick Douglass was right: Power concedes nothing without a demand.

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I had to laugh when I heard the news about the trouble Harry Reid was in, because of his remarks on racism. But the reality of racism, the complexity of racism, the ubiquity of racism, and the denial of racism - this is not a laughing matter.

For the children who are poorly served in our schools, for the young men who fill our prisons, for the families whose loan applications are denied, for the job seekers whose prospects remain dim, for those who work hard but are inadequately paid, for them it is not a laughing matter.

* * *

Ronald David Glass knows it is easy to feel overcome by despair once we realize the enormity of the task of overcoming racism. And yet despair solves nothing and helps no one. Even denial does not shield us from the insidious effect of racism in our communities, in our schools, in our courthouses, in our relationships with peers or policemen.

Glass reminds us that justice is never achieved once and for all in some cataclysmic upheaval, but rather step by step, situation by situation, particular context by particular

context. He writes, “Sometimes, in unpredictable moments of history, localized changes expand rapidly into transformative leaps that reshape an era. But even these leaps rely entirely on the innumerable small steps that precede and sustain them.”

The struggle for justice reminds Glass of his own personal struggle with cancer. During the two years of his treatment, it was not easy to be hopeful. But Glass realized, “When death pounds your defenses, the life remaining offers hope enough for taking the fight forward another day, or simply another moment. This is the nature of revolutionary hope, and it is the most reliable antidote to despair in the struggle for justice. As long as we are alive, we have the opportunity to continue to challenge the ... shape of injustice. [Revolutionary hope] reaffirms that the evils and injustice of the day have not yet extinguished us.”

The first step we must take is to open our eyes to the current realities of race, and understand its origins. In order to help rather than hinder, we first need a clear perception of the problem. The second step is to challenge the injustice we see. To seize a few of the opportunities we are offered every day, to bend the shape our society toward justice.

We know injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. But it is equally true that even our smallest effort to create greater justice anywhere, can challenge injustice everywhere. In our workplace, in our schools, in our homes, in our families, in our friendships, issues of race play out. In our every relationship, in our every conversation - we are offered opportunities challenge the status quo.

May we have the wisdom to see the countless opportunities we have to create greater justice. And may we have the courage to seize them.

Amen.