

**“Spiritual Practices for Black Lives Matter: Discomfort, Humility,
Imagination”**

Discomfort

Rev. Nathan Detering

October 16, 2016

Let us begin our sermon together not with speaking or hearing, but with singing.

Open blue hymnals to 1018 – *“Come and Go with Me,”*

This song an African American spiritual about the promise
Of a better land, and better world, originally written during
The time of slavery in our country.

Let’s sing that first verse together.

Come and Go With Me to that Land (x3)

...where I’m bound.

And friends, as we ask each other to come and go,
Come and go, come and go with each other to that land we’re bound for,
Which means not settling for the way the world is and the person we are,
But reaching, reaching, reaching for the world we want to live in, the person
we want to be,

The land we want to shape for our children and our children’s children

Instead of the trauma and drama that is flickering on our screens

And in our streets and from our bully pulpits over the land

We so often feel bound by this season –

A request:

Will you allow me the room to preach it plain this morning?

Without euphemism or metaphor or even story?

And - can we preach together, because that's what sermons are – a conversation –

Without worrying if we're all coming across as 'preachy?'

Because sometimes what we need from each other are direct, open, Honest words – words that aren't filtered through the oil of a campaign machine,

And certainly words that aren't designed to provoke, taunt, divide, Demean.

(What a terrible week of words, amen? Amen.)

What we need are words, instead, that come from love,

Even as lead us to reckon with some discomfoting spiritual work,

And then invite us to humility, as Otto will share, and then invite us to imagine,

As Heather will do.

But first let me invite us to turn around and notice the new banner hanging from the choir loft,

And I wonder, what is the symbol of? *A heart.*

And what do the words say? *Black Lives Matter.*

The heart an expression of our UU faith, that we stand on the side of love, And the words an expression of a movement that began when Trayvone Martin, 17-year-old black boy with a hood on, was killed in 2012 by George Zimmerman, and that has moved from there to demand justice and accountability for the ways black lives are treated differently and unfairly by the law enforcement, by the state, and by the white majority, which is us.

So here is the plain part:

We hang this banner inside this morning, and beginning next week,
Outside the sanctuary next to the rainbow flag, which is a sign of welcome
And solidarity with the Gay, Lesbian, Transgendered, and Bisexual people,
Because we seek to affirm our UU's faith call to build, with humility
And imagination, a world where black lives matter as much as our kinds of
lives.

We hear this call because we affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every
person.

And when that inherent worth and dignity is diminished because of a
person's race, or sexual identity or gender identity or class or zipcode or
religion,

Then all of us suffer.

That's one thing that we UU's believe, you who ask me what we believe.

We believe that what affects one person, affects us all,

Or as King put it. Injustice anywhere is injustice everywhere.

All of which sounds great, and is worthy of a sermon we can all nod along
with.

Until we remember that such a principle – that of living as though

What affects one person affects us all – asks certain things of us.

And one thing that talking about racism and white privilege and

Hanging this banner from our church certainly asks of us is an

Ability to get uncomfortable...without running for the doors, or some other

Church, or requests to the ministers to preach on other things,

Or the safety of a Sunday morning brunch.

And so here's the uncomfortable part:

I have work to do on this issue of race and navigating my white privilege.

And guess what? I'm not alone. I've got loads of company here in this room. (which is good news; we've got each other).

And that's because of the longest time I heard, and then believed,

That what was asked of me as a good person trying to be better

Was a kind of color-blindness and *'why can't we all get along?'*

And *'don't all lives matter'* and *'what we really need in these*

Homogenous suburbs and our church is more people of color

To make us feel better about ourselves.'

Or as the author Toni Morrison put it: *'for the longest time the habit of*

ignoring race is understood to be a graceful, even generous, liberal

gesture.'"

And a consequence, we have – I have, you have, we have – avoided

Having some hard, uncomfortable conversations with ourselves and each

other about how our privilege means not having to think about our privilege,

And that black and brown Americans have a very, very different experience

Than those of us with white skin.

Because while it's true on an existential, theological, Universalist level

That all lives matters,

What's also true is that all our lives don't matter the same when it comes

To our communities, our towns, our politics, our culture.

Which is why we have work to do.

Like hanging a sign that may be polarizing to some, but will open up a conversations about race that aren't happening.

Like owning up to how our how our color-blindness has kept us from Seeing the privilege in our white-majority communities and church.

Like making room in often over-full lives to address how those of Us with white skin receive benefits that those with brown and black skin Do not.

I have a sticker on my office door you might have seen. It says

“Well-behaved churches seldom make history.”

The same could be said for ones that place a premium on

Staying comfortable and satisfied and quiet and safe.

Good thing, then, that as we stand with open hearts on the side of love

And affirm that Black Lives Matter,

We have each other – to lean on, giving and receiving support,

Calling each other on our stuff,

As we invite each other

Come and Go with Me to that Land.

Let's sing again.

The Practice of Humility
Otto O'Connor
October 16, 2016

Come and go with me.

I want to invite you into the practice of humility.

One of the scariest things, I think, for those of us who are white when doing this work of anti-racist work is accepting that there is work that needs to be done that we can't see without the help of others.

It's not that we don't believe in fairness, equality or justice. It's that sometimes, we simply can't *see* that such work is needed. In our experience, people are treated fairly. We don't notice ourselves making judgements on others because of their race. We move through the world thinking that people of color, that black people, are treated the same way that we are.

So when people of color say "This is unfair" or "this is unjust" or "the police officers aren't killing your people the way they are killing mine," it's so easy for us to say "What? No. No. It can't be. Surely, I would have seen that. Surely, if there was such injustice in the world, I would know. It can't be." Which is a totally reasonable response.

Because it's not really that our pride gets in the way of this. It's our intense desire for this not to be true. Because wouldn't we all rather live in a world where oppression wasn't real? A world that was fair? A world where people were treated equality? Where the inherent worth and dignity of ALL people were acknowledged?

So, for those of us who are white, to accept that truth that we don't can be difficult to say the least.

And in some ways it's because we want to protect ourselves from the shock and devastation that accepting that as truth might bring.

The reality that our own experiences are not the baseline, not the norm, not indicative of the experiences of all people. The reality that if we know this, maybe we have to do something about this.

I know, because this is how I've felt about it.

And if you feel that way it's easy to see why saying "All Lives Matter," might make more sense. Because that's what's fair.

But friends, this is some of the hardest work. Because, for those of us who are white, we have to acknowledge that

maybe the world isn't what we thought it was. And that takes humility.

I want to invite you into humility.

The religious concept on humility, that is present in many traditions, is a humbleness before God. It is saying "I don't know what I don't know. I accept my limitations."

Humility means acknowledging one's limits. To our talents. To our gifts. To our experiences. It's understanding and acknowledging that there are things we simply do not or cannot know.

And I have to tell you, that as a white person in the United States of America, knowing the experiences of black people is something that is beyond my limits. I have to rely on what others are telling me, on the voices of black people, and other people of color, to share those experience with me. Because it's so easy for me not to see it. Because it's too painful for me to see it. And it's hard because I don't want to say I don't know what I don't know. But I don't.

And so, when I think about this work in the Movement for Black Lives and what we as a congregation can do, when sometimes it feels like we are so far away from what we see on the news. Where we see urban environments different from our and think "I just don't see it here," I go back to the practice of humility. Can we recognize that we

have much to learn? Can we recognize that we don't know what we don't know?

And it isn't as far as we think it is. Just look at the names on the Holliston police report.

One thing I hear a lot from folks engaging in this type of work, in this work of talking about race, maybe for the first time in this way, is the real fear that many of us have, including myself, of making a mistake. If we make a mistake, we will embarrass ourselves, we will feel shame, we will make others uncomfortable.

And I'm here to say that, yes, all of that might happen. But if we practice humility, we can understand that making mistakes is part of the process. And it is sacred work. Our mistakes can be gifts to help us gain better understandings.

As Nathan has said to me, spiritual practices are practices for a reason. Humility can be one of the hardest things to practice. Because it involves saying we don't know. It involves saying, we need help. It involves surrender. Which opens us up to the pain of the world.

But when we wake up to injustice, when we open ourselves to the pain in this world, we can see, we can imagine a

better future. We can see why it matters so much to proclaim “Black Lives Matter.”

Come and go with me to that land. Let us sing again.

Spiritual Practices for Black Lives Matter: Discomfort, Humility, Imagination

Spiritual Practices for Black Lives Matter: Imagination

Rev. Heather Concannon

October 16, 2016

This week, I looked up at my bulletin board for the first time in years
 A board that's become a dumping ground, over the years
 And see a torn off piece of an old envelops
 With a quickly jotted-down quote that had inspired me years ago
 Found again at just the right time.
 From Zeus Leonardo,
 Which says "Dreaming spurs people to act
 If by dreaming we mean a sincere search for alternatives
 And not the erasure of reality."

When I wrote it down, in college, I think I felt this feeling of validation
 Like, "yes. Someone else feels like it's worthwhile to believe that things could be
 different."
 Imagination and dreaming get such a bad reputation
 As youthful dreaming
 as the province of children.
 (But I also think: kids are sometimes better at believing that a different world is possible
 than adults are
 Because they haven't had all this time to learn stuff that they'll later have to unlearn.)

Imagination is not only the realm of children
 It is also the realm of liberation.

Imagination as a spiritual practice
 Is a sacred imagination,
 A radical imagination
 A holy imagination
 A moral imagination.

Moral imagination creates ethics that transcend our own singular lived experience.
 It asks us to imagine that our own experience is not the whole truth,
 Not the only way to see or experience the world.
 Moral imagination asks us to practice—practice—because again, spiritual practices are
 called practices for a reason—imagining moving through the world with another
 perspective, experience, set of touchstones and values.
 As a white people in the era of Black Lives Matter, moral imagination asks me and all of
 my fellow white people to de-center our own experiences
 And to listen deeply, compassionately, openly to people of color
 And to imagine ourselves into their stories,

To imagine that, even if we haven't had a negative interaction with the police, or the criminal justice system, to imagine that our experiences might only be a small piece of the story.

Moral imagination asks us to deeply regard the humanity of others,
And although it might feel like a loss to give up the comfort or surety that we might have around how the world is ordered,
Moral imagination promises that there is more wholeness, connection, and humanity in store for all of us on the other side.

Imagination helps us build another world
To see something that may not be realized tomorrow, or next year,
But gives us something to work toward.

It asks us to practice putting down the purely pragmatic lens that so many of us—myself included—

Walk around with, that cynical voice that tells us that that world we dream about isn't real--

The world without the prison industrial complex

Without violence against people of color

Without the astronomically high education gap, or income gap

Imagination asks us to ask more loudly and more insistently than that voice that says it's not possible and ask: but what if it *were*?

Adults are often really good, for the record, of doing this practice with kids.

Right? When a small child tells you that you are the knight and they are the dragon,

And when they say "ROAR", you don't say "you're not real" to the child you say

"AAAARRRRGGGGHHHHH!!!!"

Right?

We are less good at engaging with imagination with each other.

We jump to the "but how will we fund it?" and "but that's not possible"

And allow the pragmatic and the cynicism to win out over our imagination

Too often letting us stay in a place of inaction

Admitting defeat before we've even tried.

I know this is true for me, is this true for you?

There are two sacred words that can help us pause, consider, reflect:

"What if?"

What if my own experience is not the only way to see the world?

What if there were alternatives to policing as we know it?

What if we didn't criminalize drug charges?

What if we had ways of dealing with harm that didn't require locking so many black and brown men in cages?

What if everyone had access to their basic needs—education, food, healthcare, secure housing?

What if I talked with my white neighbor, or Facebook friend, or uncle, and it went well?

What if everyone actually had an equal voice in the decisions that affect their lives?

What if a better world *is* possible?

New ways of living cannot become reality
Unless they are imagined first.

What is that land where we are bound?
I don't entirely know, because it's not mine alone to envision.
But I do know that I've caught glimpses of the Beloved Community
For me, often in religious community
But communities of wholeness and real democracy and genuine care for one another.
But I do know that we do not live in it yet, amen?
We still have work to do to get there, amen?
Yet we can be compelled and called by the vision, amen?

In imagining a world in which black lives do matter, as much as every other life
Religion is a bridge between the world we imagine
And the world we currently live in.
And in the world we dream about
Where all lives matter, and that is reflected in our social structures
But in the world we live in now
Black lives aren't treated as though they matter.
Because of the way our culture commits violence against black bodies, criminalizes black
men and boys, defunds public education and services in predominantly black
neighborhoods, discriminates in jobs, the list goes on.
But we as people of faith are called to build that bridge
Between the world we live in and the world we dream about
This banner, this proclamation, is just one step in building that bridge
As we proclaim to the world around us:
As Unitarian Universalists, we believe that Black Lives Matter
Because we are using our moral imagination to build a world in which that is actually,
truly the case.
And while we are on the road to that world we dream about, we proclaim together:
Black Lives Matter.

I invite you to join in singing all four verses of "Come and Go With Me to that Land, as
we boldly take steps toward that land, where we are all—all of us, black, non-black people
of color, white—where all of us are bound.