

**“Undoing Racism”**

**10 July 2011**

**Unitarian Universalists of San Mateo**

**By Deanna Vandiver, Summer Minister**

**& the 2011 UUSM *Building the World We Dream About* Class**

**Reflection by: Charles DuMond**

This is the poem, “*Slaveship*,” by Lucile Clifton:

Loaded like spoons  
Into the belly of Jesus  
Where we lay for weeks and months  
In the sweat and stink of our own  
Breathing  
Jesus  
Why do you not protect us  
Chained to the heart of the Angel  
Where the prayers we never tell  
Are hot and red as our bloody ankles  
Jesus  
Angel  
Can these be men  
Who vomit us out from ships  
Called Jesus, Angel, Grace of God  
Onto a heathen country  
Jesus  
Angel  
Ever again  
Can this tongue speak  
Can this bone walk  
Grace of God  
Can this sin live

At General Assembly in Charlotte, NC, I attended a session led by “Descendants of Slaveholders.” It opened with the reading of the poem. We heard stories of discovery of hidden and unspoken pasts.

Reverend David Pettee told us of his New England heritage and the family stories of patriots and revolutionary war heroes. A few years ago, he updated his ancestry.com account and while reviewing some census documents, he found four enslaved Africans lived in his ancestor’s home.

For those who have not spent time doing genealogical research, many old US census documents include information on slaves. Remember the constitution included a

provision for “other persons” in determining the population for assigning seats in the House of Representatives.

“Representatives and taxes ... shall be determined by adding to the whole Number of free Persons, including those bound to Service for a Term of Years, and excluding Indians not taxed, three fifths of all other Persons.”

A slave represented 3/5 of a free man. Accurate records of slaves in households do exist.

Rev. Pettee’s family had never spoken of their slaveholding past. He had no ancestors from the Confederacy. He was stunned.

Reverend Mark Morrison-Reed, who also spoke at District Assembly in May, told of his complicated past. He’s descended from both slaves and slaveholders. In fact, his family has done DNA testing and learned that some of his ancestors are from two different tribes in Sierra Leone. One of those ancestors may have captured and sold the other one to slave traders.

It is estimated that there may be as many as 15 million living descendants of slave holders and I have my own story.

When our older daughter, Jennifer, was in a Montessori elementary school, they celebrated Halloween with a historical timeline. Each child would pick a famous figure in history, research the individual, give a short speech, and then line up in chronological order. Jennifer picked Sojourner Truth.

For those who may not know, Sojourner Truth was the self-given name of an abolitionist and women’s rights activist. She was born a slave in New York, escaped a year before slavery was abolished in New York, and successfully sued a white man for custody of her son. After achieving her freedom, Truth spent the rest of her life working for equal rights and to end slavery.

One of the RE classrooms at UUSM is named for Sojourner Truth.

While researching Sojourner Truth, Jennifer read about Sojourner’s last slaveholder, John Dumont. My early ancestors were Dumont’s. They were French Huguenots who came across with Stuyvesant when he was colonizing New York.

Jennifer asked if there was any family history about John Dumont and Sojourner Truth. I didn’t know, so we asked my Dad. He did some genealogical research and discovered that John Dumont is probably my 4th great grand uncle. We then realized my cousin had purchased and was living on the farm where Sojourner Truth was held as a slave.

So what do I do with this history? Some would say it is over 100 years old. Let it go. I didn’t personally cause this injustice or profit from it, so there’s nothing to do.

Maybe.

This class, “Building the World We Dream About,” has been – for me – about personal transformation. Every Sunday, we say we are here to “transform ourselves and the world.” Right now, I’m still at the personal transformation step.

Can I really separate myself from the past? People were harmed. Advantages are given to some and denied to others. How do I repair the damage caused by my ancestors? As Nelson Mandela says, “True reconciliation consists of more than forgetting the past.”

I learned in the GA workshop that Eastern Mennonite University has a program called, “Coming to the Table.” The idea is to bring together the ancestors of slaves and the ancestors of their slaveholders. To listen. To understand. Maybe even begin to heal.

I think that’s my next step.

### **“Undoing Racism – Part 1” – (Deanna Vandiver)**

The People’s Institute for Survival and Beyond proclaims a powerful message, one that I have taken to the heart of my ministry: racism has been consciously and systemically created – and it can be **UNDONE**. Unitarian Universalists of San Mateo have taken several steps toward undoing racism, personally and institutionally. Charles spoke just now of his personal journey within a racist system to name and heal the woundedness that racism deals to each of us in different ways.

Last fall, this congregation began A Dialogue on Race and Ethnicity, **ADORE**, a dialogue that led to a commitment by eight UUSMers to go deeper together on a journey to wholeness. Building the World We Dream About is an adult faith development program designed by Dr. Mark Hicks to help Unitarian Universalist congregations in the work of undoing racism.

By developing antiracist, antioppressive, and multicultural habits and skills we can participate as a faith community in the spiritually demanding work of undoing racism together.

### **Reflection by: Rajesh Ragoobee:**

As an immigrant family, seeking a spiritual home and community was not easy. I was initially ambivalent about joining a congregation where there are so few people of color. But the warm welcome and wonderful people we interacted with, more than made up for this shortcoming. We stayed because we resonated with the core values of Unitarian Universalism and we now feel part of a community. However, in a diverse area like San

Mateo, I sometimes wonder whether we are doing enough to reach out to people from a more varied socioeconomic or cultural background. Thus, my interest was sparked to participate in this class, since I'm convinced that our diversity is one of our greatest strengths. Here in Silicon Valley, I've seen how diversity is encouraged, nurtured, leveraged and rewarded by companies that are changing the world. So why can't we bring some of those fresh ideas to our own congregation and to our larger UU community? Am I personally doing enough in our community to encourage more diversity? Should I throw caution to the wind, and become more of an evangelist? Or it is possible that we are simply fearful of change? Maybe we have blind spots to how we may inadvertently turn people away? Or is it that deep down, we believe that the Unitarian Universalism only attracts a certain socioeconomic group and is therefore not so unifying or universal after all? This class provided a safe space to explore these perplexing and sometimes controversial questions.

As a person of color, life here in the US can sometimes be challenging, especially for certain minorities. For instance, after 911 many of my Indian and Arab friends, even here in the Bay Area, had to buy American flags to decorate their homes and cars in order to feel safe. Even though the dust has settled over the last decade, for many, those lingering feelings of resentment and "not belonging" remain. Depending on the context, certain minorities are sometimes looked at with suspicion, in subtle ways. During the course of my work at the Federal Government, I cannot help but notice how my white friends usually breeze through the security checkpoints at the entrance, but my identification, sometimes gets that extra second of closer scrutiny. Ever so subtle, but noticeable.

DWB, driving while black, is another fact of American life that takes getting used to. I remember many incidents when I first arrived in the US in the early nineties, first in the suburbs of Chicago and then here in San Mateo. I have to admit though, with the steady rise in the number of immigrants, and improved training of our local police officers, this situation has improved. Alternatively, maybe its just my driving that's improved!

In recent years, our airport security made the decision to not engage in racial profiling. Even though this was a wise decision, notice how they are still mocked by the media. It takes enormous courage to go against the tide and do the right thing. Hopefully the State of Arizona can learn from our airport security and abandon their racial profiling of immigrants. Racial profiling is still alive and well in the rest of our society. Even though these incidences appear to be minor, they do plant the seed of "not belonging".

Looking beyond our local community, I also began to ponder two areas that affect us at a global scale. Firstly, the role of ethics in science and secondly, the effect of mainstream media and how these overlap and intertwine to give rise to social ills, like racism.

The ethical use of science and technology is our collective responsibility. Will the rapid globalization enabled by the Internet, create a more level playing field for diverse societies to coexist, without the need to oppress each other? How the Internet

evolves, especially how the digital divide is overcome in the coming decades, will largely determine how fair globalization actually turns out to be.

We've seen how pseudo-science has been used to justify racism, but will we be more vigilant and skeptical when questionable science is used yet again to benefit a privileged few at the expense of our larger society? Certain uses of genetics in reproduction, medicine, agriculture or commerce need to be scrutinized and challenged especially from an ethical perspective.

Mainstream media is much more powerful than we think.

Can we ever turn the tide of mainstream media's insidious form of stereotyping and marginalizing people of color? For instance, if I say the word "Oakland", think about what flashes through your mind. Similarly, what happens when I say "Africa"? Now, having been born in Africa, it has always puzzled me as to why most dangerous insects, animals and diseases are invariably prefixed by the term African. For example, African bees are commonly known as "African killer bees", and even though its sting is no more potent than any other bee, the way they are commonly described, is spine chilling. Similarly, even though many species of dangerous ants are found all around the world, it's the African ants, that are labeled "African killer ants". It has also become common knowledge that African elephants and crocodiles are alleged to be much wilder than their counterparts found in other parts of the world. Isn't it also a strange coincidence that most deadly diseases, frequently the stuff of horror movies, like West Nile, Ebola, AIDS viruses, all seem to "originate" from a single continent? All these dangerous diseases that can wipe out entire populations, in spite of Africans having existed and thrived since the beginning. These stereotypes of "dangerous Africa" is great for their tourist industry but causes immense long term damage to people of African descent on many levels. But a word of advice, don't try questioning scientific experts on these claims because you'll be looked upon as just another crazy conspiracy theorist.

Having lived under apartheid South Africa and here in the US for over two decades, it's clear to me that people are not born racists. Our social conditioning plays a pivotal role in forming our prejudices - a point clearly illustrated by the controversial song, "Carefully taught", from that musical, South Pacific. The song speaks of how prejudice and hate is instilled in early childhood. Perhaps the very least we can do, is to take more proactive steps to formalise anti-racism education and protect impressionable young minds from prejudice in the media. Currently we have warning labels for the portrayal of violence, nudity, sex, language, drugs and a host of other themes, but nothing for prejudice! The only country in the world that has a "prejudice" warning is South Africa. You see they learned the hard way how prejudice can spin out of control and lead to a false ideology like apartheid. Even after they miraculously became a democracy without a civil war, their society remains highly polarized with huge socioeconomic disparities that will take generations to redress. In an interview, Nelson Mandela once remarked, "When a man has done what he considers to be his duty to his people and his country, he can rest in peace. I believe I have made that effort and that is, therefore, why I will sleep for the

eternity." As we can see throughout history, its up to us to make the hard decisions so that future generations are not left to clean up the mess.

Finally, our class, most of all, made me much more aware of the support I have in our UU community and our fire of commitment to protecting the dignity of every human being and recognizing the web of our interdependence. I'm also more aware of the challenges we face in our quest to build the world we dream about. I feel truly blessed and inspired to have been part of this unique dialogue and getting to know each other a little better, including our amazing Intern Minister and facilitator, Deanna. Thank You!

### **“Undoing Racism – Part 2” – (Deanna Vandiver):**

As a class we began together listening to affirming and marginalizing stories from other Unitarian Universalists. One of the voices that offered deep learning to many of us was told by Sojourner, an African American Unitarian Universalist woman. She wrote:

While experiencing racism with Unitarian Universalism has been painful, the reaction of UUs when I tell them my story has been even more disturbing to me. Usually most White listeners will want to hear the particulars of what happened to judge for themselves whether they would have named the incident as racism, instead of trusting me. I have to repeat time and time and again the what, where, and how, and re-live the pain.

It feels like I am being judged as to whether our first Principle should be applied to me. Rarely does this trial occur when I share other stories of oppression around the multiple identities I carry. Thank goodness for listeners of Color and White allies. They hear with their hearts and believe me without the nitty-gritty. When I receive this affirmation it helps me heal and move on. My pain is transformed.

Speaking to the power of transformation, Dr. Mark Hicks tells us that people who have been oppressed “need experiences that re-assert the fundamental nature of their humanity in order to begin their journey toward wholeness. They need to see those who are in the empowered group refuse the spoils of their privilege, and act to create a different set of conditions, a different reality.”

Each of us has within us the possibility of being accountable to a truth larger than ourselves, to trusting the experience of another even when it disconfirms our own expectations and experience, to refuse and/or to ask others to refuse the spoils of privilege.

## **Reflection by: Kathy van Leuwen, Director of Religious Education**

In the Building the World We Dream About, I learned that there is no scientific evidence to that people are genetically differentiated into separate races. There is only one race: the human one. I am just as likely to be genetically similar to someone from a different racial group than someone from my own.

“Race” is social construction developed to justify inequitable treatment of people based on the way they look, most often for economic gain. Racism is a language of hate and fear taught from one generation to the next. I am the beneficiary of hundreds of years of “white privilege” which gave my family access to resources and opportunities unavailable to people of color. In 21st century America, being categorized as white means that I have not had to consider often the way my race impacts my life as “whiteness” was considered the norm, unlike most people of color, for whom the awareness of race is necessary to navigating daily life and sometimes even survival.

As much as I am taking away from this experience, I have more to learn. The issues around race and ethnicity are complex. I would like to learn more about the Latino/Latina American and the Asian-American experiences and the ways that the American domestic and foreign policy has shaped these realities.

What can we do to make our congregation more multi-cultural and diverse? The first step is to make the commitment, by making this an explicit goal of the congregation. Our leadership, both clergy and lay leaders, should be visible and vocal allies of racial justice in the community and partner with diverse community groups in our social justice work. It is helpful, but not a pre-requisite, to have people of color in leadership roles. This can be a goal to strive for.

Leaders need to remain a non-anxious presence in the face of people’s anxiety about change. Worship should incorporate multi-cultural elements with appropriate reference and reverence and we should work as a congregation to develop our multi-cultural literacy. This kind of also takes stamina: this kind of cultural shift takes a decade or more.

I know well that we are not just a “white church.” There are people of color in our pews, and even more children of color in our Religious Education programs. Since much of our diversity sits in young, multicultural families, multigenerational involvement is a key to transforming our culture. As a religious educator, I strive to select programming that is diverse and inclusive. This is important, but we have more to do.

Mark Hicks, the co-author of the Building the World We Dream About curriculum, gave the Sophia Lyon Fahs lecture at this year’s General Assembly, titled “Toward a Religious Education for People of Color.” Dr. Hicks believes that in order to respond the lifelong faith development needs of people of color, we need to promote the historic

visibility of people of color, multicultural literacy, empowerment, interconnectedness, collaboration, identity expansiveness, and knowledge of how oppression work.

Building diversity means committing ourselves to interrupting oppression and becoming an inclusive, diverse community of beloveds.

Building the World We Dream About has challenged me to question the choices I have made about where and with whom I spend my time and has inspired me to make my life and this community richly multi-cultural.

As Mark Morrison-Reed told us at District Assembly this year, the question is not “Why aren’t there more UU’s of color?,” but “Why do I live where I live?,” “Who do I invite to my dining room table?,” and “Where do we choose to build our congregations?”

To grow, we need to put ourselves in situations that we don’t normally find ourselves in and process the experience as well as the accompanying emotion anxiety, much like we do when we take our middle-schoolers to Islamic and African-American places of worship as part of the Neighboring Faiths Curriculum.

The reason to do this work is to live big lives, and to put our values into practice, not simply to be able to count more brown faces in the congregation. It means committing yourself to a new way of being in the world.

This work needs to come from a place of love and joy in order to be sustained, and not from a place of guilt and shame. The way beyond race and racism is a spiritual journey, a path of love and acceptance and deepening into the truth that we are, all of us, so much more alike than we are different.

### **“Undoing Racism – Part 3” – (Deanna Vandiver):**

While we now know that *race* is the product of an imaginative social construction, not biological science, *racism* is painfully real. As such, racism “informs our psychological state, personality structure, the institutional and social values that shape our working lives, the view of how we interpret the world, and even the values we place on human life.” (BTWWDA) It is no joke, my friends. Almost every justice movement in our country has found racism the “single most critical barrier” to coalition for social change. (PISAB)

African American philosopher and novelist James Baldwin wrote that most people guard and keep “their system of reality and what they assume themselves to be.” The work of undoing racism invites those who are in the dominate culture to examine what is being guarded and kept; to understand how an unexamined reality can dehumanize us all.

Unitarian Universalism is a faith that calls us

to risk ourselves,  
to trust that there are many ways to understand and experience the world,  
to love beyond our skill for loving.

It is my prayer that this congregation and Unitarian Universalists the world over will commit to learning together the multicultural competencies that will stretch us into a giving, living, life affirming faith for everyone, a faith that will sustain us as we go forth to build the world we dream about. Together, we can undo the racist systems and realities that dehumanize us all. Together, we can build a new way.

May it be so. Namaste.

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