

Dreams of Justice

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First Unitarian Society of Ithaca

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I was a child in the civil rights era. My family was still living in the Washington, DC suburbs when I remember hearing my parents talk about the Negroes rioting in downtown DC and that it was unsafe to go there. It was 1968, and the six days of riots in DC followed the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.

We moved to Potsdam, New York that summer, and being geographically remote and very young, I was fairly unaware of what was happening. By the time I was in Jr. High school, it seemed like the focus had shifted to the Vietnam War protests.

In fact, by then the Civil Rights movement had won many victories. Decisions in the courts, such as 1954's *Brown v. the Board of Education*, helped to begin the desegregation of schools and established the "one man, one vote" concept to weigh everyone's vote equally. Executive orders by Presidents Truman and Eisenhower desegregated the military. The Civil Rights Acts of 1957, '60, '64 and '68 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 prohibited discrimination in hiring and employment, in schools and in any program receiving federal aid. They also made obstructing anyone's right to vote a federal crime, and outlawed discrimination in housing.

Concerns about economic inequality were left unaddressed as the Vietnam War consumed attention and funds, and the civil rights protests turned increasingly violent after King's death.

The '80's, the '90's and the decade that followed the '90's (what do we call it, anyway?) seemed relatively quiet to me in terms of racial issues. It is only in the last few years that I've become aware of the deep-seated racism that still exists in our country's heart and body.

I spoke over a year ago here about the Black Lives Matter movement, when we hung our banner on the outside of the church. I spoke about how I had become aware of the injustices that African Americans encounter mainly through seeing videos shared on Facebook. I came to realize that the injustices aren't new, only the videos are, and the capability for mass distribution. Since Trayvon Martin—the kid with the candy—was killed by the neighborhood watch volunteer in February of 2012, the reports have been coming and coming. Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, Eric Garner in New York City, Tamir Rice—the kid with the toy gun, Sandra Bland, Freddie Gray, Alton Sterling, Philando Castile . . . the list goes on and on.

Dylan Roof was just sentenced to death for shooting dead nine African Americans during bible study at their church. He showed no remorse at his trial.

Racism seems to be coming out of the closet. Especially now, with a President-elect modeling racist remarks and attitudes, the veneer of respect and decency that held it at bay has been derided as "political correctness," a useless invention of liberals.

But racism has always been there. And while it may have seemed quiet in those three decades starting with the '80's, things were going on that I had no idea about. Forces have been at work all this time to ensure that African Americans would not be able to integrate into white society, would not be able to influence elections, would not achieve anything like equality, in spite of the victories of the '50's and '60's.

I have been reading four ground-breaking books that reveal just how racist our institutions and systems are. *Just Mercy*, by Bryan Stevenson, was the UU "common read" for 2015-16. Stevenson tells of his experience defending prisoners on death row and children condemned to life in prison. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, by Michelle Alexander, is this year's community read in Ithaca. Alexander details the ways that "we have not so much ended racial caste in America, we have only redesigned it."

There's *Between the World and Me*, by Ta-Nehisi Coates. This book is a letter to his son, a visceral, eloquent examination of the hazards and hopes of black male life. And finally, *The Third Reconstruction: How a Moral Movement Is Overcoming the Politics of Division and Fear*, by The Rev. Dr. William Barber II, is the UU common read for this year. It challenges us to ground our justice work in moral dissent, and to do the hard work of coalition building in a society that is fractured and polarized.

These books, and conversation about them, have taught me that racism and racist economic, political and social systems just keep coming back. We can fight the forms they take, and they morph into new forms.

When African Americans first came to this country, it was against their will, and they were sold and held as slaves. Slavery existed for well over two hundred years until President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation and the thirteenth Amendment freed them. Reconstruction followed, where a Republican Congress removed civilian governments in the South, and placed the former Confederacy under the rule of the U.S. Army. The army conducted new elections in which the freed slaves could vote. Reconstruction programs included funding public schools, establishing charitable institutions, raising taxes, and offering massive aid to support improved railroad transportation and shipping.

The Reconstruction Era only lasted some fifteen years, ending when the removal of the U.S. Army led to the collapse of the Republican governments. Very quickly, white state legislatures enacted Jim Crow laws, disenfranchising most blacks and imposing a system of white supremacy and second-class citizenship for blacks. They were aided by the Ku Klux Klan, a secret organization that used violence to maintain white supremacy.

These Jim Crow laws held until the Civil Rights era of the 1950's and '60's, which has been called the Second Reconstruction. What I have been learning is that soon after the reforms of the Civil Rights movement gave some rights to African American citizens, new systems began to be created to take those rights away. These systems are what Alexander calls "the new Jim Crow."

She starts her book with an example: "Jarvious Cotton cannot vote. Like his father, grandfather great-grandfather and great-great-grandfather, he has been denied the right to participate in our

electoral democracy. . . . Cotton's great-great-grandfather could not vote as a slave. His great-grandfather was beaten to death by the Ku Klux Klan for attempting to vote. His grandfather was prevented from voting by Klan intimidation. His father was barred from voting by poll taxes and literacy tests. Today, Jarvious Cotton cannot vote because he, like many black men in the United States, has been labeled a felon and is currently on parole." (p. 1)

After the Civil Rights era, people could no longer admit to blatant racist policies or attitudes. Yet white people who had a need and a desire to keep blacks from gaining power or even equality found a way to do it. They found it in a clause of the 13th Amendment, which reads: "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction."

"Except as a punishment for crime." This is the clause they latched onto. The Drug War and the War on Crime were launched, and they targeted communities of color.

John Ehrlichman, an aide to Richard Nixon admitted it outright. He said, "The Nixon campaign in 1968, and the Nixon White House after that, had two enemies: the antiwar left and black people. You understand what I'm saying? We knew we couldn't make it illegal to be either against the war or black, but by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and blacks with heroin, and then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those communities. We could arrest their leaders, raid their homes, break up their meetings, and vilify them night after night on the evening news. Did we know we were lying about the drugs? Of course we did." (handout for 13th movie discussion)

The War on Drugs really got going under the Reagan Administration in the 1980's. Laws were enacted to "grant police the discretion and authority to stop, interrogate, and search anyone, anywhere." And prosecutors were given extraordinary discretion, while judges discretion was limited with mandatory sentencing laws. Police were given financial incentives to make drug arrests. Under the Byrne program, millions of dollars in federal aid have been offered to state and local law enforcement agencies to wage the war. Besides the cash, federal programs have offered equipment and training. Police are also allowed to keep material goods taken in a drug raid.

It is a fact that whites use drugs just as much as blacks do, yet the arrests of blacks for drug violations far outnumber those of whites. One way this is achieved is by making the penalties much stronger for crack cocaine—a cheaper, smokable form of the drug used by blacks—than for the powder cocaine preferred by whites. You can get the same sentence for selling only five grams of crack as you do for selling five hundred grams of powder cocaine.

We send people, predominantly young black men, to prison for extraordinarily long sentences for non-violent crimes. We sentence them to death. We pressure them into confessing to crimes even when they're innocent. We send children to life in prison without parole. We have flooded our prisons, and we keep building more. We let private companies run them, who are financially motivated to keep them full. And once people have been convicted of a crime, if they ever get out of prison, they have no rights, no opportunities, no life.

As Stevenson says, “We have created a new caste system that forces thousands of people into homelessness, bans them from living with their families and in their communities, and renders them virtually unemployable. Some states permanently strip people with criminal convictions of the right to vote.” (p. 16) Disenfranchisement of African American men in the south has reached levels like those before the Voting Rights Act. And now states are enacting laws to restrict voting by poor and minorities,

We need to turn this ship around. This is unacceptable.

It is time for a Third Reconstruction, as Barber puts it. He has been leading a coalition movement in North Carolina, called Moral Mondays, because they show up at the Statehouse on Mondays when the legislature is in session, and their movement has a moral framework. The movement has become so successful that Barber has been asked to come to other states to help them start such a movement. When I was in Atlanta, I participated in a Moral Monday at the State Capitol. Rev. Dr. Barber led a rally at our UUA General Assembly this past June, and he was inspiring.

Similar coalition movements are popping up all over. Barber says, “If we refuse to be divided by fear and continue pushing forward together, I have no doubt that these nascent movements will swell into a Third Reconstruction to push America toward our truest hope of a “more perfect union” where peace is established through justice, not fear.” (p. 122)

I admit to feeling fear about our political climate right now. I am afraid of what is going to happen when a new president takes office, and everything we have set up to protect the American people from big business interests, from racism and bigotry becomes threatened. I am afraid, and yet I know I need to not act from fear. Acting from fear does not lead to justice.

Barber says: “My son is an environmental physicist, and every now and then he tells me things about nature. And he told me one day, he said, “Daddy, if you ever get lost in mountainous territory and you have to walk out, don’t walk out through the valley, but climb up the mountain, to higher ground.””

I said, “Why must I climb up the mountain to higher ground?”

He said, “Daddy, snakes live in the lowland. But if you go up the mountain there’s something in biology and environmental studies called a snake line. Snakes can’t live above it. Because they asphyxiate. They suffocate. They’re cold blooded animals and they die.”

We need to take our politics to higher ground. Stay above the snake line. Because there are snakes out there. Snakes who have taken away important gains from the Civil Rights movement. Snakes who want to take away even more, because they are afraid.

We have to go to higher ground. We have to end the racist structures in law enforcement and the courts. We have to give everyone equal opportunities to succeed.

Martin Luther King, Jr. had a dream. We, too, have dreams; dreams of justice for all. May our dreams of justice come true.