

Changing Lanes Without Signaling¹

Rev. Myke Johnson

October 11, 2015

Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church

What does love look like? Love means to grieve with those who grieve, rejoice with those who rejoice, mourn with those who mourn, and stand with those who stand against unfairness. Today our service will explore the Black Lives Matter movement. We begin with a beautiful piece of music created by Ysaye Barnwell, an African American woman who is part of the music group *Sweet Honey in the Rock*, and who has been working for racial justice all of her life. The song is a beautiful testimony to the dignity of each child that's born into our world.

Song We Are “For each child that's born, a morning star rises...”

Lesson For All Ages

Alicia Garva

Who knows what a hashtag is? (on poster-#)

It is symbol used on Twitter and other internet social media to have a conversation about a topic. You can search for a topic by using a hashtag.

I want to tell you a story about a woman named Alicia Garva, who with her friends created the hashtag and the movement called #blacklivesmatter (*other side of poster-#blacklivesmatter*)

Alicia heard a story on the news about two and a half years ago about an African-American teenager named Trayvon Martin. Have any of you heard of Trayvon Martin? He was a high school student, and was going to the store to get some juice and Skittles. On his way home, a man saw him walking and thought he looked like a gangster because he was wearing a hoodie. The man started following him and phoned the police. Trayvon was scared, and said “Why are you following me?” It is hard to know what happened next, but the man had a gun and he shot Trayvon, and Trayvon died.

When Alicia heard this story, she was very sad. How would you feel if you heard about someone being killed when they were walking home from the store?

Later, the man was put on trial for killing Trayvon, but the jury said he was not guilty. Then Alicia felt very sad and angry. It felt to her like the jury was saying that it didn't matter that Trayvon was killed. And Alicia thought about all the young black men who had been killed in our country—because there had been very many—and how it seemed like their lives didn't matter to other people.

She and her friends wanted to do something, they wanted to speak out about it, so they created a hashtag on Twitter with the words, #blacklivesmatter. Other people started sharing that hashtag on their posts too. It went all over the internet.

Then, when another black person was killed, this time by a policeman, they spread the word again, and didn't just talk about it on the Internet. They showed up with posters for a protest to let people know that this person's life mattered too—his name was Michael Brown. There were hundreds of people, even thousands all across America, who joined in protests and vigils for Michael Brown. We had a vigil here in Portland, too.

¹ Copyright 2015 by Rev. Myke Johnson. Permission must be requested to reprint for other than personal use.

Each time another African American's life was taken by violence, they spoke up again, by marching and blogging and gathering their friends to say, "black lives matter." Alicia is an organizer who wants to make the world a better place. She teaches us that we can stand up for people who are suffering, and make a difference.

As Unitarian Universalist's our first principle states that every person has inherent worth and dignity. That means we believe that every person is special, every person's life matters. Someone asked Alicia, why do you say, black lives matter? Why don't you say "All lives matter"?

Alicia answered, "Of course all lives matter. But we live in a society where black lives are systematically de-valued and in fact targeted for destruction... So if we really want to build a world where all lives matter, then it means we will fight [right now] for black lives."²

Alicia believes if we can make our country better for black people, it will be better for everyone. In other words, if anyone's life is being disrespected, or if violence is happening to any group of people because of the color of their skin, or their sexual identity, or their legal status, our values tell us to stand up and support that person's life, and that group. If all people care about what happens, we can make a difference. Many UU's all over the country are standing up to support the black lives matter movement. What do you think we could do here in Portland? (*congregational conversation*)

Reading: Excerpt from *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates³
Published in mid-July, Between the World and Me is written in the form of a letter from Ta-Nehisi Coates to his 15-year-old son on how to survive in a black body in a country founded on the brutalization of black bodies.

I write you in your 15th year. I am writing you because this was the year you saw Eric Garner choked to death for selling cigarettes; because you know now that Renisha McBride was shot for seeking help, that John Crawford was shot down for browsing in a department store. And you have seen men in uniform murder Tamir Rice, an eleven-year old they were bound to protect... And you know now, if you did not before, that the police departments of your country have been endowed with the authority to destroy your body. It does not matter if the destruction is the result of an unfortunate overreaction. It does not matter if it originates in a misunderstanding. It does not matter if the destruction springs from a foolish policy. Sell cigarettes without the proper authority and your body can be destroyed. Resent the people trying to entrap your body and it can be destroyed. Turn into a dark stairwell and your body can be destroyed. The destroyers will rarely be held accountable. Mostly they will receive pensions. And destruction is merely the superlative form of a dominion whose prerogatives include friskings, detainings, beatings, and humiliations. All of this is common to black people. And all of this is old for black people. No one is held responsible...

[When] you learned that the killers of Michael Brown would go free, ... you went into your room, and I heard you crying. I came in five minutes after, and I didn't hug you, and I didn't comfort you, because I thought it would be wrong to comfort you. I did not tell you that it would be okay, because I have never believed it would be okay. What I told you is what your grandparents tried to tell me: that this is your country, that this is your world, that this is your body, and you must find some way to live within the all of it.

2 Interview on KPBS News February 27, 2015 at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4J02x0pLMZ4>

3 Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*, (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015) p. 9-11.

Sermon

This past summer, a young African American woman named Sandra Bland was about to start a new job at her alma mater, Prairie View A & M University near Hempstead Texas. On July 10, she was pulled over by policeman, Brian Encinia, for changing lanes without signaling. The interaction began to heat up when Encinia told Bland to put out her cigarette. Bland replied, “Why do I have to put out a cigarette when I’m in my own car?” Encinia began saying “Get out of the car!” and repeated it multiple times shouting louder and louder. When she kept asking why, he threatened to taser her, then physically pulled her from the car, threw her to the ground, and brought her to jail.

Three days later, Sandra Bland was found dead in her jail cell. Authorities ruled it a suicide, but her family questioned that determination. Some commentators have remarked that she had epilepsy, and speculated that the cause of death might have been an epileptic seizure brought on by a head injury, but then covered up by a staged suicide.⁴ Others have pointed out that even if she did commit suicide, her death was still caused by racism, by a system that was set up to destroy black bodies. How many white people would have been pulled over for changing lanes without signaling? And if pulled over, how many of those minor traffic offenses would have escalated into an arrest?

During the past few years, I have grieved the killings of unarmed black people by police or vigilantes, often brought to our attention through the Black Lives Matter movement. I have stood with the NAACP in Portland for Trayvon Martin and for Michael Brown. But something about Sandra Bland’s story broke my heart. Her innocent journey to start a new job, her bright spirit. It brought to light a reality often hidden in the shadows: no black person is truly safe anywhere.

Her arrest was captured on video by a bystander, and the video on the camera of the police car was also released. It was eerie to watch the footage, to hear her voice and see her still alive, interacting with the policeman. At first it seemed so ordinary a conversation. But then everything shifted, exploded. Some have said she should have been more obedient, done whatever Encinia told her to do. But others see a woman, an activist, standing up for her legal rights. And what right does a policeman have to pull someone from their car, threaten to “light her up”, throw her to the ground, all for a minor traffic violation?

Sandra Bland knew about the Black Lives Matter movement. She had publicized instances of police brutality on her Facebook page. She knew that even people who had fully cooperated with police had been killed. She knew about the fear of living in a black body. A week later, as I passed the flashing lights of a pulled over car, I remembered Sandra and felt an unfamiliar shudder in my gut. Was someone else feeling the terror she must have been feeling?

Soon after I learned about Sandra Bland I started reading Ta-Nehisi Coates’ powerful book, *Between the World and Me*. He paints a picture of the soul-shattering fear that permeates the experience of living in a black body in America, a body that is constantly vulnerable to assault, to capture, to torture, to destruction, to death. He writes: “Here is what I would like for you to know: In America, it is traditional to destroy the black body — it is heritage.”⁵ His words struck me to the core.

4 <http://www.easternecho.com/article/2015/10/emu-continues-sandra-bland-investigation>

5 Coates, p. 103.

As a white child, I grew up with a basic feeling of safety. I belonged to a working class family in Michigan, living in suburban Detroit for the most part, raised to believe that "all people are the children of God." It was a mostly all-white community where racial violence was something that appeared only on our television screen. It was a liberal white world aspiring to be "colorblind." Coates calls it a kind of "Dream," the place where white America lives as if asleep, unaware that it is built on the violence against black bodies.

I was asleep like that all through my childhood. As a young adult I began to wake up. For me, it began when I questioned the mixed messages I received as a woman about safety and violence. "Don't go out at night." "Don't talk to strangers." "Don't dress to draw attention to your body." I did not experience violence to my own body, only this constant threat and fear of it. But here was the paradox. A woman—a white woman at least—could "feel" safe if she stayed "asleep." It was only upon waking that the fear undergirding my own life became visible, and I could see how this promised safety was an illusion.

Once that illusion was shattered, I began to wake up to other horrible realities underneath the dream of America—the theft of the land and genocide of Indigenous peoples, the slavery and destruction of Black people. Racism began to be visible to me, though so much still remained hidden. Layer upon layer, I kept being surprised again and again at the horror of it, the extent of it, the insidious forms it takes, the interlocking systems that perpetuate it. I began to understand that we all are implicated, that no one can escape the systems in which whiteness benefits those who are understood to be white, and devastates those understood to be not white.

Even so, this knowledge is uncomfortable. If we are white, we can choose to go back to sleep for a while, we can take a break, not think about it. The Black Lives Matter movement has been trying to interrupt that sleepiness, that desire to look away. Through videos and social media, marches and public protests, ordinary people have been exposing the violence as it happens, calling out the names of those who are killed, cherishing them, remembering them.

While the public sphere was exploding with controversy over Black Lives Matter, Ta-Nehisi Coates created a brilliant window into what it feels like in a very personal way. He describes his own terror when he was stopped by police while driving; his shaky relief when he was let go. Three months later, a short time after the birth of his son, he learns that his college classmate was killed by someone in the same police force.

I want to tell you some of that story, the story of his friend, Prince. Prince Jones was a success story in every sense of the word. His mother was a physician who had worked her way out of poverty, to provide a solid middle class life for her children. Prince had every advantage her wealth and position could buy. He could have gone to Harvard, but chose to attend the historically black Howard University.

On this particular night, he was traveling to his fiancé's house, where he too, had a young child. A policeman in plainclothes, dressed incognito like a drug dealer, following him across three jurisdictions, claiming he mistook him for a suspect to whom he bore no resemblance save the color of his skin. Just a short distance from his fiancé's house, Prince was shot and killed by the policeman, who later claimed that Prince had tried to run him down with his Jeep.

It is a complicated story. The man who killed Prince was a black officer in a notoriously violent and abusive police force. The government officials who failed to hold him accountable for this death of an innocent man were also black. It was not the racist prejudice of one single individual that Coates felt a need to understand. Rather, he was trying to make sense of an entire system that has devalued and destroyed black lives throughout its history, beginning with two hundred and fifty years of slavery, and continuing through Jim Crow and segregation, all the way into mass incarceration and police brutality.

Coates could not find comfort in imagining that Prince was in a better place, or that his death would help to bring about a better world. He was grieving and angry about the horror of this one person's death, this unique in all the world human being who was no more. This “morning star rising” and “grandmother's dreaming” person whose life had come to an end.

He writes:

Prince Jones was the superlative of all my fears. And if he, good Christian scion of a striving class, patron saint of the twice as good, could be forever bound, who then could not?

And the plunder was not just of Prince alone. Think of all the love poured into him. Think of the tuitions for Montessori and music lessons. Think of the gasoline expended, the treads worn carting him to football games, basketball tournaments, and Little League. Think of the time spent regulating sleepovers. Think of the surprise birthday parties, the daycare, and the reference checks on babysitters. ... Think of checks written for family photos. Think of credit cards charged for family vacations. Think of soccer balls, science kits, chemistry set, racetracks, and model trains. Think of all the embraces, all the private jokes, customs, greetings, names, dreams, all the shared knowledge and capacity of a black family injected into that vessel of flesh and bone. And think of how that vessel was taken, shattered on the concrete, and all its holy contents, all that had gone into him, sent flowing back to the earth.⁶

Coates was devastated by his friend's death, and by what it meant about our society, and what it meant for his own son, whom he could not protect, no matter how much he might love him and work for him and strive for his safety.

Reading his words, my heart broke open again. This is our society, this society that requires of Coates that he live with this constant fear and vulnerability in his body. This is our society, that has built its beautiful dream of freedom and prosperity upon the disposability of black lives.

What does this mean for me, as a white person? What does this mean for us as Unitarian Universalists? Do we have the courage to wake up from the dream? To look reality in the face, and weep with those who weep, stand with those who stand? It is not easy to wake up, or to stay awake. There is loneliness in it, a separation from the mainstream America which is defined by the Dream. It can mean a separation from family and friends.

⁶ Coates, p. 81.

Coates says, “The Dreamers will have to learn to struggle themselves, to understand that the field for their Dream, the stage where they have painted themselves white, is the deathbed of us all. The Dream is the same habit that endangers the planet, the same habit that sees our bodies stowed away in prisons and ghettos.”⁷

I often don't have a clue about how to create change, or make things any better. But I believe that if we stay asleep we will never find transformation, and we will propel ourselves toward planetary suicide. We have to wake up to reality, honor and bear its pain, before any change can happen.

I remember that one definition of compassion is a fearlessness toward the pain of the world—a willingness to suffer with those who suffer. Compassion is the willingness to listen even when what we hear is painful or discomfoting. It is simple, even when it doesn't seem easy to do. So often, we would rather fix what is wrong, or give advice, or change the subject. But what is most needed is to listen, just listen.

The Black Lives Matter movement is trying to wake people up. If you were sound asleep at two a.m. and suddenly someone was shouting in your ear, shaking you by the shoulders, you might react with anger and irritation. No one likes being disturbed from a sound sleep. And just so, many in our nation have been irritated and angry about Black Lives Matter.

But if the voice in your ear said—your house is on fire—your feelings would race from anger to fear to action to gratitude. You would be glad someone took the time to wake you up and save your life. And if the voice in your ear was your brother, suffering a heart attack and hoping you would call 911, you would be glad he woke you up to help save his life.

The thing is, the Dream we are sleeping in has painted a picture in which some of us are white and some of us are black or brown or painted as unworthy in other ways. But in reality, awake, we are all one people. And our one world is in trouble.

I hope we will listen to the voices that are trying to get our attention. I hope we will listen with compassion and recognition. Read Ta-Nehisi Coates' book. Explore the Black Lives Matter messages. And I hope that if we all wake up, we can find our way into a livable future, a future that does not depend on the destruction of some lives, but cherishes the beauty in each being on this planet we call home.

Silent Meditation

African American UU, Kenny Wiley, has written:
Guided by that enduring, unfulfilled promise
of the belief in the inherent worth and dignity of every person,
ours is a faith that has said, or worked to say
to those who have been marginalized:

You are a woman, and your life matters.

You are gay or lesbian, and your life matters.

You are transgender, and your life matters.

⁷ Coates, p. 151.

You are bisexual, and your life matters.
You have a disability, and your life matters.
You were not loved as a child, and your life matters.
You struggle with depression, and your life matters.

Right now we are being called—
by our ancestors, by our principles, by young black activists across the country—
to promote and affirm:

You are young and black, and your life matters.
You stole something, and your life matters.
I have been taught to fear you, and your life matters.
The police are releasing your criminal record, and your life matters.
They are calling you a thug, and your life matters.

Our ancestors, principles, and fellow humans are calling on us
to promote and affirm, with deeds and words: Black lives matter.⁸

Closing Words

What does love look like?
Love means to grieve with those who grieve, and mourn with those who mourn.
Love means to show up with those who show up against unfairness and hate.
Let us go forth in love.
As we extinguish the flame of this chalice,
let each of us carry its light into every day of our lives.

⁸ <http://www.uua.org/worship/words/reading/your-life-matters>