

Human Dignity
January 17, 2010

It may be a stretch, but I'm going to ask you to imagine me as a 24-year old chaplain-in-training at the largest Mental Health facility in the nation, St. Elizabeth's Hospital in Washington, D.C. The year was 1973, the Black Muslim movement had completely overtaken the District of Columbia, and the nurses and mental health workers at St. Elizabeth's were not only predominantly black, but also ascribed to the militarism of the Muslim influence. It was a hostile environment.

Of the 4000 in-patient population, 99% were African Americans. Of the 30 chaplains in training, 29 were white. I was paired off with Mason, the only black chaplain, and a large and imposing figure preparing for the Baptist ministry at Yale Divinity School. We were competitive about the virtues and failings of each other's theological schools; all in good nature and we ended up not only spending time on the wards together, but our days off as well.

The lines between psychiatry and religion were clearly delineated at the hospital. For example, if a patient suffered from low self-esteem it was an issue for psychiatry. If a patient felt low self-esteem because he or she had fallen out of God's good graces, the chaplains took over.

You cannot imagine the surprise when one day a psychiatrist invited Mason and me in on a consultation with a young black woman with whom he reached a very unsatisfying impasse. She was virtually catatonic, and the psychiatrist hoped that Mason and I could break the impasse because despite all his best skills and methodologies, he got nowhere. After making another unsuccessful attempt to reach this woman in our presence, he threw up his hands totally exasperated and said: "You try."

I was not about to jump in. Mason uttered the first words. He looked at the woman and said: "You're very black. How many brothers and sisters you got?" She spoke. "Eight," she said.

Mason responded: "I bet you're the blackest of them all." She shook her head yes. Mason continued: "You feel like the black sheep of the family, don't you?" She shook her head yes, again. (The psychiatrist was stunned and very quiet). Mason launched into a tirade, or was it a sermon, about being black, shades of skin color, and feeling pride about whatever shade of skin blessed your existence. All I remember are a few things: Her tears, her call and response saying "yes sir," a whole lot, her affirmative nod when he asked her if she was ready to go home, and her negative nod when he asked her, breaking every rule in the book and all hospital protocol...when he asked her: "Am I ever going to see your black ass here again?" (No sir). I followed Mason out of the consulting room, breathless. She was discharged from the hospital the next day.

The past week has produced an uproar over Senator Harry Reid's prediction in a 2008 book about the presidential race in which he was quoted as saying that 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." Reid apologized saying he regretted such a poor choice of words, but I'm not sure there were any other words he could have used to express that message, namely that shades of skin color do matter. And the lighter the skin, the less difficult to fit into white America's understanding of acceptability.

Harry Reid is no racist, perhaps because we have come to view racism (erroneously) as something from the past. He is no Jim Crow, no Strom Thurmond, and no segregationist. But apparently the dignity of a human being still resides with the lightness or darkness of skin color...at least as criteria for becoming president. Reid's remark is really no different from that of the great choreographer, George Balanchine who maintained that a ballerina's skin should be the color of a peeled apple. That, too, is not racist, as we conveniently want to define racism. It's just that culturally, ballerinas are expected to be white... like presidents.

Langston Hughes' parents were both of mixed races. Both his great-grandmothers were black and both his great grandfathers were white; one was Scottish and the other Jewish. Here's a short poem by Langston Hughes called *The Cross*:

My old man's a white old man
And my old mother's black.
If I ever cursed my white old man
I take my curses back.
If I ever cursed my black old mother
And wished she were in hell,
I'm sorry for that evil wish
And now I wish her well.
My old man died in a fine big house,
My ma died in a shack.
I wonder where I'm going to die,
Being neither white nor black

He wrote in a 1926 essay that appeared in *The Nation* magazine: "We younger Negro artists now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they aren't, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too...If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, as strong as we know how and we stand on the top of the mountain, free within ourselves."

Isn't that what human dignity really means? To stand on top of the mountain feeling free within oneself. Black, white, and all the shades in between do not matter. If

you're pleased with who I am, well, fine. If you are not pleased, it really doesn't matter.

We all know the Rosa Parks story which began the bus boycott in 1955 in Montgomery, AL. Parks refused to give up her seat to a white person on a city bus, and the rest is history. But just now it has come to light that a young woman named Claudette Colvin refused to give up her seat to a white person nine months before Rosa Parks in the same city of Montgomery.

Claudette Colvin's story is out now in the book, *Twice Toward Justice*, in which she describes what it felt like not giving up her seat as demanded by the bus driver. She addresses some of the indignities blacks encountered at that time like not being permitted to try on clothing. She said, "You had to take a bag and draw a diagram of your foot...and take it to the store." When she was asked to give up her seat she said it was like Sojourner Truth was pushing down on one side of her and Harriet Tubman was pushing her down on the other.

She was hauled off the bus, handcuffed, and thrown into jail. But nobody really knows about her and everyone knows about Rosa Parks: Same city, same bus system. The book, written by Phil Hoose, identified certain reasons why Rosa Parks became the icon for the NAACP and other black organizations: Parks was an adult and Colvin just a high school teenager. But also because Parks had the right hair, the right skin texture, the right looks for white middle class America to identify in.

It makes you think real hard about human dignity, and the factors for being accepted by a society in which the predominant race establishes the standards. Alice Walker may have written in the *Color Purple*: "Everything has equal rights because existence itself is equal." But explain that to black young adults profiled in the New York Times just last month:

- Tahani Tomkins was struggling to get callbacks for job interviews in the Chicago area this year when a friend made a suggestion: Change your name. Instead of Tahni, a distinctively African-American-sounding name, she began going by T.S. Tompkins.
- Yvonne Orr, also searching for work in Chicago, removed her bachelor's degree from Hampton University, a historically black college, leaving just her master's degree from Spertus Institution, a Jewish school.

This is all referred to as "whitening the resume." People of color are hiding their racial identity, or at least dialing back the level of blackness signaled in their resume. This takes a psychic toll and is in tension with the blackness that has been celebrated in the Black Power movement and black pride movement a generation ago. By whitening their resumes these days, what message are they sending? What are they saying about their own dignity?

A law professor from NYU has written a book called *Covering*, in which he states: Progress in hiring has meant that the line originally between whites and nonwhites, favored whites; now it's whites and nonwhites who are willing to act white."

Eric Holder, our nation's Attorney General and whom many would point to as light-skinned, said in a speech, "Though this nation has proudly thought itself as an ethnic melting pot, in things racial we have always been, and continue to be, in too many ways, essentially a nation of cowards."

I believe that what Mr. Holder means by our cowardice is that we may shun overt racism and claim it's not a part of our culture or even ourselves, but racism is present today in subtler manifestations. We prefer not making it part of public discourse because it remains so nefarious in its permeation into society that we would have to indict ourselves as guilty of racism. Preserving human dignity remains a major issue for people of color in this country.

What is human dignity? Certainly harder to define than our values for our church's mission statement. I defer to an image raised by former UUA president and later executive director of Amnesty International, Bill Schulz, when he visited the Kalma Refugee Camp in southern Darfur. There were 90,000 people who had been burned out of their villages. Many witnessed their men folk murdered and the women raped and battered. But there was one woman amid the utter squalor and degradation of the refugee camp, her clothes were tattered and falling off her, but she wore around her neck a lovely piece of jewelry – just glass, no doubt, but a turquoise-colored glass that sparkled constantly in the relentless sun.

Schulz said he first thought it was a religious symbol, and asked the Arabic-speaking translator to ask her what it was. "She says, 'it's me,'" said the translator. Not clear, thinking the translator got it wrong and that the woman really said, "It belongs to me," Schulz asked: "Did she say it belongs to her?" "No," he said definitively, "She said, 'It is me.'" And then suddenly it became crystal clear.

This piece of jewelry, this small sparkling piece of glass around my neck...this is me. This is how I know that though I am mere brute, flesh, bone, water, swollen tongue, excrement-stained thighs, my most private parts exposed for all to see, that though I am brute flesh right now in this horrific camp, I am not just that. I retain a tiny hint of my humanity. I require bread to live, yes. So do the cows, goats, sheep, pigs – bless them all. But none of them decorate themselves with turquoise glass; only humans do that. I am a human being. I have dignity.

I raise all of this today because Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. believed in the dignity of all people at a time when color made the difference of being served at a lunch counter or giving up one's seat on a bus. Dignity applied to those who were hosed down by police, beaten, jailed, and frightened by dogs. Dignity applied to those who were denied justice and who were lynched. Dignity applied to those who received

inferior education, drank from separate water fountains, and barred from professional sports.

Dignity is the truth about oneself. It could be a black poet who refuses to court favor with a white readership. It could be an unemployed professional who refuses to whiten his or her resume. It could be a person in a refuge camp holding on to a piece of beauty she identifies as herself.

Obama was presidential timber not because of his light black skin or because he could speak white. Harry Reid knows that to be true, but he still played into an old form of racism where the closer one is to whiteness the better your chances of success. Even if it means surrendering your dignity.

Surrendering dignity means surrendering the freedom to be you. Not many of us have had to face this crossroad in our lives: Either conform to the rules and perceptions of those who hold power, or know the truth about yourself and honor it.

The first principle of our Unitarian Universalist seven principles is that we affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of all people. It's a huge task. We cannot take it lightly because racism, in its less overt form than a few decades ago, still robs people of their dignity. Try being black in today's job market. Try being a black Harvard professor entering his elegant home in Cambridge, MA. Or try walking in the shoes of a certain wise Latina woman. Or being an immigrant picked up by ICE. Or being anyone whose skin is not as white as yours. In racism you are not just deprived of justice, you are robbed of human dignity. Dignity. Until America's white population can grasp the complexities of dignity, we will never lose the oppression of a racist society. White America still fails to understand the true meaning of freedom. To Dr. King we say "thank you for your sacrifice 41 years ago." To ourselves we say today: we have yet a long way to go before we're "free at last."