

Words for meditation

President Barack Obama – Farewell Speech

...”If we're going to be serious about race going forward.... Hearts must change. It won't change overnight. Social attitudes oftentimes take generations to change. But if our democracy is to work in this increasingly diverse nation, then each one of us need to try to heed the advice of a great character in American fiction — Atticus Finch — who said “You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view...until you climb into his skin and walk around in it.”

For blacks and other minority groups, it means tying our own very real struggles for justice to the challenges that a lot of people in this country face — not only the refugee, or the immigrant, or the rural poor, or the transgender American, but also the middle-aged white guy....”

For white Americans, it means acknowledging that the effects of slavery and Jim Crow didn't suddenly vanish in the '60s; that when minority groups voice discontent, they're not just engaging in reverse racism or practicing political correctness. When they wage peaceful protest, they're not demanding special treatment but the equal treatment that our Founders promised.

For native-born Americans, it means reminding ourselves that the stereotypes about immigrants today were said, almost word for word, about the Irish, and Italians, and Poles — who it was said we're going to destroy the fundamental character of America.

And as it turned out, America wasn't weakened by the presence of these newcomers; these newcomers embraced this nation's creed, and this nation was strengthened.

So regardless of the station that we occupy, we all have to try harder. We all have to start with the premise that each of our fellow citizens loves this country just as much as we do; that they value hard work and family just like we do; that their children are just as curious and hopeful and worthy of love as our own.

“We begin again.” Sermon

When President Obama quoted Atticus Finch in his Farewell Speech last week, it brought to mind a moment in my own life when I realized that the difference between me and a playmate was more than just skin deep.

Mae was a little black girl I played with when I visited my grandmother in eastern North Carolina for two weeks every summer. She and her family lived in a two-room sharecropper’s shack across the road from Grandmother’s country store.

I remember that Mae and I had to do “Her” chores before we could play every day. We fed the chickens and collected eggs, hung her Mama’s wash out on a clothesline that stretched between the back corner of the house and a big old poplar tree in back of the house. That tree was a gathering place at the end of the day for the black men and women who worked on the farms around Scotland Neck, NC.

Anyway, with our work finished Mae and I would tear off into a nearby pine forest for whatever adventure our minds could conjure. We’d be lost in our imaginary world for hours until either the heat got too much or our stomachs got too hollow. Mae’s Mom would inevitably have cold peas or beans and cornbread waiting on us when we got back, but she would make us wash off in a great old aluminum tub out in the yard under that tree.

It was pretty much same every summer until the day that Mae and I came in from the woods to find her mother slaughtering one of the big white chickens we had fed just that morning. She had cut off its head and hung it upside down on the clothesline by its feet so the blood would drain out. And she was busy plucking its feathers. The sight stopped me dead in my tracks.

I was a town girl and I had never seen anything like it. I looked at Mae who was busy washing herself off in the tub and I could not understand why she wasn’t upset. It made me so mad that I just turned around and ran home to my grandmother’s. I went to her bathroom, slammed the door, and sat down on the toilet to fume. (I was a bit of drama queen as a child.)

By the time I was ready to come out, Mae’s mama was in the store explaining to grandmother that “I b’lieve I’ve done upset that child. She saw that dead chicken and turned white as a sheet. I’m so sorry.”

I was angry – not at Mae’s Mother – but at Mae! My friend. Whenever we played together after that, it was never the same for me. It was then that I began to understand that Mae and I were not the same. In grownup terms, I discovered that she had a very different world view than I. Until that point, there was never any real difference between Mae and me. Oh, we looked different and I knew that she was poorer than me, but when we played none of that mattered.

There have been so many times in my life when I’ve needed to step into Mae’s skin and walk around a bit; times when I’ve needed to look out into the world through her eyes.

Because as a Southern woman, I have to keep working to get it right. I have to keep reminding myself to remember that colored people – and I don't use that word lightly – do not know the privileges that I have had as a white woman living in America.

I am talking about those men and women and children whose skins are colored black or brown or red – it does not matter their economic station in life, our Biblical heritage and our faith tradition teaches us that we must love and respect them. All the little children of the world, red and yellow, black and white, Jesus loves the little children of the world.

John wrote in his Gospel that Jesus gave this commandment to his disciples: "Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another." No matter what your religious beliefs, I think this is the core of what it means for each of us to fully realize what it truly means to be human.

President Obama threw an interesting curve into the mix during his farewell address; he explained that climbing into another's skin:

"For blacks and other minority groups, it means tying "our" own very real struggles for justice to the challenges that a lot of people in this country face — not only the refugee, or the immigrant, or the rural poor, or the transgender American, but also the middle-aged white guy...."

Okay, I have to admit to a moments pause on that one. I mean these are the same guys who elected that-crazy- guy- to-the-next pre.....? Woo, that's a tough one.

I know these guys. And I know you do too. The mind wants to go to certain stereotypes; but honestly, they are for the most part ordinary people. Many are hard-working men – and women – who've been down-sided from middle management; who've lost their family farms; who've seen their skilled factory jobs disappear; jobs that generations of their families have worked gone. I read an article the other day about how women in these situations have had a better time of learning new skills to move on but white middle-aged men have not fared so well.

And they are scared. And they voted that way in that last election. Granted that is not enough to explain the ultimate outcome, but in reality one campaign did a better job of tapping into that fear than the other. But they are not the only ones who are afraid.

There is a boat-load of people in this country that are scared about what their future might hold. And too often terrible, terrible things happen as a consequence.

I was talking to my former step-daughter – who is an American Baptist preacher in Charlotte – and she was telling me about how she and other clergy members participated in the nightly protests that followed the September 20 police shooting of a black man who some argued was unarmed. As we drove through uptown Charlotte, she described the route the marchers took walking block after block with heavily armed National Guard soldiers standing on every corner.

On one particular night, she described how the Guard cruised up and down the streets in armored Humvees; she told me about how the Charlotte police got into “formation in the street facing the protestors. They held their shields before them and charged the group. [Friends] who’d been there on the previous Wednesday said this is exactly what led to earlier riot. On that day, when charged by a row of police in riot gear, the protestors responded in kind.

On all subsequent nights—and this went on for over a week – the marchers walked quietly and peacefully. And, yet city and state officials ordered an increased show of force. At one city intersection, LeDayne said they had the National Guard, police officers on bikes, swarms of riot police with helmets and shields, and two busloads of police officers with batons drawn. When confronted with this overwhelming show of force, about one hundred marchers escorted by 20 local clergy in the stoles – simply stopped.

LeDayne said the ministers were there to bear witness – to walk along side and follow in the footsteps of the marchers. She told me it was a scary experience hearing helicopters droned overhead, seeing blue lights flashing and sirens wailing in every direction.

And then one night the news came that the Klan had put out a call for its members to show up in force – their web site containing obscenities and the menacing suggestion, “You know what to do.”

I have known LeDayne since she was five years old and she is today one of the bravest women I know. She has gone into small villages all over Mexico, Cuba and Central America to serve the poor. She spent months in Louisiana following Katrina helping black preachers rebuild the churches and serving their communities. This woman is made of tough stuff. And yet walking down the streets of the city she loves, she was so scared.

She told me about a colleague who went home and wept in the lap of her mother following what she called the longest sermon of her life about the marches. She cried for herself, for the marchers and for her brother who is a Charlotte police officer.

Think about it, it must have been just as scary for those men and women in uniform who had been ordered to be there – who were ordered to confront and show force to the marchers.

The work of change is not easy stuff. It is the pushing back against paralyzing fear. It asks of us to exert resistance to our own limitations and inadequacies. I cannot possibly know what it was like for Mae to grown up as a black woman in the tobacco fields of eastern North Carolina. There is no way that I can feel the utter embodiment of human loss that her people have suffered.

In his Ware Lecture at the 2015 UUA General Assembly, Cornell West admitted that even though he was a Jesus-loving, free black man, “When [he] looks in the depths of [his] soul [he] sees white supremacy because [he] grew up in America. And if there’s white supremacy in [him], “ he admonishes, “ the rest of you have got some work to do.”

We all have work to do. And, "It is time [today] for the work to begin - again." (Howard Thurmond) With the beginning of this new year, with the beginning of this new...political era; with each new day and in every new moment, we begin again. We learn from the past but we move forward and as Unitarian Universalists we begin with the affirmation of the worth and dignity of every person, including middle-aged, white guys.

We begin by showing up, by bearing witness, by being willing to walk beside those in our country who are not treated with dignity and respect and by fighting against those who deny any American the full-measure of what it means to be a Citizen of this country.

And so, like our hymn *Precious Lord take my hand* says, "We may be tired, we may be weak, we may be worn," but today we begin again. And if today we fail, to paraphrase Samuel Beckett, "We ever try and ever fail. No matter. Try Again. Fail again. Fail better."

Amen.

Closing words, from President Obama's farewell speech:

It falls to each of us to be those those anxious, jealous guardians of our democracy; to embrace the joyous task we've been given to continually try to improve this great nation of ours. Because for all our outward differences, we, in fact, all share the same proud title, the most important office in a democracy: Citizen.

May you go in peace.