

Troubling The Water

Shoreline Unitarian Universalist Society

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37.9 million (Source: US Census Bureau, 2022)

57, 51, and 22 percent (Source: National Public Radio, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, 2017)

1807 per 100,000; 810 per 100,000, 327 per 100,000 (Source: Statista.com, 2023)

These figures are recent statistics.

Statistics that tell us something of who we are as a nation.

Statistics that speak to our values as a society.

They are a commentary on the people we elect to political office...

the creeds and covenants we choose to adhere to in our public spaces and houses of worship...

and who we believe ourselves to be in relation to others.

Behind each of these statistics are people, people who live here in the United States, flesh and blood who, like you and I, are part of the fabric of our nation...human beings...body, mind, and spirit...

37.9 million of whom live in poverty.

That's nearly 12% of the US population.

Of children under the age of 18, 15% live in poverty.

57 represents the percentage of (lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender, queer) LGBTQ people in the United States who report being subjected to anti-gay slurs or jokes...

51 the percentage of LGBTQ+ people who report experiencing anti-LGBTQ+ violence...

22 the percentage of LGBTQ+ people who report an experience of workplace discrimination because of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

1,807 Black men and 810 Hispanic men per 100,000 residents are imprisoned in the United States compared to 327 white men per 100,000 residents.

Incidentally, the US has the largest known prison population in the world, accounting for roughly 1/4 of the world's total prison population.

Now, you may not or may not want to believe these statistics. Perhaps you hope or have decided there is a reasonable explanation for these numbers that has nothing to do with you and me or our families, friends, co-workers, and acquaintances. I understand that these are not easy statistics to hear.

Nonetheless I share them with you, for as The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., whose birth we commemorate tomorrow said, "Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter." And so I implore your patience and invite your ear...

These things matter.

Some years back, I heard a preacher close his Martin Luther King Day sermon highlighting moments from this nation's history of racism, slavery, and abolition by imploring, "...let us use the upcoming Martin Luther King holiday to reflect upon not only how far we have come, but how far we have yet to go."

And indeed, while it is far more pleasant and frankly, less risky for any preacher, to offer a sermon celebrating Dr. King and how far we've come since he emerged as America's pre-eminent social prophet and civil rights champion, I cannot in good conscience do that in the face of the challenges before us today.

Even as the shadow cast by a rise in white nationalism grows longer over our nation, it is easy, perhaps too easy, to forget at times, especially in states considered progressive, like ours, how far we have yet to go. Though we'd like to think otherwise, racism, heterosexism and homophobia, classism, ageism, ablism, and countless other isms, phobias and the like are alive and well, even in Connecticut.

We know this in part from the statistics I cited...and that's actually part of the problem.

I don't know about you, but often statistics like those I cited, with massive figures and percentages, can be a little hard to wrap my heart around. Intellectually I know these are significant numbers and yet as large as they are, statistics are often safe, that is, they seem distant and thus, in a way, unreal. Yes they represent people, but its not like a photograph of a person accompanies each number.

Maybe it should.

For when I hear stats on poverty or people referred to as "the poor" talked about in the halls of government or around a table, I think of people I know or have met. I remember a childhood friend and the glimpse I had one day after school

into the depth of his family's poverty, an image that remains with me to this day. I picture the faces and hear the voices of people who have asked me for help on the streets and in my office at the churches where I've served and I wonder what happened to some of the patient's I visited as a hospital chaplain who had no home to return to upon discharge.

Verbal harassment and physical threats are a far more familiar and personal experience for me as a gay man. And in those stats about slurs, rejection, and workplace discrimination I see the faces of young people I've met who were thrown out of their homes...yes, in "blue" Connecticut...because of their sexual orientation. I think of the struggle my friend, whose spouse is transgender, had in getting a job. And I'm reminded of the humiliation my aunts endured having to cancel their wedding in Maine after voters there overturned marriage equality by popular vote in 2009 only to restore it by popular vote in 2012. How many here have had their intent to marry subject to popular vote not once, but twice?

When I hear the stats about race disparities, I recall stories shared by my friends, a interracial couple a generation older than me, of fearing for their safety at times in public. Or of times people I'm with or around me have used slurs or made disparaging remarks about Hispanic people never imagining that one of my husband's aunts, and thus a member of my family, is Hispanic. And I see the faces, nearly all non-white, of the people I used to ride the shaky elevator with in the Brownstone Building every day at Hartford Hospital, a building that is among the oldest and most out of date on the hospital campus and which, when I worked there, housed the less lucrative, less technologically glamorous departments, those that serve underprivileged people...oh and the pastoral care department.

While statistics convey information, alone they remind me of Robert Walsh's warning, "Not Valid If Detached". And indeed, the statistics I cited often have little meaning when separated from the human faces, experiences, and lives behind them.

Separation and connection were recurrent themes in the life and work of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. who worked tirelessly to eradicate segregation from the laws of this land and replace them with laws worthy of this nation's founding principles of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness noting, "It may be true that the law can't make a man love me, but it can stop him from lynching me, and I think that's pretty important." And so it is that the overt segregation as Dr. King and those of certain generations knew it is gone for the most part, but too many people today, continue to practice segregation within their hearts, pumping new life into it with each breath they draw and detaching from...pushing away... those not like them, with each exhale.

The gaps that continue to exist and in some cases have worsened between races and ethnicities; sexual orientations, gender identities, rich and poor, young and old, humanity and the earth's resources and other species are symptoms of this continued practice of detachment and separation from the experience of others.

As Unitarian Universalists we covenant to promote and affirm respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part. Indeed, we are part of a living tradition that calls us out of isolation and into connection...a tradition that calls us to narrow the gap...or in the words of the prophet Isaiah, "repair the breach"...that space between how we are now and who we are called to be... a people in relationship with one another and the world in which we live.

This is not something we accomplish once and for all, but something to which we are continually called to practice as a community of faith whose mission includes building "a spiritual community dedicated to social, economic and environmental justice." and "to inspire members, friends, and our larger community to go forth and make the world a better place."

For Dr. King changes to the law were important in the realization of justice, but he also understood the law can only go so far....for justice to thrive, for it to endure... love...of self and neighbor, and for many, God, must be inscribed upon the heart.

This is no mere act of will. It is not something we wake up one day and just decide to do. For most of us it is something that happens gradually and if we're honest, at times painfully. For our hearts to grow in love and compassion for others and ourselves we must risk its breaking and endure the scars that form while healing.

We do this by venturing beyond detached, segregated lives and looking behind the nameless, faceless statistics we hear or read about. We do it by de-centering the voices of privilege to grow the choir of human experience and amplify its diverse song.

When we open ourselves to the experience of others...when we learn about their lives or meet them face to face we are in a sense heeding an ancient call told of in Exodus, in John's gospel of the Christian tradition...and sung by people young and old in the 19th century hoping to escape slavery in this country. It is a call towards freedom...a call to wade in the water...the water that, so the old song goes, God's gonna trouble....and offer us an opportunity for liberation...for transformation...for escape from the bonds of separation and an "us versus them" existence.

In troubling the water, God... Goddess... our higher selves, greets, confronts, challenges, and disturbs, us. We are awakened to the prejudices, stereotypes, and other forms of segregation alive in our own hearts and minds but at the same

time we begin to discover transformation is possible...we begin to learn and listen to those “big words” Dr. King learned and preached...”everyone can be great”...and “Love is the key to the problems of the world” and with hearts no longer a stranger to ourselves or the experience of others we can choose healing for ourselves...and to help heal this world.

Just laws can be written into the legal code; but justice itself resides in the human heart. Thus the result of justice work may be fairer laws, but the real work of justice is transformation of the heart, through connection and engage with others and their experience, especially those whose experience is is different from our own. It is an act of faith, of “taking a first step, even when you don’t see the whole staircase.” to quote Dr. King.

The work of justice is a journey from comfort toward vulnerability; from dry land through troubled waters. It is a journey begun by our religious forbears and one that we continue to this day...putting names and faces to statistics, changing laws, transforming hearts and minds, healing ourselves and the world...troubling the water.

This is the nature of the horizontal, relational theology Unitarian Universalists have historically sought to live over the prevailing vertical, hierarchical theology of our orthodox co-religionists, a theology that Dr. King, though he was not a Unitarian Universalist, recognized and lived through his practice of non-violent protest.

And so, let us indeed not only reflect this Martin Luther King Day on how far we’ve come or how far we’ve yet to go, but together in faith and love, commit to troubling the water some more...that justice may roll like a mighty stream.

Amen and Blessed Be