



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“Breathing Room,”
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on November 30, 2014

This Sunday finds us in a transition time. It's the last day of November. It's the end of Thanksgiving weekend and the first Sunday in Advent, the first of the four Sundays leading up to Christmas.

I've been thinking of this as a quiet Sunday. A time to take a breath, before the busyness of December is upon us. A time to encourage in you an appreciation for the Advent spirit, which is a one of quiet contemplation, of waiting and watching, in this darkest time of the year. So you might actually say “no thanks,” to those invitations to be super busy in the days leading up to Christmas.

I was thinking of this as a Sunday to encourage some peace and quiet, some time to breathe, some time to just be. You know how to do this; we do it most Sundays in our prayer time. It's a good practice, and one you can use almost any time and anywhere. To just stop and breathe, to be quiet, is to create a space for yourself; some breathing room where you can be still and know that life is good. That you have enough, that you are enough. That you don't need to hurry so much.

I hope being part of this church helps with this; helps to ground you and remind you who you are, a person of worth and dignity and beauty. And, that you are part of something larger than yourself, a great Love which will not let you go, and this good earth, to which you will always belong.

Some of you know Virginia Wight, longtime member of this church, who moved out to Boulder, Colorado, a few years ago to be near her children. Well, Virginia clips these columns from the Boulder paper about fishing, and mails them to me. The most recent one had these words from Anne Frank at the bottom: “The best remedy for those who are afraid, lonely or unhappy is to go outside, somewhere where they can be quiet, alone with the heavens, nature and God. Because only then does one feel that all is as it should be.”

I want to remind you today that there is a balm for the troubles of this life. You can find it outdoors, under the sky, in the fresh air, where you can clear your head and feel the earth under your feet, where you can be in the presence of something larger than your current troubles. I hope you experience that here too.

Finding this breathing room, that was going to be my simple sermon for today. We could have been done by now! But then the grand jury in Ferguson announced its decision not to indict the

police officer who killed Michael Brown. The news ignited protests across the country, and a wide range of reactions. Listening to them over the past few days, against the backdrop of my desire to preach a quiet sermon today, these words from the prophet Jeremiah keep coming to mind: "They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying, 'Peace, peace,' when there is no peace" (Jer. 6:14).

We have this epidemic in our country of Black men being killed by police. One statistic says every 28 hours a Black man or boy is killed in this country by police or vigilantes. Over the past few months victims include these unarmed Black men: Michael Brown in Ferguson, Eric Garner in Staten Island, John Crawford in Beavercreek, Ohio, Ezell Ford in Los Angeles, Dante Parker in Victorville, California, and last Saturday, twelve year-old Tamir Rice, who was shot and killed by police in Cleveland while playing with a BB gun.

Responses to these killings have been divided largely along racial lines. There is a difference in our country between the experiences and perspectives of Black and White people. Nicholas Kristof wrote an essay recently called "When Whites Just Don't Get It." He says there is greater wealth disparity between Blacks and Whites in the United States today than there was in South Africa during the days of apartheid. Black students are less likely to have access to schools with advanced math and science classes, and Black men "in their 20s without a high school diploma are more likely to be incarcerated today than employed." But, Kristof says, there is a growing belief among Whites that they are victims of a racism that is worse than racism against Blacks.¹

Huh? This is like American Christians saying that they are being discriminated against, and there is a "war on Christmas." These claims deny the existence of the power each has as the dominant group. Though anyone can experience prejudice or bias, it's pretty much impossible for White people to experience what's called "reverse racism" because racism is a systemic issue that privileges whites and oppresses people of color. Being uncomfortable isn't the same as being oppressed.

In this country, your skin color is a predictor of the opportunities that will be available to you. Not completely, of course; there are those who manage, despite the odds, to overcome them. But for those at the bottom, the American dream of upward mobility is becoming less possible. The problem is, those of us who are White are often blind to the experiences of people of color. When we elected our first Black president, do you remember the claims that we had become a "colorblind" society? As if one election would erase generations of slavery, Jim Crow segregation and discrimination.

Where I went to seminary, we were required to do anti-racism and anti-oppression work. This engagement with what has been called "America's original sin" was central to our education and formation. Though it wasn't easy and sometimes made me uncomfortable, I'm grateful that I had to do this work.

Anti-racism work is about learning to look at and hear things that challenge your perception; learning to sit with your own discomfort. It's about realizing that racism exists on more than just

¹ Nicholas Kristof, "When Whites Just Don't Get It," published in *The New York Times* on Aug. 30, 2014, available online at <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/31/opinion/sunday/nicholas-kristof-after-ferguson-race-deserves-more-attention-not-less.html>

the personal level; that we are part of systems that perpetuate racism. For White people, it is about doing your own work with other Whites, with the goal of becoming allies to people of color. It's about naming and claiming our own privilege and learning how to put that privilege to work making this a better world.

The good news is that doing this hard work can be liberating for White people too. It can help free us from the often unacknowledged guilt and shame that we carry. This winter I plan to offer opportunities to learn about and do anti-racism work, and I hope you'll consider being part of that.

These days there is widespread understanding among Black parents in our country that their sons are at risk. Many of them teach their sons about how to act if approached by the police--to never be aggressive, or run away, or do anything that might cause them to be shot. Can you imagine, if you're a White parent, living with this fear?

I'm all for people taking personal responsibility-- including protestors on the streets and police officers too. But there are larger, systemic issues involved. If you doubt this, check out the statistics on income levels and opportunity, incarceration and crime for Blacks. To say nothing of the fact that we are taught, through TV, movies and the news that we should fear Black men.

The Rev. Jesse Jackson once spoke to this reality. He said, "There is nothing more painful for me at this stage in my life than to walk down the street and hear footsteps and start to think about robbery and then look around and see it's somebody White and feel relieved." What he's describing is called internalized oppression. It's when someone from the oppressed class believes what they have been told and taught by the wider culture; in this case, that young Black men are more to be feared than young White men.

Racism is insidious that way. It gets into our hearts and minds and it affects, often in subtle ways, how we see the world and how we act. Racism is not the same as prejudice. Racism is like the air we breathe, so we're often unaware of how it affects us. No one here, I trust, wants to be prejudiced or wants to discriminate. But racism is so entrenched in our culture that good intentions are not enough: we need to do our own work, so we don't perpetuate these structures of oppression.

I know from experience that this work can be liberating and life-giving. But it can't be accomplished by a sermon. It takes more time and effort and engagement than that. So if these issues intrigue you, or make you uncomfortable, I hope you'll want to take part in the anti-racism work we'll do here this winter. You can begin by reading a column published the other day in *The Washington Post* called "What White People Need to Know, and Do, After Ferguson."² I've left copies at the back of the sanctuary and on the table at coffee hour.

I began today saying we need some breathing room in our lives. So we remember who we are and whose we are. Don't we, as a nation, need some breathing room too? Some time and space

² Sally Kohn, "What White People Need to Know, and Do, After Ferguson," published Nov. 28, 2014, in *The Washington Post*, available online at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2014/11/28/what-white-people-need-to-know-and-do-after-ferguson/>

to be less reactive and more understanding? Doing the slow work of deeper understanding, the good and hard work of transformation, offers this kind of breathing room, and I commend it to you.

The cover of the next New Yorker magazine is an illustration of the Gateway Arch in Saint Louis. One half of the Arch, and the buildings around it, are white; the other half is black. At the top of the arch there's a gap. The artist, Bob Staake, says, "I lived in St. Louis for seventeen years before moving to Massachusetts, so watching the news right now breaks my heart. At first glance, one might see a representation of the Gateway Arch as split and divided, but my hope is that the events in Ferguson will provide a bridge and an opportunity for the city, and also for the country, to learn and come together."³

That is my hope, and my prayer too. That these awful events, the killing of these boys and men, will wake us up and show us that we have real work to do. That we will set about doing this work, healing the sin of racism, so that one day, all of us, all of us, will be free.

Amen.

³ See <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/cover-story-2014-12-08>