

Playing the Race Card
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Opening Words – (Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley, Responsive Reading #576 in *Singing the Living Tradition*)

If, recognizing the interdependence of all life, we strive to build community, the strength we gather will be our salvation. If you are black and I am white,

It will not matter.

If you are female and I am male,

It will not matter.

If you are older and I am younger,

It will not matter.

If you are progressive and I am conservative,

It will not matter.

If you are straight and I am gay,

It will not matter.

If you are Christian and I am Jewish,

It will not matter.

If we join spirits as brothers and sisters, the pain of our aloneness will be lessened, and that does matter.

In this spirit, we build community and move toward restoration.

Sermon

In only a matter of days, the first African American President of the United States of America will be sworn into office. Of the many things that historians may record about this moment in time, this fact will certainly be one of the most prominent. There is no denying the magnitude of this event, as a man who once would have been considered *property* in this country will now become its *President*; a person who once might have worked to build the White House *as a slave* will now enter it *as a leader*; a person who would once have been refused service at a diner because of the color of his skin will now be representing *all of us* as he dines with world leaders.

There is no mistaking the power of this moment. We, as a country, can feel proud, and that pride is felt even by those who may not have voted for Obama who yet still celebrate what this means for our nation.

What *does* it mean for our nation? For our communities? For our congregation? For each of us, as individuals? The election of an African American President is a great symbol of progress in our struggle toward racial equality...but *symbols* can be misinterpreted. Rather than *inspirations* to action they can become *substitutes*; rather than focusing our energies, they can *distract* us from the realities they are meant to represent. In a congregation and a liberal religious tradition that forthrightly commits itself to justice and equity in human relations, race is an issue that we cannot afford to ignore or avoid or oversimplify.

And the reason this is so important now is that some would like to use this election, not as an opportunity for more open and honest dialogue about racism, but as a gag order for precisely these issues.

Let me give you a couple examples:

[Dinesh D'Souza wrote this](#) when Obama was nominated as the Democratic Candidate in August of 2008:

Who could not be moved at the sight of a major political party naming Barack Obama, an African American, as its presidential candidate? To me, there could not be a better sign that America has left behind its racist past. We are now approaching what may be termed "the end of racism."

We've left behind our racist past? Hey, swell, that was getting a little heavy to keep carrying. And now we're approaching *the end of racism*...Glad that's over. That wasn't any fun at all...And there's no wonder that D'Souza is so excited about "the end of racism," which he hurries to explain in his next sentence:

The End of Racism was the title of my 1995 bestseller, hugely controversial when it was published, but now it seems to have been a decade ahead of its time.

Now this is interesting logic in itself. If you declare that something has ended and it really hasn't ended, you're not wrong, you're simply ahead of your time. Something on the order of "Mission Accomplished" in Iraq...or Former Homeland Security Advisor Fran Townsend, asked about the failure to capture Osama Bin Laden, [responding](#) that it was not so much a failure as "a success that hasn't occurred yet."

[A November 5th opinion piece in the Wall Street Journal](#) celebrated the fact that "[a] man of mixed race has now reached the pinnacle of U.S. power only two generations since the end of Jim Crow."

Calling this "a tribute to American opportunity," the article went on to say that "Mr. Obama has a special obligation" to help "put to rest the myth of racism as a barrier to achievement in this splendid country."

Put to rest the *myth* of racism? Gee, and we hope Mr. Obama puts that myth to rest in the first hundred days, because we don't want to have to deal with people whining about racism anymore, right?

If we're claiming that racism has been ended, let's just say that it's a success that hasn't happened yet. Better yet, let's face up to the fact that we haven't achieved success...and let's not call it a failure, either. Rather, let's renew our efforts to address the undeniable scars and ongoing hurts of racism with a renewed energy and honesty. Let's take advantage of the greater space that has been offered for us to truly come together. Let's take this opportunity to listen to one another, no matter how uncomfortable the conversation becomes.

And the conversation can become uncomfortable...so uncomfortable that, like other such charged issues, it seems that comedians are about the only public figures that dare to touch it.

African American comedian Dave Chappelle--whose mother was the first African American woman to be ordained as a Unitarian Universalist minister in 1981—Dave Chappelle [does a controversial skit](#) about a blind black man, Clayton Bigsby, who is also a white supremacist. Having never seen the color of his own skin, he vents his prejudicial views loudly, making all of his listeners squirm in discomfort, of course.

And that squirming is important, I think. Racism, and racial stereotypes, and the cultural conditioning that has built up around the issues of race *should* make us squirm. But if we never get real about it, we will never understand the anger and the anguish, we will never have a chance of building real community, we will never have a more perfect union. If we don't reflect on our own reality, not our idealized version of ourselves, we risk perpetuating the damage and despair into the future.

A January 8th [CNN](#) news story reads: "A new study published Thursday in the journal *Science* suggests many people unconsciously harbor racist attitudes, even though they see themselves as tolerant and egalitarian." Without going into the details of the study, though I urge you to check it out, suffice to say that the conclusions were troubling, especially for a country where some are eager to play "taps" for the very notion that racism exists. Kerry Kawasaki, associate professor of psychology at York University in Toronto, Ontario and lead author of the study, said, "Some people might think...they don't have to deal with their prejudices, and that's not related to them at all, when in actual fact they hold these hidden biases."

Anglo American comedian Stephen Colbert [frequently proclaims himself impervious to racism](#) as he is totally colorblind: "I just don't see color...I don't. Are you black?" he asks guests. "I really wouldn't know; I don't see color...Am I black? I could be. I don't know."

We can laugh, maybe a little uneasily, with these comedians, but the challenge is clear.

Are we *really* colorblind? Should that even be a goal? In an exchange that occurred in a class at theological school, I heard a white student, with the best of intentions, say, "It doesn't matter to me what color you are. I'm colorblind." A black student replied, "You can afford to be colorblind. You're white."

You can afford to be. You can afford to pretend it doesn't matter. You can afford to make believe that racism is someone else's problem if you're white.

Now let me say: I think that I understand the intention of claiming colorblindness. Not unlike African American UU Minister, Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley in our Opening Words, we wish to say:

If, recognizing the interdependence of all life, we strive to build community, the strength we gather will be our salvation. If you are black and I am white, *it will not matter*.

It will not matter. We want to scream it out: It should not matter, so it will not matter. I don't even think about color. I don't even see it.

But, listen, denial has never been the way to healthy community. It doesn't help to avoid our own histories. And it's amazing how quickly we can bury them, because to unearth them feels painful, feels dangerous, feels traitorous, even.

I was struck by this passage in [the speech that Barak Obama gave](#) in March of 2008 describing his grandmother:

a woman who helped raise me, a woman who sacrificed again and again for me, a woman who loves me as much as she loves anything in this world, but a woman who once confessed her fear of black men who

passed by her on the street, and who on more than one occasion has uttered racial or ethnic stereotypes that made me cringe.

Cringing. Squirming. In any discussion of racism, my first impulse is to place myself firmly on the correct side of the argument. I wish to distance myself as far as possible from ignorance and discrimination. I read the CNN report on the study that uncovered racist behavior in self-described enlightened people and think: I wouldn't have acted like those people; meaning: I hope I wouldn't have acted like those people; meaning: I'm at least a little scared that I may have acted like those people. I read Obama's description of cringing at the words of the grandmother he loved, and I remember back to a story that's almost too embarrassing to tell...almost...but if we are to do the work of community, we must be honest.

I grew up in Sioux Falls, SD, a very white town, I had very little exposure to African Americans, but somewhere I, a sponge like all children are, soaked up the assumptions of the culture in which I lived. We moved to Cedar Rapids, Iowa when I was six years old and happened to rent a house next to an African American family. I was awed by the whole process of moving to a new place. I was frightened and excited by the prospect of meeting new people. And I was struck by the neatness, the *normality* of the house next door where the African American family lived. My six year old self blurted out, with innocent sincerity although the words dripped with the ignorance and brutality of prejudice, I said, "They're *black*...but they're *clean*."

They're black...but they're clean. A shameful, ignorant thing to say...and what's worse is that it became a story told in the family as some kind of wise saying, as some kind of generous acceptance of the fact that, of course, blacks could be as clean and good and normal as whites. And I think: where did that come from? Where did I get that? It couldn't have been there, in my home, among my family, could it? Not *us*. We were just regular people...but it *was there*. It was there, unseen: like lead in paint; like carbon monoxide in the air; an invisible poison, and it was there.

It's a story, and not only a story but a piece of my life, that makes me cringe; makes me squirm. Further, it feels treacherous and traitorous as it indicts my family, the people that I love, just as Obama loved the grandmother who sometimes made him cringe. But it's a story that I have to tell if I am to see clearly the effect that a racist society has had on this life, intertwined and tangled with so many others. Racism does not only rear its head in this society when a person of color is called a name, turned down for a job, or harassed, beaten or even killed by the police, although it can be clearly active in such circumstances. It has become part of the air that we breathe, part of the food that we eat, part of the unspoken education of a society that imagines it can outrun its racist past, and it will not magically disappear if we simply clamp our eyes shut and wish. We need to help each other identify the effects of racism and prejudice and ignorance, the scars that have been left on our lives, so that we can move forward together. We can't waste energy on denial. We can't disguise ourselves behind our colorblind glasses.

Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley did not say: *If we strive not to see one another's color*, if you are black and I am white, it will not matter. She did not say: *if we rewrite our history*, if you are black and I am white, it will not matter. She did not say: *if we pretend there are no problems and that we have no unresolved feelings*, if you are black and I am white, it will not matter. She said: *If we strive to build community*...And community can only be built upon honest communication.

Marianne Williamson—some of you may know her as the creator of the Course in Miracles—when she was minister at Renaissance Unity Interfaith Spiritual Fellowship facilitated a discussion with writer, professor, speaker, and Minister Michael Eric Dyson which appears in a book called "[Debating Race](#)." Here is a piece of that conversation:

"Love is not this namby-pamby passive thing. Love is present when real communication is present...So beloved community—[when Martin Luther King, Jr. invoked the beloved community—that] is not a static thing; it's a process. And when a community is not yet beloved, it's not going to get beloved by fear...Being beloved doesn't mean you agree; it means you're going to stay there for the conversation."

Responding to the uproar over the words of United Church of Christ minister, Rev. Jeremiah Wright, President-elect Obama spoke in March 2008, of "the complexities of race in this country that we've never really worked through - a part of our union that we have yet to perfect." My concern is that his very election may lead us to oversimplify those complexities; that we may now judge that part of our union as *perfect enough*. And if we do so, we will do so at the expense of genuine community. If we do so, we will do so at the expense of the true promise of this nation.

"If we walk away now," Obama said, "if we simply retreat into our respective corners, we will never be able to come together and solve challenges like health care, or education, or the need to find good jobs for every American...what is called for is nothing more, and nothing less, than what all the world's great religions demand - that we do unto others as we would have them do unto us. Let us be our brother's keeper, Scripture tells us. Let us be our sister's keeper. Let us find that common stake we all have in one another."

So may it be.