

“RACE: THE POWER OF AN ILLUSION”

A Sermon Dialogue between Barbara W. ten Hove & Leo Jones
April 15, 2007 — Paint Branch UU Church, Adelphi, MD

CALL TO WORSHIP

At the annual General Assembly of the UUA last year in St. Louis, a challenge was given to congregations to talk seriously about anti-racism and multi-culturalism. In keeping with congregational polity, churches were not told how to do it – just encouraged to find a way this year to open up dialogue on this important issue.

Paint Branch has a long history of dealing directly with issues of race going back to work members did in the 1960’s to de-segregate PG county through connections to Sojourner Truth congregation in DC up to and including our relationship with the Suitland HS Visual and Performing Arts program. Our congregation is not and has not been all white for many years (unlike many UU congregations) and people of color have served and do serve in leadership positions here.

It is easy, then, to imagine that race is not or should not be a problem for us at this church. And yet, when the challenge came from the UUA, I felt, along with many others, that Paint Branch needs to deal with racism as much as any congregation.

We are a part of our culture and our culture is racist. We are a part of a religious tradition that while caring and supporting many justice issues over the years, still struggles to become truly multi-cultural. There are many things we as a church could do to address this deeply significant issue. But it seemed to me that the first thing we could do, would be to talk about it – with each other across racial boundaries.

And so Leo Jones and I decided to co-lead a discussion group about the provocative video series *Race: The Power of an Illusion*. Today’s service comes from that experience. The conversations the dozen or so of us had over a month were powerful, difficult, challenging and I believe, deeply spiritual.

May our worship together this morning reflect the many gifts we received from this dialogue. As the song we are about to sing reminds us, “We are going – heaven knows where we are going, but we know within. And we’ll get there, heaven knows how we will get there, but we know we will.”

SONG #1020 *Woyaya*

SERMON DIALOGUE: Exploring the Illusion of Race Barbara ten Hove & Leo Jones

Question 1: *Why did you want to co-lead this course at Paint Branch at this time?*

[Leo answers:]

I thought I understood my motives for co-leading the class, but as the film series and our discussions progressed, I found that the reasons for participating were layered and not entirely apparent. I view the question of racial justice as an extension of my work in public education reform. Public education represents the intersection of race, culture, language, and economic opportunity, with race as a persistent element. So, it seemed obvious to me that I sought to understand race as part of my vocation.

While this was true on an intellectual level, it didn't get to the heart of my decision to be a co-leader. Not until weeks after the class ended did I begin to understand that my entire life has been a journey toward an understanding of my racial identity. My parents shielded me from the most insidious effects of racism. My world was populated by black neighbors, classmates, teachers, doctors, and all of the others who were important in my life. Whites played a distant role, mainly on television and in the movies. Not until I attended college did I understand fully what it meant to be part of a racial minority. The realization was shocking, and left me wondering about my life to that point.

At college, my black schoolmates enforced a voluntary form of segregation: they ate together at the same tables, socialized mainly with each other, and adopted an "us versus them" mentality that for the most part excluded our white schoolmates. I felt compelled to choose whether to live my college life as part of a microcosm of the black community, or whether to engage in a social life in which I would always remain a minority.

To muddy the waters even further, I came from a family that was not racially enlightened. My parents were politically conservative, and their view of the black revolution of the sixties was far from charitable. While much of the African-American world embraced dashikis, afros, and black nationalism, my parents viewed Stokely Carmichael, Angela Davis, and Malcolm X as dangerous agitators, who sought to advance their private agendas at the expense of ordinary black people; they were a dangerous threat to the American ideals that my parents had embraced despite the humiliations large and small that they had suffered as a result of their blackness.

In addition to this background, I brought with me a lifetime of experiences that for better and for worse that were in some way informed by my identity as a person of African-American descent.

I was intrigued by the prospect of viewing and discussing *Race: The Power of an Illusion* as a part of my exploration of who I am as a black man. Paint Branch seemed a safe place to explore my issues of race relations and racial identity.

[Barbara answers:]

Like many who were raised in liberal families, my parents were very involved in the Civil Rights movement. My father in particular made civil rights a significant part of his life's work. He graduated

from Howard Divinity School in 1964. He helped coordinate the UU participation in the 1965 March on Washington and was friend and occasionally mentor to the few African American UU ministers of his day.

The mistake some people like me make is in thinking that since our parents did a lot of work undoing their prejudices in the 1960s, there is thus no work for us to do. I thought, when I first started thinking about such things, that I was beyond, maybe even above racism. I went to integrated schools didn't I? One of my compatriots in seminary was black, wasn't she? I'm not prejudiced, am I?

I blush when I hear myself say these words. As I have matured I now understand how racism permeates my culture—both the American culture into which I was born and the UU culture in which I was raised. Both cultures have very much to admire about them, but there are racist assumptions that underlie them both.

So when the opportunity came to teach this course with you, Leo, I felt very called to do so. I knew I needed to explore my own issues. And I knew that other Paint Branchers would relish an opportunity to do so as well. Watching a video and talking about it seemed like a safe and easy first step. And that mattered to me because I admit that talking about race is scary.

Question 2: What did you learn from co-leading the class? What did you unlearn?

[Barbara answers:]

The first session of the video series focused on the biological aspects of race. I found it fascinating to learn that when it comes to genetics, race truly is only (and barely) skin deep. It may have been you, Leo, who said that skin color only reflects ancestry, not genetics. We may look a lot like our parents or grandparents but our genetic material may show that we have more in common with a stranger than with a relative. That was fascinating—and a bit shocking. We were fortunate to have Matt Hare, a biologist at the University of Maryland, in our class and he helped us understand some of the complex issues around race and genetics.

In the second session we learned about stories—and how the tales we tell about race and culture impact us. When a lot of Americans tell stories about the founding of our country, for example, we talk about “manifest destiny” as if Native Americans weren't already here when Europeans arrived. Telling that story differently really does make a difference.

As someone who grew up in a southern culture, I would occasionally hear the Civil War called the “War of Northern Aggression.” What I didn't fully understand was how much that version of the story of the Civil War impacted what became Jim Crow laws and other oppressive tools to keep African-Americans “in their place.” Stories have that much power.

Finally, in the last session, I was stunned and saddened to learn of the enormous missed opportunity that happened after WWII when the Federal Housing Authority made low interest loans available to returning GI's. Though black soldiers were technically allowed to receive such loans, few were able to

use them because a tactic called “red-lining” was used to keep neighborhoods from mixing racially. What this meant, alongside the humiliation and other distressing aspects of such behavior, was that African Americans in particular, and other racial groups as well, did not participate fully in the rising economic tide that created wealth in the postwar era. That still impacts them enormously today.

And don’t get me started about the incredible laws that I discovered were on America’s books to keep voting rights unavailable to any one who wasn’t “white” (and it’s fascinating to learn how “white” got re-defined in generation after generation as well). This last session made my blood boil.

[Leo answers (What did you learn from co-leading the class? What did you unlearn?)]:

I learned that contemporary notions of race cannot survive the scrutiny of science. All of us are the victims of late nineteenth century pseudo-science that sought to divide human beings into racial groups as a justification for oppression and exploitation. While the members of our class were open to the lessons of the film, I wondered whether other audiences, less open and less liberal, would be receptive to the film’s premise. Is America ready to hear that race, which has determined such a major part of our history, is a mere social construct? Would such knowledge change hearts and minds?

Question 3: How does race impact your experience of being a part of this church?

[Leo answers:]

When I first learned of Paint Branch, in 1999, I did not think about its racial makeup. Many years had passed since I stopped attending my parents’ church, which had an all-black congregation. Their church was not as hardcore Bible-thumping and gospel-singing as other black churches, but the essential theology was the same; a theology that I rejected in early adulthood. When I arrived at Paint Branch for my first visit, the fact that the church was overwhelmingly white was inescapable. But I found the members of the congregation to be friendly and warm, and I was won over by our theology of acceptance and inclusion.

I am not colorblind; I recognize that I am part of a distinct minority in our church and in our denomination. But I have attempted not to be defined by my so-called race. The cause of racial justice comes naturally to me, but so does the cause of religious tolerance, the quest for peace, the search for balance in our political discourse, and the urgent need to protect our environment.

[Barbara answers:]

When Jaco and I first looked at Paint Branch, one reason we found ourselves interested was the diversity we saw on the Search Committee. Unlike all the other churches we talked with that year (this was 1999), Paint Branch had a young adult, a transgender person and an African American on their search committee. When we arrived here, we discovered a handful of active members who were people of color and a group of what has come to be called “white allies,” who had been involved in racial justice issues for years.

All of that was good. But over time we’ve seen the racial make-up of this church change very little. Even though we are one of only three UU congregations in majority black Prince Georges County, our

congregation does not reflect the community around it. I also think that the church mirrors my own personal experience a bit in that many of our elders here have done extraordinary work in building a more racially just world while we younger members have perhaps thought, as I once did, that their work did the job and there was little left for us to do. It's my hope that Paint Branchers will continue thinking and feeling and working together to make this church a truly anti-racist and multi-cultural place.

Question 4: What are the biggest challenges we face as a religion in dealing with race?

[Barbara answers:]

First, we have to acknowledge that our congregations reflect our history. Our religious ancestors emerged from the Puritan tradition, which was entirely white and primarily English. History isn't bad or good; it just is. While it is true that some of the earliest Unitarian and Universalist congregations in America had members who were people of color, this was the exception, not the rule. And yes, many of our Unitarian and Universalist ancestors spoke out against slavery, worked hard for abolition and civil rights, and even, very occasionally, reached out to people of color. But it is also true is that many if not most of our congregations held on tight to the status quo. Churches are, I've learned, inherently conservative institutions. They change very slowly.

But they can change. So another challenge we face is learning how to change in ways that will allow us to become truly diverse. This isn't easy at all. A lot of what we've tried in the past hasn't worked. A first and obvious step in my view is to talk at a deep level with people of color within our religious tradition and hear what they have to say about it. To that end, Jaco and I have talked with Leo about hosting an event in the near future with all the people of color at Paint Branch. We're anxious to learn what kind of unintentional barriers we may have created here that possibly keep people of color from feeling accepted. We want to learn what we can do as leaders to help Paint Branch become truly anti-racist and multi-cultural.

[Leo answers:]

We Unitarian-Universalists have the annoying habit of hiding our light under a bushel basket. As a result, unless one stumbles upon a church or our denomination, many of those who could find a church home among us don't know we exist. I think it is telling that we have so few African-American members when we are located in one of the most affluent majority-black municipalities in the country.

Our greatest challenge is our unwillingness to spread the word that in Unitarian Universalism we have found the freedom and safety to explore matters of race, class, and sexual orientation.

Question 5: What gives you hope?

[Leo answers:]

We have the wherewithal to oppose racial injustice, first by increasing the diversity of our congregations, and then by applying the same energy that has made our denomination one of the foremost advocates of the rights of gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, and transgender persons. The only question is whether we have the will.

