

**White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church**

**The Hidden Wound**

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## READINGS

*from Wendell Berry – novelist, poet, farmer, from his book The Hidden Wound.*

It occurs to me that, for a man whose life from the beginning has been conditioned by the lives of black people, I have had surprisingly little to say about them in my other writings. For whatever reasons, good or bad, I have been unwilling to open in myself what I have known all along to be a wound- a historical wound, prepared centuries ago to come alive in me at the my birth like a hereditary disease, and to be augmented and deepened by my life. If I had thought it was only the black people who have suffered from the years of slavery and racism, then I could have dealt fully with the matter long ago; I could have filled myself with pity for them, and would no doubt have enjoyed it a great deal and thought highly of myself. I am sure it is not so simple as that. If white people have suffered less obviously from racism than black people, they have nevertheless suffered greatly; the cost has been greater perhaps than we can yet know. If the white man inflicted the wound of racism upon black men, the cost has been that he would receive the mirror image of that wound upon himself. This wound is in me, as complex and deep in my flesh as blood and nerves. I have borne it all my life, with varying degrees of consciousness, but always carefully, always with the most delicate consideration for the pain I would feel if I were somehow forced to acknowledge it. Yet I know that if I fail to make at last the attempt I forfeit any right to hope that the world will become better than it is now.

*from Ta-Nehisi Coates, African American journalist for The Atlantic magazine, and recent recipient of a MacArthur “genius grant.” He is writing in this passage to his teen-age son.*

It was the week you learned that the killers of Michael Brown would go free. The men who had left his body in the street like some awesome declaration of their inviolable power would never be punished. It was not my expectation that anyone would ever be punished. But you were young and still believed. You stayed up till 11 p.m. that night, waiting for the announcement of an indictment, and when instead it was announced that there was none you went into your room and I heard you crying. I came in five minutes after, and I didn't hug you, and I didn't comfort you, because I thought it would be wrong to comfort you. I did not tell you it would be okay, because I have never believed it would be okay. What I told you is what your grandparents tried to tell me: that this is your country, that this is your world, that this is your body, and you must find some way to live within the all of it. I tell you now that the question of how one should live within a black body, within a country lost in a false Dream, is the question of my life, and the pursuit of this question, I have found, ultimately answers itself.

*from Howard Thurman, African American theologian, from his memoir The Luminous Darkness,*

The fact that the first 23 years of my life were spent in Florida and in Georgia has left its scars deep in my spirit and has rendered me terribly sensitive to the churning abyss separating white from black. ...Nevertheless, knowing all of that, experiencing all of that, nevertheless a strange necessity has been laid upon me to devote my life to the central concern that transcends the walls that divide, and would achieve in literal fact what is experienced as literal truth: human life is one and all men [and women] are members one of another.

## The Hidden Wound

*Why don't our buttons just say "All Lives Matter?"*

That question, a good question, was put to me last month by a person in our sixth grade Religious Education class, a young Unitarian Universalist, who asked it with such sincerity, such authentic curiosity, such urgency. He wanted to know why this church he's been in all his life- the church he's proud of and loves and has worked hard to explain to his extended family and to his friends at school- why his church would make such a partial statement, less than whole; what seems to him to be a qualified, exclusive statement about love and human rights. "Why do our buttons say [and I appreciated how he said "our buttons"], *Black Lives Matter* and not just *All Lives Matter*?" It seemed to him to stand in contradiction to everything he's heard here about the broad, inclusive sweep of Universalism: all souls saved, with no exceptions. I know all this because he came and told me, first stopping in my office on a Wednesday night, and then making an appointment to have his parents bring him back. He had thought about it a lot. He brought hard questions and perspectives, angles on this that I had not yet considered. He brought respect for disagreement and for serious conversation. At one point he said, "I don't mean to make you feel awkward. I just really want to know about this." He was asking a question we've all been holding now for some time: **What is role of the church, what is the role of the liberal church and specifically a predominantly white liberal church regarding racial justice right now?**

Last spring, we had 500 buttons made, and in the summer bought 500 more, and they do not say *All Lives Matter*, even though we know that all lives do. When we talk about the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part, when we talk about the worth, and sacred, shining dignity of every single person, no matter who they are or what they've done, we are saying *all lives matter, all life matters*, and that is a radical theological statement. It should go without saying and we know it doesn't. We know that one way to look at the whole history of human life on this planet is to consider, and remember and own, the countless, continuous ways that humans have disregarded, disrespected, desecrated life, lives, the living Earth that holds us all. *All Lives Matter* can never go without saying. It is a radical, beautiful statement. It would make a good slogan or hashtag or button. But it is not what our buttons say right now, the buttons that I bought for you last spring.

The buttons say *Black Lives Matter*, the phrase coined in 2014 by three young African American activists and thinkers: Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi. They chose those words deliberately, consciously and conscientiously to reopen, rip open, an old wound, an infected, festering wound, in America, which Wendell Berry, who is white, calls "the hidden wound," because for white people it mostly is. For people of color, the wound of racism and race history gapes everywhere, bleeds everywhere, demands immediate and constant critical care, because it is spirit-crushing, soul-deadening, psyche-distorting; racism is literally and physically life-threatening, every day, every night, all the time. The injury is old; in white people it festers under the skin, deep in the mind and in the marrow of our bones, hidden from us and by us and exacting a terrible cost. *Black Lives Matter* – the hashtag, the blog posts, websites, articles, T-shirts, books, buttons, banners, demonstrations, marches, chants through the streets- that small

phrase, is meant to rip away every respectable bandage, open the wound and expose it to light, as painful as that is. It says something obvious which is not obvious at all.

The phrase showed up in a sweltering moment, brilliantly, between the deaths of Trayvon Martin in Florida and Michael Brown in Ferguson, when one single aspect of entrenched American racism was suddenly everywhere in the news, in city after city: the deadly behavior of some police against young black men.

Was this new behavior? **No**, it was not.

Was this, is this, the only evidence of racism we see? **No**, it is not.

Are African Americans the only targets of white racism day-in, day-out? **No**. They are not.

Is racial justice the only or the most important issue commanding our attention, compelling us to act? **Who can say?** Such things cannot be ranked. But it is one catastrophe, and it intersects and interacts, feeds into and is fed by all the others that also call us out, call us to account.

*Black Lives Matter* speaks to an acute crisis, and also to a chronic, ancient sickness, at least 400 years old. *Black Lives Matter* (I mean the phrase now, three small words, not any action taken under the banner, but the phrase itself) is a provocative, prophetic, prayerful, tragic, hopeful declaration- brazen in its hope. Its specificity is its genius: Yes, *all lives matter*. Latino lives matter, indigenous lives, queer lives, women's lives, the lives of immigrants and refugees, elders, the mentally ill, the poor, all "the least of these," in Jesus' words. To say *Black Lives Matter* denies none of this. In fact it begs these larger questions, and at the same time demands that we not allow ourselves easily to be distracted from this specific, urgent question: *do black lives matter?* There are other urgent questions. But to go deeply into this one, into America's harrowing and hidden wound, may illuminate your response to all the others.

*Do black lives matter in 2015?* Theoretically, yes, but what of the black life, for example, that once breathed in the black body of the boy lying in the street there, filled with bullets; or the black body of the child Tamir playing in a park; or the mother who braces herself when speaking with her child, the black child of her black body? She braces for "The Talk" that is a rite of passage in African American homes, the talk which takes place when a child is very young, single-digit young: about how to walk, how to talk, how to be invisible, how not to look white people in the eye, which apparently frightens them (us) and makes them (us) dangerous, how to hold your hands up whenever you are stopped, walking, driving, shopping, sitting on your porch, hold them up and hold them high - and even then you may not be protected, whether you are poor or wealthy, in prison or in college, doctor, lawyer, a kid on the corner or the tennis pro James Blake (who in September, in Manhattan, on his way to the US Open, was profiled, tackled, handcuffed, injured coming out of his five-star hotel, and said afterwards and fairly graciously, "This happens all the time."). The talk black parents have prepares their children when they're very small to live in our shared world, defining the geography of the neighborhood and nation, offering a crash course in American history and culture which is absolutely and in every way different from the lessons learned by other children, white children - and so side by side we grow up in different countries, different planets really, and no amount of affirmative

action will staunch that wound among us and inside us in our lifetime. This is the long work of generations. *Black Lives Matter* – the phrase - calls me back to consciousness of this reality, which is important because as a white woman, I can lay down my care about this stuff at any time: that is my great privilege. I don't have to pay attention unless and until I feel like it. *Black Lives Matter*, because it is so specific and so shockingly straightforward, calls me back to sorrow and to mourning, to anger, to conscience, culpability, awareness of my ignorance about how so many millions of my fellow citizens make it through a day. I'm called to a sense of complicity, but not only that – for much of this is beyond my own making. We're not responsible for the accidents of our birth or for past genocides or slavery –so it's not just complicity or the sorry wallow of white guilt. We're not called to fix the past. We're called to shape the future. This is a patriotic call, and for members of the liberal church it is a moral call. We're called to reimagine what matters, who matters and pour healing light, searing light, into old wounds.

When I bought the buttons in May, I invited you to write to me about the conversations that ensued, both out loud and in your heart. These are some of your responses:

- *I feel trepidation when I wear the button, disappointment that almost no one has commented on it, and a bit of relief at the same time.*
- *On days I wear the button, I sometimes feel like I am wearing a scarlet letter. Only mine says hypocrite.*
- *Most people don't say anything. I wonder why I am waiting for others to comment on my button. Why don't I bring up the topic myself? I have been reading about how hard it is for black people to talk to white people about white privilege, because white people get hurt, offended and defensive. I've certainly felt hurt when I've been accused of racism. I'm worrying about my feelings.*
- *This to wear or not to wear a button debate is one I engage in sometimes on a daily basis and sometimes not. There are more than a few days when the button and the campaign don't even enter my mind. One day I dug in my purse only to be stabbed by the button, which pricked my conscience. That's the thing about white privilege. I can walk around oblivious to what others cannot just lay aside.*
- *I pointed the button out to my doctor and she asked me why I wear it. I said it is raising awareness of racial inequities in our country. I surprised myself with that short, simple answer- one I had not thought out ahead of time. Her response was to shake my hand.*
- *At Brine's market in Stillwater the man behind the meat counter wanted to know where I got it, so I gave him mine. The gentleman was beaming and obviously delighted that I was wearing the button in support of people who, like him, are not 100 percent Caucasian.*

- *When you asked us to consider wearing Black Lives Matter buttons, I have to confess that some not very kind thoughts ran through my brain - which tells me I am still carrying my father's prejudices. I read a quote recently that said "Angry is sad's bodyguard". I would like to believe that describes my first reaction.*
- *My struggle is to believe my life matters.*
- *I took the button. I wore it home. I wore it up to Backus MN. I don't feel right wearing the button. Right now I am just trying to make sense out of my own life. I don't want to make trouble or get involved in trouble. I have enough problems. For now, I am signing off of Black Lives Matter.*
- *Every morning when I put the button on I feel that I am pinning my heart on my sleeve. I think about my daughter and her kids and how they all have African American heritage. Years ago I observed my daughter being stopped by two young officers in front of her house. I was holding one of the kids while watching out the window. My daughter had done nothing wrong. But they wanted to see her license and ask her questions "Whose car is this? Who is that woman? Whose baby is that? I think that those two police officers were just harassing her because she was "driving while brown."*
- *I put my button on this morning as I got out of the car to walk to work. Do I ever feel like Hester Prynne. Why does this feel so risky? I notice people on my route more – an old guy with no teeth, young energetic guy with headphones, professional guy waiting for bus, middle aged woman in burqa driving past, older guy smoking near my building. I'm naturally friendly, but my pin declares their lives matter regardless of whether I am friendly, and regardless of their behavior toward me. Also, as I declare THEIR lives matter, I'm aware that belief naturally extends to the other people I pass – all these people of all races / ethnicities – their lives matter too. It's a surprising awakening to wear a declaration of something mattering to me, for all the world to see.*
- *Last week when I got a haircut my African American barber said that he liked my button. I said thanks, and we're looking forward to the day we don't have to wear one. He said "that's great; we're working together" and we shook hands. Not to sound maudlin, but I felt that we touched souls for a second, notwithstanding our forty-five year difference in age.*
- *As I prepare for a trip out of town, I think, "This is a good time to put on my Black Lives Matter button." I put in in my purse thinking to put it on later. Once in the airport, when I encounter a Black employee I wish I had put it on already, then approaching a White person of authority, I feel cautious about being controversial. I am shocked to realize I've made this all about me.*

I'm grateful to all of you who wrote, and all who took buttons and wore them and gave them away, and those who haven't worn them but still think about it.

**This is so complicated.** And many of you have shared real concerns about the movement that is Black Lives Matter, a decentralized, deliberately unorganized grassroots groundswell, and the many informal, sometimes spontaneous public actions. You've raised concerns about protests at the State Fair and the Mall of America, about civil disobedience, about people blocking major highways, about random demonstrators who take it on themselves to shout hateful slogans, and about those inciting retaliatory violence, especially against police. The movement is not orderly, nor disciplined, and I think each person must discern where and when we enter. One person here raised deeply thoughtful questions about the response in Ferguson to the decision by Department of Justice not to indict the officer, Darren Wilson, who shot Michael Brown. This person is concerned that the people so angry in the streets there, and also people here, including our own church and the UUA, may be uninformed, and maybe willfully so, clinging to a false narrative of "innocent victims" and "guilty police," and a false narrative about what really happened - ***and this may be so.*** Nothing about this is simple.

I think of Frederick Douglass, abolitionist, former slave, who spoke more than once to the Unitarian community I served in Massachusetts:

*Those who profess to favor freedom and yet deprecate agitation, are people who want crops without ploughing the ground; they want rain without thunder and lightning; they want the ocean without the awful roar of its waters. This struggle may be a moral one, or it may be a physical one, or it may be both. But it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will.*

The passage appears in the back of our hymnal.

***What is the role of the liberal church and specifically a predominantly white liberal church regarding racial justice right now?***

As I have said before, I believe we're called to take our lead from activists of color, in the churches, in the street, to be *foot-soldiers* in the words of Martin Luther King, not generals – which has not, historically, been the habit of UU's; to be *followers* for once, not leaders; *disciples* in the words of African American Unitarian Universalist Paula Cole Jones, disciples who know they have much to learn, in addition to so much to offer. What we can offer, in humility, is the power, the immense power, of our privilege. What we can offer, also, we in the liberal church, is a certain kind of faith.

In his memoir, *The Hidden Wound*, written in his 30's about his childhood in Kentucky, Wendell Berry speaks about the churches there. He's mindful in this writing that he was born in 1934, less than 70 years from the end of the Civil War. He's suggesting that slavery is recent history, still an open wound, and I believe that's true, in the south and in the north, in black consciousness and white sub-consciousness, in our politics, economy and also our religion. He says that in Kentucky, as in other parts of the South, a certain liberalism prevailed, most especially regarding the separation of church and state. (You can hear traces of it still in the continuing cries for "states' rights.") Ministers could not hold public office, nor address the legislature. You might think, as I do, this is generally a good thing, but the reason for it there and then [this was 1790]

was “the clergy’s insistence on attacking the institution of slavery.” This was inconvenient. Berry writes, “And so beneath the public advocacy of the separation of church and state, we see working a mute anxiety to suppress such admonitory voices as might discomfort the practice of slavery.” The true voice of the church was silenced, resulting in the complete separation of “morality and state.” He goes on to say that as the 18<sup>th</sup> century became the 19<sup>th</sup>, masters faced a theological problem, with slaves sitting right there with them in the pews, hearing the same sermon, preached from the same texts. Too many verses in the Bible speak of earthly things, how people ought to live, in regard to one another. Too many verses speak of love, compassion, honor and respect, justice, in the market, in the home, love of neighbor and equality, the Kingdom of God, not up in heaven, but right here in our midst. “Clearly,” says Berry, “it would not do. If a man wanted to remain a preacher his concern had to be with things heavenly, not worldly, unless he was a saint or a fool. The question of how best to live on earth as a human person was permitted to atrophy, as the churches devoted themselves obsessively to the question of salvation.” Verses about belief, and only belief, and only narrow belief, such as John 3:16 (“For God so loved the world,” etc.) eclipsed all others; prurient fretting about people’s sexual sins replaced any larger public ethics, as the Christian white churches abandoned “the great moral tasks of honesty and peace and neighborliness and brotherhood.” The true voice of the church went silent, and small religion justified large evil. I should say that this was not only a southern transformation. Many conservative churches, north and south, became in this away tacit agents of the slave economy.

We have a larger, more courageous and more faithful voice than that. We know that the role of the church is to speak truth to power, to speak the truth in love, even when the “power” is an old and toxic myth deep inside our psyche. It may not be that *black lives matter* is a chant that you yourself can raise; I hope it is, but if it’s not, find the words, the holy words, with which you will speak to racism with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength, the words to lance, as if with a scalpel, this bloody, lethal wound - the words that will shake you awake.

For now, for myself, I hold the small phrase *Black Lives Matter* as a gift: unsolicited, hardly uncomplicated, unruly in my daily life. I hold it like a prayer, asking what it has to teach me, as a minister, as a citizen, as a mother, as a person infused with whiteness, infused from my birth with the mythology of whiteness. It is one bead on the makeshift rosary I try to keep in my hands. The phrase startles me awake, often in unwelcome ways. I know that in matters of the spirit, “awake” is almost always a good thing, even if uncomfortable, just as in matters of medicine, opening a wound is a good thing, if there’s poison there. Opening the wound is good, even if it’s painful.

From the brilliant theologian Howard Thurman comes wisdom to companion us:

*The scars are deep in my spirit and have rendered me terribly sensitive to the churning abyss separating white from black. ...Still a strange necessity has been laid upon me to devote my life to one concern: human life is one and all men [and women] are members one of another.*

All human life is one. And black lives matter.