

Soul Work: Classism
Kitsap UU Fellowship, March 9, 2008

Chalice Lighting

The Rev. Jay Atkinson

I kindle the single flame of this chalice:

as a symbol of shared unity amid the richness of our human diversity;

as a beacon of hope for those whose lives are darkened this morning by
doubt, or sorrow, or despair;

as an emblem of that divine spark which animates and guides us toward
the highest aspirations of our common humanity.

Welcome and Greeting

In 1982 or 83, our 3 year old daughter asked what religion we were. Her friends in the neighborhood had talked about their churches and Karyn wanted to try church, even though I am sure she did not know what it meant. We knew we could probably enjoy the UU church, since we had been to some Xmas eve services with my family in Spokane. So after looking in the yellow pages [this was before the internet] we started attending. We liked it and so did Karyn, so we have been members since. We still enjoy attending a spiritual place where we are not told what creed or dogma we have to believe, and a congregation that is open and accepting of everyone.

Meditation

Let us enter together now into a time of meditation or prayer.

What defines the Self? How do you know who you are?

 There are words that we use,
short-hand categories of
 race, age, gender, ethnicity, profession and the like.
Underneath those labels,
 there lives a story,
a story that is unique,
 a story that is the truth of who You are.

Only you know your whole story.

 Only you can know your whole story.

But we are able to share our stories,
 speak them out loud,
be heard, find ourselves known.

This is the work of religious community,
 this sharing of stories,
this sharing of Self...

Why do we do it?

Because when we do,
 we discover that underneath the complexity,
underneath this miraculous uniqueness of each individual,
 there is a unity, a commonality, a recognition of one another
as human, as holy.

In the silence, may we listen for the song that is uniquely our own,
 listen for the themes and cadences of each individual story...
and let us listen, as well, for the ways in which all stories weave together
 to create a melody that is beautiful and grace-full
beyond compare.

Amen, and blessed be.

Readings

Introduction:

Today, we will be looking at our society, our lives and our congregation through the lens of class.

We will use as our working definition of classism: “the systematic assignment of characteristics of worth and ability based on social class.” This is a complex and delicate subject, and I want to acknowledge up front that in the space of a single worship service, we can only hope to begin to touch on some of the spiritual issues that classism raises.

We need to remember that as Unitarian Universalists, our first principal is to affirm the worth and dignity of all human beings. That includes people in all classes, from the poorest of the poor to the most exploitative of the rich. It also includes, most especially, ourselves. Whatever feelings, reactions, or insights come to you, please treat yourself with compassion and acceptance.

On the East Side, people buy their groceries a pinch at a time; three cents' worth of sugar, five cents' worth of butter, everything in penny fractions. The good Jewish black bread that smells of harvest-time is sliced into a dozen parts and sold for pennies. But that winter even pennies were scarce.

I walked down a street between dripping tenement walls. The rotten slush ate through my shoes. I saw a stack of furniture before a tenement: tables, chairs, a washtub packed with crockery and bed-clothes, a broom, a dresser, a lamp.

The snow covered them. The snow fell, too, on a little Jew and his wife and three children. They huddled in a mournful group by their possessions. They had placed a saucer on one of the tables. An old woman with a market bag mumbled a prayer in passing. She dropped a penny in the saucer. Other people did the same. Each time the evicted family lowered its eyes in shame. They were not beggars, but “respectable” people. But if enough pennies fell in the saucer, they might have rent for a new home. This was the one hope left them. (from Jews Without Money, by Michael Gold, pp. 241-242)

“Coming from a New England background, you had a honed discipline of what was expected....Showing off money was a sin. It was not that status was not important, but marriage was very closely controlled and predetermined, and everyone knew where everyone else fit.”

A family name alone was enough to place someone in the pecking order. Wealthy people dressed down. Now...the rule is: If you've got it, flaunt it.

“What has happened in America is that achievement is so important that everyone wants everyone else to know what they have done. And in case you don't know, they want to tell you with a lethal combination of houses, cars, and diamonds. I was appalled at a recent dinner party when a woman leaned over and said, “My husband paid \$250,000 to join the golf club, and he doesn't even play golf.” (Class Matters, pp. 169-170.)

According to Mom, I was born on a cotton sack out in the fields, 'cause she had no money to go to the hospital. When I was a child, we used to migrate from California to Arizona and back and forth... I remember when we used to go out and pick carrots and onions, the whole family....At the time, they were paying sixty-two and a half cents an hour...

I'd go barefoot to school. The bad thing was they used to laugh at us, the Anglo kids. They would laugh because we'd bring tortillas and frijoles to lunch. They would have their nice little compact lunch boxes with cold milk in their thermos and they'd laugh at us because all we had was dried tortillas.

What really hurt is when we had to go on welfare. Nobody knows the erosion of a man's dignity. They used to have a label of canned goods that said, "U.S. Commodities. Not to be sold or exchanged." Nobody knows how proud it is to feel when you bought canned good with your own money. (in Working, pp. 7-14)

Della Mae Justice stands before the jury in the Pike County Courthouse, arguing that her client's land in Greasy Creek Hollow was illegally grabbed when the neighbors expanded their cemetery behind her home... "I grew up in a holler, I surely did," she tells jurors as she lays out the boundary conflict.

Despite her success, Justice worries about what people might remember about her, especially about the time when she was fifteen and her life with her mother and stepfather imploded in violence, sending her into foster care for a wretched nine months.

"I was always in the lowest socioeconomic group," she said, "but foster care ratcheted it down another notch."

While she was in foster care, Justice lived in one end of a double-wide trailer, with the foster family on the other end. She slept alongside another foster child, who wet the bed, and every morning she chose her clothes from a box of hand-me-downs.

"I think class is everything, I really do," she said recently. "When you're poor and from a low socioeconomic group, you don't have a lot of choices in life. To me, being from an upper class is all about confidence. It's knowing you have choices, knowing you set the standards, knowing you have connections." (Class Matters, pp. 63-65)

Class Reflections: Different Americas

The myth is that the US is a classless society. Many people, including our current President, would have us believe the myth. Yet while it is true that class in the US has historically been somewhat more fluid than in other parts of the world, it is not true to say that class doesn't matter.

In fact, it may be that class matters more here in the U.S. It may be that the fluidity of our class structure leads to great fear of loss of status, which leads to greater disdain for people who are lower down on the socio-economic ladder and greater resentment of people who are higher up.

We may say that we live in "one nation, under God," but in actuality, we inhabit different Americas. Our life experiences are shaped by our socio-economic status, by the behavioral norms in our families and communities, by the places we live and the people who are our neighbors.

The American dream foisted on us by the media...the white picket fence, Donna Reed wearing an apron and a carrying a feather duster, that American Dream almost never comes true. But there's another American Dream, from the declaration of independence:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.

Roberto Acuna, the migrant farm worker, part of whose story we heard earlier, writes,

Working in the fields is not in itself a degrading job. It's hard, but if you're given regular hours, better pay, decent housing, unemployment and medical compensation, pension plans...we have a very relaxed way of living. But the growers don't recognize us as persons. (Working, p. 13)

There is a longing in me to see this American Dream come true, to live in a country where all people are recognized as people. To get there, we have several other myths to confront.

We must get rid of the myth that some people are more worthy than others...that wealth and socio-economic status are earned, through hard work or greater intelligence or better values. The fastest growing group in our country these days are the working poor. There are a lot of people who work, hard, often two and three jobs, who are barely able to keep a roof over their head and food on the table. (If you haven't read Barbara Ehrenreich's Nickel and Dimed, I can't recommend it highly enough.) There are a lot of people who see their life's work go up in smoke due to the high cost of medical care and prescription drugs.

Inherent worth and dignity means no one has to earn the right to be treated as a person.

We must also let go of the myth that we are a country where it is easy to pull yourself up by your bootstraps. Education can be a ticket out of poverty, but it's not easy for poor people to take advantage of the educational system. If we truly wish to "Leave No Child Behind," we need to give more financial support to our schools, especially those in lower income areas...Imagine if we spent as much on our schools as we are spending on the war in Iraq. Imagine if the state actually covered the cost of a college education for every high-school graduate who wanted to attend.

Last, but not least, we need to let go of the myth of the trickle-down economy. When the government gives tax breaks to the wealthiest among us, the rich get richer while the poor get poorer and the middle class struggles to keep afloat. In the years between 1979 and 2005, the wealthiest 5% almost doubled their wealth, with an average 81% increase in real dollars adjusted for inflation. Meanwhile, the bottom 20% lost ground and the folks in the middle made modest gains that for the most part are inadequate to offset increased housing and education prices.

It doesn't have to look that way...Between 1947 and 1979, when our country had more progressive social and taxation policies, everyone got ahead...We all grew. The real American Dream was within our grasp, and we let it go.

Dare we dream of a government that puts the needs of the citizens ahead of the profit lines of corporate donors? Just something to think about.

Telling Our Stories

We turn now from the political, to the personal. What happens when we look at our own lives through the lens of class awareness?

If your parents had little or no college education, if they occasionally had a hard time meeting basic expenses, if you grew up living primarily in rental housing, or in a small house long saved for and lived in for decades, those are all indicators that you grew up as part of the Working class.

If your parents had degrees from 4-year colleges, if they did okay but needed to work to pay the bills, if they owned their own home and traded up at least once, those are indicators that you grew up as part of the professional-middle class.

If your parents attended elite private schools or colleges, if they had an inheritance, if your family owned more than one home (and yes, a cabin counts, no matter how rustic) those are indicators that you grew up as part of the owning class.

Obviously, life is complex, and many people have indicators that put them in more than one class. However, when you reflect on your class background, what do you see? How has it informed your life? How has it informed your faith?

At this point, both the worship associate and the minister spoke from their personal experience.

Even Here: Classism in UU Congregations

A young woman visited a UU congregation, not this one, and at the coffee hour after church, she was talking to a member of the congregation. "What do you do?" the UU woman asked. "I'm a waitress," the young woman replied. The woman literally turned her back and walked away.

In a UU congregation, not this one, a young family left following the Ingathering Water Communion service, which sounded to them like a travelogue. As they couldn't afford to travel, they felt they didn't belong in this community after all.

In a UU congregation, not this one, a young woman listened to her peers talk about their ski vacations and their college plans. She kept quiet, feeling ashamed that her family couldn't afford vacations or tuition. She dropped out of the youth group and didn't come back until years later, with a degree and what she considered the "proper" economic resources.

A man walked into a UU congregation, not this one, wearing scruffy jeans and a flannel shirt. No one said a word to him all morning long.

In a UU congregation, this one, sometimes people come seeking religious community, and leave because they feel they don't belong because they're not adequately educated, sophisticated, or wealthy. We will give off that impression, inadvertently, if we're not careful to examine all of our ideas, our policies and procedures, through the lens of class.

The way it is supposed to work is that people bring to the community as much as they can of the three T's-- time, talent and treasure. Those who have more time give more time. Those who have special talents share their expertise. Those who have money need to give money...and not just enough to pay their own way, but enough so that everyone who wants to can participate. Each gives as much as they can, creating an abundance from which we all benefit.

We are meant to be the antidote to the fee-for-service economy, the respite from the dog-eat-dog business world, the voice of love and peace that quietly (but persistently) insists that happiness doesn't come when we buy more stuff, but when we choose to pay attention to the beauty and the gifts in other people, in the world, and in ourselves.

Ruby Dee, in the quote I included in your Order of Service, says "Classism and greed are making insignificant all other kinds of isms." This may be the toughest nut to crack, the hardest 'ism' to confront, in our world, in our congregations, and in our own hearts. But with the power of story, with faith in the inherent worth and dignity of all people, with determination and grace and as much love as we can muster, we can do it. We WILL do it. We will make the original version of the American Dream come true.