

Poetry of the Global Majority

A Sermon Delivered on January 13, 2019
by
The Reverend Axel H. Gehrman

*“Poetry is the lifeblood of rebellion, revolution,
and the raising of consciousness.”*

-- Alice Walker

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Meditation: by Joy Harjo, a member of the Native-American Muscogee (or Creek) Nation, a piece entitled “Eagle Poem”

To pray you open your whole self
To sky, to earth, to sun, to moon
To one whole voice that is you.
And know there is more
That you can't see, can't hear
Can't know except in moments
Steadily growing, and in languages
That aren't always sound but other
Circles of motion.
Like eagle that Sunday morning
Over Salt River. Circled in blue sky
In wind, swept our hearts clean
With sacred wings.
We see you, see ourselves and know
That we must take the utmost care
And kindness in all things.
Breathe in, knowing we are made of
All this, and breathe, knowing
We are truly blessed because we
Were born, and die soon, within a
True circle of motion,
Like eagle rounding out the morning
Inside us.
We pray that it will be done
In beauty.
In beauty.

First Reading: by Tony Medina, from his book *Love to Langston*, which honors the great poet Langston Hughes with a “unique biography in verse,” written for young readers. This is a poem entitled “Poetry Means The World to Me”

Poetry means the world to me
its how I laugh and sing
how I cry and ask why

Poetry comforts me
when I use jazz or
the blues or the way
regular folks talk -
the language
they use

Words don't always
have to be neat
and polished
like a statue

They should be
used used used
to say what you like
or don't like
what you see think
or feel-

Words to fight against
hate and unnecessary
suffering

Poetry is what *I* use
to say
I love you

Second Reading: by Elizabeth Alexander, a poem commissioned for the inauguration of President Barack Obama, entitled "Praise Song for the Day"

Each day we go about our business,
walking past each other, catching each other's
eyes or not, about to speak or speaking.

All about us is noise. All about us is
noise and bramble, thorn and din, each
one of our ancestors on our tongues.

Someone is stitching up a hem, darning
a hole in a uniform, patching a tire,
repairing the things in need of repair.

Someone is trying to make music somewhere,
with a pair of wooden spoons on an oil drum,
with cello, boom box, harmonica, voice.

A woman and her son wait for the bus.
A farmer considers the changing sky.
A teacher says, Take out your pencils. Begin.

We encounter each other in words, words
spiny or smooth, whispered or declaimed,
words to consider, reconsider.

We cross dirt roads and highways that mark
the will of some one and then others, who said
I need to see what's on the other side.

I know there's something better down the road.
We need to find a place where we are safe.
We walk into that which we cannot yet see.

Say it plain: that many have died for this day.
Sing the names of the dead who brought us here,
who laid the train tracks, raised the bridges,

picked the cotton and the lettuce, built
brick by brick the glittering edifices
they would then keep clean and work inside of.

Praise song for struggle, praise song for the day.
Praise song for every hand-lettered sign,
the figuring-it-out at kitchen tables.

Some live by love thy neighbor as thyself,
others by first do no harm or take no more
than you need. What if the mightiest word is love?

Love beyond marital, filial, national,
love that casts a widening pool of light,
love with no need to pre-empt grievance.

In today's sharp sparkle, this winter air,
any thing can be made, any sentence begun.
On the brink, on the brim, on the cusp,

praise song for walking forward in that light.

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My grandfather was a poet, and loved poetry. Poetry meant the world to him. I don't know that any of his poems were ever published. But I remember, when I was a child in Germany, how he would write small poems for birthdays and anniversaries, poems that playfully described the significance of the celebration, and often a sly commentary on the people involved. I was deeply touched by his ability to capture some of my particular childhood habits and hobbies, and how he conveyed them imaginatively in verse and rhyme.

Throughout his life he collected poems and memorized his favorites. And he taught me a few, too. For instance a poem called "Warte." I still have it memorized:

Februarschnee/ tut nicht mehr weh,/ denn der März ist in der Näh!/ Aber im März/
hüte das Herz,/ daß es zu früh nicht knospen will!/ Warte, warte und sei still!/ Und
wär der sonnigste Sonnenschein/ und wär es noch so grün auf Erden,/ warte, warte
und sei still:/ es muß erst April gewesen sein/ bevor es Mai kann werden.

Which in English means:

February snow/ doesn't hurt anymore/ because March is close by./ But in March/
protect your heart/ that it doesn't bud too soon./ Wait, wait and be still!/ Even in
sunniest sunshine,/ and even if the Earth is as green as ever,/ wait, wait and be still:
April must be over, before May can arrive.

This poem is by Cäsar Fleischlen, and is included in a poetry anthology my grandfather published in 1968. This book was my grandfather's pride and joy. It was dedicated to members of the Free-Religious Congregation in Offenbach, Germany, which he had served as minister for 34 years at that point.

I was confirmed in my early teens and, like all the church youth, received my own copy of the book. This is it - 381 pages (show book). It's called: Weltmelodie – Melody of the World.

That title meant a lot to my grandfather. He was a universalist at heart. He felt the poems touched on universal spiritual sensibilities, universal hopes and struggles. My grandfather believed in the inherent worth and dignity of every person, in freedom and justice, just as we do here, today.

As a child, I was deeply impressed by my grandfather's religious vision – and, in fact, it played a big part in my decision to become a minister. But I was always slightly stumped by the fact that his world-wide collection of poetry included only German authors.

The choice to draw only on German poets was, of course, a conscious decision my grandfather made. But given Germany's history of patriotism laced with nationalism and racism and militarism, my grandfather's well-meaning anthology can raise all sorts of questions. Questions that are timely, even today

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As well-meaning Americans, we struggle with the moral implications of militarism and racism and national identity. This week's example is the controversy about a wall being built along the southern border of the United States.

The wall is intended to protect hard-working, upstanding U.S. citizen from criminals and drugs and dangers of all sorts that seem to be threatening us from a rising tide of would-be immigrants from the south. The wall is supposed to protect us from them. But what it really does, is make a sobering statement about who we consider "us" and who is "them." What does an American look like? What do our families and friends, the people we care about look like?

* * *

I am a white, European-American, heterosexual, cis gender man. In many ways, I look like those who hold the most power, and who have stood center-stage for centuries here. The joke is that even though I may look like a typical American, and have lived most of my life here, I became a citizen only a few years ago.

Appearances can be deceiving. They are often superficial. To uncover deeper meaning, we can turn to the work of poets.

For instance Claudia Rankine. She wrote a book-length prose poem called "Citizen: An American Lyric." In it she shares her first hand experiences and cultural observations. On page 44 she writes:

At the end of a brief phone conversation, you tell the manager you are speaking with that you will come by his office to sign the form. When you arrive and announce yourself, he blurts out, I didn't know you were black!

I didn't mean to say that, he then says.

Aloud, you say.

What? he asks.

You didn't mean to say that aloud.

Your transaction goes swiftly after that.

A few pages later she writes:

Standing outside the conference room, unseen by the two men waiting for the others to arrive, you hear one say to the other that being around black people is like watching a foreign film without translation. Because you will spend the next two hours around the round table that makes conversing easier, you consider waiting a few minutes before entering the room.

* * *

Poetry has the power to convey deep meaning, on levels that are often inaccessible in our usual political arguments.

The anthropologist and essayist Rajat Singh writes:

During unspeakably dark moments, where do we turn? To facts? Beliefs? Or to someplace else? Facts organize the world, which we go mad to control. When we cling to our beliefs out of fear, they in turn dull our minds. But poetry, specifically that of the revolutionary poet, can both soothe our disquiet and awaken us to our complacency. Within the revolutionary poet's words lies the potential not only to speak of our discontents, but also to bring us together, move us to action, and help us imagine how to create new futures... The word "poet" comes to us from the Greek for "making." Verse is how we remake the world. And dawn is an opportunity to envision the horizon anew and clear, and to imagine how the next day, as the sun burns off the dew, may be better." (from "Why We Need Revolutionary Poet Faiz Ahmed More Than Ever," Dec. 5, 2016)

* * *

At a UU ministers' meeting this year, my colleagues were talking about our efforts to challenge white supremacy and support racial minorities. We were processing an exchange from earlier that day, when a white male colleague of mine made an off-handed joke that was deeply disrespectful to others, especially those who weren't white heterosexuals.

It was toward the end of the conversation, that a colleague of color invited members of the "global majority" to join her for lunch and to talk some more.

Global majority? What's that? The phrase stuck with me. The global majority, of course, is made up of the billions of people who are not white. But somehow the idea caught me by surprise. And helped me realize how often I act as if I am a member of the majority, and assume that my experience, my perspective, my needs and my interests are more important than those of others – the minorities.

This, often unconscious, sense of self-importance makes me blind and deaf to those who are different. It is the exact opposite of the most cherished belief we profess: the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

* * *

This dilemma isn't new to me, nor to Unitarian Universalism. Ten years ago, Elaine and I field-tested a new curriculum the UUA was developing called "Building the World We Dream About." Over a twelve-month period we conducted and evaluated 24 workshop sessions at the church we served in Illinois, all of which were designed to "interrupt the workings of racism and transform how people from different racial and ethnic groups understand and relate to one another."

I remember in session seventeen we were asked to conduct a self-assessment of our congregation's racial and ethnic relations: How comfortable were we talking about race with people from non-dominant racial groups? How were people of color represented in positions of power and authority in the congregation? Were our policies and practices designed and monitored with an antiracist cultural lens? And perhaps most important for me: did our worship services represent a broad array of cultural traditions and experiences?

It was that last question that stopped me in my tracks, and helped me realize that an overwhelming majority of the theologians and scholars, political scientists and poets I quoted in my sermons were white, European-American men, most of them dead.

Over the past years, I have learned to increasingly pay attention to the racial and cultural background of the authors I read. To notice whether they are men or women or gender non-conforming, whether they are gay or straight or queer; whether they were born in this country, or moved here, or live somewhere else; whether they identify and are identified as white or black or brown or yellow or red – or any combination thereof.

It makes a difference.

I try to be mindful and respectful and aware. But, of course, there is a lot I still miss. Despite my best efforts, I still carry my share of unconscious racism and sexism and classism.

A poem by Gwen Nell Westerman captures some of this. Westerman is a citizen of the Cherokee Nation. Her poem is entitled "Dakota Homecoming." She writes:

We are so honored that
 you are here, they said.
We know that this is
 your homeland, they said.
The admission price
 is five dollars, they said.
Here is your button
 for the event, they said.
It means so much to us that

you are here, they said.
We want to write
an apology letter, they said.
Tell us what to say.

* * *

We want to affirm the worth and dignity of all people – regardless whether they look like us or look different, regardless what country they were born and raised, regardless what culture they claim.

There isn't a single right way to do this. And none of us can do it perfectly. But every one of us can try. Each of us can strive to do better, to look beyond the familiar, to be more respectful and more curious, and to strengthen our powers of imagination and empathy.

This work is not a burden, it is a blessing. It opens our minds and hearts to amazing beauty and profound wisdom to which we had been oblivious.

Each day we go about our business, walking past each other, catching each other's eyes or not, about to speak or speaking. All about us is noise and bramble, thorn and din...

We can choose to pay more attention to each other – to the woman and her son waiting for the bus, to the farmer considering the changing sky. We can choose to remember those who have died for this day, who brought us here, who laid the train tracks, raised the bridges, picked the cotton and the lettuce.

We can choose to open our whole self to sky, to earth, to sun – to each and everyone, friends and strangers, and countless people we may never meet.

You can choose to open yourself to the one whole voice that is you, and know there is more that you can't see, can't hear, can't know...in languages that aren't always sound.

No matter what language we speak, we can choose to listen for the Melody of the World. It is a melody you can hear in poems written for millennia, in millions of verses, most of which try to tell us something about love.

May we open our minds and hearts to all people
And together create a world
Of justice and love.

Amen.