



Sermon

One of the things I talked about last week is how the practice of shame is used to keep people in the perceived proper boundaries of their race, and that’s kept a lot of people from speaking about what they think about race and racial politics, for fear of making a mistake and being shamed for it. I told a story about a white woman asking a black woman what it was like to be black. The black woman, seeing that the white woman thought they had nothing in common when it came to race, tried to help her see that they had a lot in common. We all have a race, some are just more aware of it than others. So even though I’m talking about blackness, and more specifically Mark Morrison-Reed’s experience of blackness, I’m going to expect that all of us can relate to his story. I think he’d want it that way, because although we each experience our race in unique individual ways, there are systemic patterns in the experience of race that affect every one of us.

The best way for me to introduce you to Mark Morrison-Reed is to tell you how I came to know him. Back in 1997, I was in a difficult place in my life. In the first year of a Ph.D. and in total denial about how wrong that was for me, I desperately needed some hope. I hadn’t attended church since I left the Mennonites nine years before but I knew I needed something spiritual. I needed community, friends, a place to belong, something that was bigger than me and more meaningful than my endless reading lists. One fateful Sunday, I attended the First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto. Mark and Donna Morrison-Reed were the ministers of that church. I was mesmerized by their preaching. Donna preaches from her brilliant mind. Mark preaches from his heart. When he preached, I would forget where I was. Where Donna worked my mind, Mark worked my tear ducts. He always cried when he preached, and then I cried when he cried so I always brought Kleenex when he preached. Both of them touched something so deep in me that was dying to be nurtured and validated. I was amazed that something so spiritual could happen to me in a church of all places, because quite frankly, it never had.

But although they were amazing, the church itself was inwardly focused and emotionally cold. I’d leave worship moved to my soul, and stand in coffee hour with my visitors mug so someone would talk to me, and no one did. Perhaps you’ve heard the rule six friends in six months or you’re gone. It doesn’t matter how good the preacher is. The minister gets people in the door. The members keep them coming back. Well, the members were more interested in talking to each other than to me, so one Sunday I just didn’t have the heart to go back, and that turned into another and another and I went back to my old pattern of sleeping in on Sundays.

But one day, as I was walking to the subway, there was Mark, and I just wanted to run and hide. I felt like I’d been caught skipping school! But a bright smile came over his face. “You’re Krista!” he said, “And you’ve been to my church!” And I remember thinking “How could a minister of a 540 member church remember my name?” “You’ve been many times!” he said. “Six times,” I said, rather proudly. “But not recently!” he said, and I blushed, and he laughed, and started asking me about myself, what I did, how I found the church, where I lived, and then he started naming people who lived in my neighborhood. By the end of the conversation, I felt so valued that I promised to try again and next Sunday there I was with my visitors mug, and he introduced me to people and I started making friends. I signed the book four months later. Soon after, Donna talked me into joining the board of trustees. In my



"Unitarian Universalist Theologians III:
Mark Morrison-Reed"
Rev. Krista Taves
January 24, 2010

Emerson UU Chapel, Ellisville MO

second year on the board, at the age of 29, she invited me to accept the position of president. That same year, Mark and Donna listened to me with compassion and understanding, when I told them I was dropping out of my Ph.D. and beginning seminary. I am a minister because of Mark and Donna Morrison-Reed.

But in all the time I knew Mark, I never knew the depth of his experience as a black man. I didn't know that even with all the authority he wielded as the minister of one of the largest Unitarian churches in Canada, that he looked into every face, black or white, and sought acceptance. I knew vaguely that he had been raised in a middle class black family but I didn't know what that meant. I didn't know that he been told in a more ways than he could count that he wasn't black enough because he fit in too easily with whites and this left him with scars so deep it took decades to heal. I didn't know that he still felt like a minority in all white groups of people and was always ready for the difficult experience of being stereotyped. As a teenager, he had been beaten for being black. He wanted out of the United States so badly, that when his father had a research assignment in Switzerland, he elected to stay there when the family came home and spent his remaining high school years in a liberal arts school in the Swiss Alps. When he came back to the United States for college, it was a different world. The Civil Rights Movement had taken hold. His mother was a civil rights activist working in the movement lead by Martin Luther King. She also served as the president of the newly formed Black Unitarian Universalist Caucus. She was a leader in planning the National Conference of Black Unitarian Universalists in 1968.

Mark himself went to a racially mixed college and had black friends and white friends. They all felt themselves to be on the vanguard of a new era of racial equality. It was a time of optimism and Mark and his friends fully supported King's peaceful methods, trusting they would bring racial integration and social harmony to their divided country.

And then King was assassinated and Mark watched as his white friends shrank back in shame, and his black friends radicalized. It became unsafe to have white friends. For his family, who were so integrated into mixed schools and communities and their Unitarian Universalist Church, it was a painful and confusing time. Each of them was in danger of being seen as a traitor to their people. His sister Carole, still in high school, stopped hanging with her white friends, for their safety and for hers. Some of his brother Phillip's friends joined the Black Panthers.

There were calls for open rebellion in Mark's circle of friends. Many declared integration a failure. Separatism was the only way. The white man was not to be trusted. And Mark was torn. He wanted to be loyal to his people, but who were his people? He had come to see all people as his people. He wanted freedom and justice and equality, but he could never accept violence as a way to justice and freedom.

He did not accept our society's mythology of redemptive violence. This is the mythology that says freedom is only protected and created by violence, and that if you don't have freedom, it's just that you haven't used enough violence to get it. That is the mythology that said 9/11 could only find justice through armed invasion. This is the same mythology that says Afghanistan can be solved with more troops. This is the same mythology that sees



capital punishment as justice rather than as simple revenge. This same mythology, the mythology of redemptive violence was operating in the charged emotion that took hold of so many Afro Americans throughout this country. And of course is it any surprise. When you have suffered oppression all your life, how can you always be patient? Some just couldn't trust anymore. Many of Mark's black friends began preparing for open revolt and there was less and less room for those still prepared to follow the path set out by Martin Luther King.

Last week I talked about how whites are shamed by other whites when they move beyond the perceived boundaries of their race. That kind of shaming doesn't only happen with regard to one race. When Mark attended a Black Student Union meeting, the fiery speaker chose to use Mark as an example. He said that before they took to the streets they had to take care of business. There were vanilla lovers in the room, Uncle Tom's. Oreos because they were black on the outside and white on the inside. Their minds had been twisted into thinking that whites could be trusted and they were undermining the ability of blacks to take their freedom back. And then he pointed to Mark, and told him to get out. Mark stumbled to find the right words. "I don't hold with violence. Love is the answer and the white man [isn't] the enemy."

No one defended him. Black friends supported him in private but wouldn't take the risk publicly. And his white friends, who he thought would thank him, were just so frightened and so confused and so ashamed they just didn't know how to begin responding. And soon he didn't want to turn to them anyways. Just the thought sent the word "Uncle Tom" racing through his mind.

In Mark's memoir, he identifies this moment as the one that he would struggle with for years. In his mind he would stand by his conviction that he was right, that integration not separation, and peace not violence was the way to freedom and justice. And yet still there was always, just under the surface, this visceral shame, that he would never be black enough for anyone, especially himself. When he committed himself to Unitarian Universalism and decided to become a minister in this predominantly white denomination, he would feel that shame. When he fell in love with and married a white woman, he would feel that shame. When he served all white congregations, he would feel that shame. He knew in his mind and in his heart that he was living truthfully and ethically and religiously. But there would always be this internal voice, sometimes soft and sometimes very loud, condemning him as an Oreo. I am reminded of the story of the Beautiful Tiger. At a certain point, the shame didn't have to come from the outside anymore. The Tiger was shaming herself, creating her own prison. And over the years, Mark grew in his hunger to open the door and step out, fully grounded in his blackness, fully anchored in his humanity.

Mark Morrison-Reed's theology rises from the conviction that we truly are one. This is the most true theology there is. But he is under no illusions. It may be the most true theology, but it is often the most difficult theology to live. So much around us teaches us how to judge one another, how to distrust one another, how to write each other off. What this really teaches us is how to judge ourselves, how to distrust ourselves, how to write ourselves off. And when we try to break away from those divisions, there will be resistance because we have all been shamed into



"Unitarian Universalist Theologians III:
Mark Morrison-Reed"
Rev. Krista Taves
January 24, 2010

Emerson UU Chapel, Ellisville MO

behavior that says these divisions are normal and that we are helpless before them and thus that resistance will come from around us and within us.

The reason we need each other is that we can't become free alone. This is not a solitary journey. The Beautiful Tiger needed the Strong Lion to walk by and tell her how beautiful she was. His truth telling is what cracked her shame. There are times we are simply not strong enough to do it on our own. There's a reading by Mark Morrison-Reed in our hymnal. It's 580. Listen to the words in light of what you've just learned about him:

"The central task of the religious community is to unveil the bonds that bind each to all. There is a connectedness, a relationship discovered amid the particulars of our own lives and lives of others. Once felt, it inspires us to act for justice. It is the church that assures us that we are not struggling for justice on our own, but as members of a larger community. The religious community is essential, for alone our vision is too narrow to see all that must be seen, and our strength too limited to do all that must be done. Together, our vision widens and our strength is renewed."

Mark's theology is the story of the Beautiful Tiger and the Strong Lion. Four decades after that horrible experience, Mark is anchored in his blackness which means that he is anchored in his humanity. While the memories of his struggles likely still bring pain, there is no anger, no recrimination, no resentment for those who judged him. He has found his peace. May it be so for us as well.