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**Reading** "I can survive" Ruby K. Payne

I can survive in poverty. I know which churches and sections of town have the best rummage sales and I know which rummage sales have "bag sales" and when. I know where to dumpster dive, meaning I know which grocery store garbage bins can be accessed for thrown-away food. I know how to get someone out of jail. I know how to physically fight and defend myself physically. I know how to get a gun, even if I have a police record. I know how to keep my clothes from being stolen at the Laundromat. I know what problems to look for in a used car. I know how to live without a checking account. I know how to live without electricity and a phone. I know how to use a knife as scissors. I can entertain a group of friends with my personality and my stories. I know what to do when I don't have money to pay the bills. I know how to move in half a day. I know how to get and use food stamps or an electronic card for benefits. I know where the free medical clinics are. I am very good at trading and bartering. I can get by without a car.

I can survive in the middle class. I know how to get my children into Little League, piano lessons, and soccer. I know how to properly set a table. I know which stores carry the clothing brands my family wears. My children know the best brands in clothing. I know how to order in a nice restaurant. I know how to use a credit card, checking account, and savings account – and I understand an annuity. I understand term life insurance, disability insurance, and 20/80 medical insurance policy, as well as house insurance, flood insurance, and replacement insurance. I talk to my children about going to college. I know how to get one of the best interest rates on my new car loan. I understand the difference among the principal, interest and escrow statements on my house payment. I know how to help my children with their homework and do not hesitate to call the school if I need additional information. I know how to decorate the house for different holidays. I know how to get a library card. I know how to use the different tools in the garage. I repair items in my house almost immediately when they break – or know a repair service and call it.

I can survive in wealth. I can read a menu in French, English, and another language. I have several favorite restaurants in different countries of the world. During the holidays, I know how to hire a decorator to identify the appropriate themes and items with which to decorate the house. I know who my preferred financial advisor, legal service, designer, domestic-employment service, and hairdresser are. I have at least two residences that are staffed and maintained. I know how to ensure confidentiality and loyalty from my domestic staff. I have at least two or three ways to keep people whom I do not wish to see away from me. I know how to enroll my children in the preferred private schools. I know how to host the parties that "key" people attend. I am on the boards of at least two charities. I know the hidden rules of the Junior League. I support or buy the work of a particular artist. I know how to read a corporate financial statement and analyze my own financial statements.

## Sermon

Did you know that heavy women used to be considered extremely sexy because only wealthy women had the luxury of getting fat? A plump wife was a sign of success. Being skinny meant you worked yourself to the bone. You probably lived on potatoes and bread. You were low class. You know the saying "bring home the bacon?" If you were working class and managed to scrimp together enough to buy bacon, you would hang it in your window so everyone could see you'd "brought home the bacon." And then you'd invite your friends over, and you'd sit together and chew the fat. And that's where the saying, "Chewing the fat" came from. There was no better way to show off your good fortune than by inviting your friends over for a rich fatty meal.

Compare that to today. Fewer people work with their bodies, and the cheapest food is filled with salt and high fructose corn syrup. Feedlots mean that most everyone can buy meat. The fattest meat is now the cheapest and lean meat is most expensive. The tables have turned. Poor and working class people now tend to be heavier than middle and upper class people. Thinness has the status because those with the leisure time to work out and the income to buy higher quality food can afford to be thin. Throughout human history, whatever becomes connected to poverty is least valued. Whatever is connected to wealth is most valued, whether it's body type or clothing, the kind of car you drive, the house you live in, where you go to college, or the music you listen to. To give you an example, baggy pants worn low around the hips started with African American gangs because it made it easier to hide a gun. It wasn't until the style appeared on the runways of Paris and then in malls across middle class America that it became a status symbol.

This morning is the fifth in our series *Weaving the Fabric of Diversity*. We've talked about racism, ageism, ableism, and today we are talking about classism, the ways that we judge each other based on economic status. There are two ways to look at class. First, class is determined by your income level. Second, class is also a culture, and that's what our reading was about today. Every class, whether it's poor, working, middle or upper class, has its own rules about what has value. Those rules allow you to survive in that class. When you grow up in a class you usually aren't aware of the rules, they are second nature. But if you change your economic level up or down, or if you encounter someone from a different class, you may find yourself in a place where the rules you learned don't work anymore. This is often the first time people realize they're in a class. And, here's the thing about that. The poorer you are, the more likely you're going to have this experience. The wealthier you are, the least likely you are to have this experience, because you have more power to stay in your comfort zone and to keep others out.

Just out of curiosity, how many people here would say you have left the class you grew up in? Did you have to learn middle class culture to fit into this congregation? Actually I know many of us probably have, because in every congregation I have served I've done pastoral care with those struggling to learn the rules of middle class culture so they can find their place in a Unitarian Universalist congregation. I remember in one congregation one of the most beloved members came to me and said she had to resign her membership because she had lost her job and couldn't pay her pledge. And I said "That's ridiculous. You are a beloved member. Let your congregation carry you for a while," and she just couldn't do it. She was too ashamed. What had she learned in the culture of that church?

Class is alive and well in this country, in our schools, our neighborhoods, and in this congregation, but this is not something we talk about very often because the national culture of this country doesn't give us a way to talk about it. The story America tells itself is that we broke away from a class-based society when we broke away from Britain. We became something brand new. In America you can be anything you want to be. Anyone can be President. There's only one class in this country, the

middle class. When politicians talk to “the people,” they talk to the middle class. When Obama announced Elizabeth Warren as chair of the Consumer Task Force this week, he said she would be “one of the country’s fiercest advocates for the middle class.” What is all this business about “the middle class”? It’s our national story. There’s one big problem with this. America has the largest gap between rich and poor of any developed country. This is the only rich country that claims there is no class, but has the largest class divisions there are.

This truth is painful for many Unitarian Universalists because we see ourselves as a justice focused religion. Our theology holds equality as a primary value. For us equality isn’t just about having the belief that everyone is equal, it is about everyone having the same opportunities in life. In the very beginning, both Unitarianism and Universalism took to heart the biblical understanding that we are all children of God, and that meant being able to participate equally in God’s creation. UUs played huge roles in establishing the public education system and founding schools like Washington University, believing that access to education is the key to equality. So to see that our country is marked by tremendous economic inequality is very hard for many Unitarian Universalists. It cuts to the very core of our faith.

What’s also been hard is the fact that very few working class people seem interested in Unitarian Universalism. Most of the people in Unitarian Universalist congregations are middle and upper class, and no matter how much we’ve tried to change that, it hasn’t shifted at all. People have asked questions like: What are we doing to push away working class people? Don’t they want free religion just like we do? Don’t they want a religion where they aren’t fed dogma, where they get to make choices, where they are in charge of figuring out what they believe?

What we’re starting to figure out is what those of you who come from working class backgrounds have known intuitively for a long time – Unitarian Universalism is filled with assumptions that are middle class, and they often don’t make sense or feel as true to working class people. Let me give you some examples.

One of the assumptions in Unitarian Universalism is that we are called to make this world a better place. Now you might be asking, what’s middle class about that assumption? There are so many things wrong in the world, should we just sit on our hands and do nothing?

One of the things that marks different class cultures is how we understand human power. Depending on your class, you have less or more power over your life. The wealthier you are, the more protected you are from the unexpected things of life, like losing a job, or getting sick. When you have retirement savings, investments, health insurance, and business connections, losing a job doesn’t have to mean that you lose your livelihood. Your cushion allows you to have some power in your life. If your experience of life is having control and power, that will influence your theology or worldview. Believing that we can change the world absolutely makes sense to you.

The poorer you are, the more vulnerable you are. Losing a job or getting sick can mean losing your house, not being able to feed your family, not being able to fill the gas tank, or having to choose between groceries and utilities. Your everyday experience shows that you have very little power to change your life or the world. How is a religion that is based on having power and having choices going to fit with the reality of your life? It could feel like a cruel joke. Can you see how our theology which says each of us can make a difference in the world, makes more sense to a middle or upper class person than it may to a working class person?

In our religious education program, we teach our children that this world is an exciting and safe place. We teach you to see possibility wherever you look and to trust the world around you. In

lower working class culture, this is a dangerous thing to teach your children because you are setting them up to crash and burn. It's far better to teach your kids that the world is dangerous and can beat you down. The rules aren't there for you; they're for middle and upper class people. Don't expect that to change. You teach your children to be ready to defend themselves at any moment and to expect a lot of knocks on the way. They can't be soft or they won't survive.

Another example. So much of our religion is about self-actualization and personal growth. You have to have time and money for those things. If you're working three part time underpaid jobs to barely get by, self-actualization is a luxury.

My reason in bringing this up isn't to tell you that Unitarian Universalism is wrong. We're not wrong to teach our kids to trust the world. We're not wrong to want to make this world a better place. We're not wrong to want personal growth. But let's be honest about why we value these things. Unitarian Universalism emerged from a middle class culture, so that means its values are going to include some people and exclude others, so when we say we welcome everyone, it's not true.

This recession has brought a lot of people down who never thought it could happen to them. We are all vulnerable. How is this middle class religion and our congregation's middle class culture supporting those who are struggling financially? When I was unemployed for more than a year and a half I found more to hold onto at AI Anon meetings than I did in my UU church because AI Anon knew how to speak to the experience of feeling helpless. Our UU theology didn't seem to have a language for those who weren't feeling like we could change the world. This experience has deeply influenced the theology that I bring to my ministry. That experience left me so shaken that I was determined to bring a greater range of experiences into how we live our faith.

Let me tell you what I see in this congregation. I see a lot of people who are firmly in the middle or upper class who aren't worried about that changing. Others live middle class lives, but are hoping your job is safe, maybe preparing in case it isn't. Some of you grew up middle class, but haven't been able to get beyond working class income. It's been hard trying to maintain a standard of life you can't afford. Some of you grew up working class but achieved a middle class income. This has changed you. You're not working class anymore; you're reminded of that every time you go home, but every once in a while you're reminded that middle class culture is not second nature to you. And it's these last two groups, those who grew up middle class but are living working class, and those who grew up working class but are living middle class, who are most likely to question if they belong in Unitarian Universalism.

One of the things I said at the beginning of this sermon is that the values of the wealthiest trickle down and have the most status and power in society as a whole. Those with the most secure and highest incomes have more power to set the values in many social settings, and that includes this congregation. We in this room have different levels of power. One of the foundational elements of Unitarian Universalism is truth telling and authenticity in love, so we are called to speak of our real differences. There are BMWs and old Ford Tauruses in our parking lot. We live in massive homes and tiny homes. We shop at Saks and Wal-Mart. Some of you will graduate college with no debt, some with tens of thousands of dollars of debt. Some of us take our vacations in Europe, others go to Six Flags on a Saturday afternoon. It is much more challenging to bring together these differences than it is to handle our theological differences – whether we are atheist or theist or pagan or agnostic or whatever. That's the easy stuff. Class and classism is where the rubber hits the road. How willing are we to let ourselves be changed by the different class realities in this room? My hope is that when we can honor these truths, we can be there for each other in a more truthful and authentic way and you will all know that you belong here. Amen.