

Sermon: “Do Black Lives Matter More?”
Rev. Dr. Alexander Riegel
Grosse Pointe Unitarian Church
June 19, 2016



Reading from W.E.B. Du Bois, “The Souls of Black Folk”

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, — an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife — this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He does not wish to Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He wouldn't bleach his Negro blood in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of opportunity closed roughly in his face.”

Sermon *Do Black Lives Matter More?*

This sermon touches upon the question, do black lives matter more... more than white lives, brown lives, red lives... more than gay lives, lesbian lives, and transgender lives... do black lives matter more than *all other* lives? I have avoided preaching on the Black Lives Matter movement because it has been clear to me from the start, and I would have thought to most people, that the notion that black lives matter does not entail that black lives matter *more* than *all other* lives. In fact, such reasoning is patently bad logic, Tweedledum. It simply does not follow that if one group claims that their lives matter, that their lives matter more than *all other* lives.

Unfortunately, logic is not winning the day in our current cultural climate. Negative emotional tendencies are being stirred by cantankerous political diatribe and the usual news media frenzy that attends the political season. As a result, the Black Lives Matter movement is receiving backlash of varying degrees. The subtlest backlash is the transmutation of the “black lives matter” slogan into “all lives matter,” effectively co-opting and disempowering the movement. The strongest backlash is the labeling of the Black Lives Matter movement as a “terrorist organization,” on which more in just a bit.

Perhaps I am overly naïve but I would have thought that the transmutation of the “black lives matter” slogan into “all lives matter” would have abated by now. However, this co-opting of the phrase continues to be debated online, in the media, and in the public at large. I have been asked my opinion on this matter about half a dozen times in the past few months. So, this sermon can be seen as my response to the question, “Do black lives matter more?” or, “Don’t all lives matter?”

Of course all lives matter. That sentiment is not negated by the notion that “black lives matter.” Indeed, I believe that most people involved in the Black Lives Matter movement would affirm that all lives matter. Black lives matter. White lives matter. Brown lives matter. Red lives matter. Straight lives matter. Gay lives matter. Lesbian lives matter. Transgender lives matter. All lives matter. It follows from this that black lives do not matter more - only that they matter *as much*. But, here’s the rub... the Black Lives Matter movement and the phrase “black lives matter” need to be distinctly recognized because they grow out of a social condition that is unique to the black experience.

Speaking in general terms, from a sociological and/or psychological point of view it cannot reasonably be denied that the narrative of black America stands out as uniquely burdensome and angst ridden. From the manner of the arrival of Africans to the shores of the Americas hundreds of years ago to the plight of today’s black Americans, the black narrative is especially daunting. It is the black narrative that includes being bought and sold as property, lynching, women as handmaidens, the denial of education, separate and inferior public facilities, laws structured to preserve the black ghetto, disproportionate incarceration rates for similar crimes... you know I could go on and on and on... The point is that the black narrative has been many centuries in the making... burdensome... angst ridden... especially daunting. And we are sorely mistaken to think that that narrative is past us. It is alive and well today. It is what gave rise to the Black Lives Matter movement. And this is what so many white Americans don’t understand. Black people in America continue to live that narrative while most white people are oblivious to it.

Indeed, the white elephant in the cultural living room is the psychodrama of the black community living in the context of the white power structure. W.E.B. Du Bois identified this phenomena as early as 1903 and labeled it “double consciousness,” meaning that black people not only possess a consciousness formed by their race and experience, they must also possess the consciousness of what it means to be black in a white world, that is, they must look at themselves through the eyes of the other. White people can surely understand what Du Bois meant by this, simply by asking themselves, “What is it like to be a white person in a black world?” This seems a veritably nonsensical question, doesn’t it, my white friends? The extent that it seems nonsensical is the extent to which one identifies with the white power structure, on which more perhaps down the road...

About 60 years after Du Bois MLK again named the white elephant in the cultural living room. This taxonomical exercise cost him his life. Further, that big white beast has hardly been tamed. Surely progress *has* been made toward realizing MLK's vision of a world in which all children are judged by the content of their character and not the color of their skin. But the fact remains that institutional racism persists and there is still a great deal of consciousness raising to do. That, in general terms, is why the Black Lives Matter movement has emerged. Hence, while all lives matter, blacklives matter, and the Black Lives Matter movement matters to all of us, for as MLK also said, we are "caught in an inescapable network mutuality."

As in the times of W.E.B. Du Bois and MLK, today there is a predictable backlash against the black community organizing and asserting its inherent worth and dignity. To date we have not seen the violent forms of backlash that were evident in the 1960s but the context in which such violent forms of backlash could occur is developing. There was white power structure tolerance for the Black Lives Matters movement when it began, following the acquittal of George Zimmerman, the Floridian man who shot Trayvon Martin to death. However, the Black Lives Matter movement has proved to have staying power. Hence commences the narrative game...

If you were attending GPUC in the Fall of 2015 you might have heard me deliver a sermon on narrative. Narrative is the interpretation of events according to a storyteller. Storyteller A might spin narrative X on the basis of certain events. Storyteller B might spin narrative Y on the basis of those same events. Narrative X and narrative Y can be so significantly different from one another that the events to which the narratives refer ultimately lose significance: the most persuasive narrative simply becomes reality. Politicians and the media understand this full well. If one listens to the words of politicians during election cycles and the storylines of the media through the lens of narrative, one can see the truth of this. Further, one can see how language becomes a tool in the narrative game. Politicians and the media rush to frame events with certain language, in an attempt to tell the most persuasive narrative, that is, in an attempt to create reality for us. Sadly, this succeeds more often than it fails.

Let me give you a simple example. Raise your hand if you remember the race riots of the 1960s. Now raise your hand if you remember the black revolution of the 1960s. Language matters, doesn't it?! You can try this for yourself. The next time someone mentions the "race riots" of the 1960s, interrupt the speaker with the following phrase: "You mean the revolution?" You'll immediately change the way the language game has been played for the last 50 years and cause a glitch in the speaker's system. On the one hand, it's always fun to watch a presumed narrative come to a screeching halt. On the other hand, you'll raise consciousness.

We now see the narrative phenomena occurring relative to the Black Lives Matter movement, which is evident if one pays attention to the language used to talk about the movement. From the Internet to our television sets, we increasingly see and hear the Black Lives Matter movement referred to as a "terrorist" organization by conservative politicians and media outlets. No less than the following have begun playing the narrative language game, by repeatedly referring to the Black Lives Matter movement as a "terrorist" organization: Tim Constantine of *The Washington Times*, Sean Hannity and Bill O'Reilly of *Fox News*, and Rush Limbaugh. Hosts of other less prominent figures have taken to

referring to the Black Lives Matter movement as a “terrorist” organization. A simple Google search will give you ample evidence of this.

So, it is important to understand the language game and its role in producing narratives. Further, it is important actually to play the game oneself. Those who produce narratives must be countered by those who hold to a reality that insists on the inherent worth and dignity of every person and the recognition of the inescapable network mutuality in which we are enmeshed.

The Black Lives Matter movement is but the latest incarnation of the attempt of the black community to organize and assert its inherent worth and dignity. I want to encourage us to see this movement both as a reminder of, and an opportunity to work toward those values we Unitarian Universalist profess. Of course I am primarily speaking here of our first principle: the inherent worth and dignity of every person. But I am also speaking to values that the inherent worth and dignity of every person entails, like justice and freedom.

There is great work before us, my friends, both in scope and importance. The conditions are right for us seriously to engage antiracism work. If we don’t embrace the Black Lives Matter movement directly, there is always the NAACP or the Southern Poverty Law Center. Indeed, the new Grosse Pointe - Harper Woods chapter of the NAACP has a number of GPUC members in it already and meets here every fourth Thursday of the month at 6 PM. Consider joining us. What better opportunity might we have to put our action where our mouths are and begin this work more earnestly?

I will end here with this thought:

There is one worthy goal: radical inclusivity.

There is one true path to that goal: unconditional love.

May it be so.