

# AFFIRMING BEAUTY IN DARKNESS

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*...Is there no beauty in darkness?*

*I ask this question.*

Frederick W. Wilson

The question [raised] in this poem by Fred Wilson is not a rhetorical one. Our culture and our language reinforce the exclusion and devaluing of persons of color. In our culture, white has come to represent all that is pure and good, it has become 'superior.' White is associated with the heavenly, the clean, the innocent. At the same time, our language portrays a generally negative usage of the word black, associating it with sin, evil, wicked, gloomy, depressing. Ascribing negative and positive values, respectively, to the colors black and white enhances the institutionalization of this country's racist values...

Blacklist  
Blackmail  
Black Mark  
Black Magic  
Black Market  
Black Mass  
Black Monday  
Black Hearted  
Black Plague  
Black Mood

Good guys wear white, bad guys wear black; we fear black cats; we talk about the Dark Continent. However, it's okay to tell a white lie; lily-white hands are coveted, it's great to be pure as the driven snow; clouds are white and dolls, angels and brides wear white. The color white is associated with purity; the color black with impurity. Devil's food cake is chocolate; angel's food cake is white!

We shape language, and we are shaped by language. Our use of light and dark language and imagery shapes our attitudes about persons of color and inflicts constant psychological damage on the entire society by the use of connotations that have racist implications. Our thoughtless use of the terms white and black, dark and light, assume dimensions of overt racial significance. If we are ever to be free of racism, we must understand the many ways that racism is manifested in our society, and that language is one of them.

There is a common misconception that racism in America no longer exists; that it ended sometime in the late 60's or early 70's. Let's be clear about one thing. Racism is as alive today as it was 20 years ago, though it is often manifested in more subtle ways. America is a racist culture; it has been one since it was first colonized by Europeans. Racism continues to be a core value and practice of American culture and life. "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the colorline - the relation of the darker to the lighter races," wrote W.E.B. DuBois in *The Souls of Black Folk*, published in 1903. The problem of the colorline is still with us as we approach the end of the 20th century.

Twenty years ago, the Kerner Commission issued a report which warned, "Our nation

is moving toward two societies, one black, one white - separate and unequal. Last week, a group of specialists on race and urban affairs, some of whom worked on the Kerner Commission, reported that the problems seen then still persist. While strides have been made in some areas of race relations, the plight of poor, inner-city blacks, they concluded, is more dismal now than it was 20 years ago. Tearing the nation apart today, the new report said are "quiet riots" in the form of unemployment, poverty, housing, school segregation and crime. These quiet riots are more destructive of human life than the violent riots of 20 years ago. They warn that America is again becoming two separate societies..."

We like to think that the sports arena is one place where we have attained equality and an absence of racism. However, according to an article in the Florida Flambeau, psychologist Raymond E. Rainville, of the State University of New York, found that the announcers of National Football League games on the three major television networks, subjected black athletes to more negative comments about their talents, abilities and motivation. He concluded that the announcers were "building a positive reputation for white players and a comparatively negative reputation for black players." It seems that the bias against black even extends to those wearing black uniforms. In a controlled experiment, two researchers from Cornell University, Mark G. Frank and Thomas Gilovich, using experienced football referees, discovered that the referees were more inclined to penalize teams that wore black uniforms than teams that wore white ones.

Language not only influences how white people view persons of color, it also influences how black people see themselves. These unremitting negative racial associations have a subliminal effect, in the same ways that the sole use of man and mankind to indicate dual-sex humanity distort the vision after a time. Researchers have found that two-thirds of the black children participating in a recent study prefer white dolls. This same study also indicates that in American society children associated being white with success, popularity and beauty....

It is time for our language to reflect the beauty of both black and white. It is time for our language to fashion new mirrors to reflect positive images of all people. Then, perhaps we can help to grow persons to know their own worth within themselves.

My mother and I have been discussing grandparents and great-grandparents a lot lately. Remembering her grandmother, she writes me, "I am certain that Grandma never considered herself prejudiced, but consider: I was the darkest of the grandchildren, the youngest and her favorite, whether because I spent so much time with her or because she pitied me, I don't know. But she called me her 'Brown Sugar' and often said, 'Poor, Brown Sugar Child, all your mother did for you was to give you a nose and a little hair.' My own beloved grandmother, whom I never thought had a prejudiced bone in her body, when faced with the stillbirth of her only son's child said, "It's all for the best." I thought she meant because my aunt and uncle were both nearing forty and the marriage seemed to be in trouble. My mother tells me, no, she was afraid the child would be dark like my uncle's wife. I don't think either of these foremothers of mine was operating out of prejudice, but rather out of the knowledge that in this culture, white is perceived as good and black is not!

What does all this have to do with religion and UUism in particular? Our Principles and Purposes speak of "the inherent worth and dignity of every person" and "Justice, equity and compassion in human relations" and of "The goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all." Our language as a religious people must constantly reaffirm the equal worth and beauty of all people. As the Hymnbook Resources Commission looks at our current hymnbooks, we see that UUs have a problem here.

Our theological language in general and especially our hymns use light and dark as metaphors for good and bad. The preference for white/light is obvious. The opposition to black/dark is equally obvious. We present only the positive images of light and white are presented in our religious language. Likewise only the negative images of black/dark are used.

Some examples from *Hymns for the Celebration of Life* make this abundantly clear:

*In the darkness drear*

*Too long the darkened way we've trod*

*Turn our darkness into day*

*I saw the powers of darkness put to flight*

*On shadowed thresholds dark with fear*

*And dawn become the morning, the darkness put to flight*

*Praise ye, daughters and sons of light*

*Ring out the darkness of the land, ring in the light that is to be*

*O'er white expanses, sparkling pure the radiant morns unfold*

### **Is there no beauty in darkness?**

Our hymnbooks contain no negative images of light/white. Our hymnody reflects a bias toward light/white and a bias against black/dark. We've become stuck in a single interpretation of the rich symbolism of dark and light. "We have been trained in our Western culture to seek only the light, the masculine "Yang" of our existence. Yet all creation and wisdom teach us to seek out and await in the dark, the feminine "Yin" aspects of our soul," writes John Giannini. As long as we continue to legitimate our hatred of the dark with theological language, we can continue to justify our prejudices, and maintain the racist climate of our culture.

Mark Belletini writes, "The impulse toward inclusive language is rooted in a religious ground. It is a discipline of consciousness-raising that claims by redefinition the vision of Universalism. Such consciousness roots our actions in the richest soil of our UU heritage. "This is a discipline which each of us is capable of undertaking. Often, when faced with situations of human injustice, we feel powerless to change the economic, social and political conditions which are at the root of such injustice. If we can begin with something as simple and yet as powerful as language, perhaps someday men and women can live without the dominating need to crush another to prove their worth as a person -- or a nation. One of the current advertising placards on the "T" reads "Words hit hard as a fist. Watch what you say." Let's all take that advice to heart. Let's remember that what we say has the power to hurt or to heal.

It is vital that we acknowledge that there are negative connotations to white. It can be soft, vulnerable, pallid, and ashen. Light can be blinding, bleaching, enervating. We must acknowledge that darkness has a redemptive character, that in darkness there is power and beauty. It is the place that nurtured and protected us before our birth. Welcome darkness, don't be afraid of it or deny it. Darkness brings relief from the

blinding sun, from scorching heat, from exhausting labor. Night signals permission to rest, to be with our loved ones, to conceive new life, to search our hearts, to remember our dreams. The dark of winter is a time of hibernation for both plants and animals; seeds grow in the dark, fertile earth.

The words black and dark don't need to be destroyed or ignored, only balanced and reclaimed in their wholeness. The words white and light don't need to be destroyed or ignored, only balanced and reclaimed in their wholeness. Imagine a world that had only light - or a world which had only dark. We could not exist in either. Imagine, if you can, a world where everyone looked and acted just the same. We need to revalue both light and dark, they are both necessary to our continued survival...