



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK
Spirituality · Community · Justice

**Developing Double Consciousness:
Beyoncé, Black Panthers, & W.E.B. Du Bois**

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At our special congregational meeting this morning, we voted to approve a new mission statement: **“We join together to encourage spiritual growth, build a beloved community, and act for peace and justice.”** To reflect on how we might live out those goals, I would like to invite us to consider this mission statement from the perspective of W.E.B. Du Bois (1868 - 1963).

Among Du Bois’s many accomplishments, he was the **first African American to earn a doctorate from Harvard University** (Dorrien 168). He was **one of the co-founders of the NAACP**, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (221). And he was a fierce activist for racial equality for many decades. If you want to learn more about Du Bois, there is an excellent new book by Gary Dorrien titled [The New Abolition W. E. B. Du Bois and the Black Social Gospel](#) (Yale University Press, 2015). But **perhaps the best entry point into Du Bois’s life and thought is his own book [The Souls of Black Folk](#)**. For now, I invite you to hear just one sample of his prose:

If in the heyday of the greatest of the world’s civilizations, it is possible for one people ruthlessly to steal another, drag them helpless across the water, enslave them, debauch them, and then slowly murder them by economic and social exclusion until they disappear from the face of the earth — if the consummation of such a crime be possible in the twentieth century, then our civilization is vain

and the republic a mockery and a farce. (26)

Du Bois could write—powerfully and devastatingly—and these words remain relevant today in our age of the #BlackLivesMatter movement, well over a century after they were first published in Du Bois’s 1899 The Philadelphia Negro.

Another reason that Du Bois’s perspective continues to be relevant, especially to religious progressives such as Unitarian Universalists, is that he had a **strong skepticism toward religious orthodoxy**. For instance, back in 1940, he did not hold back when delivering a commencement address at a historically Christian university: he called them out for “a childish belief in fairy tales, a word-of-mouth adherence to dogmas, and a certain sectarian exclusiveness.” He criticized their teachings about Jesus as “a miserable apprehension of the teaching of Christ.” At the same time, similar to the way that we UUs seek to draw wisdom from all the world’s religions, balanced with the insights of modern science, Du Bois, also had a spiritual wellspring of his own, a keen appreciation of Jesus, and a lover’s quarrel with the black church. His writings were strewn with religious images and references throughout his career, even after he supposedly dropped religion for Marxism.... **“Du Bois was not anti-religious; he was against faith used for fraud, belief used to bully, and Christianity when used to control....”** (22-23)

Indeed, I suspect Du Bois would concur with Pope Francis’s blunt evaluation last week of Donald Trump’s position on immigration: “A person who thinks only about building walls, wherever they may be, and not building bridges, is not Christian.” Go, Pope Frank!

Returning to Du Bois, one of the most fascinating details about his life is that he died at age 95 on August 27, 1963, the same day that thousands of Americans were on their way to the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. **In a symbolic passing of the torch, the day after Du Bois died, The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. took to the stage in front of the Lincoln Memorial to deliver his “I Have a Dream” speech.**

Dr. King and the Civil Rights Movement did not emerge out of nowhere. King and many of his allies were part of a much larger black social gospel movement that started long before them (25) And it helps to step periodically out from the trenches of peace and justice work to take a longer view at how **the work for peace and justice in one generation can lay the**

groundwork, often in unpredictable ways, for progress in the next generation.

To consider what that might mean here at UUCF, I invite you to look at the insert in your Order of Service titled “**Continuum on Becoming an Anti-Racist, Multicultural Institution.**” When I first signed-up for an anti-racism workshop more than a decade ago, the continuum was one of the parts of the training that most resonated with me. As with many open-minded, curious, progressive people, I found it relatively easy *intellectually* to begin to see **the difference between *individual* racism (“personal prejudice”) and *institutional* racism**—the more insidious systemic bias that is intricately woven into our criminal justice, employment, housing, healthcare, political and education systems, which privileges whites and discriminates against non-whites. Increasingly, I have become aware that changing the minds of individuals is an important first step in the long journey of dismantling such *institutionalized* racism.

Studying this continuum over time has led me to *celebrate* how far we have already come (thanks to Du Bois, King, and so many others), *recognize* how far we have to go, and *see* some steps needed to get there. Specifically, you’ll see on the continuum chart **three paradigm shifts regarding racial and cultural differences: (1) experiencing differences *negatively*, (2) *tolerating* differences paternalistically, and (3) *celebrating* differences.** As a native son of South Carolina, I know all too well the history of exclusive, officially segregated institutions — and their ongoing effects that continue into the present. We are right to celebrate that we have made significant progress on the continuum toward rectifying many obvious injustices.

That being said, it is important to recognize that **progress along this continuum often happens *not* in a linear progression, but in a *spiral* that loops backward even as it moves forward.** From that perspective, I would invite you to consider that, collectively as UUCF, there are many ways in which we are “An *Awakening* Institution” that is increasingly interested in “Anti-Racism Analytic Change.” And this continuum invites us to see some of the ways we will know whether we are continuing to awaken collectively as UUCF, when we:

- **Sponsor programs of anti-racism training, and**
- **Develop deeper understandings of accountability to oppressed communities**

Those are our growing edges.

The challenge is to admit that we are still in the messy middle. Importantly, **that confession is not about self-flagellation; it is about emboldening us to do what it takes to become a more inclusive, transformed institution.** Looking at a few more of the bullet points on the continuum, it is impossible to say in advance what it would look like specifically here at UUCF to “ Intentionally redefine, restructure, and act upon anti-racist perspective on all levels of [our] internal life and [our] relationships to the community” and “Audit and restructure all aspects of institutional life for full participation of people of color, including their worldview, culture, and lifestyles.” But I can say that I am grateful to be on this journey with you—of finding out. In the words of one black liberation theologian, “Set your pace as if you are going to do [anti-racist] work for the rest of your life. **There is joy in this work, because it enhances your humanity.**”

This turning point *from* the messy middle of paternalistically tolerating differences (in intentional and unintentional ways) *to* authentically celebrating differences is another place where Dr. Du Bois can be a guide for us today. Du Bois wrote that **living as a person of color in a white supremacist country has given people of color a “double consciousness”** (30). In the spoken meditation, Danielle described a similar “double consciousness” from growing up female in a sexist culture. Likewise, there is the “double consciousness” of the closet for many Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender folk — or for people living with disabilities in an ableist society.

Du Bois wrote that his experience of double consciousness emerged from being forced to look at himself “through the eyes of others, of **measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity**” (187). Du Bois’s transformative response was not to hide the Black part of his double consciousness, but instead to hold up cultural and racial differences in tension with one another. Memorably, in *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois began “each chapter with double epigraphs pairing Negro spirituals with verses by Byron, Schiller, Whittier, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Swinburne, Tennyson, and others” (208). **In a racist, segregated society, Du Bois asserted the equivalency of Black culture with White European culture.** (That’s one of many ways he helped set the stage for Dr. King.) Today, we call this practice of “double consciousness” **Intercultural Competency: the ability to move “in and out**

of different cultural worldviews,” build bridges between cultures, and integrate cross-cultural perspectives.

People of color have long been forced to develop intercultural competency to survive amidst the white supremacist culture into which they were born. The challenge of becoming an anti-racist, multicultural institution is for those of us who have been “taught that we are white” to also increasingly develop a double—or multiple—consciousness. **That doesn’t mean that we have to get rid of white European culture, but if we want to build a beloved community, we do have to be *less of a white European monoculture* —** and instead embrace a multicultural pluralism in which European culture is *one among many* cultural differences that are celebrated.

To give you a recent example of what I mean, let me say two sentences you will rarely hear come out of my mouth: (1) “Let’s talk about the Super Bowl” and (2) “Let’s talk about Beyoncé.” In general, I’m not a big fan of either the Super Bowl or Beyoncé. But I’m very interested in Beyoncé’s performance at this year’s Super Bowl halftime show.

Super Bowl 50 was held in the San Francisco Bay Area, but it was not the 50th anniversary of the Super Bowl that Beyoncé was interested in celebrating. **By outfitting her back-up dancers in black leather and Black Panther-style berets, Beyoncé reminded the nation that the Super Bowl stadium was less than an hour’s drive from Oakland, where 50 years ago the Black Panthers were formed.** Backstage, her dancers were photographed with their fists raised in the black power salute and holding a sign that read “Justice 4 Mario Woods,” who in December was “shot more than 20 times” by police in San Francisco, with at least six shots hitting him in the back.

To set the stage for this demonstration, Beyoncé released a powerful video the day before the Super Bowl titled “Formation.” Among the many powerful images, the most moving is of a **young black boy wearing a hoodie while dancing in front of a line of white police officers in riot gear — invoking the memory of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin**, who was murdered four years ago this coming Friday by a white neighborhood watch volunteer who perceived a young black-skinned male wearing a hoodie as life-threatening. Unlike what happened to Trayvon, when the young black child in the video throws up his hands at the end of his dance, **the police officers raise their hands in the “hands up, don’t shoot” gesture — invoking the 2014**

murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri by a white police officer. The video then cuts to a wall of graffiti that says, **“Stop shooting us.”**

Through the lens of W.E.B. Du Bois, I invite you to consider that **Beyoncé is challenging the Super Bowl audience to have a double consciousness in regard to race:** to see the world more clearly by viewing it not only from a perspective of white privilege, but also from the Black experience of institutionalized racism. There is a lot more to say—*from* the unconscious (or perhaps conscious) racism behind the protests about President Obama’s right to nominate a new Supreme Court Justice, *to* the **#OscarsSoWhite** protest movement that will be coming to a head next Sunday evening.

But for now, as I have been reflecting on our new Mission Statement, two next steps occur to me if we want to take seriously the challenge of living into these goals to encourage spiritual growth, build a beloved community, and act for peace and justice. These steps may or may not be the ones we decide to take, but either one could be a strong catalyst for making progress in **“turning our dreams into deeds.”**

The first step might be hosting an eight-session workshop here at UUCF next year titled Beloved Conversations, a new experiential curriculum designed by Meadville Lombard, one of our UU-identity seminars, to facilitate **“Healing Conversations About Race and Identity.”**

A second step might be recruiting members and friends of UUCF to attend next year’s annual “Leading Edge” conference in New York City. (If you are feeling especially motivated, the next “Leading Edge” conference is this April 15-17, so there is still time to sign-up and attend two months from now.) The focus of this conference is **“Preparing Ethical Leaders for a Just Society,”** and I’ve heard many UU congregations report transformative results for their peace and justice work from attending this conference, which networks “activists, analysts, preachers, poets, prophets, teachers, trainers, and writers.” (Closer to home, there are at least three anti-racism events or trainings happening in our district in early March. Details are online at jpduua.org.)

For now, I will close with these words from Peter Morales, the first Latino president of the Unitarian Universalist Association:

My dream for Unitarian Universalism is that we confess that **we do not have all the answers**. We need to admit that this is hard work, that [**cultivating anti-racism and multiculturalism**] **is as rigorous a spiritual discipline as we will encounter....** We not only have gifts to give each other, we *are* gifts to each other.... Our journey toward wholeness has just begun. We are not sure of the way. We have often lost our way in the past, believing our destination was in sight and easily reached. We were a bit arrogant and a bit naive. We are wiser now. We know we will not get there soon. And we know **we need to walk together and walk humbly**. Come. Let us make that journey together. One step at a time; *paso por paso*. Hand in hand; *mano en mano*. Come. Leave no one behind. Together, we can make this journey. Come. (405)