

Prisoner of Hope

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Last Summer, while attending the General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association, I had occasion to hear a lecture given by Cornel West. Dr. West, who teaches at Princeton, is the author of the best-selling book, *RACE MATTERS*, published by our publishing house, Beacon Press. I had read the book, and was eager to hear the author discuss his concerns in the context of our annual denominational gathering.

The question of racism is one which has dogged our movement for most of our history. It is no secret that counted among the early Unitarians in New England were some of the wealthiest and most sophisticated families of the region, many of whom had made the family fortune in the infamous triangle trade, which involved trading molasses and rum for slaves and selling those slaves in the West Indies and in the southern colonies. At the other extreme, early Universalists were among the first to denounce slavery as incompatible with the assumptions of the new nation and inconsistent with the moral imperatives of true religion. Great Unitarian leaders like, William Ellery Channing, entered the debate on slavery, denouncing it as an unacceptable practice. The great Unitarian preacher and social reformer, Theodore Parker, went ever further. Parker publicly burned the Constitution of the United States, calling it a pact with the devil since it recognized the institution of slavery. Parker, it is said, wrote his sermons with a loaded pistol on his desk, determined to defend runaway slaves under his protection. The abolition movement received much support from individual Unitarians and Universalists, but at the same time, other Unitarians, who played a major role in the political establishment, were fearful of the consequences of such radical agitation, and many Universalists equivocated in their response to slavery; for, while they hated the sin of slavery, they were unwilling to condemn the sinner, the slave holder--they looked in vain for a win-win solution to a no-win situation.

Eventually the Unitarians and the Universalists resolved their ambivalence, and became staunch advocates of an end to all forms of racial segregation, and to all systems of apartheid. But at the same time, we have remained a predominantly white, middle-class, establishment denomination, with few people of color in our congregations or in our leadership. When the call was issued for support of the Civil Rights movement--in Selma, or in Chicago, or in Birmingham--Unitarian Universalists responded in great numbers. We marched, we petitioned, we boycotted, we voted to end centuries of injustice and oppression of African Americans and a few of us even died for the cause. We used our publishing house, to print important books on the question of racism in America. We gave a public platform to African American leaders long before they had achieved national prominence. And our concern for racial justice continues to be part of our social consensus. But the fact is that we have remained a stubbornly monochromatic movement.

I wanted to hear what Cornel West would say to this white, affluent, well-educated denomination.

What I heard from Dr. West did not surprise me. Here was a man who was clearly part of the black middle-class: well educated, articulate, successful, accomplished. He could speak to us in our language and he recounted to us a familiar litany of the daily instances of disrespect and racism which he encounters in his life--little things, like the recurring experience of watching as taxi-cabs in the city regularly pass him by in favor of white passengers; of knowing, in a strange neighborhood, that he is constantly watched by police and citizens alike because of the color of his skin, of never being quite free of the fear that he may be the victim of police violence because he is not white. And he related that personal experience to larger questions of political and economic and social policies.

He also recounted the sense of loss which comes to African Americans who are successful in terms of the dominant culture. They grow away from the African American community and come to fear it and the crime and violence of the inner city. Like the rest of us, they tend to forget the positive support structures in those impoverished communities, structures which have persisted over the generations despite the enormous challenges they have confronted, and think only of the pathology which receives such relentless attention from the media. Unable to enter fully into the life of main-stream America, and no longer fully part of the African American community, such people live in a kind of limbo.

Little of this was new information for me. As I listened to Dr. West, I found myself remembering other times and places: African American members of my congregation in Illinois, who, from time to time, had to explain to the police why they were on the wrong side of town as they made their way to church; my son, who is African American, and the way in which, as a young man, he was frequently stopped by the police in his own neighborhood and forced to explain and justify his presence; the night he spent in Jail, while he was in college, and the manner in which the police refused to answer our questions, and eventually lied to us when we attempted to determine his situation; the young soloist who stood in this church and explained to us the circuitous route he takes to Summit in order to avoid neighboring communities where he is likely to be stopped by the police and forced to justify his driving through the area; and I heard my son, again, explaining his tenuous relation to the ghetto school children with whom he works, saying, "I'm no role model for them; to them, I'm just a Black dude who talks White."

Dr. West, with great passion, offered us insight into what it means to be black in white America, a successful African American in this era when segregation is no longer the law of the land, but racist practices and assumptions still flourish. He gave voice to the frustration, the anger, the sense of isolation which often accompany being African American. He gave us insight into the sense of pervasive helplessness when it becomes clear that no matter how the law is written, there seems no way to repeal the terrible legacy of racism and prejudice which slavery and its aftermath have bequeathed to us all.

At the conclusion of his eloquent and passionate presentation, Dr. West indicated that he was willing to entertain questions and comments from the audience. The audience, being composed of Unitarian Universalists, was eager to engage the speaker in dialogue. As often is the case, much of the conversation took the form of personal testimony, affirming the concerns of the speaker and reinforcing the points he had made. One member of the audience, however, asked Dr. West, in light of his experience, was he optimistic about the future. Did he believe that there was any way in which we might overcome the terrible legacy of our history?

Dr. West paused for a moment. Then, with sadness in his voice, he said, "No. I am not optimistic about the future." He went on to talk about conditions of our cities; the daily destruction of the lives of black people; the unwillingness of our society to do what needs to be done; the role of the media, relentlessly portraying black culture in terms of violence and irresponsibility and confessed that he could not find in the contemporary world any reason for optimism. "However," he went on after a brief pause, "while I am not an optimist, I remain a prisoner of hope. The two are not the same thing."

In many ways, that last statement was one of the most important comments I heard at the General Assembly, for it has profound implications not only for how we respond to racism, but for how we address complex problems of all kinds, and it offers an imperative for a moral life at almost every level. Dr. West, in suggesting that there is a distinction to be made between optimism and hope, offered a creative perspective on a world which stubbornly refuses to incarnate our dreams or to satisfy our expectations or to realize our ambitions.

Optimism, says my dictionary, is the doctrine that everything is ordered for the best. Most of the time, I find optimism a difficult doctrine to embrace with eyes open. We live in a world awash in resources, but a world in which, nevertheless, millions are homeless and hungry and ill-clad, a world in which random violence is the daily experience of millions more, a world in which baseless prejudices and ancient hatreds inflict needless suffering and death on young and old alike, a world structured in such a way that whole generations and entire classes of human beings are treated as expendable, a world in which the poor see no future and the rich find little satisfaction, a world in which those who have nothing fear that future will be no better, while those who have everything live in constant fear the loss of what they have. In such a world, it is difficult to embrace an optimistic vision, to believe that somehow everything is ordered for the best.

And yet, that is the broken, shattered, fragmented world in which we live our lives and that is the bleeding, suffering world in which we are called to structure a moral existence. To see the world clearly is to be tempted to dumb resignation and despair. Yet, if we yield to that temptation, we become complicit in all the horrors which surround us. The great challenge is to see the world for what it is and yet not succumb to helplessness and resignation, to understand that there may be no evidence that anything we do or say or think will make much difference and yet refuse to close our eyes, refuse to censor our thoughts, refuse to silence our tongues.

Dr. West suggested that the alternative to simple optimism, or desperate resignation is hope. Hope, according to my dictionary, involves living in a spirit of expectation. To be a prisoner of hope, in Dr. West's words, is to be captured by a very special kind of expectation. The expectation which captures us is not that everything will work out for the best; not that our dreams will be realized and our ideals accomplished; not that the world will become what we want it to be. Rather, to be a prisoner of hope is to know that the world is neither defined by our fears nor limited by our dreams. To be a prisoner of hope is to be enthralled by the conviction that there is more at work in the world than we can know or understand, that the world is complex beyond our ability to orchestrate it or manage it. To be a prisoner of hope is to be caught up in the expectation that somehow, in ways we cannot imagine or anticipate, out of the deep and unformed resources of existence may arise, at any moment, people and circumstances with the strength to transform us and the world, our dreams and our fears in ways we cannot anticipate. To be a prisoner of hope is to understand that there exists in the world a power we do not control and do not fully understand, which, at any moment may redeem our history, moving it in different and unexpected directions. To be a prisoner of hope is to live with a fundamental trust in the underlying nature of reality and its ability to confound our worst fears and our most cherished dreams, producing a world richer and more challenging than anything we could have planned or envisioned. And above all, to be a prisoner of hope is to hold oneself open, ready to respond affirmatively when the new possibility erupts among us.

Tomorrow the nation, amidst the "I Have A Dream Sales," will be celebrating and remembering the life of a man who exemplified this kind of hope. If you read the life of Martin Luther King, Jr., it becomes clear that there is little in his early life to explain the impact he was to have upon the nation and the world. The child of the black middle class, what David Halberstam in his book, *THE FIFTIES*, refers to as "Black Baptist Brahmins," Martin Luther King, Jr. had, from birth, a favored position in the African American community. As a child he was protected from the economic vicissitudes which swept the nation and black Americans especially. He was guarded from the full experience of racism and segregation. He was well educated, at the best schools. He went north to graduate school, where, it is alleged, he did well in part because he plagiarized portions of his dissertation. He was a young man who could expect a bright future, and who was not reluctant to indulge his appetites. He returned to the south, to the ministry of a prestigious church. He was shaped and molded by many of the same forces which shaped and molded countless black preachers, and he shared many of the same flaws and shortcomings to which such men seemed susceptible. He appeared destined to spend his life as the respected and trusted and beloved chaplain of the Black elite. There would have been little reason to believe that somewhere deep in this man was hidden the power to move a nation and redirect history.

Nor would anyone have been optimistic about Montgomery, Alabama, as the place where the civil rights revolution might begin. When Rosa Parks, tired from a day of work, climbed on a bus, and refused to give up her seat to a white man, no one would have guessed that this simple event would provide the impetus to topple the structure of

segregation across the nation, and call out of Martin Luther King the great power which lay hidden within him. In that unexpected, almost random circumstance, the times and the people came together to produce an unanticipated and unpredictable change. In the midst of the least promising of times and circumstances, lie the possibilities for a different world. To be a prisoner of hope is to know that in any circumstance there are always more possibilities than we can imagine, that there are always more resources than we can comprehend, and that novelty, a new beginning is always possible. To live in hope is to know that the world, at its base is never manageable, that it is full of surprises and challenges and possibilities, and that therefore we must learn to expect the unexpected and to open ourselves to new opportunities as they arise.

A prisoner of hope does not believe that everything will always work out for the best, or that all problems will be solved. A prisoner of hope does not believe that future will assume the some preconceived form or structure. A prisoner of hope does not have to have all the right answers to all the great challenges. A prisoner of hope is one who seeks to respond with integrity to the moral challenges of the day, knowing that the effort may be inadequate or futile or even wrong, but that what is required of us is not that we be right but that we be engaged and that we remain open to the lessons the world is trying to teach us.

Sometimes what we are called to learn is that we must live indefinitely and as creatively as possible with problems which do not seem capable of solution. Sometimes we are called to learn that there are other paths to resolution than the ones we have favored, along which we have journeyed so long. Sometimes we are challenged to abandon our familiar responses and embrace risky possibilities.

The one thing a prisoner of hope cannot do is to embrace pessimism. Pessimism, after all, is little more than a tantrum, an angry and childish response to a world that has not seen fit to follow the script we have written for it. A prisoner of hope does not give way to despair, but struggles for justice and peace and mercy in this less than perfect world, always open to emergent novelty, always ready to learn what is to be learned and to embrace the unexpected possibility which time and circumstance cast up out of the wreck and ruin of our dreams and hopes.

The night before Martin Luther King died, he gave a speech in which he outlined rather dramatically. what it might mean to live as a prisoner of hope. In what seemed almost a premonition, he told the audience that he had been to the mountain top, that he had seen the promised land, and he knew, in his heart, that they would reach that world of promise. He did not know how they would make that journey. He did not know that he would enter into the promise with them. But that, he said, did not matter. He had been to the mountain top and had seen over into the land of promise and somehow, some day, in some manner he could not describe the promise would be redeemed.

That is to be a prisoner of hope: to see the world as it is, clearly and without romantic illusions; to feel its pain and its injustice and its inequity; to understand fully the distance between what is and what ought to be; and to give ones self to the work of narrowing that

distance, not because we know what needs to be done, and not because we have assurance that it will make a difference, and not because we will reap the rewards of our efforts, but because, by enlisting ourselves in the work of the world, we open up the possibilities of unexplored avenues, unanticipated alternatives, unexpected opportunities out of which some new thing may emerge. To be a prisoner of hope is to seek to ally oneself with the forces of renewal in world where logic and reason suggest renewal is an impossible dream.

And that, my friends, is what religion at its heart is all about--evoking and encouraging and sustaining people who are determined to live as prisoners of hope.