

The Arc of Justice Up Close and Personal

I am tired... triggered... stressed... outraged... terribly sad...

How do I compress 400 years of injustice into the few minutes of a sermon? How do I do that without lecturing, or accusing, or making people feel bad about themselves? When I wrote this sermon, I struggled with what to say about our UU principles and how they address this difficult time of racial upheaval. Then it occurred to me that we already know what those principles say. We already know what we need to do to make a more perfect union. You probably don't know what it is really like to be a black man in this society. So this morning, I'm going to tell you what it is like.

You know, I had my first life-threatening experience with a Southern Sheriff when I was 12 years old in 1968? How can you know that out of the countless times I've been stopped by police in my life, at least seven times were for completely non-legal reasons? Did you know I was stopped by two separate pairs of police in cruisers within 10 minutes on one night in Santa Barbara, California, and that both sets of officers tried to provoke me physically? I survived that experience because I was a college student, and I guess I wasn't threatening enough, or maybe breaking my head might cause too much trouble with the university. Did you know that in March of 2012, I almost did not make it back from a trip to Texas because a Texas Trooper detained me for nearly an hour. He interrogated me in his cruiser because I believe he was trying to decide whether to kill me that day. I survived that time because I disarmed him with patience and kindness and thoughtful listening and... well... I think I survived because he'd never met anybody like me.

Here's a newsflash... the police are not friendly to black people. We avoid them like the plague. They are the modern overseers who will either kill us or send us to a penitentiary plantation. So, you either survive an encounter and go home, or you're unlucky enough to have a cop who will try to provoke you through humiliation or threat into an arrest. They will tell you to say or do something. If you refuse or are simply confused, they'll claim you were resisting orders. If you argue, then you're resisting arrest. If they get you in handcuffs, depending on where you live or the mood of the cop, there is a possibility you'll never make it to the police station. Do you know how many black people have been killed by gunshots to the head while handcuffed and in police custody?

No... the police are not our friends. They sure as hell don't protect and serve us! If they do... say we have a pleasant experience... we're always surprised. If you don't believe me, find another random black man and ask him to verify what I'm saying. If he's honest, he'll tell you of his experiences that most likely surpass my own.

So, let's say you play the game, and you play by the rules. You go to college and get a degree. You learn that to succeed you always, always wear a coat and tie. Hell, you sleep in your tie so you're really, really comfortable in it. You know you have to be at least five times better at anything you do than your white counterparts.

In my case, I started a multimedia company in the Bay Area when I was 26 years old in 1984. Eight years later, I secured a 10 million dollar contract for my company with a Lockheed Space and Missiles Company division called Lockheed Integrated Solutions Company (LISC). I employed 14 people working in shifts at one of their facilities, and we were rocking. We developed specialized software and unique, innovative computer-based training for LISC. Then, when LISC won the contract, with our help, they decided to screw us. They stole our software, selling it to the government for years and not paying us for it. They also lied to the government

that we couldn't deliver the computer-based training software we promised. They told the government that because we are a minority-owned firm, they discovered we didn't have the expertise to do the work. So the government gave LISC a waiver without investigating their claims, and they sold cheaper videotaped training programs from other companies to the government instead.

After I discovered all this, I confronted LISC senior management for an explanation. Shortly after that, I was called into a meeting with them... all middle-aged white men. When I asked them why they were deliberately screwing my company out of millions of dollars, they said something to me I will never forget – something that was etched into my DNA. The Vice-President of that division told me they all agreed, “\$10 million is too much money for somebody like you”. I left my body at that moment! He then told me I could sue them, but I'd never win, and their army of lawyers would make my life a living hell. He was right. A few months later, we were gone. They looted us. They did that through racial discrimination, fraud, theft, and plain old avarice. My company didn't survive that blow. There are former employees even today, 30 years later, who have never gotten over that experience.

I learned not to demonstrate the software I created in business meetings because I was too much of a distraction in presentations. I learned to send my white engineers to do that in my place. I also learned not to show up to some clients because they preferred to interact with my white employees. If I were as assertive as a white man would be, I would be seen as threatening. If I called people out for being unfair, I had a chip on my shoulder.

Oh, and don't get me started on how much fun it is to look for an apartment. It got to be almost comical after I purchased one of those brick-sized cell phones. I'd call from the parking lot to arrange for an apartment. Two minutes later, I'd walk into the office, and somehow, they wouldn't have any more apartments. “No, we don't take cats. No, you can't pay cash three months in advance.” I learned the best thing to do was to have my white wife at the time, and her mother do the renting. I was always away on a business trip. Later, people would be incensed with me that I did not state that I am black in newspaper want ads when they came to my door looking for a room to rent in my house. Once, I managed to rent a place (had a signed contract), but the owner later told me that she rented it to a white couple because they “would be neater”.

And, let's see... shopping is always a thrill. It goes under the general category of doing anything while black. I am constantly scrutinized wherever I go. Or there is often an assumption that I shouldn't be where I am. Those questions aren't always orally expressed, but they're there, which started very early in my life. “You can't swim here 'cause you're a negro. You can't play here 'cause you're black. Would you please get something to clean this up? What are you doing in this neighborhood? Who's your friend? Where do you live? What's your address? Are you maintenance? I thought we were going to meet the CEO of your company. I know you just saw someone else doing that, but you can't write a check here. Are you in the orchestra? So, you're actually going to get in that airplane and fly it?”

You most likely have not heard most of these things before from your black friends because we are socialized to keep them from you. We are born to please you, appease you, to keep you psychologically comfortable, and to keep your mind off of our differences, so you don't see those differences and abuse us, or pity us, or victimize us for them.

I know this is a shocking thing to say, but it is based in the complex science of Epigenetics. In Resmaa Menakem's groundbreaking book called *My Grandmother's Hands*, he claims that trauma is compounding and that trauma, such as that caused by racial or environmental factors,

can be transmitted through DNA. Menakem's description of the role of DNA in transmitting trauma is eye-opening. He wrote:

“Trauma can also be inherited genetically. Recent work in genetics has revealed that trauma can change the expression of the DNA in our cells, and these changes can be passed from parent to child. And it gets weirder. We now have evidence that memories connected to painful events also get passed down from parent to child – and to that child's child. What's more, these experiences appear to be held, passed on, and inherited in the body, not just in the thinking brain.”

White people can be dangerous to us black men. Sometimes we don't know what you're going to do. Will you sick a dog on me? When I knock on your door for directions, will you shoot me in the face? If I drive in your gated community, will I be roadblocked in? If a white cop stops me, will I survive the encounter? If I offend you somehow, or you perceive me as a threat, will you use your ace-in-the-hole-white privilege to call down the wrath of white supremacist law enforcement on me? If you haven't done that yet, you can take lessons from Amy Cooper. Actually, you don't even have to do that in most states. If you're armed, all you have to do is say you were afraid for your life, and voila, you can kill a nigger in self-defense. You have to stand your ground, after all.

This insane, broken system of white supremacy coded into law, and assured by juries, is what allows 99% of all police involved in the killings of black people not to face any charges. It will enable the lawyers of the jogger Ahmed Arbery's killers, after chasing him and striking him with their trucks, to claim that the father and son killed him in self-defense because Ahmed fought them and tried to wrestle the shotgun from the son, Travis McMichael.

See, here's what I'm getting at. Epigenetically and sociologically, I have been programmed to survive by not causing white people any discomfort associated with the power of their privilege. My silence is the unspoken, unconscious, and potentially deadly dance that we do. The situation we're in is my fault for not telling you about the constant pain and suffering I experience, on top of the other crap we all have to deal with. The terrible thing is that when I don't tell you these things, I become complicit in my own oppression.

On the other hand, who wants to hear about terrible things their ancestors did? White people are not stupid. You know about the struggles black people have, and you don't want to hear about it all the time. So you pretend that the civil rights laws are working just fine. Because we live in a post-civil rights age, most of the problems of injustice, racial inequities, and economic disparity have at least a proper structure for redress that black people are not availing themselves of. You marched with Martin Luther King, or you know someone who did. You're not prejudiced. You did your part.

Guess what?

Whatever it was that you did, or now do, to be an ally of black folk – whatever contribution you once made – whatever hand you use to lift your brother... it is obviously not enough. The terrible thing is that it makes you feel bad, which makes you complicit in my oppression.

And so here we are again. The 1920s saw race riots in this country. The 1960s saw race riots in this country. The 1990s saw race riots in this country. Now, in 2020 (right on schedule), we see race riots in this country. Why? Because we have never addressed our dark secret with anything other than legislation and some goodwill. We have not changed hearts and minds.

So here we are. What do we do? How can we fix this? I have some ideas that come from our UU principles and traditions. I first want to say that the entire world has witnessed our national struggle with race. People of nearly every nation express compassion for African Americans. I have to say three good things have come out of the trauma of watching George Floyd's execution in our own country.

The first good thing is the outrage against his murder and the fierce protests that reveal an awful lot of white folks, young and old were there in the streets with us during the summer. In cities all across this nation that don't have a lot of black people in them, especially those young white kids are marching with the same fire as their black brothers and sisters. I hope they get their sorry "I marched With King" parents off their couches and into the fight.

The second good thing is that black people are finally revealing how much we are hurting. We are not willing to accommodate white America's fragility any longer. We will insist that you take responsibility for your actions and beliefs that perpetuate this unjust system of White Supremacy. The more uncomfortable you are, the more we will consider this a good sign of progress.

The last good thing is that Donald Trump doesn't pretend to hide his racism anymore. He doesn't even pretend to be a president. He has revealed his profound amorality and breathtaking narcissism in all its startling splendor. Americans have a stark choice to make: authoritarianism that preserves White Supremacy or a messy democracy that might finally live up to its stated principles.

As a people, black and white, we are tired... triggered... stressed... outraged... and terribly sad...

We can't get through this without some radical changes. People of color need to tell white people "Ouch" when we are hurt, and you white people have to believe us. We all must understand, on a DNA level, that we all suffer when one suffers. We are all diminished when one is diminished. Injustice for one is an injustice for all. Damn it, people, this is only a dry run for the crushing reality of climate disruption to come. If we can't figure out how to let go of the illusion of race and the illusion that one group of human beings are superior to others, we are doomed to extinction. And we will deserve it.

So here's how we're going to do this thing from now on. We are going to love the hell out of each other.

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