

Frozen anticipation: The intersection Between Race and Democracy Leslie Takahashi Morris

Even in February, the North Carolina sun can be blinding. This is especially true the morning after a freak ice storm. Frozen rain has sheathed the trees on the side of the highway in temporary glass. On my way from Chapel Hill to Greenville in the eastern, economically challenged part of North Carolina where race still holds an undeniable correlation to opportunity, I round a bend on the highway and am nearly blinded by the crystalline brilliance of a stand of trees. The ice sparkles and dazzles, a trumpet-blare of sight shouting off the younger bare branches of the transplanted ornamentals and glistening off the more irregular barks of the junk hardwoods dividing the highway from field. It sings, it sounds, it stuns. My reaction to this beauty is to burst into angry tears.

The tears are not for the trees and yet they are. As I take this particular trip, as I round this particular bend, I am thinking about how to make institutions I believe in responsive to the needs of those they do not serve well -- particularly to the needs of minorities within our society. This morning my chest literally aches as I think about the multicultural, anti-racist intentional new church start that was negotiating a parting with its minister, one of our denomination's few-and-growing-fewer African American ministers. I believe this to be the right -- the only possible -- decision, but, for me, it is also a failure and for my friend, for the congregation, for the extension office, and for our movement which has yet to find ways to truly share power with those whose life experiences buck the prevalent, white, middle-class norm. This decision had been made democratically at this blind intersection of race and democratic process.

So are my tears merely a response to inopportune beauty? No, they are a wrenched gut-level reaction which for a moment saw those multi-limbed forms as the growing potential of democracy and that ice as the inherent conservatism binding them from future growth. I should not be surprised by that ice, as a person whose Japanese American father and family learned during their internment in World War II what disregards idealized democracy could have for the rights of small, identifiable groups. I should be more hardened now as a person who has lived all her adult life in the South and tried to be an ally to African Americans who, as novelist and social critic Lillian Smith noted, "come in contact with evil in their own region which were accepted and defended by southern political and church leaders, all of whom claimed to be 'democratic' Americans." (Smith 1949, 76).

I am not cynical enough yet, but I am tired. This trip has been part of a longer journey, one that I have been on for the last five years. One early mile marker along the way was a Post-It note I scrawled across one afternoon in the early days of my current job. On this note, I had written "How can we stop tearing things down?" It was in that note, in that job, that I began my meditation on the problem of democracy and the rights of minorities and my search for ways to fit the two into a solvable equation.

As the then-new director of a statewide leadership community committed to helping those who had not traditionally been touted as leaders within our state and particularly women and people of color, I was overwhelmed by the breach of understanding between those raised and affirmed in the state's white-boy system and those left in its wake. I was committed to creating real conversation across difference, but

when I did, the result was an emotional and seemingly endless melee, seemingly both unresolvable and inconclusive. “Are we going to TALK forever or will we ever be able to DO anything?” one of our white male participants asked in frustration one day. Six years later, I am more skilled at the conversations – and I still am looking for an alternative way of sharing power that moves beyond the talk.

The old ways aren’t going to work simply because you put new faces in them. That lesson was seared into me when I was asked to be the policy advisor to the first African American president of the state’s 58-campus community college system. I held that job for exactly 20 months – an inexorable tenure during which I had watched how the good-ole-boy system operated on those who were not of its ilk and who, in fact, dared to disdain it. My decision to take on this leadership program job, despite my physical and emotional exhaustion, was my way of processing the unethical and deplorable behaviors I had seen, of melting the ice encasing my own heart. I needed to find a way to believe that our way of government could still meet the challenge of an increasingly diverse and militantly separatist population. I still do.

Anthony Weston notes that most of the toughest ethical dilemmas are, in fact, “right versus right” dilemmas, quoting John Dewey who wrote that “most conflicts of importance are conflicts between things which are or have been satisfying, not between good and evil.” (Weston 1997, 55). This is a variation on the theme of the right-right dilemma ethicist Rushmore Kidder refers to as “individual versus community”. Here it is a set of individuals, a group too small to have a dominant voice in a winner-take-all democratic community, struggling to have a place in our democratic functions.

Sometimes one is traveling on multiple roads at once. The stretch with the ice-laden trees serves as N.C. Highway 264 and 64 simultaneously. In my personal travels through questions of minorities and democratic institutions, I found myself on such a confluence when, shortly after my Post-It lament, I found myself at a Thomas Jefferson District meeting of the Unitarian Universalist Association. As a past-congregational president, I had been aware of district activities, but only vaguely and I was thoroughly unprepared to step into an emotionally charged vote on whether to keep or change the District’s name in light of the growing body of evidence that Jefferson’s personal relationships with his slaves were unethical.

To overturn the name required a two-thirds vote and it failed by a small margin after an extensive and grueling discernment process. After the vote, Leon Spencer, an African American then-member of the UUA Board of Trustees, stepped to the microphone in tears to say that after years of activism in the denomination, he thought he might be too tired being the unheard voice of the minority among overwhelmingly white Unitarian Universalism. Through my attendance at that meeting, I was asked to attend a pilot run of a new anti-racism program with the T.J. District Board and later to join the District’s Anti-Racism Transformation Team. Through this work, I also became an advisor and later member-on-loan to the multicultural church start-up.

With my professional work and with the denominational work, we have been on a search for alternative structures, for the kind of “shared power” that Sharon Welch talks about in *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*. (Welch 1990) We search and we travel but it seems from the mile markers we pass that we have not yet found an alternative route.

A mile marker. The ministers of the Southeastern Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association vote initially not to go through the anti-racism training but instead to use another model deemed less controversial. This repeats a refrain that the District Anti-Racism Transformation Team has heard again and again: that the model sponsored by the Faith in Action Department and its African-American head is unacceptable because it claims that racism – personal and institutional -- still exists in our congregations and in district and denominational structures. [A fact noted in the 1983 Commission on Appraisal Study which concluded “both institutional racism and individual racism have created (and still create) problems for black Unitarian Universalists.” (Commission on Appraisal, 180)]. The Team does an audit and identifies a number of the ways perpetuation is built into the District governance procedures, but we are unable to act, in large part because of the opposition of the ministers.

A mile marker. White leaders, both ministerial and lay, approach me about the performance of the African American colleague. Though I encourage them to talk directly with the African American minister, it is clear that they are uneasy in the same way that white community college presidents were loath to talk to the system's first black president. Once again I am caught asking questions about my own ethics and responsibility not to be a channel for dysfunctional rescuing.

A mile marker. I attend a meeting of the first continental gathering of people of color open to those who are not religious professionals. In the opening circle of this incredibly diverse group, pain begins to spill out even in the introductions as the majority of attendees acknowledge that they consider themselves Unitarian Universalists but no longer attend congregations because of the pervasive racism they experience there and the paralyzing invisibility they feel cloaking their perspective, their culture and their experiences.

A mile marker. The Fellows in my program are experimenting with a consensual process to help them arrive at a group decision about what set of project ideas to fund. Decision on one project is delayed when two men -- one white and one Jewish -- begin to question the merits of a project designed and lead by women and people of color. Eventually the project is passed but not before the two women who have designed it are made to feel attacked. The tensions that arise are aired and instead of dealing with the difficult differences between their world views, the parties involved decide the problem was the consensual decision-making process which allows a small number of people to stop an action. How would this group have felt, I ask them, if the parties in this case had been reversed?

A mile marker. The new church tries to construct its by-laws. This is a congregation where the majority are white, but it is a 60 to 40 majority, not the 99 to less than one more typical of the established Unitarian Universalist churches in the area. Still, the process breaks down around the issue of how to empower the people of color. The minister introduces the idea of using a caucus system and letting the caucus comprised of the people of color have a veto given the intention of the congregation to serve as a conduit to bring Unitarian Universalist values to people of color. This is widely rejected by many, including a number of the members of that caucus, as undemocratic and unfair. The minister's response is to issue a 25-page partial version of the by-laws no one else can understand and which is the straw on a

very troubled camel's back. For lack of a model that works, no by-laws are adopted and instead attention gets caught in the relationship with the minister.

And a mile marker. Through this paper assignment, being introduced to the whole idea of alternative models of structuring democratic processes. Through the writings of Lani Guinier and Henry Giroux and others, I experience a creeping feeling of embarrassment that even as a person deeply interested in governance and democracy and civil rights and as someone who had done some deliberate study of these issues, I had never been exposed to these ideas of how to restructure our democracy to make it better serve all of our citizens.

As I am traveling this particular morning, I am feeling the chill of tradition and of raw, unrepentant power. My blush of shame turns to white, hot anger and I am shouting in my car, banging my hands on the steering wheel. Fortunately, North Carolina rural roads are pretty empty at this hour of the day. More fortunately, anger generates heat and heat melts ice. In the non-metaphoric reality of those trees, the ice has already melted, trickling down as spring-tantalizing water, already hastening the coming season's growth.

Heat and more heat is what I have found in these beginning explorations into alternative methods of structuring democratic processes. If democracy is the "good" for the community, but a voice for the minority is what people of color need, perhaps we need not chose in a zero-sum, either-or choice. "In an ideal democracy, the people would rule but the minorities would also be protected against the power of majorities," Guinier writes (Guinier 1998, 4). Radical ideas such as this one brought incalculable heat on her when she was one of President Clinton's early nominees. Despite all the aspersions cast on her, she notes that hers is merely a "principle of taking turns" (Ibid., 5) that structures decision-making to allow the reciprocity that is essential to truly making democracy work. For, it turns out, Guinier's explorations into the writings of anti-democratic figures the likes of James Madison discovered that democracy was never intended to be the plaything of a set, majority interest but rather a series of "fluid, rotating interests" (Ibid., 4) who would cooperate out of a need for reciprocity.

A tyrannical majority is a set majority indifferent or hostile to the needs of numerically smaller groups. That sort of tyranny was not the democracy desired by the founding fathers, Guinier argues (Ibid., 3) and if that occurs than other democratic structures exist and should be explored. I recall Alexis deTocqueville's musing after his journeys to the experimental United States of America in the 1830s. "The advantage of democracy is not, as has sometimes been asserted, that it protects the interest of all," he wrote. "But simply that it protects the advantages of the majority." (deTocqueville 1990, 248.)

Guinier quotes Chief Justice Warren Burger: "There is nothing in the language of the Constitution, our history or our cases that requires that a majority always prevail on every issue." (Guinier 1998, 17) This makes sense and it also flies against the idea of democratic structure that most of us cut our teeth on. "There is nothing inherent in democracy that requires majority rule," Guinier writes. "It is simply a custom that works efficiently when the majority and minority are fluid, are not monolithic, and are not permanent." (Ibid., 17) I am reminded of the children's game where you try to find a hidden object guided by clues of

“cold” when you move farther from your goal and “warm” when you move closer. This idea is warm. These ideas suggest another set of roads to travel, if I can find the energy.

In fact, this is a road for our denomination, it seems to me. The fifth of the Unitarian Universalist Principles and Purposes states that “we covenant to affirm and promote...(t)he right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large.” Does this not, then give us a special mandate to try to explore alternative methods for hearing the smaller voice within our larger circle? More warmth. More ice melting. The reality is that on issues involving race, we have a permanent and often indifferent white majority in our congregations with only a little fluidity on the edges of its boundaries. Tyrannical, our black minister would no doubt conclude. One major objection to the denomination’s race work is the label anti-racist that infers that attitudes and institutional practices continue to be racist (i.e. combining power and privilege to the disadvantage of other groups.) I wonder if the majority would prefer the work labeled as “anti-tyrannical”?

My experience says an undeniable relationship exists between the success of democracy and its ability to resolve this dilemma of how to give a voice to the minority, whether it be the minority because of skin color or sexual preference or ethnicity. Sharon Welch puts it this way: “I turn to multicultural education because I think democracy is a wager, an experiment, an effort to see if it is possible on a large scale for a people to define themselves without demonizing and self-righteousness. Democracy, then, is not a given aspect of human nature, but a structure that must be created anew in each generation.” (Welch 1999, 93.) She later describes multicultural education as “the opening of spaces for interaction” (Ibid., 94) and “a process of deconstruction” (Ibid., 95). So perhaps we can’t stop tearing things down, even when we don’t know what to build next.

The risk we must take is to believe the new structure will be better for us all. “The real value in exploring alternative election systems is that engaging with and trying to remedy the experience of racial under-representation can provide useful lessons about democracy for all groups, not just blacks,” writes Guinier. “Issues of minority inclusion become an opportunity to think about issues of voter inclusion across lines of race, class and gender.” (Guinier 1998, 262-3)

Amid this growing warmth – and the certainty that the trees will grow again — I feel a chill. Why did it never occur to me to challenge democracy, to ask whether that particular form of community could hold against the injustices it was doing to individuals? Ignorance and intellectual laziness, certainly, but also clear capture by the prevailing bias on this issue: I too believed that at some level the majority vote was right, even though I disagreed with the majority view. When a vote came – to keep the District name painful our African American members and would-be members, or to adopt a shorter and less cumbersome form of by-laws for the new church start – I didn’t see another way around it. I lacked the open heart Anthony Weston urges on those seeking to resolve tensions between ethical rights (Weston 1997, 73.)

That other ways of thinking about democracy simply never entered into my frame of reference. Henry Giroux points the finger for this on our educational processes which separate the political from the conversations about difference (Giroux, 56) and he blames right-wing control over the media, politics and

economics that seeks to display “difference in order to replace it with a hegemonic project of national unity” with “the specter of race as an ideological signpost for an assault on whites.” (Giroux, 95). Will knowing about “single-member plurality” and “party list systems” and “cumulative vote” systems make me a better person or citizen or UU leader? (Amy 1993, 226-236) Maybe not, but here too a discussion of racial inequities has been perceived as an attack on whites. Being on this path is making me feel warm, warm, warm.

Yet still a frozen finger is pressing against my heart. For isn't that exactly what has happened in our denomination? Sharon Welch writes that “one of our major challenges as a nation is to learn to be accountable for our multiple identities: to recognize ways in which we have power and then to use it well, to recognize the ways in which we and other groups are denied equity, opportunity and access.” (Welch 1999, 106). And isn't that the challenge of Unitarian Universalism as well? The Commission on Appraisal Study of the black empowerment controversy put it succinctly in two of its report's concluding statements: “When it comes to racial justice, the UUA is ‘missing the mark,’ blinded by the idealism of UUs” and “In the empowerment controversy, a win/lose mentality soured the process of democracy. The philosophy and tactics of the Black Unitarian Universalist Caucus were perceived by many as nondemocratic: the data indicate that this perception was an overreaction.” (Commission on Appraisal, 182).

In so many ways, that chapter in our denominational history mirrors the national pattern. The discussion is about minority group rights versus fairness of process with majority forcing the discussion to focus on the latter. “Election reform...is not, however, primarily about electoral rules. It is not simply about getting more people of color and women into office, although that would be an important incidental benefit,” Guinier argues. “It is about learning how to enlist and resist power simultaneously.” (Guinier 1998, 271) Will our denomination have the constitution to be in the starting ranks for this unmapped and strenuous trek?

I am near the end of a particular leg of my journey. I will be leaving North Carolina, my job and my involvement at two Unitarian Universalist churches. I enter the next leg with humility.

Just as I was ignorant of these alternative ideas about democracy and how it can be fine-tuned, I am, without a doubt, ignorant of other efforts within our denomination to address these concerns. And my view of our majority culture is clearly tempered by the lens that has covered my eyes for the last five years. The experience of one state or one clearly troubled congregation or one embattled district do not constitute the sum of the truth, though fragments of a greater understanding may be embedded there. We as a denomination may not have that much chance to influence the wider society even if we do find the ethic of risk that allows us to experiment with new ways to honor minority voices. And certainly, whether I personally stay engaged with these issues or not is not of ultimate significance.

I am thinking this on the end of my physical, car-bound journey, as I near Greenville where I will meet with prospective candidates for the program that has been such an important learning ground for me over the last six years. The day has warmed and ice is falling in great, grinding sheets from the roofs of

houses and in shimmering, tinkling snake skins from power lines. In our society and in our religious association, I long for such a thaw and transformation.

Sharon Welch's ideas chide me for the certainty for which I cannot help but still long. I want alternatives with no risk of failure and loss – some new whole that the traditionalists will embrace with as much certainty as the old. “The power which is holy is also fragile,” Welch writes. “We are constituted by it; it is sustained by us. Such fragility is intrinsic to creative power. Central to its working is the eliciting of responses from others and courageous openness to novelty and creativity. Creative power, the power of love, and the power of the web of life, can never guarantee the results of its operation.”

I shiver to think it may not come or if it comes it may not last. I know I have no choice but to keep on traveling. For it is, I believe, as Lani Guinier says: “After all, democracy takes place when the silenced find a voice and when we begin to listen to what they have to say.” (Guinier 1998, 272) I believe in both those voices and the institutions they could save.

My eyes are dry. Ice shards spangle the road. I look for patterns in their glitter -- and I hope for the stamina to keep on driving.

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