WHITNEY YOUNG: PART II

A Sermon by
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The other night at our committee on ministry meeting, the conversation turned to the topic of race, and the question came up, "Why don't we have more African-American members in this congregation?" That's a question you may have thought about, too, especially as we are commemorating the memory of Whitney Young, one of our great civil rights leaders. So I thought I'd begin by sharing some of my thoughts concerning my question, and if you have different thoughts or additional thoughts, I'd like to hear those as well. I do know that none of the four UU congregations I've served in the past 30 years, including this one, has had more than one or two or three black members at any one time.

We pride ourselves on our diversity, and we are diverse in many significant ways – theologically certainly, and others as well – but diverse racially we are not, denominationally. I don't know what the exact figures are, but I suspect denominationally we are less than 5% African-American, and perhaps significantly less than 5%. The only period I know of that was different was during the black power days of the turbulent 1960's, when the UUA nearly went broke funding a black, ostensibly Unitarian Universalist, organization. During those few brief years, the figures were higher, our black membership increased. But when the funding stopped and that period of time was over, we went back to being an overwhelming Caucasian denomination. Now there are congregations that are more interracial than we are, and those tend to be in large urban areas – New York City, Washington, D.C. There are not an awful lot of those nationally. The question is why. Why are we overwhelmingly white when we value diversity, we want diversity? Certainly if members of any minority racial group made their way here, we would welcome them warmly.

It's long been said that most people become members of churches because other church members invite them. You may have heard that, and I think the figure I've seen is 40% of new church members are attracted by existing church members who invite them and tell them about the church. And I've also seen another figure recently on the UU ministers' chat list room, that the average Unitarian Universalist invites a guest once every 27 years. Now, is there a correlation?

Since I've been a member of downtown Rotary club, I've realized more than ever before just how passive we are in terms of recruiting members. Oh, there are reasons. Members of the Rotary Board of Trustees are expected to bring in personally at least one new member each year; that is our responsibility as leaders, and we are reminded of that obligation frequently. We may say, well, that's Rotary, it's not a church. There are communication advantages to joining – business networking and so on.

While some of that is true (and I know Bob Perrin would agree with me, because I've heard him say this), there are parallels between Rotary and religion. The major motto is "Service above self." Or we may say, well, we invite people only every 27 years because most of us are introverts and we're not comfortable doing that, and there's some truth in that. Or we may say we don't want to appear like those pushy evangelicals who just turn our kind off, and there's some

truth in *that*. Then, too, historically there is that shadowy strain that dates at least back to the time of the Boston Brahmins of elitism. We are the elect. Not the saved, but maybe the intellectually elect. There is some truth to that, and over the years I have met a few smug Unitarian Universalists who don't want anything to do with the unwashed masses, who want to make finding us as difficult as possible, and who've done a pretty good job in many circumstances.

When I was in Long Island, New York, I was very proud of our first new member that had come in "on my watch," shall we say? He was a male hairdresser, great guy, I think he had his own salon. And the president of our congregation, a brilliant man and a wonderful individual said, "Well, you know, he's really not the kind of member we want." Didn't meet his high standards of culture, or whatever it was.

So why don't we have more black members? Well, who among us has black friends or coworkers whom we could invite? How large is the pool? And then too it seems to me, and this is my own particular theory, that the black Christian church has been and is more vital to black culture and experience than white Christian churches are to whites, that the church experience has meant more because the stakes are different. Historically I believe membership in a white Christian church is a sign of God's blessing – or the members *think* it is – a sanctification of God's favor. The Lord has been good to me, so I am going to pay the Lord back. You know, those old commercials you could hear about "The Lord gives you the wheat, give him an hour."

Well, the black Christian church, since days of slavery, has meant much more than that to African-Americans. It's been part of the ingrained survival system. Plantation owners used to like to have a black preacher come and preach to the slaves because he would offer them the reward of the afterlife, a paradisiacal afterlife, so you could endure the hardships of this life. And there was probably even some talk of even the harder life is here, the better it's going to be over there. There will be a Day of Judgment. And blacks identify with the stories and the symbols (we just sang "Go Down Moses"), the bondage in Egypt, the bearing of the cross is deeply ingrained, I think, in the collective unconscious, and it's not part of our heritage at all. We're coming from a very different place ecclesiastically.

Let me put it another way: For us the church is an elective because we are at a certain spot on the hierarchy of needs. For blacks the church is a required subject, part of the core curriculum, if you will. Given its history, the history of blacks, the symbols, and the place that race occupies in our society. So how much overlap can there be? How much crossover is possible? Might not a black Baptist experience appear as alien to us as a Unitarian Universalist experience might appear to an African-American? And everything here is white; that's a very obvious thing. We have white columns on the outside, we're white inside, the pews are white. I don't think it has to do so much with intellect, and you'll hear people say, "Well, you know there are intelligent people among blacks, or there are intelligent people among Hispanics." I don't think it has so much to do with intelligence or logic, as it has to do with the psychological, where people are coming from.

Which is a long way around to Whitney Young, because Whitney, a black man, was a member in everything but name during the early 1950s, a member of this very church. One of our great civil rights leaders, when he was executive director of the Omaha Urban League, Whitney Young felt comfortable here, and he also felt comfortable at St. John's AME church in North Omaha,

because Whitney felt comfortable everywhere, including the Oval Office of the White House. I call him one of our hidden heroes.

I was at the Martin Luther King memorial luncheon sponsored by the Interdenominational Ministerial Association a couple weeks ago tomorrow, and it was great. There were 500 people. The majority I think were African-Americans, very interracial, and we were spoken to by Dr. Johnson, who is senior pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta. A wonderful message, very dynamic. I happened to spot a Presbyterian woman minister I hadn't seen in some time; she is a member of our clergy group. And I went over to her and said, "Georgianna, where have you been?" She said, "Well I have rheumatoid arthritis and I have to retire, I'm moving to Arizona." So we chatted for a while and I said, "You know, I just gave a sermon on Whitney Young yesterday at church." Georgianna is an intelligent woman, and she had *no* idea who Whitney Young was – had never even heard of him, that she remembered.

So Whitney Young is among our hidden heroes, because much of the best and most effective work he did was out of the public eye. He didn't grab for headlines, he wasn't sensational. His job was to sell civil rights to the white power structure and have them foot the tab for it, which they did – the corporations and then the government. He was comfortable here; he was comfortable in North Omaha. A black journalist wrote, "He was urbane enough to talk with the fat cats downtown, and hip enough to talk with the tough cats uptown, and he never seemed out of place doing either. That's one of the reasons he was undervalued during his lifetime and is less remembered now. I think people, if they have any memory at all of Whitney Young, they may confuse him with somebody like Ralph Bunche or Thurgood Marshall.

But he was also undervalued by his own people during his lifetime. He never scored high in national measures of black opinion. Nancy Weiss writes, "The very nature of the role he had carved out for himself meant that he would be mistrusted," mistrusted!, "among his own people." How could he feel comfortable at that white Unitarian church? Suspicious? Can we trust him? And there were some times when Whitney Young was called "Uncle Whitney" or "Whitey Young," or something he didn't like at all, "the Oreo cookie," black on the outside, but really white on the inside.

After his untimely death at age 50 (he died, apparently drowned, while swimming off the coast of Africa at an international conference attended by Senator Muskie and Ramsey Clark and others) William Raspberry, the columnist, wrote, "Bridge builders are, by the very nature of their work, neither on one side or the other. Whitney Young could never be either a member of the power structure, or a true-blue soul brother. It was a sacrifice he knowingly and willingly undertook because he believed it had to be done."

His contributions were immeasurable. We have no idea. One of his greatest accomplishments was transporting the National Urban League from a social service agency into a civil rights organization, and a force in the struggle for civil rights.

The Urban League has been around for a long time. It was founded in 1910, and dedicated to advancing the economic and social conditions for blacks in the city. Nothing controversial about that, unless you're some kind of racist. The Urban League left the business of political and civil

rights to the NAACP, which dealt with legislative action and protest. That was not the way of the Urban League. The Urban League's tools were negotiation, persuasion, education, and investigation, and supplying the information or the results of those investigations. The Urban League had credit for no role in critical legal victories, and it would not play a part in direct action protests of the 1950's. For example, the bus boycotts of Montgomery and Baton Rouge and Tallahassee – it wasn't involved in any of those.

Then, as the focus of the civil rights struggle moved from the courts to the streets, new and more militant organizations led the protest. They took over the vanguard. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference – do you remember? CORE – Congress of Racial Equality. And SNCC – Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee – the most radical of the groups, as it turned out, actually gave up being nonviolent and endorsed violence and a radical restructuring of society. They were against capitalism, they were against nonviolence, and wanted separatism, not early during their existence, but later.

The NAACP was seen by many young demonstrators, compared to these new groups, as too cautious, too old-fashioned, and too middle class. And then, since the Urban League had always been seen as more conservative than the NAACP, hey, they looked increasingly staid and out of touch. Whitney Young understood the need for a change in perception, the way people perceived the Urban League, and of the relationship of the Urban League to the civil rights movement.

Both happened through the League's involvement in the August, 1963, March on Washington – do you remember? – around the Reflecting Pool, a hot day. The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom was the full title, and not only did the National Urban League end up being one of the sponsoring organizations of that march, Whitney Young, who was not the official leader, had a major role in orchestrating the success of that march that we all remember, when Dr. King delivered his famous "I Had a Dream" speech. Whitney Young was deeply involved in the entire decision-making process, and was able to bring leaders of these diverse organizations – there were 10 co-sponsors – together! People from SNCC and CORE and SCLC. There were six civil rights organizations involved, and four other groups as well.

You can imagine, after years and years of not being involved in this way, his executive committee and his board were *extremely* skittish about this and reluctantly agreed to do it, and then they wanted to rescind their involvement, they wanted to pull back. Well, Whitney was able to persuade them, saying, "The revolution is here, and unless we are involved, we will be left by the wayside. We need to change with the times; we need to change the times." And at the same time he was convincing his board, he was getting all the other groups to agree to the conditions for the participation of the Urban League, which really shaped the whole thing. The march would focus on dramatizing the general problems facing blacks, it would be interracial, there would be no violence, no civil disobedience, there would be agreement *beforehand* by the organizations as to the goals of the march. The leaders would have to share their speeches ahead of time to assure a basic consistency in the approach and agree on objectives. All of this was the work of Whitney Young. And his role is not well known today.

He sold the other nine co-sponsors, and then he was called in to do maybe the toughest selling job of all, and that was to sell President John F. Kennedy. Kennedy was worried because he had

introduced an omnibus civil rights bill to Congress, and he thought that a demonstration might hurt the chances of its passage. So he got the leaders all together at the White House and said, "We want success in Congress, not just a big show at the capital. Some of those people are looking for an excuse to be against us. I don't want to give any of them a chance to say yes, I'm for this bill, but I'll be damned if I'll vote for it at the point of a gun." So Kennedy wanted it called off. We know it wasn't called off.

It wasn't called off because of Whitney Young. Bayard Ruston, who was really the leader of the march, said that Whitney sort of boxed the President in, and addressed all of his concerns so effectively that the way was smoothed for the march to take place. And it did! It went off very smoothly.

We all remember Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech. But other leaders spoke that day, including Young. Young said, "The League's presence says, and I hope loud and clear, that while intelligence, maturity, and strategy dictate that as civil rights agencies we use different methods, we are all united as never before on the goal of securing first class citizenship for all Americans now." And then he laid out the agenda for what it would take to accomplish real equality of opportunity.

That march was a watershed for the National Urban League, as well as for our country. "From that point forward it would no longer be possible," thought Whitney, and he was right, "for people to think of civil rights agencies without considering the National Urban League." And it was here, in Omaha, that he learned to soar.

At his funeral, March 17, 1971, at Riverside Church in New York City, the great soprano Leontyne Price sang two solos, "Climb Every Mountain" from *The Sound of Music*, and the old spiritual, "Well Done." The last speaker of three was the Reverend Peter Samsom of Community Unitarian Church in White Plains, where the Youngs worshipped. And Peter said, "Young often said there were always ways not to do what you don't want to do. A nation that can send men to walk on the moon can eliminate its ghettos if it wants to. And he tried to make us want enough."

A young neighbor of Whitney's in New Rochelle commented upon his death that he was one of the very, very few strong and just and clear-sighted men who put his arms around the country and held it together to heal it, so that it would not explode. He is a hidden hero.

As the mourners left Riverside Church, the organist played one of his favorite songs, "The Impossible Dream" from *Man of la Mancha*. Young had carried the lyrics to that song on a slip of paper in his wallet for a long time. We want to thank Whitney Young, who learned to soar in Omaha, for making the dream more possible.