

Call to Worship

“No amount of technique or learning, no amount of attending talks and discussions, can ever reveal to you the unknown. If you really see the truth of this, actually experience it for yourself, then you are free of all Masters and gurus, of all teachers, saints, and saviors. Because, they can only teach you what is known, and the mind which is burdened with the known can never find what is unknowable.” Jiddu Krishnamurti - Hamburg 1956, Talk 4

Let us seek the unknown together and find peace in the truth that may be revealed.

The Common Good - Part 1
(June 23, 2013)

Sung (a la School House Rock) - We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

When I was in rehearsal for the show *Ragtime, the Musical* back in 1996, the whole performing cast had the good fortune to work closely with the creative team. Author of the original book, E.L. Doctorow; author of the book for the musical, Terrence McNally; choreographer, Graciella Danielle; director, Frank Galati; composer, Stephen Flaherty and lyricist, Lynn Ahrens. Not many people realized it but, Lynn Ahrens wrote many of the School House Rock tunes and lyrics including the “Preamble”...not the actual Preamble but the TV song. I had some wonderful conversations with her about the craft of songwriting. As a lyricist myself, I was very eager to share with her how much her music (prior to award winning shows like *Ragtime, Once on This Island* and *Lucky Stiff*) had meant to me as a very young person who was fascinated by communicating through song. I told her that the “Preamble” was one of the tunes that I hummed constantly as a child and always looked forward to during my Saturday morning cartoons. It was as a result of hearing catchy commercial music like this as well as studying the classics and a host of other music that led me to actually doing a show like *Ragtime*. She was of course, flattered. What is interesting to me now, however, is that there I was talking to her about the preamble of the United States Constitution, a paragraph that, although it has no real legal meaning, sets up the entirety of the rest of the

Constitution as an instrument designed for the *common good*. Yet, the show we were working on, *Ragtime*, was about the very different perceptions of what the common good actually is; how one person because of their sex, religion or race or social status, can experience the world as a very different set of outcomes entirely. *Ragtime* is a musical about how ill fitting the American dream really can be and the sacrifices that are made emotionally, culturally and even spiritually to live into that dream.

Right now, I am reading a very good book, *Lovingkindness: the Revolutionary Art of Happiness*. I'm only at the beginning really, but so far the author, Sharon Salzberg has shared a great deal about her own experience with discovering and embracing Buddhism. I am struck by the clarity of her writing and I expect I will enjoy not only the book but putting the book into action...its not an instruction manual on Buddhism, but rather a guide toward discovering ways to be genuinely happy. However, there is another part of me that is puzzled. Salzberg, like many Westerners, traveled to the East to seek spiritual enlightenment, specifically through Buddhism. This is something we hear a lot about, and we see a great deal here in the Bay Area...Westerners embracing Buddhism. I wonder, why don't we hear about people coming from the East seeking spiritual enlightenment here in the states...seeking it from Christianity...Judaism...Unitarian Universalism? No, instead, we hear about people coming here in search of wealth, or ways to learn how to be more wealthy. That says a lot. Why is this such a one way street? Is it that the spiritual grass is that much greener? Is Buddhism that much "better?" I am not raising this question to at all be critical of Buddhism or those seeking/practicing Buddhism. I am just asking, rhetorically, what is missing in our own Western based spiritual practices that leaves us lacking? Have we considered that it may not be lacking at all?

Consider this, every religion and spiritual practice seeks to do the same thing: make sense out of existence. Whether that is to prepare us for death, or birth, or give us tools to sustain adversity, to give us hope, to build community, all of it is aimed at satisfying the answer to the perpetual “why?” Even the lack of spiritual practice, even the determined belief that this is all we’ve got here and now, is a way of processing how we view our existence. It is human nature to ask “why” and that, as I see it, is about the only real common good that we can legitimately pursue: finding a personally satisfying explanation for the question “why life?”

Westerners traveling East to find “Truth.” Odd thing, so if on a certain basic level we are all seeking the same thing, why would someone have to go to East to find truth? What’s to say we aren’t able to attain the same level of enlightenment through our own traditions? Are they that tainted? Or are we? Why should we have to learn someone else’s ways to find enlightenment. The human animal, regardless of where they are, seeks peace in its heart. It seeks oneness with existence. In our largely Judeo Christian shaped Western world, we actually have the same goal of peace, enlightenment and truth as any Buddhist or Muslim, but we suffer from uniquely Western challenges of life. But Buddhists, Muslims and everyone else also suffer from their own unique challenges of life. No human is perfect and no human is outwardly the same. What binds us together is a sameness of inner purpose...not a sameness of outward practice. If the purpose is linked to our being human and not how we are human, then it stands to reason that we should be able to find that “truth” within; regardless of how we choose to practice that truth.

I like to study anthropology in my spare time...genetics and human migrations. It amazes me that humans who exist with no knowledge of one another all come up with the same stuff. On a biological level, we all eat and secrete, we all procreate and die, but then also on a spiritual level, we all stand in awe of things we can't explain and we seek an answer...whether that be through faith or science or both or neither. I love the fact that many scientists are actually deeply spiritual just for this reason. Ancient drawings, statues, language...all of these attest to the inner sameness of the human animal. This is the reason every culture has ritual and spiritual practices and sometimes what we call religion. There is a human tendency toward humility for our existence that wants to package that immense knowledge into something that is comprehensible; the real common good.

I try not to be the black guy who gets up and always talks about being black; and I don't believe that conversations about race are all about black and white. But I'm going to go there to demonstrate a related point. I cannot stand the expression "post racial." It implies that we have "overcome" and hints at a job well done for everyone who was fighting through the sixties and seventies...yay, its all over now. Many achievements have been made admittedly, but the same attitudes that created slavery still exist. Slavery wasn't created out of meanness. Slavery was created out of ignorance and selfishness...and a sense of inherent superiority. The assumed cultural superiority that created that disparity is still evident in advertising, public policy and pretty much everything else in this country that continues to live by a government and Constitution that was created by wealthy white men. The more I study politics, I believe we will not ever be able to claim a cultural position in the United States of being "post racial" unless we are willing to give up the foundation of our government and start again by including all of the voices that make up the population. My generation (Generation X) in the United States is the generation of

deconstruction; we think...often too much. Wedged between technology and the death of religion, civil and human rights and Reaganomics, we saw the world of the 60's and 70's spun completely out of control (my apologies to the Baby Boomers) and reaching adulthood said, quite simply, enough. The words "post racial" are part of that spinning out of control "oh, we worked so hard, so there must be a result, right?" There is indeed a result, but its not that easy.

When I can have a conversation with a 19 year old black acting student where he says "I give up...again this semester, there are no roles for me" I would say we're far from done. His gripe, which was my own gripe 30 years ago, is that in the education he is paying for, he is perpetually relegated to the position of chorus member or supporting player. Despite the best intentions of a program led by a marvelous Latino director, the roles aren't there...rather they are there, but it would require him being in a program that was predominantly black, because theater as much of our culture, is still Jim Crow the good black roles are in all black cast plays and musicals. The situation is that, in order for him to have a decent role, there must be at least 5 more of him to be able to cast and sadly in his program, there are not. But there is light on the horizon. This season on Broadway was a first. Not just for the number of leading role Tony awards given to black actors, but for the roles in which these actors won. (Patina Miller, Pippin; Cicely Tyson, The Trip to Bountiful; Billy Porter, Kinky Boots) None of these roles *had* to be a black actor, but they were enhanced by what the actors brought to the table as black actors. Gone for good are the days of an "all black cast Hello Dolly!"...even though that served a purpose in 1968. Of course, the Tonys this year, did suffer in that there were also no Latino or Asian Americans and certainly no indigenous people recognized or really included in a meaningful way in casting...and one marvelous play that was all Asian, got very little press or play at all...but the signs

are there. In the theater at least, they have actually started to throw away the rules...the Constitution and government of theater if you will, is being rewritten. Somehow, in the theater, they've started to tell the common human stories with a variety of human packaging. I believe there is hope for my young actor friend.

Again, I am put off by calling something "post racial." For me "post racial" conjures up language like "color blindness" or believing that people of all races are the same or leveling the playing field. I don't want to leave my cultural, racialisms behind...If I do, what does that leave me? You see, the problem with the concept of "post racial" as it is largely presented is that it is based on a white Western concept of "commonality" which is fine if you are white and Western. There is this assumption in "post racial" that my unique racial-ness can and WANTS to be blended into the "melting pot" and that this will be for the "common good." But that is the same assumption that told me to straighten my hair. It is the same assumption that told me to be a lawyer or doctor or banker. It is the same assumption that says I should want a heterosexual modeled relationship. But no, those priorities still leave one group calling the shots. Ask the descendants of the **Nisenan** people, the **Southern Madiu** people, the **Valley Miwok** and **Me-Wuk** people, the **Patwin** people, the **Wintun** People and the **Wintu** people any of the indigenous people of the land we are sitting on now. Ask an Australian Aboriginal...ask different people what their "common good" represents and you will get very different answers.

The way in which we need most to be come "post racial" is by letting go of a colonial Western centered world view. When you look at indigenous people living off of the land or in nomadic tribes, do you see someone who has "less" or do you see someone living their truth? Some people not only want to live in villages, but

they don't understand why we wouldn't want to live close to our multiple generations and instead choose to cocoon ourselves in homes where we have so much "space" that we rarely see even our children. Some people don't actually want to support endeavors that use money to make money. Some people don't want to be rich or even have any major stake in what our financial system is about, just ask some of our homeless populations. Yes, we all need water, but at the cost of displacing people? We all need clothing, but at the cost of modern slavery and the serious threat to health? Are money and wealth and "prosperity" bad? I suppose it depends on who is pushed out of the way or manipulated to create that wealth. And it definitely depends on who is deciding what "wealth" really is.

In certain social justice circles there is a lot of talk today about "equity" and "sustainability" and "resilience." In addition to my studies at Starr King School, I work for a non-profit organization that is all about equity. We do incredible work in helping local groups and organizations create opportunities to foster financial independence and greater wealth, access to food, education and to keep vulnerable populations out of prison.

But my challenge even to this noble organization is "to what end?" Equity...so we can all have two cars a home with a mortgage and raise children who will spend 40 years working just so they can retire? Who decided that our "American Way of Life" was such a good thing? I actually don't understand why we should have to live a lifestyle where we need to take 2 weeks of vacation. If we were actually living in balance with what our bodies and minds and community needs, we would have no need for vacation. We might actually live in balance with the seasons and also be able to embrace the shifts in ourselves from one time of life to the next, from day to day and from hour to hour. There would be no retirement, because

there would be an important role in the community for us as elders and everyone in the community would want to support that role and all the other natural roles that are part of our human way of being.

One reason I love hanging out with the teens is because many of them think like this. In fact, what seems very exciting is that there is a major cultural shift occurring in the Western world. 20 somethings in this country can't find jobs. They can't afford school and the language they speak is entirely different than the generation directly before them due to technology. So what are they doing? Changing the playing field. They're talking about pooling resources, living communally, leaving the cities, and or leaving the country and living and working entirely "off the grid." They are exploring spiritualities that have nothing to do with anything that any of us practice. They are exploring sexuality without bounds. Many of us, don't get it. We think "oh I was the same when I was young." But no, they are very, very different. The world that we...that's you and me, people over the age of 40 have created, has reached a saturation point. We cannot sustain any more useless attorneys. We cannot build any more hospitals for rich people, and staff them with professionals who look at medicine as a business. We cannot create any more schools of "higher learning" that are jammed with students who have to wait until someone else dies so that they can get a job. We cannot pump any more pollution into the earth. We cannot make our way of governing and our stewardship of the land we stole any more complicated. We cannot keep doing this...and the next generations see it clear as a bell. And although they love us, they are perfectly willing to let us charge headlong off the cliff...letting us die in the mess that we have created...because this world of capitalist pursuit without consequence does not suit THEIR common good.

Let me close by bringing this back around to our faith. In his Berry Street Lecture “There’s a Change A-comin’” last year, Rev. Dr. Frederick J. Muir criticized what he calls the “iChurch” and rabid individualism among Unitarian Universalists. It is a fascinating and delicious talk, but I caution against the negative framing of the Apple industries “i” in that the next stewards of our existence have a very different view of that little letter and the technology it represents. Instead, I think it is more a question of whether we belong to a “we-ligion” or a “me-ligion?” ME-ligion is the faith practice that is purely driven by individual goals and desires and the individual truth. We see this a lot. Some of those same people who have gone abroad seeking Buddhism or other enlightenment come squarely from this space. As do some people who experienced oppression in the name of other traditions they grew up with and carry that damage looking for healing and self reconciliation. This is an important part of Unitarian Universalism that is even lifted up in our fourth principle “A free and responsible search for truth and meaning.” But taken to an extreme, ME-ligion begins to assume that everyone is doing the same self centered practice. WE-ligion on the other hand has the potential to acknowledge the identity of the self, while pointing more toward our sixth principle “Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.” Humility. Here I believe is one place where we start to point toward that truth, that real “common good” that I speak of. It is a common good that is small and simple enough to acknowledge that life and existence, however we experience it or explain it on a personal level, was here before us, is greater than us and will go on after us. Yet it is a common good that is spacious enough for us to be our whole selves beyond the imaginary boundaries of “states” or the history of slavery and genocide, and allows us to access what is at our unique cores outside of Western contexts. It is a common good that will enable the next generations to reclaim what it means to be truly human and wrest it from the priorities established

in a monochromatic, monophonic world dominated by a handful of cultures who were motivated by fear. And they will replace it with love. Let us help them. May it be so.