

One sentence take-away: Provide insight into the ongoing subjugation of blacks in the U.S. and the rage felt by that community.

Quotes: Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that. MLK

Nothing in the world is more dangerous than a sincere ignorance and conscientious stupidity.
MLK

Opening words: 1st quote by MLK

Closing Words, Singing the Living Tradition, #639

Several years ago I was in a local park with my daughter, helping her practice soccer, when raised voices attracted my attention. I saw a group of four young teenage boys bullying another boy about the same age. Something within me turned on, something I didn't even know was there. A deep anger welled up. I took off running, my daughter shouting behind me. Ignoring her pleas, I ran up a hill, vaulted a fence, and began screaming at the bullies in loud, vulgar street language. With some snide comments directed at me, the bullies dispersed. The bullied boy went off in a different direction without comment. I don't know if he was grateful, or if I had made the situation worse.

I know I was left shaking with anger. I wondered at what had just happened. I know that my daughter was really frightened.

Where did that rage come from? I knew but I hadn't known it was there. When I was in 7th grade I took a school bus. I hated that bus. I would sometimes walk three miles home through snow and slush to avoid getting on that bus. I rode my bike in nice weather. The upper class bullies thought it was their god-given privilege to make life miserable for "moldies", as we 7th graders were known. I'm sure the 7th grade girls were bullied as well by the upper class females, but I was too preoccupied with my own well-being to pay much attention. There were many forms to the bullying at the bus stop and on the bus, but there is one that sticks with me, almost 50 years later.

When I was that age it was totally un-cool to wear a hat, no matter how cold it was--and in Cleveland, Ohio, temperatures were sometimes in the teens or lower while we waited for the morning bus. When one's ears get that cold they are painful as circulation returns. When the bus arrived I'd try to get a seat near the front, as that was safer. The bullies all sat in the back. Unless, of course, I was their target for the morning, in which case, it didn't matter where I was sitting. A bully would grab the seat behind me, sometimes forcing someone else to find another seat. The verbal harassment would start. Then they would flick my already painful ears, causing excruciating pain. My ears, because they stuck out, got more attention than those of many of my friends. I felt powerless. I could fight back, and get suspended from school, as well as getting thoroughly beaten up, or I could just take it. I took it, feeling ashamed at my weakness.

Ta Nehisi Coates (Tah-Nuh-Hah-See) is a journalist and national correspondent to *The Atlantic*. In his 2015 book *Between the World and Me*, he describes this rage and feeling of powerlessness from the perspective of a black boy and man. He is writing to his 15 year old son.

Let me preface this by saying that I am not equating my experience in a segregated white suburb of Cleveland with the experience of blacks, particularly black males, in our country. What I recognized in Coates experience was how deeply those 7th grade experiences of fear and powerlessness and humiliation had affected me. That recognition gave me some visceral insight into what Coates described of his experience and of the experience of blacks in our country.

If I, who endured bullying as a relatively minor part of my young life, whose life was never in danger, was so powerfully and unknowingly shaped by these events, then what would it be like to experience this all of one's childhood and adult life? How would that change me? How would that change you?

Coates describes his fear and the fear of blacks throughout the book. As a parent, he is afraid for his son. As an adult, he recognizes the fear of his youth. About growing up in a Baltimore ghetto, he writes: "When I was your age the only people I knew were black, and all of them were powerfully, adamantly, dangerously afraid." "Everyone had lost a child, somehow, to

the streets, to jail, to drugs, to guns."ⁱ "I had seen this fear all my young life, though I had not always recognized it as such."ⁱⁱ

Coates estimates that fully 1/3 of his consciousness when he was a child was devoted to trying to stay safe. He says, "My brain was concerned with who I was walking to school with, our precise number, the manner of our walk, the number of times I smiled, who or what I smiled at, who offered a pound and who did not--all of which is to say that I practiced the culture of the streets, a culture concerned chiefly with securing the body."

Coates describes how black powerlessness to change a system stacked against them leads to rage against self and rage against the ghettos in which they have been confinedⁱⁱⁱ. He writes, "The crews, (the gangs) the young men who'd transmuted their fear into rage, were the greatest danger."^{iv} He describes how, apropos of nothing, a crew member pulled out a gun, and for a few moments Coates life lay in the balance of what this "boy with the small eyes," would decide. He did not shoot.^v

Coates wonders at the extraordinary loss of time this entailed, for him and other blacks.^{vi} He wonders at how the fear and the contortions blacks undergo to stay safe, to fit in, to be invisible, to not offend, eat at their bodies.^{vii} Health issues which are more prevalent in blacks are usually ascribed to diet, lack of exercise, obesity, or other causes. I've never heard them ascribed to living a life in fear and anger, although that makes perfect sense to me.

We heard of this fear in our reading about the reaction of black youth to their urban ghetto environment.^{viii} Coates describes black parents, including his own, who beat their children out of fear for their young lives, to teach them how to subjugate themselves to a world that can assault their bodies, can take their lives, at any time. "Either I can beat him, or the police," his father said.^{ix}

In his book *Stride Toward Freedom*, Dr. Martin Luther King recounts a boyhood story of riding with his father in the family car. His father accidentally ran a stop sign, and was pulled over by the police. According to King, the policeman said "All right, boy, pull over and let me see your license." Indignantly, his father replied, "I'm no boy." Pointing to his son, he said "This is a boy. I'm a man, and until you call me one, I will not listen to you." According

to King, the policeman was shocked into writing the ticket and leaving as quickly as possible.^x

The senior King was lucky. As we have seen so many times in recent years, interactions with the police and gun toting vigilantes can go terribly bad very quickly for blacks, black men especially. Statistics compiled by The Guardian show that black deaths at the hands of police number 5 per million, while deaths of whites and hispanics number only two per million.^{xi}

We remember some of them: Michael Brown killed by police, Ferguson, Missouri, August 9, 2014; Trayvon Martin, killed by a vigilante, Sanford, Florida, February 26, 2012; Eric Garner, choked by police for selling cigarettes, New York City, July 17, 2014; Tamir Rice, 12 years old, killed by police for having a toy pistol, Cleveland, Ohio, November 23, 2014; John Crawford III, killed by police for holding a BB-gun in a Walmart store, Beavercreek, Ohio, August 5, 2014; Renisha McBride, shot for seeking help in a white suburb of Detroit, November 2, 2013; Marlene Pinnock, a homeless grandmother-beaten at the side of the road by police, Los Angeles, July 1, 2014.^{xii}

Coates does not blame the police. He lauds the efforts at police reform, but feels that there is so much more that must be recognized and addressed. The police reflect the will and fear of America. Whatever we might say about our police and the criminal justice system, a criminal justice system in which black men in America account for eight percent of all who are incarcerated in the entire world; whatever we might say, we cannot say that they were imposed by a repressive minority. The police mirror the fear and will of society.^{xiii} Coates calls all of us who believe ourselves to be white to task.

When Coate's son, Samori, was about four, they left their relatively safe Flatbush, NY City, neighborhood to go to a show on the Upper West side. Leaving the show, moving at 4-year old speed, they were holding up people coming off the escalator. A white woman pushed Samori, saying "Come on." That hidden switch that flipped in me flipped in Coates. This woman had exercised her white prerogative to put a hand on his son, to push him. Anger and fear spilled out. He raged at her, attracting a crowd. There was some pushing. A man said "I could have you arrested." He didn't care. But he did care about his son. Coates noticed his son cowering off to one side, witnessing in his father more fury than he had ever seen.

Coates left with Samori, full of rage and thoroughly shaken at having put his son in danger of losing his father to the police and to the "criminal justice system."^{xiv} He had forgotten the rules. As a black, especially as a black man, he had committed an error as dangerous on the Upper West Side as in his old neighbor on the Westside of Baltimore; he must be without error, walk single file, work quietly, attract no attention, be twice as good.

Coates returns again and again to what he calls The Dream, a dream in which the majority of those in America who call themselves white live. A Dream paved with Good Intentions;^{xv} a Dream founded on the belief that one is doing right. Coates quotes Solzhenitsyn: "To do evil a human being must first of all believe that what he's doing is good, or else that it's a well-considered act in conformity with natural law."^{xvi} The Dream thrives on generalizations.^{xvii} This Dream forgets or minimizes that this country was acquired through murder and tamed through slavery and believes that this has had no lasting effect on how things are now.^{xviii} Coates does not think that America is any different than any other empire throughout human history; empires of any skin color have always been built using the bodies of those without power. The difference is that America claims to be exceptional. We claim to be "the greatest and noblest nation ever to exist, the loan champion standing between the white city of democracy and the terrorists, despots, barbarians and other enemies of civilization."^{xix} Therefore, we should hold ourselves to an exceptional standard.

What would be required to awaken from the Dream?

To awake from the Dream we will have to figure out how to live in ways that do not build on the powerless. Ways that free us from our fear of black. Ways that do not incarcerate based on skin color. Ways that pay a living wage, both in this country and in places like Bangladesh where "fast fashion" is made for our enjoyment and workers are crushed in unsafe buildings. We would have to recognize that our appetite for material goods and cheap transportation builds on the back of an Earth that strains under the load, whose non-human inhabitants go extinct by the hundreds of species every day.^{xx} Coates describes the plunder of the Dream, not just of human bodies, but of the body of the Earth.^{xxi}

Coates is not optimistic that we will do this, that we who believe ourselves to be white will awaken from the myth that we are where we are due to our own hard work and merit and that we are deserving of all that we have and of all that we take.

I hope that he is wrong. I try to remain optimistic. My belief in Unitarian Universalists and in this church help me remain so. To varying degrees UU's and we in this Fellowship have awakened from The Dream. More than many, less than some, we are awake. We affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every human. We are aware of the pain of Earth. We know that we are interconnected with her health. This drives our social action and environmental justice efforts. Yet, being awake is never a place where one arrives. It is a lifelong process of paying attention and reflecting on events and hidden meanings and causes. I ask that we remain open to the journey of Awakening as we move through our lives. I ask that we remain open to how Awakening calls us to be and to act in this world.

Amen and Blessed Be

ⁱ Coates, 16

ⁱⁱ Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*. Penguin Random House LLC, NY. 2015. (14)

ⁱⁱⁱ Coates, 106

^{iv} Coates, 22

^v Coates, 19

^{vi} Coates, 91

^{vii} Coates, 92

^{viii} Coates, 14

^{ix} Coates, 16

^x Martin Luther King Jr., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King Jr.* Ed. James M. Washington. Harper Collins, NY. Coretta Scott King, 1986. (421)

^{xi} <http://www.mintpressnews.com/776-people-killed-by-police-so-far-in-2015-161-of-them-unarmed/209127/> Accessed 1/16, 2016

^{xii} Coates, 9. Extra details and dates found online from news reports and Wiki.

^{xiii} Coates, 78

^{xiv} Coates, 93

^{xv} Coates, 33

^{xvi} Coates, 98

^{xvii} Coates, 50

^{xviii} Coates, 32

^{xix} Coates, 8

^{xx} http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/08/17/un-environment-programme-_n_684562.html Accessed 1/16/2016

^{xxi} Coates, 150