

“Recognizing – and Resisting – the New Jim Crow”
A Sermon Delivered on March 9, 2014 by Shari Woodbury, Intern Minister
At the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Columbus, Indiana

PRAYER

By whatever name we know you – Spirit of Life, Inner Light, Source of Peace – we call you into this time, and this place. We call you into the sanctuary of our hearts. May we all be aware of that Presence which lifts us out of the clutter and confusion of our lives. Help us to draw up that Love that dwells deep within, the love of generations which has brought us to this place. When we feel pain like an arrow, and tears like the raindrops, bring us also love like an ocean, and strength like a mountain. When we are frightened by the darkness in our world, spark the light of courage in our spirits. When we feel small and alone and uncertain what to do, sustain us in community, and ready us to take the first step. Help us to know our power and use it to heal our world. Amen.

VIDEO CLIP

Introduction: As you may have seen from the church newsletter, the book which inspired today’s service will also be the focus of an adult Religious Education discussion group that will meet three times, starting March 26. The brilliant book is called *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, by Michelle Alexander. A couple years ago, Alexander spoke on this topic at General Assembly, the annual gathering where Unitarian Universalists from around the country come together to conduct the business of our democratic association of congregations. In the clip I’m going to play for you, Alexander told the thousands of gathered UUs about the thesis of her book. [The clip is at this link: <http://www.uua.org/multiculturalism/271759.shtml>]

SERMON: “Recognizing and Resisting the New Jim Crow”

Over the last year, my husband William and I have started talking about where we might be willing to move after I finish seminary and accept a call to serve a congregation. I’m painfully aware of how differently I think about this now than I would be if it were just me. Because my soulmate is African American, and we have a 4-year old daughter (3 in this picture) – who by the age of two had already come to identify herself as “brown like Daddy.” When we talk about where we might live, we immediately rule out the South. William is also averse to places like his hometown of Terre Haute, where there are too few minorities, and for the same reason, New England – despite the many UU churches there (and how much we enjoyed our honeymoon in Maine).

During these conversations, I find myself shying away from the big cities, too – places where many black and brown people are stuck in ghettos. Places where other people might mistake my husband, or my child for a member of the urban underclass. Might see them as a

threat, regardless of the reality – as happened to Trayvon Martin and Jordan Davis. Here is my



conundrum. For how can I practice solidarity with all people, and how can I teach my child to do so, if I am busy keeping her away from marginalized groups? I began to wonder if this was a latent classism seeping out of me. But it actually has a lot to do with some developments in our nation that, up until recently, I have been sleeping right through.

During the heyday of the Civil Rights Movement, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., told the graduating class at Oberlin College, “There is nothing more tragic than to sleep through a revolution.” Michelle Alexander describes her own awakening in her landmark book, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. It might seem surprising that Alexander was slow to recognize the larger pattern of our age. How could such a person – a highly acclaimed civil rights lawyer, advocate, and legal scholar – not see what was right under her nose?

But as I read her book, I found myself waking up, too. Now, I thought I already knew a lot about racial justice. Growing up, I was influenced by my mother’s deep admiration for Gandhi and King. Later, in graduate school, when I took a course on “Gender, Race and Class,” I felt like the scales had fallen from my eyes. I was fired up! I never finished my PhD in sociology at IU. But I joined a racial justice task force at my church and for seven years, I helped lead our efforts in the congregation and community. My commitment ratcheted up another level when I fell in love with a black man, married him, and became a mother. Now it is the Mama Bear in me which drives my hope, my fear, my anger, and my determination when it comes to issues of race and equality in our country.

I tell you all this because there are probably people in this room who have considerable knowledge of the Civil Rights Movement. In decades past, this congregation has learned from special speakers, written letters to the editor. Some of you have gone to stand in solidarity with members of Columbus’ African American community during flare-ups of racism. And there may

be people in this room with firsthand experience on the receiving end of racism and ethnic prejudice – a kind of deep, lived knowledge that I will never have. So I just want to let you know that I was not naïve when I cracked open *The New Jim Crow*. And if you are in that position too, it does not necessarily mean that what is contained between its pages would read to you like the same old, same old stuff.

No, as I poured over Michelle Alexander’s book, I learned some distinctly new things that shocked me. Things that break my heart all over again – things happening right now. I began to connect the dots between all the personal anecdotes and media messages and sociological analysis to which I’ve been exposed – and the massive human rights crisis that Alexander documents with such fierce love. The picture that emerges should be deeply disturbing to all of us who care about the inherent worth and dignity of every person – who care about people, period. And all of us who believe in the transforming power of love are needed in the new revolution that Alexander’s book is quickening in our country. All of us are needed.

Let me tell you about the Two Big Things that I hope you will remember a week, or a month, or a year from now. They have to do, first, with the racial politics that underpin this whole thing, and second, with the scope and impact of the problem.

The U.S is the world's leader in incarceration with 2.2 million people currently in the nation's prisons or jails-- a 500% increase over the past thirty years.
(Source: The Sentencing Project)



Let’s start with the last one first. What is the scope of the problem? Alexander describes it in these terms: “In less than thirty years, the U.S. penal population exploded from around 300,000 to more than 2 million, with drug convictions accounting for the majority of the increase. The United States now has the highest rate of incarceration in the world, dwarfing the rates of nearly every developed country, even surpassing those in highly repressive regimes like Russia, China, and Iran.” But there’s more: “The racial dimension of mass incarceration is its most striking feature. No other country in the world imprisons so many of its racial or ethnic minorities. The United States imprisons a larger percentage of its black population than South

Africa did at the height of Apartheid... in major cities wracked by the drug war, as many as 80 percent of young African American men now have criminal records and are thus subject to legalized discrimination for the rest of their lives. These young men are part of a growing undercaste, permanently locked up and locked out of mainstream society.”

So why did this happen? It’s not because crime was up – crime was declining at the start of this trend. And the preponderance of black and brown people in our prisons cannot be explained by different rates of drug crime. People of all races use and sell drugs at similar rates. White youth are actually the most likely to engage in drug crime.

What is going on then? This is what really blows my mind. You see, there was a deliberate decision made by some of our leaders to depict black men as criminals – to create a dehumanizing stereotype – without saying so directly. It was done to appeal to white voters scared by the changes that the Civil Rights Movement was bringing. They fanned the flames of fear for their own political gain.

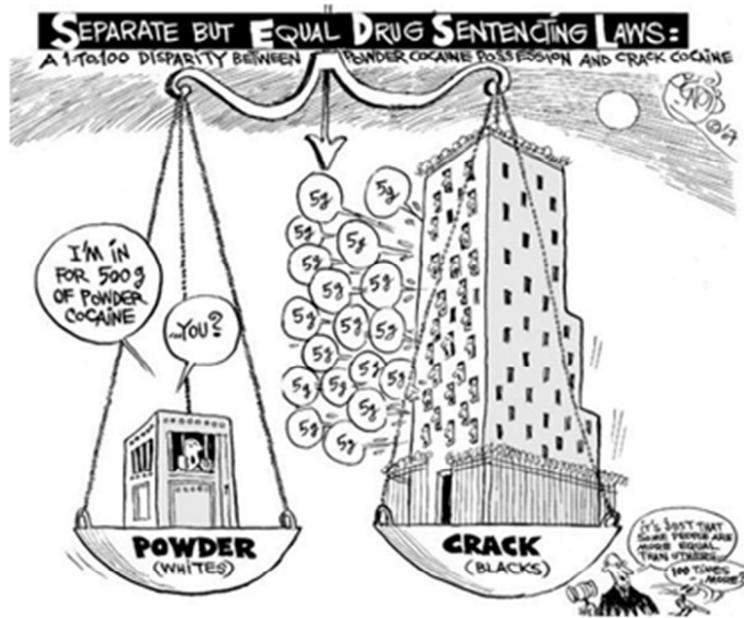
Such leaders in the 60s and 70s “gave lip service to the goal of racial equality but actively resisted desegregation, busing, and civil rights enforcement.” This is when conservatives began framing welfare as a wedge issue between poor whites, depicted as hard-working, and poor blacks, painted as lazy and undeserving. Richard Nixon was the first to use the rhetoric of a “war on drugs.” But it was Ronald Reagan who mastered the new strategy. Reagan’s colorblind “rhetoric on crime, welfare, taxes, and states’ rights” was designed to appeal to disaffected white voters, while providing plausible deniability that race was what they were really talking about. It was no longer publicly acceptable to call out for “segregation forever,” but people could speak in praise of “law and order.”



I was a child of the 80s, so there is much I remember about this era – particularly the War on Drugs that Reagan made real in that decade. It might surprise you to learn that the public did not consider street drugs a problem before Reagan unveiled the War on Drugs. To

get the funding to scale up the War on Drugs – and the race-based campaign promises that were implicit in that war – his administration realized they needed to sell Congress and the broader public on the need for this war. They needed support not just from those spooked by the Civil Rights Movement, but from a majority. They got it via a media campaign which, through images and stories, associated black men with criminal activity. They went straight to fear, playing on our instincts of self-protection.

Now it's important to know that inner cities were hit particularly hard by the deindustrialization then taking place, and crack became a problem during this vulnerable time – just a couple years after the War on Drugs was unveiled. Crack cocaine is actually no more



harmful, and was no more prevalent in black communities, than the rise of powder cocaine use was among white Americans. But to people like Reagan, the spread of crack in inner cities was an opportunity. They seized upon it, and the media responded. “Thousands of stories about the crack crisis flooded the airwaves and newsstands, and the stories had a clear racial subtext” – featuring black crack whores, crack babies, gangbangers, drug kingpins. I remember this. This is what built sufficient support for the War on Drugs. This was a campaign to criminalize blacks!

Over the 80s and 90s, we saw the “get tough on crime” line of thinking turn into a competition among politicians of all stripes to prove who was tougher. Bush, Clinton, and even Obama today have fallen in line with the new norm of being “tough-on-crime,” including sustaining a War on Drugs that has not, by any measure, been effective in reducing drug use. The War on Drugs *has* been effective at what its original boosters designed it to do: keep black and brown people down, and keep poor people of all colors from coming together across color lines to challenge the economic status quo. This divide-and-conquer strategy is nothing new in our country. It's what led elites in the so-called “new world” to turn from the use of indentured servants for cheap labor – which included many Europeans as well as Africans – to the use of chattel slavery, an even harsher and more permanent source of labor reserved only for

Africans.

White supremacy had helped rationalize, first, the horrible treatment of Native Americans, and later, the enslavement of Africans – but it was economically motivated. Poor whites eventually accepted that “racial bribe.” Instead of banding together with poor folks of all colors – as they had done on a number of occasions before, to the alarm of the planter class – poor whites accepted the rather meager reward of a less-miserable existence than slaves, and the psychological boost of feeling racially superior. The racial bribe worked again during segregation, the old Jim Crow. And it has worked again in this new Jim Crow era, for a long



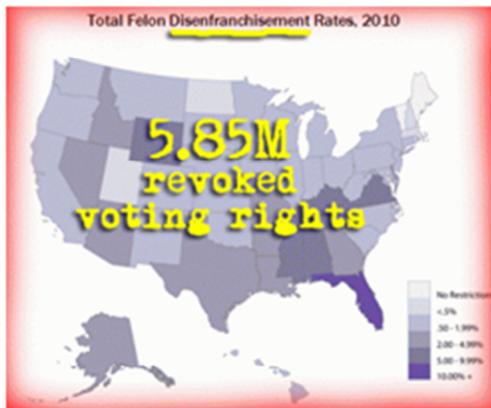
time, keeping Americans physically and psychologically separated by race. Helping to distract us from fundamental questions about our economic system and the inequality it produces.

So the War on Drugs didn't just win votes for “law and order” politicians. It reshaped our social order – because that's what it was meant to do. Though local law enforcement agencies initially resisted the imperatives of the federal War on Drugs, the financial bribes in federal grants and equipment proved too compelling to pass up. Thus it is that forces that are supposed to keep us all safe, have instead been deployed for what is effectively a war on poor communities of color. For that's where the stop-and-frisk tactics are concentrated. That's where the SWAT teams with their military equipment go and traumatize families. That's where large numbers of children have fathers in prison – fathers who land there largely through plea bargain, regardless of their actual guilt or innocence. White college kids selling hard drugs on campus get little police attention. But a black man with some weed is considered a public menace.

Take Clinton Drake. This African American man was arrested in Montgomery, Alabama for possession of marijuana – first in 1988, and again in '93. For having about \$10 worth of marijuana on him, as a “repeat offender” in the War on Drugs, Drake faced between 10-20 years in prison. He accepted a plea bargain on the advice of a public defender. This meant he

would spend “only” five years in prison – “five years for five joints.” When he got out, he was told he’d have to pay \$900 in court costs before he would be eligible to vote. He’d been employed at a local air force base before prison, but now, unemployed, and unlikely ever to get a good-enough paying job to be able to pay back that \$900, he was effectively disenfranchised. Drake said, “To me, that’s a poll tax. You’ve got to pay to vote... They treat marijuana in Alabama like you committed treason or something. I was on the 1965 voting rights march from Selma. I was fifteen years old. At eighteen, I was in Vietnam fighting for my country. And now? Unemployed and they won’t allow me to vote.”

As Drake’s case shows, rather than providing a cheap source of labor to the economic elite, as slavery and Jim Crow segregation both did, the War on Drugs has crippled the ability of millions of people – especially black and brown men – to gain employment at all. You see, discrimination against ex-felons is perfectly legal for employers, and it is widely practiced. (I understand this is an issue for some job-seekers right here in Columbus.) If that weren’t bad enough, those who have been through the criminal justice system can also be barred from housing assistance, food benefits, and student loans. They may be required to stay away from old friends and neighbors suspected of involvement with drugs, too. If you have the misfortune of having grown up in the ‘hood, that basically means that you can’t go home again. So where could you go? Looking back, it is not surprising that when I volunteered at a day shelter for the homeless last year, many people there, black and white and Latino, had been in prison, on probation or parole. Homelessness is a logical outcome for already-marginalized people put through the criminal justice system.



In many states, felons are also barred from voting – sometimes for the rest of their lives. Even if the time in prison was short. Even if the crime was minor (like possession of marijuana, an extremely common conviction). Even if you were innocent and accepted a sentence as a plea-bargain. If felons could vote, it might’ve changed the result of our 2000 presidential

election – it is believed that if the 600,000 former felons of Florida had been permitted to vote, Al Gore would have won instead of George W. Bush. As Michelle Alexander points out, “No other country in the world disenfranchises people who are released from prison in a manner even remotely resembling the United States. . . the United Nations Human Rights Committee has charged that the U.S. disenfranchisement policies . . . violate international law.”

In some ways this new Jim Crow is different than the old segregation, though. The reign of “Law & Order” has spawned a prison-industrial complex upon which many poor rural communities are now dependent for jobs. And of course, many African Americans are *not* caught in the system of mass incarceration. Racial profiling affects black and brown people in this country no matter where they live, however. After William and I got married, and he moved to Bloomington, he was annoyed, but not surprised, to be followed around Best Buy. For a year, every time he went in to buy equipment for his high-tech business, or just get his fix of the electronics atmosphere, they were watching him.

Similarly, the crime of DWB – Driving While Black or Brown – is a concern regardless of social class. My seminary friend V., who is black, talks matter-of-factly about the driving lessons she is giving her 16-year old son. He knows where to put his hands if he is pulled over – on the steering wheel, where the cops can see them. And this talented young cellist, who plays in orchestras and jazz combos and aspires to be a professional musician, knows what to do before the officer reaches his car – activate the voice recorder on his phone. (That way if he is harassed by police, he’ll have evidence.) You see, V. is an attorney – early in her career, she prosecuted criminal defendants as a district attorney, and she now runs a state agency for New York – so she has some insight into these things. Her son is at much higher risk of getting pulled over and getting into trouble than most of the sons and daughters of this congregation.

Still, the presence of a black middle class makes the new Jim Crow very different than the old. And images of *exceptional* African Americans – people like Barack Obama and Oprah Winfrey – can blind us to the existence of a racist caste system in our day. There is also more collateral damage from mass incarceration – people harmed who were never its intended targets. Because the current caste system must be race-neutral on its face, white people can get caught in it. If you are white, you are far less likely to be targeted by law enforcement, and the discretion that is built-in at every stage of the criminal justice system tends to work in your favor. Police may not have even stopped Clinton Drake had he been white. But the War on Drugs has sent plenty of white folks – mostly poor white folks – to prison, too.

This system of mass incarceration that distinguishes our country among the so-called “developed” nations *was* racially motivated. It continues to have enormous consequences, most dramatically for people of color, though really for all of us – no matter where we live. And it’s not going away by itself. Perhaps what we most need to realize about this racial caste system is that no overt or widespread racism is necessary for the system to replicate itself. All that is required to keep it going now is for good people to do nothing. To look the other way, right past the millions of people that are being warehoused, the millions of lives being wasted on our watch. All that is required is that we go back to sleep even when the alarm goes off.

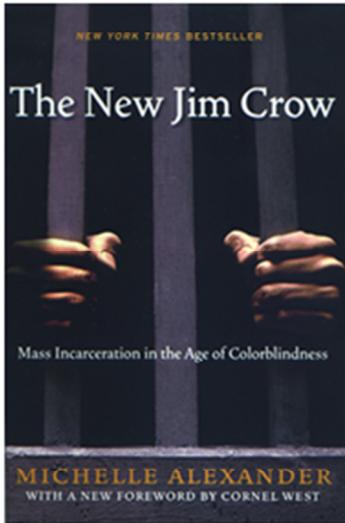


Now do you remember that discussion I let you in on at the beginning, between me and my husband, about where we might live after I finish this internship? What I see now is that my deeply-held fears about letting my brown child get too close to the ghetto are quite rational. Because in our country's current racial caste system – although all of us are affected, even if we don't know what is going on – still, it is in those inner cities that our second-class citizens are trapped and concentrated. That is where the risk of getting sucked into this damning and dehumanizing system is the highest. Especially for people who look like my dearly beloveds.

But – beyond my fear, what I also feel is that my Mama Bear instinct is for every child, not just my child. And that is a resource we all have – that fierce love of a mother or father for the children, the protective instinct of a grandparent or aunt or uncle, the wisdom and caring of a mentor – it is for all the children of our nation, is it not? All of them. The determination to protect them. To nurture them. To make it better for them. And to teach them how to “confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love.”¹ That is what we are called to do. For we in this room do have power. We *can* make a difference. Historically, we UUs *have* made a difference in the abolition of slavery, in women's suffrage, in the Civil Rights Movement, and most recently, for GLBT people, helping to turn the tide of public opinion toward respect and equal treatment.

So here's what I am inviting you to do. First, get your hands on a copy of Michelle Alexander's brilliant book – we've got a dozen copies for sale at coffee hour today, or you can get it from Viewpoint Books, or order it online. Public libraries in Bartholomew and Jackson counties both carry it as well. Commit to reading it, and to learning what is actually going on in our country. There's so much more in the book.

¹ From the Sources of our living Unitarian Universalist tradition. They are fully enumerated here: www.uua.org/beliefs/principles/index.shtml



- Book Discussion Series
- 3 Weds., 7-8:30 PM, UUCCI
- March 26, April 9, April 23



And second, if you can, come participate in the book discussion series. It'll be here at the church, on three Wednesday evenings over 6 weeks – every other Wednesday – starting March 26. This is a great way to process the issues in *The New Jim Crow*, to share with others, and to explore what we can do, to be part of the revolution – part of the solution.

I invite you to wake up with me, to stand on the side of love with all the profiled and plea-bargained, all our disenfranchised and forgotten brothers and sisters in this unfinished experiment in democracy that we call the United States of America. May that day be not far off



when we step out of the shadow of racial caste for good, and live as one people. Amen.

Note: Unless otherwise indicated, all quotes are from The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness by Michelle Alexander (The New Press: New York, 2012).

CLOSING WORDS

Martin Luther King, Jr., said, “In the End, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends.” May we be vocal friends of all those still separated and unequal.

Dr. King said, “Faith is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase.” May we have the courage and conviction, the love and daring, to take that first step.

We are a good people, a strong people, a willing people. We shall overcome some day. We shall overcome some day!

Blessed be, go in peace.