

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., AND CLASSISM

Rev. Kit Ketcham, Jan. 20, 2008

In the fall issue of the UU World magazine, Doug Muder, a writer for the World, wrote an article entitled “Not My Father’s Religion, Unitarian Universalism and the Working Class.” Some of you probably read the article and may have been struck by its relevance (or not) to your own life.

In the article, Muder described his upbringing in a working-class family, where his father worked in an Illinois factory, making cattle feed. It was steady work but not much fun and had a negative effect on his father’s health, with chemicals, noise, and night shift work.

Doug Muder grew up in a very conservative Lutheran household in the Midwest, and the elder Muders continue to be conservative Lutherans, content with a religion that specifies what to do and what not to do in order to get to heaven. Doug Muder is now a Unitarian Universalist and when he gave his first sermon, his father came to hear him but has never returned. There just aren’t any other people like Doug’s dad at his New England UU congregation. Doug wonders why UUism doesn’t attract more working class folks and his article is a theory in process about this question.

As I read the article, my own family came to mind. I come from working class forebears---both my maternal and paternal grandparents and great grandparents were folks who were pretty close to the edge of poverty much of their lives.

Farmers, gandy-dancers, draftsmen, clerks, gas station operators, mailmen, carpenters, cowboys, orchardmen, firemen, loggers, small business operators, to name a few of the jobs my male ancestors held. Their wives were almost universally stay-at-home moms because that’s what women did in those days.

My dad was the first person in his family to get much education beyond high school and that was two years of study at Moody Bible Institute in Chicago, preparing to be a Baptist minister.

My mom went to school too, two year at Oregon Normal School fresh out of high school, to be a teacher and, when she married my father, to learn how to be a minister's wife. They got their Moody Bible Institute education during the Depression and struggled just to eat during those years, never mind paying for hospitalization when my mother had a miscarriage of her first baby.

This slim layer of education separated my parents, in a way, from the working-class status of their families to that point. But their roots defined them still. So I grew up in a family where people who worked in service occupations were highly regarded, treated respectfully (they were our aunts and uncles and grandparents, after all), and who were not pressured to get more education or to move up in the world. Where they were was fine.

But nearly every one of those working class parents did push my generation of cousins to get an education, even just a year or two of junior college or training in a trade. And so it is that most of my cousins and both my siblings and I have at least a year of college and some of us have much more.

But almost every member of my family of origin is a member of a conservative congregation. I do have an aunt who is a Presbyterian and a cousin who is a Methodist, but nearly everyone else is staunchly in the conservative camp and always has been. Except me, of course.

I have done a lot of thinking about why this may be so. Education is clearly not an adequate explanation for the strong preference my family has for conservative theology.

I don't pretend to understand each person's affinity for theology I find inadequate. And I don't really care. I am at peace with their choices and know that they are good and loving people, regardless of what faith they hold.

The people I know who choose other religions than Unitarian Universalism are smart people, educated people, fine people. They are not interested in UUism, I think, because to them, we're not really a religion. We're nice smart people, but we aren't a religion by their standards. We know we're a religion, but their definition of religion is different from ours.

So Muder's question "why aren't working class people more attracted to Unitarian Universalism?" sticks in my mind---and, to some extent, in my craw. I think it may be the wrong question.

My question might be "who are we really as UUs? Are we merely upper crust mostly-white liberals or are we reflective people from all walks of life? If so, how do we reach out to other reflective people from all walks of life?"

Muder lives in New Hampshire and grew up in the Midwest, so perhaps his viewpoint is tinged with that cultural overlay. I look around this West Coast congregation and at the Western congregations where I have been a member in the past and I see lots of people who are like me, whose education was hard-won, who don't have McMansions, just ordinary houses, who read murder mysteries and do crafts, who play old songs on old acoustic instruments, who don't dress in designer clothes or have designer pets or big honking cars.

Many of us have working class roots and are comfortable in that place. And we found UUism! So how does it happen that we may have a class problem? Because I think we do, but I'm not sure it's the way Doug Muder sees it! At least not in this part of the country!

I do think we need to ask ourselves how we view our neighbors and friends, especially those who work for us, whose jobs are service jobs, who make minimum wage, who work two or more jobs to make ends meet. Because I don't think we are fully aware of our privilege, even though we give generously to charities, support good causes, and try to walk our talk.

I want you to change personas for a moment. I want to invite you to imagine yourself as an immigrant woman working as a housecleaner here on Whidbey. Or imagine yourself as a custodian at one of the schools. Imagine yourself as a waitress at a local restaurant. Imagine yourself with an 8th grade education. Or as a man living in a camper in the Trinity parking lot and working days in construction. Or a student scraping by on student loans and several jobs. In this new persona, listen to these quotes from a survey on classism.

QUOTES

I ate out with a friend — someone proud to call herself a Massachusetts liberal — and the waitress got her order wrong. My friend said, "Well, if she was smart, she wouldn't be a waitress.

I was once part of organizing a radical book fair. It was held in a hall at a local university. At the end of the day several folks started to leave, despite the fact that the hall was a complete mess. When challenged to help clean up, one of them replied "Isn't that for the janitors to do?"

My mother is a passionate liberal Democrat. Her long-time housekeeper, a Mexican immigrant Pentecostal, voted for Bush

on moral grounds. My mother says of her, "These people just don't understand!"

"Of course I am going to be patronizing to workers, I'm educated."

I have heard two different feminist governing boards, when deciding how to set fees for an event, say, "Everyone can afford five dollars. If they are not willing to spend five dollars, then they don't care enough about the event."

A faculty friend of mine and I use to talk about classes I taught on issues of hunger and homelessness. The faculty person, who came from working class roots, said "Those homeless people like being homeless; they choose to be that way, and they like living under the bridge". My mouth instantly dropped!

When I was a cashier at a food co-op, I hated it when members would say, "Have a great week-end," assuming that I had 2-day weekends off.

I was in college — an elite college where class stuff went down everyday. But one of the most classist things I ever heard was from a woman working to provide internships with school alumni for college women. I had won an internship in N. Dakota and had received a scholarship from the Dean to get airfare to go to fulfill my internship, but they wanted to issue it on a reimbursement basis. I didn't have money or a credit card, nor the safety net of my parents. When I tried to explain this to the woman, she simply told me: Well, ask a friend if you can buy it on their credit card. I didn't end up going, because none of my friends had credit cards with \$500 available either. I was so angry that this woman called herself a liberal working on behalf of young women's development.

What do you hear between the lines in these personal experiences with classism? How would it feel to you if you actually were an immigrant woman or custodian or parking lot dweller or waitress or student and overheard these remarks?

I have to admit that I squirmed at some of these quotes, recognizing some of my own hidden assumptions, attitudes I didn't realize that I had, ways of viewing others whose lives were unfamiliar to me, not understanding how patronizing my attitude or actions might be.

It gives me pause to know that even with my own working class roots, I might not be aware of ways I am patronizing to people I really want to know and help.

One of the prophetic men and women whose wisdom inspires us UU's, Martin Luther King, Jr., began his work as a civil rights activist working for the liberation of African Americans in our nation, but his perspective broadened as he began to see the connections between racism and classism, the invisible lines that poverty draws between people. He could see that the poor white families in the South were no better off than the poor black families, except that they had pale skin and could therefore lord it over poor black people. He once wrote the following in an essay entitled "The Community of Man":

"As long as there is poverty in the world I can never be rich, even if I have a billion dollars. As long as diseases are rampant and millions of people in this world cannot expect to live more than 28 or 30 years, I can never be totally healthy even if I just got a good checkup at Mayo Clinic.

"I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. This is the way our world is made. No individual or nation can stand out boasting of being independent. We are interdependent."

The interdependent web links us all, he was saying. The destiny of the rich is linked to the destiny of the poor.

"I, a privileged white woman, can never be what I ought to be until you, an impoverished immigrant woman, are what you ought to be." Hmmm.

Turn it around and hear it again: “I, an impoverished migrant worker, can never be what I ought to be until you, a privileged person, are what you ought to be.”

The destiny of the poor is linked to the destiny of the rich. What is my obligation as a privileged person to assure a less-privileged person of a better life? What had I ought to be, in the words of Martin Luther King? What must I be in order to give others the chance to be what they ought to be?

The questions of privilege and wealth and education and career hover over every UU congregation. How do we provide a social and religious context here for all who enter this sanctuary?

How do we combat the impression some may have that Unitarian Universalism is mainly for educated, privileged people who are doctors or professors or lawyers or engineers or artists or social workers or therapists? Because we ARE all of those things AND we are also landscapers and hair stylists and accountants and construction workers and deep sea fishers and disabled people, limited income people, military people, retired people, small business people, young and middleaged and old people.

We are a rainbow of humanity and each of us brings to this congregation a set of traits, skills, knowhow, resources, which enriches our time together. We sometimes assume that we must all have the same kind of history, background, and upbringing, if we are in this place together. But we are remarkably different.

We have a common hope, though, in coming together and that is that we will find others who are reflective about the ways people ought to treat each other, the ways we ought to treat the earth, and the ways we can work together to achieve a better world.

And if there is something more we should be doing, I suggest that it is in the area of making sure that all of us, no matter our income level or our education or our employment or our history, that all of us have an equal place in this community, that our activities are affordable for all, that our events offer child care, that our conversation not linger on our expensive trips or our great educations or the hallmarks of privilege but on the common human experiences we all have.

Let us, also, be more mindful of the needs of the very poor in our larger community. If they come through our doors or if we have a chance to befriend them, let us be unfailingly respectful and never patronizing, remembering that hospitality is the trademark of true religious community. Let us seek to be helpful by offering our resources to agencies which serve our community. Let us give our time and energy where it matters to people.

And above all, let us examine our own attitudes and assumptions about others. Let us exercise our commitment to our first principle, affirming and promoting the inherent worth and dignity of every person, whatever their station in life, whatever their sexual orientation or gender identity, whatever their race or creed or color, whatever their abilities or age or nationality.

And as we make ourselves what we ought to be, in Martin Luther King's immortal words, we will give others a better chance to be who and what they ought to be.

Let's pause for a time of silent reflection and prayer.

Hymn # 169, We Shall Overcome

BENEDICTION: Our worship service, our time of shaping worth together, is ended, but our service to the world begins again as we leave this place. Let us go in peace, mindful of our attitudes and assumptions about each other, committed to seeing each other as valued friends and equals. May we create here a community that is strong and vibrant and rich with the gifts of all who assemble here. Amen, Shalom, Salaam, and Blessed Be.