

“Ujima: Each Other’s Harvest

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Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden
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A Celebration of Kwanzaa
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How is it that we are celebrating Kwanzaa? We’re three days past the last day of this holiday, but our youngsters are learning about and celebrating Kwanzaa in their religious education classes today. This is one of the reasons that we’re “running late” on the traditional Kwanzaa calendar, which spans the seven days from December 26 through January 1. While this might clarify some confusion as to why we’re celebrating Kwanzaa on the 4th of January, you might also be asking yourselves why we’re celebrating it at all, since so many of us don’t identify as African-American and Kwanzaa was founded as a distinctively African-American holiday.

Two considerations come to mind as I ponder this matter—one, a rationale, the other, a question. Many of the principles and rituals that mark Kwanzaa are applicable across cultural identities. BUT, does this understanding risk what has been called cultural appropriation—that is, behavior that happens intentionally or otherwise when one culture adopts the rites and practices of another culture as if it were the domain of both? I wrestle with this concern in the celebration of Kwanzaa.

We are, in the community that is this congregation and this faith, more than one culture. We are variable and textured in who we are and how we identify—culturally, theologically, ethnically, racially, and more. The risk is that we make of this holiday a cultural, theological, ethnic, and racial puree—a watered down approach to who “we” are; and by “we” I mean the inclusive “we.” I seek to acknowledge the differences, to hold up the texture, to celebrate the variations, and to proclaim that we are about the interdependent web of all life, textured and variable as it is. In our individual and communal behavior, we observe and live out the realities of the power and privilege in tension with the disempowerment and oppression to which so many among us are downwind. “Race matters,” as Cornell West declared in the title of one of his earliest books on racism--racism that flares again and again in this community and this nation, racism that is the very fault line of this country as we know it.

How understandable it is that there was a need for a holiday underscoring the dignity, history, and hopes of those among us who identify and are identified as African American. As for those of us who are black and brown and Caribbean American or European American or Asian American, try explaining the subtle distinctions to many who wield power on the streets.

In deference to all who are African American and in the struggle among so-called white folks to become conscious and accountable to those among us who are African American, let us hold up what we can all learn from the celebration of Kwanzaa—in Swahili, “first fruits of the harvest.” I welcome, during the Reflection and Dialogue following this service, the feedback of how you, the inclusive you and the distinctive you, digest this worship experience.

There is no singular “African American experience” just as there is no singular “European American experience” or “Native American” or “Asian American” experience. Through this faith that we share, we seek to honor the interconnected web of all life without reducing it to mush.

While Kwanzaa is barely a half-century old, the principles and practices in which it is rooted are age-old. While Christmas is barely two millennia old, a mere nanosecond in the passage of time, the wonder and miracle of birth are age-old; and Christmas is after all about the birth of a baby of color. Stretching the conventional focus of that holiday as we do, Christmas is about the birth of every child, each of us a little miracle with countless paths along which fate and choice will find us.

On this Sunday just a week after the celebration of the third day of Kwanzaa, we return to the principle connected with the third day—*Ujima*: “*we are each other’s harvest.*” The implications of being each other’s harvest are “collective work and struggle to benefit the community.” We can speak of the community of African Americans, not as homogeneously defined but as pluralistic as any populace described in ethnic or racial terms. And we can speak of the community that is at the heart of what Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. described as “the beloved community.” Whatever the degree of inclusiveness, a harvest happens only by people working together and struggling on behalf of the larger whole. In the poetic proclamation of Gwendolyn Brooks:

“...we are each other’s harvest:
we are each other’s business:
we are each other’s magnitude and bond.”

An African-American specific *Ujima* was given voice by that mid-20th century prophet, Malcolm X:

“The American black man should be focusing his every effort toward building his own businesses and decent homes for himself. As other ethnic groups have done, let the black people, whenever possible however possible, patronize their own kind, hire their own kind, and start in some ways to buildup the race’s ability to do for itself by starting his own program to lift up his own sense of values.”

Inclusive? No. Sexist in language? Perhaps, though it wouldn’t have occurred to many at the time. Magnetic? Inspiring? Mobilizing? Ringing with affirmation of the beauty and power of living black? Absolutely.

What were those values of which Malcolm spoke? Kwanzaa scholar, Dorothy Winbush Riley, names them:

“...kindness, generosity, patience, tolerance, cooperation, and compassion... a sense of truth and justice, right and wrong, and doing things for and taking care of others through services that build and maintain a community.”

“Ujima,” she continues, “is putting each other to work solving problems so that all benefit and have mutual pride in the harvest.”

When we as a congregation live out the understanding that we thrive by each committing to and acting on what is needed, according to our various and varied gifts, we reap a harvest of gratitude and pride. Each of us readily acknowledges that “It’s not all about me; it’s not all about you.” A full harvest comes from a commitment to a larger “us,” an “us” that is ever expanding and reaching out even as we reach more and more deeply in. A full harvest is physical, spiritual, secular, and sacred. It comes with inspiration, perspiration and celebration!

When we dedicate a child, we dedicate that child in the Name of Love. It is not just the parents or primary caregivers who dedicate themselves to the blossoming of this child. It is the entire congregation, the entire community of faith. How a child grows in spirit and deed is driven by how all of us become accountable for that child’s well-being and the well-being of the child’s family.

Like the seeds in the ear of the corn, we are each cradled by a husk, the fabric of family closely knit and woven by the bonds of communal caring and responsibility. Our roots individual and familial intertwine underground, in those spaces often unseen, where the braiding of loving care continues through the most trying times. From generation to generation, from harvest to harvest, we awaken and stretch and survive and thrive and give and receive as seedlings for the next generation. Across time we are “each other’s harvest.”

On this day of celebrating “the first fruits of the harvest” and what it takes for them to come to fruition, hear a passage of Judith Boswell Griffie’s poem on what it takes to raise a child, inspired by many African proverbs that speak this reality:

It takes a whole village to raise a child
and I am a village raised child.

I am mothered by village mothers
and fathered by village fathers
fed by the village cooks
and clothed by the village weavers.
I am protected by village keepers
and taught by village teachers.

...I hear stories from the village griots
and honor the village elders.
I am loved by the village,
loved by the village—All
And every breath and heartbeat
echoes praise to my village God.

I am a valued African gift
made so by village love.

May we each and all know that we are a valued and valuing human gift, made so by the love and care of a community larger than we might imagine.

So may it be and Amen.

Sources:

Gwendolyn Brooks, "Paul Robeson," in Dorothy Winbush Riley, *The Complete Kwanzaa: Celebrating Our Cultural Harvest*, HarperCollins Publishers, 1995.

Judith Boswell Griffie, "It Takes a Whole Village," in Dorothy Winbush Riley, *The Complete Kwanzaa: Celebrating Our Cultural Harvest*, HarperCollins Publishers, 1995.

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