

If It Happens to You, Then It Happens to Me

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A lone man stands on a hill and begins to dance. You might look at him and think, that nut, what is he doing? You might look at him and think, that looks like fun, but I could never do that. You might look at him and think, I wish *I* had the courage to do that...

I saw the TED video, *How to Start a Movement*, a couple years ago and was immediately struck by the important role played by that second dancer. I'd always assumed that being a leader meant being the lone nut, the one everyone stares at, the one that gets dismissed (or gets recognized and then has to follow through!). You have to be awfully fired up about something to be that lone nut. But when I saw that video I realized that what Sivars calls the "first follower," is actually a leadership position all its own. The first follower is the one who realizes that the lone nut is onto something and encourages others to join them.

This kind of leadership position may appear safe. After all, you're not the one standing up first; you haven't started the dance that everyone then follows. If no one else joins you, then you haven't risked much, right? The dance ends and you go back to your seat a little sweaty but none the worse for wear. But what if it's not a dance? What if it's something more important?

Guide my feet, while I run this race...

Last summer I watched with stunned horror as the story around the shooting of Michael Brown unfolded. I could not understand how a trained officer shot an unarmed teen, not once, not twice, but six times in “self-defense.” I read about the 95% white police force in a 67% African American town. I listened as people of color asked for due process, asked for information, asked for justice and saw the police department respond with assault rifles and armored vehicles. My heart ached for the family of Michael Brown and for the residents of Ferguson who felt they didn’t have a voice and would not be heard unless they did something drastic. And so the community rioted and part of my heart cracked.

Next came the decision of the Staten Island grand jury not to indict the officer that strangled unarmed Eric Garner to death on a sidewalk; the officer that did not let up when Garner repeatedly told him he couldn’t breathe. Deep in my chest, my heart was aching so hard that *I* couldn’t breathe.

But that was soon followed by the shooting of unarmed Walter Scott. Shot in the back, the police officer claimed self-defense, claimed Scott stole his Taser, but a cell phone video showed the officer planting the Taser on Scott’s body. My heart cracked again. The dull ache in my chest would not go away. How could this keep happening??

Then came the day I sat in an airport watching a city I love erupt in violence. Unarmed Freddie Gray died of a spinal injury sustained while in police custody. For a week, residents of Baltimore, MD protested peacefully: people of color asked for due process, asked for information, and asked for justice. And after a week of being dismissed, a week of being

ignored, a week of struggling to contain grief and outrage, Freddie Gray was buried and the city rioted. My heart broken open, I sat in the airport on my way to the UUA for my final credentialing interview and I cried.

Hold my hand, while I run this race...

Maybe you've visited Baltimore. You toured the Inner Harbor and you went to an Orioles game. Maybe you watched *The Wire* and learned all about Baltimore's drug problems. But have you *been* to Baltimore? In 2006 I lived in the Reisterstown area of Baltimore, just blocks from the Pimlico Race Track, home of the Preakness, part of horse racing's triple crown. This model of old society money and influence is surrounded by a neighborhood stricken with poverty. I was the only white Gentile on a street populated with either Orthodox Jews or African-Americans. The kosher pizza and ice cream shop was next to an urban clothing discounter. On more than one occasion I was asked to a neighbor's house to turn off an appliance on a Friday evening. I still remember the evening when I accepted a spur of the moment invitation to Shabbat dinner while wearing my Church of the Younger Fellowship chalice t-shirt.

I enjoyed living in Baltimore. The city lives up to its moniker of Charm City. People, black and white, say hello as they pass total strangers and neighborhood identity is strong. Yet while those scenes from *The Wire* are sensationalized, they were filmed on the actual streets of Baltimore where there are entire blocks of boarded up and condemned row houses. The school system in Baltimore is so bad that the state took it over in the mid-nineties and it *still* has one of the lowest graduation rates in the country. Corruption and mismanagement of

public funds is rampant and the disparity between the haves and the have-nots can be traced back for generations. And it is very clear that in Baltimore, MD, the have-nots are people of color, predominantly African Americans. The message sent over and over and over again sounds an awful lot like “you don’t matter.” How many times can you be told, “you don’t matter,” before you think “*it* doesn’t matter,” “my *life* doesn’t matter,” “*our* lives don’t matter?”

So you can start to see why a statement like Black Lives Matter is radical, why a movement like Black Lives Matter is so very critical. When the system is constantly showing you how little you matter, you start to believe it. A steady drop of water will wear away stone and we’re talking about the soft tissue of hearts and minds and the gossamer threads of identity and soul.

Stand by me, while I run this race...

In his book, *Acts of Faith*, scholar, organizer and religious leader, Eboo Patel talks about the power of institutions to indoctrinate, to teach a specific ideology, particularly to youth. He highlights the National Socialist Teachers League that taught Nazi ideology to German children. He also mentions the National Volunteer Corps in India, designed to marginalize Christians and Muslims in the 1920s. And more currently he describes the formation of Al Qaeda and the radicalization of Muslim youth. We have only to look at Thursday’s shooting in Chattanooga to see the devastating impact of teaching hate.

What Patel knows and what social psychologists know is that it is very easy to impact the behavior of youth. He cites a study where youth at a summer camp were split into two groups and one group was given distinct advantages over the other. When the differences were noted by the youth, the situation quickly devolved into violence. Yet when the youth were forced to work together cooperatively to solve a problem the feelings dissipated and the youth expressed feelings of unity and solidarity.

In this country we hold the hearts and minds of 73.6 million children and youth. If, as sociologist Peter Berger says, institutions are best understood as programs for human activity, then what are our institutions saying to those children? Are they saying that the Confederate flag represents heritage not hate? Are they saying that the Civil War was about states rights and not slavery? Are they removing the Civil Rights movement from history books like happened in Texas this week? Are they saying that one in three black boys can expect to go to prison in their lifetime? Cause if that's what they're saying, and believe me, it is, then why is anyone surprised that we have racial tension in this country? My heart is broken open and I *cannot* breathe when I stop to take in the entirety of it all because it is not just the Confederate flag and the Civil War and the prison system. It's that people of color are charged more for the price of a car, that people of color are twice as likely to be pulled over while driving, that people of color are less likely to get called for a job interview but four times likely to get arrested on a marijuana drug charge even though marijuana use is the same between blacks and whites. The list goes on, it has been going on, and it will continue to go on unless something changes!

Search my heart, while I run this race...

Now, I didn't start here, in this heart place. I grew up in this country, in its institutions, and just as children of color received messages about expectations and abilities and even worthiness, I got those messages too. I remember when my family moved to Raleigh, NC and my parents asked me if I was going to be OK attending a school with a significant population of African American students. I didn't understand the question. Why wouldn't I be OK? But I grew up in this country. I went to an inner city magnet school for high school. There were 2,000 students and 30% of them were African American, when the average high school had 20%. There were great academic programs: eight foreign languages, advanced math and science classes, specialized English classes such as Short Story Writing and Poetry. There were dance labs and pottery studios and a TV station. Can you guess how many of the students districted for that school participated in these specialized programs? In the gifted and talented program I was in predominantly white classes with a couple Indians, a few Asians and never more than one or two African American students.

Outside of class, racial tension was high. The year before I started there, a riot erupted over the November Food Drive because all the posters depicted only people of color. I rode the bus, which picked me up in my affluent white subdivision. Our neighbor next door had a pool and a corvette in the driveway. Our neighbor behind us had horses. Before the bus came to my neighborhood, its last stop was at a trailer park, where it picked up almost all of its passengers, predominantly African American students. I was one of only three or four white students that rode the bus and the second to last stop on the route. I would get on the full bus and no one would let me sit with them, so I had to stand. If that was the worst that happened for the 20 minute ride to school, then that was a good morning.

Getting on the bus each morning I was afraid. I was afraid not just of what would be said to me, but what would be done to me. I was hit. I was groped. I was threatened with a lighter. I was angry that I was forced to ride a bus that didn't have room for me and angry that I was being threatened and assaulted when I hadn't done anything wrong. All I saw was students of color deliberately mistreating me. And all they saw was a privileged white girl. The reality of our situations didn't matter, the institution known as the Wake County School System was doing a wonderful job of emphasizing disparity and sowing dissention.

For I don't want to run this race in vain...

I am so thankful that I chose to go to a small school for my undergraduate degree. What it allowed me to do was interact with people of color as individuals again. The ability to build direct relationships goes a long way towards dispelling misunderstandings, myths and stereotypes. When you are in relationship with others it is about people and it is about connections.

I cannot say that I instantly became an ally after that. I've done a lot of work to understand my own privilege and it hasn't all been easy. It was a powerful moment when I realized that the fear and anger and frustration I felt on that bus is what people of color live in this country live with everyday. So I worry whether I even have the right to speak about racial issues and whether I'm being a good ally or if I'm just doing it to satisfy my own ego because it's the "right" thing to do. However, this is what I know: after the shooting of Michael Brown I felt compelled to act. I cannot tell you why it was Michael Brown and not Trayvon

Martin that so stirred my heart, only that after last summer I vowed that I would not, could not be silent anymore. I attended a rally for Michael Brown, I made sure that each session of Adult RE included an educational opportunity to explore issues of oppression. I attended an anti-oppression training for religious educators. I read *Black Like Me* for the first time. And then last month a young white man walked into a historically black church in Charleston, South Carolina and killed nine people gathered for a prayer group. My soul cries out and my knees cannot carry the weight of the grief and I am a lucky one, because I can chose whether or not to get involved. My skin gives me a pass. But my heart. My heart... My heart is broken open and I do not have a choice. My heart has issued an imperative. It will not be ignored.

So what does it mean, that moment when you realize that your survival is tied up with another's? That moment when you realize that if it happens to you, then it happens to me? It means that you are transformed, because if we cannot figure this mess out then we will *all* go down together. I am transformed into someone for whom injustice is no longer a topic for philosophical debate but a matter of life and death, a matter of spiritual wholeness and liberation. It means taking those seven principles out of the front of the hymnal and off the walls of the classrooms and bringing them to life.

We bring them to life by acting as allies for people of color. It means listening to people of color when they share their stories. It means showing up when asked. It means speaking out when faced with oppression and injustice. It means letting people of color lead the way and following their direction.

Last month I attend the Unitarian Universalist General Assembly. Part of what happens at General Assembly is the passing of Actions of Immediate Witness. These are statements from the assembled body of UUs about current issues. This year an Action of Immediate Witness was offered that stated support of the Black Lives Matter movement. This statement was presented by a group of largely youth delegates and people of color and was carefully drafted to reflect that language of the Black Lives Matter movement. Yet when it came time to approve the statement, some delegates sought to remove significant parts of the document, specifically those related to prison abolishment. Knowing that this challenge was coming, people of color asked white allies to stand in solidarity, to line up at the pro microphone in support of the statement and at the con microphone in disagreement with the amendments. And so I stood. Through a maze of parliamentary procedures, one amendment passed. Elandria Williams, daughter of Erven and Elnora Williams, members of this church, spoke passionately about the importance of standing as allies to people of color and not editing their words. The language of prison abolishment was integral to the Black Lives Matter movement. A message came down the line that if the amendment passed, allies were to abstain from voting: a watered down statement would be worse than none at all. Yet, the debate continued. Delegates in favor of amendment took issue with the idea of prison abolishment, despite explanation from the AIW creators that the term meant replacing the current prison system with a new more just and equitable system. The process was muddled and tensions were so high that the moderator paused the procedure to have chaplains lead the plenary body in a prayer. I really thought that there might be a walk out. And I knew that if people of color walked out of the plenary hall that I would go with them, that my job as an ally was to listen and follow.

The story has a happy ending, as wise minds found a way to clarify the statement in such a way that the majority of delegates voted in favor of the Action of Immediate Witness. And so it is that the 2015 General Assembly of Unitarian Universalists supports the Black Lives Matter movement. Now we get to ask, what does that mean for us at home?

The day I sat down to write this sermon, I opened Facebook to see that another person of color had died while in police custody. Sandra Bland was pulled over by police for failing to signal before making a turn. Now she is dead. I do not understand how you go from a routine traffic stop to being dead in a matter of days. I am outraged and I have questions. *You* should too. Sandra Bland is just the most recent in a long line of injustices towards people of color. When will enough be enough?

People of color are standing up. They are asking us to stand with them. They are asking that we be outraged with them, that we ask questions and speak out. Let us be the first followers, let us be the ones who have the courage to follow and show others how to follow. Let us be part of the transformation. In the words of Bernice Johnson Reagon, of Sweet Honey and the Rock “We who believe in freedom cannot rest.” I cannot rest. There are people dying and my faith calls me to action and my spirit gives me voice. My heart is broken open and I cannot rest. I will not rest.