

Black Lives Matter and the Practice of Listening / Feb. 28, 2016

by Rachael Hayes, guest speaker

I don't generally start a sermon by explaining who I am, but this time I think it's important. I am a second year masters of divinity student at Union Theological Seminary and a member of the Fourth Universalist Society in Manhattan. I'm White, and I have been doing racial justice work since December twenty fourteen. When we do this work, it's so important to be clear about where we are standing.

It means a lot to me that I am standing here in Staten Island, less than two miles from where Eric Garner received a fatal chokehold, to meet you in your work for racial justice. Deaths of Black men at the hands of police and vigilantes were simply sad news to me until the special grand jury decided not to indict Eric Garner's killer on December third, two thousand fourteen. This one should have been different. There was video of the chokehold and Garner's cries of "I can't breathe." The world saw, and the world heard.

I found my classmates in an unused classroom, giving hugs and mourning, trying to make sense of blatant injustice. We waited for more news. Some of us left to protest, not knowing what we would find but aware that the grief and rage could be held in pain alone or held in solidarity.

As we walked to the subway, I thought, "Anything could happen, and I am okay with that. It's not about me. I'm okay with being arrested, okay with being hurt. This is where I need to be tonight." Not a comforting thought, especially when I told my mother about it later, but something had changed in me, and I heard it.

We chanted in Times Square and flooded the streets of midtown, creating a holy gridlock, circumnavigating the Rockefeller Center tree lighting, which was the same night, cheerful tourists confused about why we acted out with pain and shouting when the world was twinkly and bright. They didn't know, or they didn't care, or maybe some of them didn't get it yet but have since found their lane in the movement, just as I did the night of December third.

We marched and chanted, paying little heed to sore feet and hoarse voices. On 48th Street, the voices around me began to fall out, and I heard the heartbreak in my own voice. I grew scared of it being so loud, so raw, so vulnerable, and I grew quiet for a few lines until someone nearby told me, "Don't stop. You still

have a voice.” So I kept going, pounding the streets with my feet and crying “Black Lives Matter” with those who were raising the chants.

The next night, a large group from school set out to protest again. We met up with thousands at a rally at Foley Square. We blocked traffic on Broadway and Canal Street and the West Side Highway. I began to see that even in our protest White supremacy was a dangerous force. We could follow the lead of the young White men who had loud voices and took their own authority for granted, or we could follow the actual movement organizers, many of them women of color who have been doing this work without recognition for a long time. I began to listen for who was raising a chant as well as what they were saying.

Some people’s voices float to the top automatically and are almost always heard. That’s privilege. And I’m not going to berate anyone for having privilege, because that’s not helpful. We all carry many levels of oppression and privilege within us, and understanding what to do with our privilege is much more productive than feeling bad about it. So it became important for me to lift up the voices that might not have been heard in the normal patterns of our culture. That was my opportunity to use my privilege as an educated White person to advance justice rather than perpetuate injustice.

I learned that I have an opportunity and a responsibility to use my voice and my privilege to elevate the voices of others rather than getting my own message across.

I began to see that the opportunity to listen was happening all the time, not just at protests.

Black Lives Matter. This message has been mistaken for saying Only Black Lives Matter, which misses the point of affirming the inherent worth of Black people in a world that does not. Black Lives Matter has also been mistaken for meaning Black Deaths Matter, which is true but misses another point: every Black life has inherent value and we need to value Black lives throughout their whole lifespan, not only when their story has ended.

Black Lives Matter all the time, and Black Stories Matter, and we have the opportunity to lift up Black stories. It’s not hard to find them. I discovered that sometimes my Black friends had something to say about racial justice work, and if I was smart I would listen. More of the time, their work was somewhere other than teaching me how to be a better ally, and that was really important to learn.

Luckily we have an abundance of media in our culture, and anyone who has something to say can post it on Facebook, or tweet it, or blog about it. I began reading articles on The Root, and Colorlines, and For Harriet, which is a really smart Black women's blog. I began following links out of mainstream commercial media.

I discovered that people were not just talking about high profile cases of Black men dying. They were lamenting the treatment of Black girls in schools, deaths of trans women of color largely uninvestigated, abuse of immigrant women and children, abuse of incarcerated people, Islamophobic hate crime, police killings of Native Americans, police killings of the mentally ill and homeless. The Black Lives Matter movement was talking about these injustices more loudly than anyone else I encountered. When I listened, the death of one Black man had opened my ears and my heart to worlds of injustice right below the surface of a highly-produced US American respectability. And once I had heard, I had a responsibility not to turn away.

I'm not actually someone who protests every week, though there are some who do. My work for racial justice usually looks a lot more like what I am doing right now. It involves talking to the people who are in my lane, as folks in the movement say. I began talking to my family and people at church and friends of friends, inviting them into the conversation and then listening too to what they had to say.

I began taking groups of UUs to marches. It was scary and humbling to help others wrestle with how to be an ally who listens to and lifts up the voices of others. Once I was marching with a friend who is a lawyer, and she had a problem with one of the chants: "Indict, convict, send the killer cops to jail. The whole damn system is guilty as hell." She told me later, "I'm a lawyer. I am the system. I can't say that." But we talked about it, and I really listened to her discomfort, just as she had really listened to the chant and all of the feelings and frustrations that made it a healing chant for the people who raised it. Because of the listening she did, her own racial justice work has become really powerful, and I am grateful for her ongoing witness.

Another time, some folks I was with heard a chant that made them uncomfortable. I don't remember which one, and it was probably something hard to hear, but their impulse was to drown out that discomfort. Drawing on their desires for what the march should look like based on civil rights marches of the sixties, they started saying, "We should sing. We should sing *We shall overcome*." Their impulse was to reflect an idealized protest rather than be in solidarity with the people marching alongside them. But these very White, very

privileged people were trying to use this traditional Black song to introduce some respectability into the march. There are a few levels of why this seemingly respectful impulse was actually disrespecting the people who marched with them. But most relevant to us right now, they were making the march about their need to be there in a particular way rather than to be with and attentive to the people with whom they were in solidarity.

This is so much like what happened last summer at General Assembly. The youth caucus and DRUUM, the people of color caucus, had brought an action of immediate witness in support of Black Lives Matter. There was a lot of contention around this action, and someone from DRUUM had asked me to be ready to speak in support if necessary because I was a delegate and because she knew I had done a lot of Black Lives Matter work with my congregation. The other delegates from Fourth Universalist and I stood a few people back from the microphone after the youth and people of color. And the people in line behind us got very upset with our group. We kept inviting youth and people of color to go in front of us. We were privileging their voices and inviting them to speak to their work themselves rather than speaking about them. The democratic process can be used to silence people rather than give them a voice, and our turn went over and over again to people who don't usually get to speak at General Assembly or other places of power. We never gave our statement, which was brilliant, and the people who were behind us, probably also with brilliant statements, were more focused on saying their piece than supporting the youth and people of color to whom they lent their solidarity. Their feet and probably their hearts were in the right place, but their ears were not. They were more excited to be heard than to listen. (This action of immediate witness did pass, eventually, with minimal damage to its content, and I recommend that you read it because it's also important to listen to each other.)

And now we get to the business of banners. I am so excited to hear that this congregation has voted to hang a Black Lives Matter banner. Thank you for all of the work you have done to come to this decision. How powerful. I won't be able to tell you what to do or how to do it, because I don't know what it's going to mean in the everyday life of your community.

What I do know is that you are starting a powerful conversation with your neighbors. You are taking the work you have done and inviting the larger community to join you. **Be ready to listen.**

You are entering a conversation with people who are doing similar work in other contexts. You are also entering a conversation with people who have not

done any of this work. There's no way to know how people will respond, but it's important to meet them where they are and to listen.

Fourth Universalist has had a Black Lives Matter sign in our wayside pulpit box for over a year now, and we had no way of knowing what it would bring us. We began to hold vigil in front of it from time to time, not as a regular exercise but as part of other racial justice work on Martin Luther King Day, on Selma Sunday, after the shooting in Charleston, on the anniversary of Michael Brown's death in Ferguson. It became a place for us to gather, and it held us to our word. Some people wanted to talk about it, some people were doing their very busy New York City things, but it touched lives. Some people asked us to take their picture under it. Some people wanted to tell us why they didn't like it.

And then other racial justice organizations and projects began to ask us whether we meant it, whether we would work with them. A man who was raising money for his movie about Eric Garner's death asked if we would be interested in hosting an event for him. He said he never would have thought to ask a big stone church on Central Park West to get involved in his work—he was talking to Black churches and organizations—but then he saw our sign and thought it might be worth a shot.

You are about to start a conversation. And it may change the world. And it may change you. But you've got to keep listening, because your listening will empower someone you never expected. What you hear will inform how you do the work of justice. Your listening will inspire hearts to grow, including your own.

We are all trying to get free together, and we have all got to listen.