

“Dear Dmitri...” © Rev. Erika Hewitt
delivered 21 September, 2014 ★ Midcoast UU Fellowship, Damariscotta ME

*“The devaluation of black life in America is as old as the nation itself
and has yet to be confronted.” ~ The Guardian*

The Text: “Cuz He’s Black,” by Javon Johnson

If you can suffer through YouTube’s imposed ad, you’ll see why this video of slam poetry champion Javon Johnson preceded my sermon:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u9Wf8y_5Yn4

The Commentary

Dear Dmitri,

How old were you when you learned to be afraid of the police?

When did you learn that, in the words of Javon Johnson, “poor black boys are treated as problems well before [you’re] treated as people”?

These are questions that you and I haven’t discussed yet. How could I not have asked them over our many years of conversation?

I have your picture in front of me so that I can see you as I speak. You sent it to me three years ago, at my request. In it, you’re standing on the basketball court of a federal prison. Spirals of barbed wire are visible in the background. For as long as I’ve had it, your picture has sat on my home altar. You’re never far from my thoughts.

When I look at your face, I can see your fierce intelligence as well as your anger — the anger that, as you put it, “brought [you] back to prison” after you were released the first time. Over the past eight years, as our friendship and respect have deepened, I’ve come to understand both.

What the people [reading this sermon] don’t know is that in 2006, you and I were matched through the Letter-Writing Ministry program overseen by the Unitarian Universalist Church of the Larger Fellowship. I had volunteered to be a pen-pal to an incarcerated person interested in Unitarian Universalism, as any UU can do. To be frank, you gave the coordinator pause: she suspected that the

intense, barely-contained energy in your application letter might scare off other volunteers... so she matched you to me. (I think it's best that I never asked her to explain that.)

Our early letters were tentative. It took a while for you to trust me, a white lady minister. It took a while for me to discover the raw heart and brilliant, suffocated mind under your blazing writing. You and I honor the rules established by CLF — for example, you don't know my last name or where I live, and our many letters are routed through Boston — just like we honor the etiquette of the incarcerated world: I've never asked you about the crimes that led to your convictions. Over time, you shared those details with me voluntarily... although, knowing what I now know about the prison industrial complex, and how mass incarceration functions as a modern form of sanctioned racial segregation, I could easily have guessed.

Let's name what's apparent in this photograph: you, Dmitri Carson,¹ are a Black man. Let me name what's invisible: You've been in prison almost continuously since you were 19. You're now 32, and you hope to be out in three years. When and if you're released at 35 years old, you'll face eight additional years of probation. You will have spent half of your life — and *all* of your adult life — in prison.

I view that as a waste of tragic proportion — both for you, and for the community which you might otherwise be enriching with your presence and wisdom. You're a gift, Dmitri (and Lord knows I wouldn't say that about just anyone). But you were born black and male in America, which means that even though you were born in 1982, not 1842, the odds were never in your favor.

The odds *did* favor me. That's the luck of privilege: I was born white and female into an educated and successful family. The first half-dozen times I flew in an airplane, it was as a toddler and then as a child with my parents, traveling to Europe, where they'd lived for years before I was born. The first time *you* flew on a plane, you were a 30-year old in shackles and handcuffs, being transported between prisons. You were forced to leave behind all of your accumulated possessions, terrified by the take-off, and astonished to discover that planes fly above the clouds. You gazed out for an hour, in awe. You never realized that was possible, and were still marveling when you came back to Earth, and were put in your new cell, where to wrote a letter describing it all to me.

¹ Not his real name.

I cherish your letters, Dmitri; your face is familiar and beloved to me. The pages and pages of letters that have flown between us have woven us into friends. To everyone else looking at your picture, though, you're a statistic: a human face tacked on to the fact that

more than 60% of the people in [U.S. prisons] are... racial and ethnic minorities. For Black males in their thirties, 1 in every 10 is in prison or jail,... trends... intensified by the disproportionate impact of the “war on drugs,” in which two-thirds of all persons in prison for drug offenses are people of color.²

In fact, “in some states, black men have been admitted to prison on drug charges at twenty or fifty times greater than those of white men.”³

You're one of them, Dmitri. I know you accept responsibility for your actions; you and I and the judge all know that you did something illegal. What I'm saying out loud is that the price you paid for that crime is a price that only people of color pay. It's not a coincidence.

I don't know how much news you have access to, but about six weeks ago I spent the greater part of two days watching in real time, minute by minute, something that's related to you living behind prison bars: the so-called “riots” in Ferguson, Missouri. I say “so-called” because I didn't see a violent rebellion of dangerous people with brown skin, but rather a grieving and justifiably enraged community embodying a longstanding unrest.

I saw, tweet by tweet, cell phone video by video, a people pushed to the breaking point by grief and rage for young black men whose lives have been taken away by bullets; taken away by mechanisms of fear; and yes, taken away by the War on Drugs, the driving force behind “the systematic mass incarceration of people of color.”⁴

I believe this, Dmitri. Even if I'd never gotten to know you, I'd like to think that I would have readily seen the solid, inarguable connections between three things:

² <http://www.sentencingproject.org/template/page.cfm?id=122>

³ Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, p. 7.

⁴ Alexander, p. 60.

- 1) the “new Jim Crow,” in which “more African-American adults are under correctional control today... than were enslaved in 1850, a decade before the Civil War began;”⁵
- 2) the now-commonplace killing of unarmed young black men, “shot dead by a policeman, or some white person who just thought he was in the wrong, simply because he had brown skin;”⁶ and
- 3) the painful truth that, in the words of a local Quaker, slavery is this country’s “founding sin” and its most tragically unresolved issue.⁷

This is the reason for so much unrest, *still*, in Ferguson; in Black families; and in the hearts of so many of us who are willing to see those connections: many of us know that racism isn’t so much a function of individual prejudice (or lack thereof) as it is part of the bricks and mortar of our society’s institutions.

It’s not enough for white people to rid themselves of personal prejudice — although that, right there, can be hard; I bow deeply to those willing to wrestle with their inner biases. The worst, most sinister nature of racism doesn’t have to do with people and their prejudices; it has to do with the uneven playing field of our system. As one grieving Black mother insists, “racism isn’t history — it’s now.”⁸ Racial segregation isn’t history; it’s now.

Here’s how I know that’s true, Dmitri — here’s the confession I can hardly bear to say out loud:

Every time another unarmed Black man is killed in this country by a frightened neighbor or cop or fellow shopper (... you know the names: John Crawford III; Trayvon Martin; Kimani Gray; Kendrec McDade; Jonathan Ferrell; Oscar Grant; Ervin Jefferson; Amidou Diallo — all of them in their teens and twenties); every time a new name is added to the roll call of Black men who won’t live into their thirties, this thought enters my mind: *Dmitri’s lucky to have made it to his thirties alive.*

Lucky to be alive?!?

⁵ Alexander, p. 180.

⁶ Keesha Beckford: <http://www.bonbonbreak.com/dear-white-moms/>

⁷ Spoken at the Michael Brown memorial service, Midcoast Meeting of Friends, Sept. 7, 2014.

⁸ Keesha Beckford: <http://www.bonbonbreak.com/dear-white-moms/>

Do you feel lucky, Dmitri? Lucky that, when you were arrested, you weren't confronted by an officer who, out of nervousness or fear, pulled out his revolver instead of his handcuffs?

Do you feel lucky that you never found yourself lost or hurt in a white neighborhood and, knocking on a door to ask for help, were shot and killed by a fearful gun owner?

It is ludicrous that you could be considered "lucky" for never being choked or beaten or shot to death for reaching for your ID a little too fast?

Is that how far the bar has been lowered, for African-American men in the United States?

And if so, what does that mean for the rest of us?

What does it mean for well-meaning white people who declare that they're "colorblind," but don't understand how painfully that denies your lived experience?

So many questions. Some of them even have answers... and we have time. We have years ahead of us, you and I: years to write more letters, to ask and answer these questions. I'm not going anywhere. And neither are you.

More than two million people are incarcerated in prisons and jails across the United States. Like many Americans, most prisoners have never heard of Unitarian Universalism, and those who have 'non-traditional' spiritual beliefs often despair of finding a religious community that will respect their beliefs and encourage their spiritual growth while they are incarcerated.

The (UU) Church of the Larger Fellowship's letter-writing ministry matches prisoner-members with non-incarcerated UUs for an exchange of friendly letters on topics of mutual interest. All letter-writers (prisoners and "free-world") agree to the same guidelines, which emphasize that our program is not intended for romantic, legal-aid or financial/gift interactions.

To learn more, please visit <http://www.questformeaning.org/programs/prison-ministry/letter-writing-ministry/>