

## **America's Divide: Where Do WE Stand?**

Rev. Dawn Fortune

Unitarian Universalist Congregation of the South Jersey Shore

January 10, 2021

The United States witnessed something this week unseen since the early 1800's: an attack on – and breach of – the United States Capitol building by hostile forces. Not even during the US Civil War were shots fired in Congressional Chambers.

The scene was made even more surreal by the fact that these insurrectionary rioters were incited and encouraged by the sitting president of the country. For weeks, the Current Occupant stoked the anger of his followers via tweet. They organized openly on a variety of social media platforms about their plans to seize the government that day and debated which leaders ought to be priority targets for capture or execution. They showed up with gallows and a guillotine.

The president told his believers at a rally earlier in the day that they would have to fight hard, and with strength, not weakness, to take back their country, to seize back an election he claimed was stolen, and he encouraged them to then march to the Capitol do deliver their mouth-foaming rabid rantings in person.

What could possibly go awry?

What emerged from that was an all-out assault on the building and people of our Congress – House AND Senate, causing leadership to be whisked away by security as the chest-thumping revolutionary wannabes roamed the halls of the Capitol. Capitol Police barricaded the doors to the legislative chambers so that the remaining members of congress could be escorted to safety, as the mob pounded on the doors, breaking the windows and attempting to breach the gaping hole their destruction had wrought. One woman was shot and killed by police as she attempted to enter the house chamber before the room was safely cleared.

Five people died in Wednesday's failed coup, including a Capitol Police officer who was bludgeoned with a fire extinguisher. Anyone with an electronic device and internet connection has no doubt seen all the frightening images of the carnage.

What was on display this week for the world to see was the outrage of a portion of the US population who are utterly convinced that their country has been stolen from them, as though it was a thing to possess and not a pluralist community of which they are but one part.

A deeper examination of this thinking is likely to reveal that the source of their grief and outrage is the loss of their own central role as keepers of the power in this country. These are the men (for the crowd was overwhelmingly very white and very male) who

fear most deeply that they are losing control of something they have been taught for generations was theirs to possess. Not unlike abusive husbands, they have become most enraged, and most dangerous and most violent, now that their previously cowed partner has filed for divorce.

It is as though there is a widespread feeling of emasculation that must be undone: after eight years of President Barack Obama, the black man who was successful and whose policies and efforts encouraged a culture in which bullying was named as wrong and immoral, as opposed to the birthright of the strong, and their very relevance as dominant players was imperiled. They've had four years to try to reclaim that dominant role, and once more, it has been taken from them.

In her 2016 book "White Rage," Emory University Professor Carol Anderson identifies the trigger for white rage as black advancement.

"It is not the mere presence of black people that is the problem; rather it is blackness with ambition, with drive, with purpose with aspirations, and with demands for full and equal citizenship. It is blackness that refuses to accept subjugation, to give up. A formidable array of policy assaults and legal contortions has consistently punished black resilience, black resolve." (Anderson 2016)

It is our capitalist, free-market culture that encourages competition instead of collaboration that feeds the idea of a scarcity model when it comes to dignity and justice as it applies to wealth and power. In classic capitalism, two or more players compete to earn market share: if you build a better widget than your competitors, you have a better chance of selling more, and thus making more money. The market is a limited pie of cash, and thus what one gains, the others lose.

Rights and justice, like love and dignity, do not come in portions limited like a pie cut into slices. But when you're afraid that someone is out to take away what you think is your fair share, your birthright place at the top, well then, it feels like an attack. It feels like an attack on your power, and like an attack on your identity as the top dog, the one in charge. Not only do they fear losing power and prestige, but they fear losing their very personhood, and becoming irrelevant.

The traditional order being challenged is a constructed hierarchy of value among humans, a hierarchy built upon the arbitrary construction of human divisions.

That's a real mouthful of words, so let me see if I can explain. In the United States, like in most cultures, there exists a "pecking order" among different kinds of people. And in the United States, we discern "different kinds of people" first and foremost by race.

We have a caste system that functions just like caste systems in other places around the globe, but ours is based largely upon the color of a person's skin, and it has been that way from the very first day colonizers landed on the shores of North America.

In her book "Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents," Pulitzer-Prize-winning author and researcher Isabel Wilkerson describes the unique development of the caste system we now live with.

"If they were to convert this wilderness and civilize it to their liking, they decided they would need to conquer, enslave, or remove the people already on it and transport those they deemed lesser beings to tame and work the land to extract the wealth that lay in the rich soil and shorelines.

To justify their plans, they took preexisting notions of their own centrality, reinforced by their self-interested interpretation of the Bible, and created a hierarchy of who could do what, who could own what, who was on top and who was on the bottom and who was in between.

There developed a caste system, based upon what people looked like, an internalized ranking, unspoken, unnamed, unacknowledged by everyday citizens even as they go about their lives adhering to it and acting upon it subconsciously to this day. Just as the studs and joists and beams that form the infrastructure of a building are not visible to those who live in it, so it is with caste. Its very invisibility is what gives it power and longevity. And though it may move in and out of consciousness, though it may flare and reassert itself in times of upheaval and receded in times of relative calm, it is an ever-present through line in the country's operation." (Wilkerson 2020)

This concept of a birthright entitlement to be the ones who hold the power and make the rules and benefit from those rules, then, is woven into the fabric of our nation. It is in our cultural DNA.

Sir Isaac Newton stated in his laws of motion that an object in motion will stay in motion unless it is acted upon by an outside force. Likewise, an object at rest will stay at rest unless it is acted upon by an outside force.

This stuff that is in our genetic makeup, then, is not going anywhere unless we do something about it.

This will not heal if we ignore it. It is more than a minor cut or scrape. This is systemic, historical, and chronic, and it's not going to move unless we move it.

I have a therapist friend who described the work of healing deep, systemic, emotional trauma as being like treating the victim of a motorcycle accident during her years as an emergency room nurse. The patient comes in with a lot of presenting wounds needing

attention. It would be easy to simply apply some Neosporin and bandages, but that's not actually going to work. The gravel embedded into flesh must be exposed and removed before the wound can be washed clean and treated. It is slow, painful work. But it must be done before real healing can happen. Left with the gravel and road detritus buried in the skin, the wounds will fester and get infected, causing more pain and suffering and requiring more radical, invasive treatment.

This is the work before us as a nation. We can try to remove the images of violence from our memories, but the deep wounds remain and they must be addressed.

The unpleasant realities exposed and illustrated in technicolor for the world to see this week are as complex as they are painful. There are many layers of cultural bias at play here, as well as the disturbing tendency of people to be willing to believe the most outlandish conspiracy theories.

It all boils down to one thing, though: people are treated very differently in the United States based upon the color of their skin.

Our reading this morning by Rev. Dr. Jacqui Lewis, describes in unblinking terms the reality of how differently black people and white people are treated by police in the United States. We must not turn away from the images of police officers posing for selfies with the rioters, for seeming to open the barricades to allow the seditionists inside, for their utterly boggling restraint from using violence.

That riotous mob showed up prepared for conflict, and yet very few were injured or killed. One person was killed by officers as she tried to breach the doorway of the House Chamber, another was trampled to death by her compatriots. Another made the poor decision to smuggle a taser into the building and accidentally discharged the weapon in his pants, causing a fatal heart attack. A fourth person also suffered a fatal heart attack, the details of which are not public.

Only one person was killed by police, and that while was in the act of trespassing with violent intent.

Had those rioters been Black? I do not have to explain how different the outcome would have been. You know as well as I do what that would have looked like.

Nearly 500 people were arrested in Washington DC in the four days from May 30 to June 2, 2020. Countless others were injured. Unarmed protestors were met with thousands of law enforcement officials in full tactical, military-grade riot gear and those officers fired rubber bullets and chemical agents at the protestors.

This week we saw footage of police officers helping people down the steps of the Capitol building on their way out after the violent invasion. America's racial caste system is very, very plain to see.

As sensitive human beings, we do not like conflict like this. We don't like that kind of anger on display, the threat of violence that comes with it, and the harm it causes. It is our instinct to want to heal, to wrap things up, stop the bleeding, to find a speedy and clean resolution and move on and away from the unpleasantness.

I need to caution you, though. It is far too early to be calling for healing. The wound is still fresh. Like the victim of the motorcycle accident or the long-term trauma survivor, there is a lot of painful work that we need to do if we want to move forward without a cultural and spiritual scar that always aches and limits our movement.

And in this effort, we cannot compromise.

This is not the time for incrementalism or finding common ground. In issues of justice, seeking the elusive "middle ground" is not an act of moderation, it is an act of capitulation.

In a December 2019 piece published by Novara Media, British philosopher and author Raoul Martinez illustrated this point thusly:

"The centre ground doesn't necessarily represent majority opinion – it's a consensus of the powerful. In the US, for instance, public opinion has for decades been in favour of universal health care, while most US politicians – Republicans and Democrats – have staunchly opposed it. The shifting centre ground has reframed political perceptions to such an extent that someone like Bernie Sanders, who would one have been regarded as a middle-of-the-road politician in the mould of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, has long been characterized as a radical insurgent.

Struggles to abolish slavery, end child labour, resist colonialism, extend voting rights, achieve racial and gender equality, and grant basic human rights to all required courageous members of society to challenge the dominant identities and narratives of their day. Those who did were labelled as extremists, and sometimes punished with imprisonment or death. It's easy to look back at the injustices of history with moral clarity and ignore the fact that this clarity owes its existence to the hard work of those who came before us. Our moral compass is the outcome of yesterday's sacrifices and struggles." (Martinez 2019)

In his "Letter From Birmingham Jail," Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King laments the effects of the tepid support his movement received from moderate white progressives.

"I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Councilor or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to "order" than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a

positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says: "I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action"; who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a "more convenient season." Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection.

I had hoped that the white moderate would understand that law and order exist for the purpose of establishing justice and that when they fail in this purpose they become the dangerously structured dams that block the flow of social progress. I had hoped that the white moderate would understand that the present tension in the South is a necessary phase of the transition from an obnoxious negative peace, in which the Negro passively accepted his unjust plight, to a substantive and positive peace, in which all men will respect the dignity and worth of human personality. Actually, we who engage in nonviolent direct action are not the creators of tension. We merely bring to the surface the hidden tension that is already alive. We bring it out in the open, where it can be seen and dealt with. Like a boil that can never be cured so long as it is covered up but must be opened with all its ugliness to the natural medicines of air and light, injustice must be exposed, with all the tension its exposure creates, to the light of human conscience and the air of national opinion before it can be cured." (Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King 1963)

As Unitarian Universalists, we sometimes confuse our commitment to affirming the inherent worth and dignity of all people as an obligation to not offend people.

But.

Our commitment to the inherent worth and dignity of all people does not mean we get to sit idly by when someone with power attacks someone without it. Yes, the attacker has inherent worth and dignity due every human being. AND, their violence is unacceptable.

And frankly, when we fail to interrupt abuse, OUR behavior is unacceptable as well.

I remember lessons from my Catholic childhood in which I learned about *sins of commission* and *sins of omission*. A sin of *commission* is when I hit someone. A sin of *omission* is when I see someone get hit and fail to stop it.

Too often we default to the “it’s not my place to judge” approach, which has the effect of offering our silent approval to the one doing the harm and communicating to the victim that our own need to avoid conflict outweighs their suffering.

Bishop Desmond Tutu famously said (paraphrasing broadly here) “if you take a neutral position when you see an elephant standing on a mouse’s tail, the mouse will not see your behavior as neutral. You have chosen the side of the oppressor.”

If we fail to act in this time, we take the side of the oppressors. We take the side of the plainly racist culture and policies of the police and law enforcement and our dominant culture in Washington.

Now is not the time to seek common ground, closure, or healing.

Now is the time to demand transparency and accountability, for without those, we are doing nothing more than putting a smiley-face bandaid on a festering wound.

We must have an investigation into what happened.

We must learn how this breach happened.

We must learn who made the strategic and tactical decisions that failed so badly, and we need to hold them accountable.

We need to hold accountable all those who defiled and ransacked the sacred civic space of democracy, and work to ensure that the world understands that such behavior will never go unpunished.

We must *hold accountable* all those who aided and abetted the insurrectionists: those who urged them on, riled them up, got them lathered up and furious and then gave them marching orders.

We must *hold accountable* those who peddle conspiracy theories and demand that our officially licensed broadcasting entities be regulated so that they are not permitted to produce and promote material that is factually untrue. FoxNews is not allowed to broadcast in Canada because there are regulations forbidding the presentation of lies as truth in journalism there.

We must *demand* a truth and reconciliation commission that encompasses all the governmental crimes of the last four years. Police brutality. Babies in cages. Environmental catastrophe. International corruption. Crimes against humanity.

All of it must be brought to light, scrubbed clean, and allowed to heal.

We must demand that the truth be exposed, and we must acknowledge our own complicity where it is real.

None of us is without blame in this nation.

None. Of. Us.

If we have not participated in direct violence, we have benefitted from hundreds of years of a racially based caste system that lifts some while oppressing others.

Our job now boils down to three very simple steps:

1. Educate ourselves. Educate ourselves about racial justice, about economic justice, about gender justice. It is not the job of the oppressed to educate those with privilege about that privilege. Do your homework. Read uncomfortable books and articles. If you're not sure where to start, do a google search for "anti-racism reading list" and start there. If you struggle with google, ask your librarian. They'll know where to direct you.
2. Work to undo the damage done. Simply saying "I'm sorry," is not enough. Paper crumpled into a ball will never lay flat again. We need to own our part in this injustice and work to make it right.
3. Follow the lead of those who are most marginalized. This is not about us leading anything. This is about us showing up to offer help and support. When there are rallies, show up and march with a sign, but don't try to lead. Our role is to be right-sized, to listen, to take direction.

2021 has already been a long year.

There is hope on the horizon, but a new presidential administration will not undo the damage done, and it will not permit us to ignore the deep traumas that must be addressed.

I am committing to this work personally. I need to learn more about all kinds of things, including my own privilege and how I can best be helpful to those who are more marginalized than I.

Normally I encourage you to some course of action at this point in my sermon, but today I want to morally *charge* you to take action. We are past the time for encouraging action and well into the realm of it being a moral *imperative*.

So, go now.

Read.

Work.

Follow.

Get right-sized.

Work for justice.

The time for compromise is gone. Let's do this.



### Works Cited

Anderson, Carol. *White Rage*. New York, London: Bloomsbury, 2016.

Martinez, Raoul. *The Centrist DelusionL 'Middle Ground' Politics Aren't Moderate, They're Dangerous*. December 11, 2019.

<https://novaramedia.com/2019/12/11/the-centrist-delusion-middle-ground-politics-isnt-moderate-its-dangerous/> (accessed January 8, 2021).

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. "Letter From Birmingham City Jail." *Liberation*, June 1963.

Wilkerson, Isabel. *CASTE The Origins of Our Discontents*. New York: Random House, 2020.

Other resources that went into the creation of this sermon:

<https://www.yesmagazine.org/opinion/2021/01/07/trump-capitol-america-white-supremacy/?fbclid=IwAR1ID5FE3EraH-PCSM7P3wARozubxBrQOIqxPflhKWMzNp3BCJYQqzivws>

[https://engage.onbeing.org/20210109\\_the\\_pause?recruiter\\_id=5495&fbclid=IwAR1po1qgn7Pn\\_e755zeHj11gitzoi19j9l1uPkMxjqB49tudgXr1zG9kews](https://engage.onbeing.org/20210109_the_pause?recruiter_id=5495&fbclid=IwAR1po1qgn7Pn_e755zeHj11gitzoi19j9l1uPkMxjqB49tudgXr1zG9kews)

<https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2014/04/140413135953.htm>

[https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles\\_Gen/Letter\\_Birmingham.html](https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html)

<https://www.uua.org/ga/past/1966/ware>