A New Definition of Self Reliance

Rev. David Kraemer

The Rev. Rosemary Bray McNatt is president of Starr King School for Ministry, our UU seminary in Berkeley, Calif. She is a former editor for the New York Times Book Review , and published author.

Several years ago, when she was still in seminary, her literary agent called to ask whether she would consider being a co-author of Coretta Scott King’s autobiography. She was one of several writers being considered, and in the end, she says, she didn’t make the cut. But during an hour-long meeting with Coretta King , McNatt came upon an intriguing, and troubling revelation.

“‘Oh, I went to Unitarian churches for years, even before I met Martin,’ Coretta told McNatt.[[1]](#footnote-1) She had been, since college, a member of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, which was popular among Unitarians and Universalists. “‘And Martin and I went to Unitarian churches when we were in Boston.’

What surprised and saddened McNatt was what she said next. The gist of it was this: ‘We gave a lot of thought to becoming Unitarian at one time, but Martin and I realized we could never build a mass movement of black people if we were Unitarian.’

It was a statement that pierced McNatt’s heart and troubled her mind. She considered “what our religious movement would be like if the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. had chosen differently, had cast his lot with our faith instead of returning to his roots as an African-American Christian. Certainly no one with King's gifts would have lived in complete obscurity. (But, McNatt writes) our liberal religious movement would have neutralized the greatest American theologian of the twentieth century. Certainly his race would have been the primary barrier. In a religious movement engaged until the 1970s in the active discouragement of people of color who wished to join its ministerial ranks, King might have found his personal struggles to serve Unitarian Universalism at least as daunting as the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

“Even if race had disappeared as an issue, King might have found the barrier of theology insurmountable. Though from the very start of his theological training he revealed a decided bent toward liberal religion, by the time his faith had been tried by the civil rights movement, King had said No to the sunny optimism of liberal faith—an optimism frankly untested in the heat of the battle for liberty and dignity for African Americans.

…

“The notion of the self-perfectibility of human beings was an inadequate theology in the face of the sustained hatred and embodied evil of the segregationist South,” McNatt writes. “Yet King retained his faith in the great potential for goodness in humanity—his faith in the possibilities of human nature—that Unitarians and Universalists would lift up as a central affirmation of our free faith. Reason and experience revealed as much to King about humanity as about divinity, and what he thought and learned taught him the importance of both.

“For King to have answered the call to a liberal religious faith, a faith that clearly resonated with him … would have meant a fatal separation from the sources of his power—a faith in a suffering God who stood with suffering people despite their mistakes and failures, and covenantal love between himself and oppressed African Americans, the people who grounded his passion for justice but did not restrict it solely to themselves.”

It’s an interesting idea, huh? What if Martin Luther King had been a Unitarian Universalist?

In fact, as UUs, we have a strong legacy of racial justice work, dating back to abolition and carried through the civil rights movement of the 20th century. In 1965, UU minister, Rev. James Reeb, and two other Unitarian ministers, Rev. Clark Olsen and Rev. Orloff Miller, travelled to Selma, Ala., to participate in a voting rights campaign. After eating dinner at an integrated restaurant on March 9, they were attacked and severely beaten by white segregationists armed with clubs. Reeb died in the hospital two days later. The following year, King delivered the Unitarian Universalist Association’s Ware lecture at general assembly.

In the years that followed, we struggled among ourselves as to how to respond to issues of race and class. The argument kept us out of racial justice work for a long time.

But in 1992, General Assembly delegates passed a resolution calling for racial and cultural diversity in our churches,

And in 1997, delegates followed up by calling for all levels of the Association to embark on the intentional path to become anti-racist and multicultural.

We continue to seek answers questions about race, oppression, white privilege, and reconciliation.

And still there is so much to be done.

The tragedies that have occurred in recent years across the country are stark illustrations. The protests they have sparked are proof that racial issues, racial injustice, is far from behind us.

We should not have needed blood to tell us this. Over the last 30 years, incarceration rates for African Americans increased four times as much as for whites.

One in 9 young black American men experienced the historic 2008 election of Barak Obama from their prison and jail cells; 13 percent of black adult men could not cast a vote in the election because of a felony conviction.

Imprisonment statistics alone might reveal to us how far away from that radiant tomorrow we are. But look then at high school graduation rates. Look at unemployment. Look at access to housing and to loans. The disparity is shocking.

And still we hear that being poor is the result of personal choices, not systemic inequality.

The idea that everyone – black or white -- can succeed in this country is hard-wired into us. It’s part of our American psyche, our can-do attitude, our independence.

It’s rooted in the idea that we are all capable of determining our own destiny. We believe that we need is simply the freedom to do so.

We believe this is true for every body. We hold this to be self-evident, that all people are created equal. All people are endowed with the rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

Independence, freedom, liberty – these are the things that we are about as Americans.

These things also are what we are about as Unitarian Universalists.

We often understand our free and responsible search for truth and meaning as an individual search. We help newcomers answer the question: “Are my beliefs welcome here?” We hold no creed, no revelation, no authority other than our own conscience.

We take the American ideal of self-reliance right down into the depths of our religion.

Indeed, self-reliance is our heritage. The architects of our national ethos are the architects of our beliefs.

Straight from our own Ralph Waldo Emerson come these nuggets:

“Insist on yourself; never imitate.”

“Is not a man better than a town?”

“Nothing can bring you peace but yourself.”

And “Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string.”

If these things sound right to you, well, they sound right to me, too. The American Transcendentalists are part of my DNA. I have been drawn to these ideas since long before I was a Unitarian Universalist.

Emerson and Henry David Thoreau shaped my thinking from the time I was in High School. I have engaged Transcendentalist thought on and off over more than 30 years now.

Here’s a story about how the radical individualism pioneered by our own religious ancestry plays out in another way.

For more than a year, members of the Racial Justice Task Group at my old church in Rochester, Minn., attended school board meetings and met one on one with board members and administrators to push for greater equality in the test scores between white students and students of color or those with limited English speaking skills. The graduation rate for black students in the district at that time was 46 percent.

One school board member we talked to said it’s like this:

A few years ago, he got to know the son of an African American businessman there in Rochester who was struggling a bit during high school but showed some talent in basketball. The board member knew a coach with a junior college with a good ball program, and with a little blend of encouragement and string-pulling, he got the kid a scholarship to this school. Now it’s up to you, he says.

But sadly, after a time, it didn’t work out. The kid was back in Rochester. He’d lost his scholarship, blown his chance. That’s how it goes. You can provide all the opportunity you want, but some people just won’t pick up on it, says the school board member.

That’s sad. But it was his choice.

That’s the expectation we hold of ourselves, right? That even if some of us were privileged to be born into middle-class or better homes, even if we have been graced with some natural talents or intelligence, even if we were born white – that what we do with what we’ve been given is up to us, individually.

We are …

Self reliant.

That’s the expectation we have of people who show up at work each day, that the opportunity is there, it’s just a matter of whether you choose to pick up on it. You are, in the last wash, responsible for your self.

Self reliant.

That’s the expectation we throw at students who receive a scholarship to play ball at a junior college somewhere far from home, far away from any kind of support network, in a community where you have no friends, and maybe not even any potential friends who look like you. You are literally on your own.

Self reliant.

Is it really true that with all the opportunity in this nation that the problem really is that some people just don’t pick up on it? Is the problem really just that some people can’t seem to find that self reliance?

King puts it this way: “It's all right to tell a man to lift himself by his own bootstraps, but it is a cruel jest to say to a bootless man that he ought to lift himself by his own bootstraps. It is even worse to tell a man to lift himself by his bootstraps when somebody is standing on the boot.”

As primarily white people, another part of self reliance means that we are on our own to come to some admission of who we are and what our role in this is. We own this problem. This is not just a problem for Black folks, or Native Americans or Muslims. It’s our problem. We make it so. And I don’t just mean us as generic white people. I mean us as Unitarians. We feed this with who we are. In fact, we might have helped invent it.

Emerson was a leading intellectual of his time and of this movement. His ideas grew from and shaped the idea of Yankee individualism even as they forged American Unitarianism. I am deeply wrapped up in Emersonian stuff.

So when I heard about a writer who had a very different view of Emerson, I had to get the book. It is “A History of White People” by Nell Irwin Painter. And she offers a look at Emerson apart from the more usual accolades. Painter writes that even as Emerson shaped American thought he authored white race theory.

The story begins, she says, with Emerson’s own education. German thought was in vogue those days, particularly the thought of German romantics such as Kant and Goethe.

In England, this line of thinking caught writers like Thomas Carlyle, with whom Emerson struck up a friendship. Through the ideals of this Germanic strain, American Transcendentalism found its notions of nature, intuition, genius and individualism. And in an embodied sort of way, Emerson came to identify these high ideals with Saxons and Englishmen and even virile, handsome, self-sufficient – and of course, white – Norsemen. The upshot is that in Emerson’s writing, the developing picture of the ideal person is that of an Anglo-Saxon.

These ideas are evident in Emerson’s book “English Traits.” By most accounts, “English Traits” is a witty travelogue of Emerson’s visits to England and his wry observations of the people he meets. But in Painter’s eyes, he betrays a “white racial ideal.” Emerson speaks for an increasingly rich and powerful American ruling class.

And even as he creates hegemony, Painter points out, he says some really awful things.

As he lionizes this English-Saxon-Nordic archetype, he lays to waste “lesser” peoples, including the Irish, who were loathed in Emerson’s day. He denigrates the French who “break faith at a whim.” And he views blacks, even in those days before social Darwinism – as pre-developed.

Here’s an example. Emerson writes:

“If the black man is feeble and not important to the existing races, not on a parity with the best race, the black man must serve, and be exterminated. But if the black man carries in his bosom an indispensible element of a new and coming civilization; for the sake of that element, no wrong nor strength nor circumstance can hurt him; he will survive and play his part.

Even if we give Emerson a pass for unfortunate language, his point is still the same – in the march of history, black people are at the back of the line.

Now science and anthropology clearly show that race, if it is anything, is nothing more than skin color, arrayed across the globe in a spectrum of tones. If you walked from sub-Saharan Africa up through the Fertile Crescent all the way to Scandinavia you would find at no point a dividing line in the skin color of native people. There are no real “races.”

History, on the other hand, shows a quite a different picture. Particularly after the arrival of Europeans to the Western hemisphere and the development of the slave trade, “race” became a real phenomenon.

There are many institutions deeply affected by the emergence of this idea, institutions where the fiction of race is made fact – housing, banking, lending, employment, marriage, education.

In a small group discussion on these issues a few years ago, a man in my group remarked that he has known all along that there are no real differences between black and white, between Hispanic and Asian and European. And more, while he could understand that even as recently as the last generation many Americans did not hold this view, at no time in his life has “racism” ever been OK. This has been true not just for him and his friends and family, but for all of our culture, he says. You just can’t call anyone names any more. There are no more segregated water fountains. Even our president is black.

So maybe, he says, we’re over the hump. Maybe if we watch this work itself out for a bit, maybe racism will disappear. There will always be a few bad actors, of course, he says. But in broad terms, it’s just not OK to be racist. Problem solved. Right?

So why is it that we still see so much disparity between people of different skin color? Why is it that blacks and Hispanics and Muslims and Gays and Lesbians and Transgender people and women – women for crying out loud – still see a problem?

Author Eduardo Bonilla-Silva writes:

“Nowadays, except for members of white supremacist organizations, few whites in the United States claim to be “racist.”

“Most whites assert they “don’t see any color, just people”; that although the ugly face of discrimination is still with us, it is no longer the central factor determining minorities’ life chances; and finally, that like Dr. Martin Luther king Jr., they aspire to live in a society where “people are judged by the content of their character, not by the color of their skin.” …

“But regardless of whites’ “sincere fictions,” racial considerations shade almost everything in America.

“Blacks and dark-skinned racial minorities lag well behind whites in virtually every area of social life; they are about three times more likely to be poor than whites, earn about 40 percent less than whites, and have about an eighth of the net worth that whites have. They also receive an inferior education compared to whites, even in when they attend integrated institutions.

“In terms of housing, black-owned units comparable to white-owned ones are valued at 35 percent less. Blacks and Latinos also have less access to the entire housing market because whites, through a variety of exclusionary practices by white realtors and homeowners, have been successful in effectively limiting their entrance into many neighborhoods.

“Blacks receive impolite treatment in stores, in restaurants, and in a host of other commercial transaction. Researchers have also documented that blacks pay more for goods such as cars and houses than do whites.

“Finally, blacks and dark-skinned Latinos are the targets of racial profiling by the police that, combined with the highly racialized criminal court system, guarantees their own overrepresentation among those arrested, prosecuted, incarcerated , and if charged for a capital crime, executed. Racial profiling on the highways has become such a prevalent phenomenon that a term has emerged to describe it: driving while black. In short, blacks and most minorities are, “at the bottom of the well.”

“How is it possible to have this tremendous degree of racial inequality in a country where most whites claim that race is no longer relevant?

With all the opportunity in this nation, with everyone abandoning prejudice, with everyone seeking nothing but success, is it really that the problem is that some people just don’t pick up on it? Is the problem really just that some people can’t seem to find that

Self-reliance?

The logic of the Protestant work ethic goes like this:

We are all called to the work that we do, whether we are doctors or teachers or wait staff at a restaurant. To fail to work is to fail your call. You have failed yourself. You have failed God, maybe. You have failed society. You have failed to be an American.

But imagine how a simple goal such as good grades might look if you were a member of a group oppressed by the dominant society. If you were oppressed, the most “self-reliant” thing you could do is to resist, resist every last aspect of those who are keeping you down. You would not dress like them, you would not speak like them, you would not share their goals – particularly those goals that lead to the dominant culture’s definition of success. You would not give a rip about good grades.

Getting good grades only means you are kissing up. To “win” is to fail. But to “fail,” that is to win.

No wonder so many black students are failing to graduate. By this account at least, they are winning.

But not really. Not for themselves. Not for us as a society. We have work to do. Work in our institutions. Also work within each one of us.

Maybe what we need is a new definition of self-reliance. Maybe we need to come to terms with our own Emersonian beliefs, and work to change them.

Now I’m not so naïve as to think that we’re going to redefine the United States along Socialist lines. I do not believe that we will dump freedom and individuality and self-determination. But here are some what-ifs that put a different spin on self-reliance, that might give us a new view of our old selves.

What if self-reliance meant recognizing the privilege we enjoy and acknowledging that we have not gained this all on our own? In fact, we enjoy enormous advantage. Are we so full of ourselves to not admit how we got here? “Self” for many of us, is hardly alone.

White people too often forget how connected we are, how much we take for granted. It is hard to see this from the inside. Transplanted to a new community where we know no one, we nevertheless can expect to drive down the street without anyone turning to look. We can expect that no one will assume just by our presence that we are an immediate threat.

We can walk into a restaurant and find food we are accustomed to eating. Movies feature people who look like us. The music in a night club moves to a beat we are familiar with. And no one in school assumes that we are there, too, because someone else wants to make a political statement.

We assume that pulling yourself up by the bootstraps, no matter who you are, is a goal shared by everyone. That social class is a prison only if you let it be. That upward mobility is the natural state of affairs. We forget, that in a truly classless society, there would be no upward mobility.

We need a new definition of self reliance.

What if Self-reliance meant understanding how much we owe to others.

Second, what if self-reliance meant giving up a bit of what we have so that others may have more? Martin Luther King writes that no one gives up privilege willingly. What if we were the first to do so? What if self-reliance included a bit of sacrifice?

Another school board member with whom we spoke points out that in any objective sense, to “fail” in protest is not to win.

Not in terms of social productivity or even in terms of personal health. She is right, of course. But our job then is to dismantle the class and racial competition, the us-against-them premise of our culture. We need to find a way in which “we” speaks louder than “me.”

In the school district, where resources are finite, goals such as eliminating the achievement gap often receive great lip service … until it comes time to decide which other programs might be cut. Well-meaning people say they are all for helping “those” people. But when band or chorus or an arts program or advanced calculus comes on the chopping block, all bets are off.

I think this is a false dilemma. I think we too quickly fall into camps with this reasoning. There needs to be a way to create musicians among students of all skin color. Or better, there must be a way for music to create good students of all colors. But we get trapped in our circumstances.

This is part of our insular independence, too. We need to give up our ideas of who wins and who doesn’t.

We need a new definition of self reliance.

What if self-reliance meant giving up attitudes that stand in the way.

Lastly, what if self-reliance meant recognizing that we, as people of all colors, are here on our own and that what we do in this life is all that matters? What if we believed in no grand plan. No last accounting on judgment day, when each of us gets our due. Just life. And us. And we are responsible for what is right, what is just, what can be relied upon.

This is what John Lennon sings about in Imagine. And this is where I think our liberal religion has a jump on redefinition. Our free and responsible search for truth and meaning means we are already heavily vested in the world. What we do in this life matters.

I realize that not all of us believe the same thing, that afterlife might be a part of your worldview. But I think we agree that our beliefs are up to us, and that what we believe matters.

What we need is a religion that is not about me, but about us. We need religion through which we create community, by which we strengthen the bonds between us. Religion that we practice together.

We need a new definition of self reliance.

What if self reliance meant that we rely on our selves, plural, all of us together, to find meaning.

That’s a vision of self reliance that might allow us to see that the work is not over, the problem is not solved. It might never be. But if we work at it, we can say along with Emerson, “Speak your latent conviction, and it will be the universal sense.”

1. Rosemary Bray McNatt, *To Pray Without Apology*, published “UU World” magazine, Nov. 1, 2002. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)