

## **“The Power of Dreams”**

September means back to school. No ritual is more familiar in this land of free and universal public education. The backpacks get bigger each year. The kids are text-messaging each other instead of passing notes in study hall. But some things remain the same.

One constant, for example ... Most children in these United States will be attending racially segregated schools this fall, just as they did fifty years ago, when I was starting kindergarten. For it was exactly a half century ago, in September of 1957 that Little Rock, Arkansas, became the first city in the country to implement the directive the Supreme Court's had handed down in *Brown v. Board of Education*, declaring “separate” educational facilities to be inherently unequal.

Little Rock was in some ways an unlikely place to test the Court's authority, a fairly moderate Southern town by the standards of that era. The local school board had already approved a plan to integrate Central High School, and nine African American students were registered for the fall semester there.

But Governor Orval Faubus was facing re-election and knew he needed the votes of the White Citizen's Councils to regain office. So when the young black teenagers arrived at the school house for their first day of class, they were met by the Arkansas National Guard in full combat gear, called out by the Governor to barring the entry in defiance of federal law.

Scenes of mob violence flashed across the nation's TV screens. One of the black girls was nearly killed by the crowd. Until finally President Eisenhower took action, summoning one thousand paratroopers of the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division to Little Rock where, on September 25, with bayonets drawn, they accompanied the nine adolescents to their first day of class at Central High. The youngsters gathered each morning all that year to be driven to school by a military convoy with machine guns mounted front and back.

Those were dark days by many measures. Yet despite the turbulence of the times, those were also days of dreaming. Martin Luther King Jr. had just risen to national prominence, to stir the country's imagination (and its conscience). He didn't articulate new ideals, just reminded people of the old ones, out of usage from long neglect: American ideals of justice for all, religious ideals of love and charity, using a religious language that seemed to bring people together, Christian and Jew, North and South, black and white, rather than dividing them.

Where have those dreams gone? The language of brotherhood and sisterhood? The aspiration that people might finally set aside their superficial differences and learn to live together as a single human family?

Later this month, former President Clinton will host a reunion for the Little Rock Nine,

honoring their courage in opening the school house door for others to follow. But Elizabeth Eckford, whose photograph has become synonymous with bravery (neat in a fresh white dress, text books tucked under her arm and striding forward with calm and dignity amid a snarling, shouting throng) said recently that her neighborhood in Little Rock has become even more segregated than it was in 1957.

Little Rock High School, now a national historic site, has become mostly black instead of all white. And that's true of many of nation's schools, including the four districts that were part of the original Brown v. Board decision. While America is becoming more diverse racially and ethnically, its public schools are becoming less so.

"What happens to a dream deferred?" asked the poet Langston Hughes. "Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun? Or fester like a sore--And then run?" The country seems to be retreating from its dreams today. This past June the Supreme Court ruled that plans at work in Seattle and Louisville to integrate their public schools were against the law, a decision couched in the rhetoric of equality with the effect of furthering educational apartheid.

Which is sad. Recently I was talking with Wally Elliot, one of our neighbors and a local school board member about Burlington's plans to integrate schools across socio-economic lines. Supposedly that kind of mixing raises test scores, and I remarked to Wally the research there seemed a little shaky, but that it still seemed a good thing to me to bring kids together across ethnic and class and racial lines (in other words, good for our children, good for our nation, good for our democracy). Wally said yes, that's true. But he reminded me that its illegal now for school boards to deliberately pursue racial balancing of any kind. That's how far we've come in these last fifty years.

And what makes it even more troubling is that integration doesn't seem to be working outside the classroom, either. Robert Putnam, the sociologist who wrote *Bowling Alone*, came out with a new study suggesting that diversity isn't bringing us together as a people. Rather, as the number of languages and cultures in a given town rises, the more the individuals in that municipality tend to disengage and withdraw from civic organizations and participation in public life. The bad news is, communities that are more diverse also tend to be less cohesive.

So what happens to a dream deferred? "Maybe it just sags, like a heavy load," says Langston Hughes. Part of what happens is that people become disillusioned, apathetic, or worn out. They give up trying or just lower the bar. If we can't reach the dream of brotherhood, people think to themselves, we'll settle for raising minority test scores by three percent. If we can't really have the dream of equality, we'll settle for Connie Rice in the State Department and Clarence Thomas on the Court. A weariness sets in.

A weariness that can also affect our religious institutions. Unitarian Universalists were at the forefront fifty years ago. Our church in Atlanta was one of the first in the deep South to desegregate. Whitney Young Jr. was a member there, and Dr. King spoke from the Unitarian pulpit. Our youth in down in Georgia met together with the teens

from Ebenezer Baptist Church. We shared a common dream. And because of that, there were more African Americans in our denomination in the 1960's than there are today. In fact, there were more people of all sorts in our denomination forty or fifty years ago--children and adults of all races--than there are in 2007. So while the population of the United States has grown tremendously larger and more varied--so that people of color are now a majority in California and other rapidly growing states--our faith has stayed small and insular and overwhelmingly white.

My dream is that Unitarian Universalism can be bigger than that and I think we have to do better than that. Because our dream as people of faith is really not different from Dr. King's dream or the American dream. It's a dream of people united by goodwill, not divided by dogma or creed. It's the dream of a community where people are not just tolerated, but where everyone belongs. It's a dream of people cooperating together, not just competing for private gain but pursuing the common good. Respect for the individual. Equality of opportunity. A society that works for all its members. A dream that the richest country in the world can provide all its children not only with housing and healthcare for the bodies but also give them an understanding that they are more than consumers in the marketplace or producers in an economic free-for-all, but also citizens empowered with important rights and responsibilities and obligations to the rest of the human race.

Fifty years ago, Martin Luther King Jr. remarked that eleven a.m. on Sunday morning was the most segregated hour in America. What would he say today? That we need to learn to dream again. That this congregation and every church and synagogue in the United States ought to work harder to move beyond tribalism, beyond ethnicity, beyond narrow provincialism. I don't know about you, but I was glad to hear some Thomas Dorsey from the choir loft last week. Because last time I checked, they don't just sing J.S. Bach up in heaven. And if a black baptist pastor in Louisiana can pay white folks to hear him preach, a Unitarian choir in Vermont ought to be able to sing a little gospel. My dream is that this congregation will learn to live out the meaning of its principles and realize that talk of a "world community with peace and justice for all" is vain except as we begin to make it happen here in our own town and neighborhood. My dream is that we will be the change we want to see.

Because fifty years from now, we know the world is going to be a very different place. Those of us who were around at the time of Little Rock will be gone then. Burlington High School, which is now twenty percent non-white, will have a black principal in a student body where thirty-four languages are spoken at home instead of the current twenty-seven. This meetinghouse may still be here. But whether it remains relevant to the times or becomes a New England anachronism, a preserve of white Yankeedom, will depend on the boldness of our vision in this generation.

September for me means back to school, and also means back to church. Back is good. Back is familiar. Back is comfortable. But part of me doesn't want to go back, at least not if that means going backwards, retreating or retrenching or even just maintaining the status quo. I want to go forward into September, forward into a new

year, forward to a renewed dedication to the faith we share, forward to a new kind of congregation, forward just a step closer toward that mountaintop, where we can all see the Promised Land.