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It matters where we put our urgent energies.

Beginning Again

Most people in this valley know Paul Priestman not as our office administrator but as the “Cheese Man” at the Farmers Market—yes, that delicious Tamworth cheese. For him to make cheese, his cow needs to produce milk. To produce milk, she needs to keep bearing young. And so, this holiday season was a calf watch around here as Paul’s cow, Gretel, was about to give birth. Christmas came and went. No baby. Still no baby on New Year’s Day.

Then, the morning of January 2nd, Paul and his kids popped by the barn on the way to school. You guessed it. The calf was halfway out—in perfect form, as if diving into life, front legs crossed, head in a tuck. Before their eyes, the rest of him emerged, just like that. Gretel took it all in stride—cleaned him up and got him on his feet.

You may have seen the photo from that day. Gretel’s broad back in the foreground, her newborn calf looked out at the world for the first time. Sunlight streamed in the doorway behind them. Ears soft and iridescent. And those brown eyes. Luminous. Peaceful. Innocent. The tenderness and the trust—the clean slate of a new life—transfixes us. What says “new” and “fresh” like a newborn? What says “beautiful” and “miraculous” like a newborn? What says “possibility” like a newborn?

How precious is the clean slate of an unfettered beginning!

Not like most of our beginnings which are layered with complexity. For adults, beginning *again* is more like it. We come to most things beginning again—a new year, a new relationship, a new project, a new chapter of life. And when we’re on our game, we bring with us what matters most. Beginning again anything of any *import*, we must, in the African American vernacular, “stay woke,” as in “I was sleeping but now I’m woke.” We must stay woke. Awake. Aware. Our eye on what matters.

MLK Jr. Day has come around every year since 1983, every year a chance to begin again: to re-engage in the work for which King lived and died. Thirty-four years is a long time to sustain a sense of freshness and possibility and immediacy. It says something about America’s priorities that, while opportunity and rights for some people have truly evolved since King’s time—women, the LGBTQ community, people with disabilities—the racial divide is still brutally real.

What has happened over these years to *its* urgency? What does it take today, in a New Year that millions of people say is different and urgent, to bring King’s work alive? What does it take to bring newness and freshness and possibility to what UU Rev. William Sinkford calls “the racial nightmare” of our country?¹

Part of what it takes is a look at our innocence. Not the innocence we see in a newborn but innocence that comes of not seeing our own understandings clearly. We can claim innocence

¹ William Sinkford, “The Dream of White Innocence,” *UU World*, Winter 2016, 26.

when, really, cultural blinders prevent us from seeing the truth. I don't know about you, but the past couple of years have exposed blinders I didn't know I had. Revelation has come from conversation and blog, from the news and books. When it hits, the cognitive shift feels visceral.

Consider the image of baby strollers in the book *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates. He remembers seeing...

“...white parents pushing double-wide strollers down gentrifying Harlem boulevards in T-shirts and jogging shorts...I saw them lost in conversation with each other, mother and father, while their sons commanded entire sidewalks with their tricycles. The galaxy belonged to them, and as terror was communicated to our children, I saw mastery communicated to theirs.

[He goes on, writing to his teenaged son.] And so when I remember pushing you in your stroller to other parts of the city...I remember feeling ill at ease....

In those days I would come out of the house, turn onto Flatbush Avenue, and my face would tighten like a Mexican wrestler's mask, my eyes would dart from corner to corner, my arms loose, limber, and ready. This need to be always on guard was an unmeasured expenditure of energy, the slow siphoning of the essence....”²

Those strollers—an everyday part of family life—drove home for me a newness, a sad wakefulness about the fear that people of color live with every day. Who amongst us has seen parts of our innocence chip away as we've come to see more clearly what it means to be white?

And so, how to mark Martin Luther King Day this time around? We've heard threats of building a wall between borders, of banning Muslims from this country. We've seen, up close, on our screens, more and more racial killings by police officers, riots in the street, devastation in Baton Rouge, Minneapolis, Dallas and Chicago. This weekend we've heard a president-elect on the eve of his inauguration excoriate civil rights leader and icon Rep. John Lewis of Georgia.

In 2013, the day Trayvon Martin's killer was acquitted, an Oakland organizer posted these wistful words: “I'm still surprised,” she wrote, “at how little Black lives matter.” We might well wonder “how little Black lives matter” when reading the weekend section of a local newspaper, full of fun things to do on the holiday tomorrow.

Let's go for urgency and newness instead. Let's blow out some of our so-called innocence and feel the truth. Let's go for staying woke.

You may be aware that an old UUFES issue has blown in recently like a squall. Several years ago, there was a time in the service for announcements—the board and minister ended this practice. Today, the subject of announcements has blown into an urgent controversy. Hold on! We need to look at our priorities. It matters where we put our urgent energies. This year *is*

² Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*, New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015,90.

different. To millions of people—especially those in danger of being left behind, marginalized or worse—this year has significance like no other.

Here, in this faith community, we have a choice. We can make internal controversy our top-of-mind concern...or we can turn toward the broken world around us and focus on how to make a difference—we can live our principles and walk toward the uncomfortable mess of race relations in America. As people of conscience, who do we want to be? What are your hot burner issues?

We'll figure out how to communicate better and better at UUFES. That is worthy of our attention, and I would suggest that a long view is appropriate—a time of thoughtfulness and a wide conversation in which everyone listens generously.

But surely the fact that people wake up scared every day in this country because of the color of their skin is not a long view issue! Surely, the fact that parents school their children in fear has urgency! Surely, when only some newborns grow up with hope and possibility, with dignity and respect as their birthright, we must pay attention!

Where, as a faith community, do we want to put our God-given time? On whose behalf do we want to figure out how to take a stand? How to rally support? How to make a difference? “You’ll know that you are taking meaningful action,” writes Ann Friedman in *New York Magazine*, “when you start feeling uncomfortable. When you are nervous and a little scared.” No one ever said this work was easy.³

As we head into tomorrow, let us embrace that discomfort. Let us notice our blind spots and not stand for an all too familiar brand of innocence. Imagine feeling frightened every time we leave the house. Imagine teaching children and grandchildren to be terrified of officers of the law. Let us come this year to Martin Luther King Jr. Day with a sense of resolve. This year *is* different. Our neighbors’ lives are at stake and the way forward is to broaden our understandings. To open ourselves to the work of dismantling our innocence.

So may it be.

³ Ann Friedman, “Finish Your Ugly-Crying. Here’s What Comes Next,” *THE WORK BEGINS*, 9 November 2016, <http://nymag.com/thecut/2016/11/finish-your-ugly-crying-heres-what-comes-next.html>