

Reading: “Black Boys Play the Classics” by Toi Derricotte

The most popular “act” in
Penn Station
is the three black kids in ratty
sneakers & T-shirts playing
two violins and a cello – Brahms.
White men in business suits
have already dug into their pockets
as they pass and they toss in
a dollar or two without stopping.
Brown men in work-soiled khakis
stand with their mouths open,
arms crossed on their bellies
as if they themselves have always
wanted to attempt those bars.
One white boy, three, sits
cross-legged in front of his
idols – in ecstasy –
their slick, dark faces,
their thin, wiry arms,
who must begin to look
like angels!
Why does this trembling
pull us?

A: *Beneath the surface we are one.*

B: *Amazing! I did not think that they could speak this tongue.*

Sermon: “The Sword and the Scale” – c. The Rev. Vail Weller
Sunday, July 10, 2005 at the First Unitarian Church of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Thank you, Toi, for being willing to share your poetry this morning as a part of this service. That makes it very special for me, and for all of us.

Beneath the surface we are one. Amazing! I did not think that they could speak this tongue.

This poem is about a number of things: it’s about being drawn to beauty, it’s about the racism in our culture, and it’s about how we interpret, or frame, our experience. The same word can have very different meanings, depending upon your world-view. For example, when I say *justice* what do you think of? To liberals, justice tends to mean “fairness”, while to conservatives, it tends to mean “punishment” - as in “bring them to justice”. (*Respect* also has two meanings – some hear it as “admiration”, some as “fear”.) A member of my congregation recently told me that she was given a pin that was a figure of Lady Justice. Do you know what Justice actually looks like? She both holds scales, for fairness, and a sword, for punishment! So, both meanings are represented.

Just as there are different images of justice, there are different images of God: some see God as parent, some see God and Nature as the same, some see God most expressed through other people. The hymn we just sang ends with the words: “Our true God we there shall find/ in what claims our heart and mind, and our hidden thoughts enshrine that which for us is Divine.”¹ Our theological beliefs are best expressed in how we live our lives, how we parent our children, how we treat our neighbors and our partners, and how the world is made better for our being in it.

I imagine that many of you are still in shock about the results of this year’s presidential election, and some of you, like some in the congregation I serve, might be sinking deeper and deeper into despair about the state of the leadership in our country.

There has been a lot of talk about the divide in our country since the last Presidential election: the divide between red states and blue states, Republicans and Democrats, and those who consider themselves to be progressive and those who consider themselves to be conservative. The linguist George Lakoff has come up with a body of work which helps me better to understand these divides, and I’d like to share some of what I’ve learned from him with you, this morning.

¹ “Down the Ages We Have Trod” in [Singing the Living Tradition](#) (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993) 2.

Lakoff begins by explaining the two differing world-views. He describes them as the “strict father” and the “nurturant parent” paradigms. It has been personally helpful for me to consider how these models relate to my own parenting, but I’ve also been helped to understand what’s been going on in the political sphere.

I do want to talk about how the strict parent model relates to politics, but I am keenly aware that this is not the Democratic club, the Republican office, or the Green Party headquarters: this is a religious community. So I also want to move us from the political application to the theological.

“We live,” writes Antoine de-St. Exupery, “Not by things, but by the meanings of things. It is needful to transmit the passwords from generation to generation.” Let’s learn about how one linguist has done some translating for us.

George Lakoff is a linguist at UC Berkeley. You may have seen him on “NOW” on PBS...I just heard him speak to a huge crowd at General Assembly in Fort Worth, Texas two weeks ago. He is the author of “Don’t Think of an Elephant: Know Your Values and Frame the Debate”, as well as “Moral Politics”. I can honestly say that reading Lakoff’s book “Don’t Think of an Elephant” helped me to make sense of the political landscape more than any other thing I’ve ever come across. I have found it fascinating to link the same learnings to the religious sphere.

In order to get his thinking straight on these parenting paradigms and how they link to the current political divide, Lakoff studied James Dobson, on the recommendation of two of his colleagues who are linguists and members of the Christian Coalition. You may know that James Dobson is the author of “Dare to Discipline”, which has sold millions upon millions of copies. He’s on 3000 radio stations. Lakoff points out that Dobson is teaching people how to use the strict parent model to raise their kids, and that Dobson fully understands that this links to right-wing politics. (Not long ago, in fact, I watched James Dobson introduce Tom DeLay at the National Day of Prayer observance on CNN. Right-wing politics and right-wing religion are very closely connected.) Here are the assumptions that the strict father model is based on (as I share these, I encourage you to make the obvious connections to political policies, and perhaps also religious worldviews):

The world is fundamentally a dangerous place, and it always will be, because there is evil out there in the world. The world is also difficult because it is competitive. There will always be winners and losers. There is an absolute right and an absolute wrong. Children are born bad, in the sense that they just want to do what feels good, not what is right. Therefore, they have to be made good.

*What is needed in this kind of a world is a strong, strict father who can:
Protect the family in the dangerous world,
Support the family in the difficult world, and
Teach his children right from wrong.*

What is required of the child is obedience, because the strict [parent] is a moral authority who knows right from wrong. It is further assumed that the only way to teach kids obedience – that is, right from wrong – is through punishment, painful punishment, when they do wrong. This includes hitting them, and some authors on conservative child rearing recommend sticks, belts, and wooden paddles. Some authors suggest that this start at birth, but Dobson is more liberal. He writes, “There is no excuse for spanking babies younger than 15 or 18 months of age.”

The rationale behind physical punishment is this: When children do something wrong, if they are physically disciplined they learn not to do it again. That means that they will develop internal discipline to keep themselves from doing wrong, so that in the future they will be obedient and act morally. Without such punishment, the world will go to hell. There will be no morality.

Such internal discipline has a secondary effect. It is what is required for success in the difficult, competitive world. That is, if people are disciplined and pursue their self-interest in this land of opportunity, they will become prosperous and self-reliant. Thus, the strict father model links morality with prosperity. The same discipline you need to be moral is what allows you to prosper. The link is the pursuit of self-interest. Given opportunity and discipline, pursuing your self-interest should enable you to prosper...

In this model there is also a definition of what it means to become a good person. A good person – a moral person – is someone who is disciplined enough to be obedient, to learn what is right, do what is right and not what is wrong, and to pursue her self-interest to prosper and become self-reliant. A good child grows up to be like that. A bad child is one who does not learn discipline, does not function morally, does not do what is right, and therefore is not disciplined enough to become prosperous. She cannot take care of herself and thus becomes dependent.

When the good children are mature, they either have learned discipline and can prosper, or have failed to learn it. From this point on the strict father is not to meddle in their lives. This translates politically into no government meddling.²

You'll notice that Lakoff's model posits a strict father, and he does this on purpose. He says that in the strict father worldview, the father is head of the family. Period. Reading Lakoff suddenly helped me to make sense of in some of Bush's speeches, the ones that were mocked on Saturday Night Live over and over again because to those not "in" on the language references, they just plain didn't make sense...

For example, in the State of the Union address in 2004, Bush made a point to say that the United States surely didn't need to get a "permission slip" from the United Nations in order to invade Iraq...he said that because adults don't ask for "permission slips". You do not ask for a "permission slip" when you are the person with the moral authority. Every conservative in the audience, Lakoff says, got the reference immediately.

Or when he talked over and over again in a number of speeches about "working hard" ("I've been working hard, I work hard, I'm working hard"), I just kept wondering, "Why is he emphasizing this?" Then I realized, he's the dad, coming home from a long day at the office, in need of his pipe and slippers and some peace and quiet...don't trouble him with what's actually been going on in the lives of his family members...he needs to rest. It all began to make sense.

Lakoff assures us that the progressives also have a moral system. It too comes out of a family model: what he calls the nurturant parent model, and this worldview is gender-neutral. Here are the basics of this worldview. Again, think of the applications not only to politics, but also to religion:

Both parents are equally responsible for raising the children. The assumption is that children are born good and can be made better. The world can be made a better place, and our job is to work on that. The parents' job is to nurture their children and to raise their children to be nurturers of others.

What does nurturance mean? It means two things: empathy and responsibility. If you have a child, you have to know what every cry means. You have to know when the child is hungry, when he needs a diaper change, when he is having nightmares. And you have a responsibility – you have to take care of this child. Since you cannot take care of

² Lakoff, George. Don't Think of an Elephant! (White River Junction Vermont: Chelsea Green, 2004) 7-8.

someone else if you are not taking care of yourself, you have to take care of yourself enough to be able to take care of the child.

All this is not easy. Anyone who has ever raised a child knows that this is hard. You have to be strong. You have to work hard at it. You have to be competent. You have to know a lot. In addition, all sorts of other values follow from empathy and responsibility.

First, if you empathize with your child, you will provide protection. This comes into politics in many ways. What do you protect your child from? Crime and drugs, certainly. You also protect your child from cars without seat belts, from smoking, from poisonous additives in food. So progressive politics focuses on environmental protection, worker protection, consumer protection, and protection from disease. These are the things that progressives want the government to protect their citizens from. But there are also terrorist attacks, which liberals and progressives have not been very good at talking about in terms of protection. Protection is part of the progressive moral system, but it has not been elaborated on enough. And on September 11, [Lakoff points out,] progressives did not have a whole lot to say. Nurturant parents and progressives do care about protection: it is part of our moral system.

Second, if you empathize with your child, you want your child to be fulfilled in life, to be a happy person. And if you are an unhappy, unfulfilled person yourself, you are not going to want other people to be happier than you are. The Dalai Lama teaches us that. Therefore it is your moral responsibility to be a happy, fulfilled person. Your moral responsibility.

An aside: I can't believe I'm going to say this, but...I recently read something by Dr. Phil, who said in your relationships you are either *contributing* or *contaminating*. He says if you're miserable, you're *contaminating*, and your misery makes the environment toxic. His point, the larger context, was that self-care is a necessity for all of us: he was writing pointedly to new mothers, whose self-care may seem like a luxury. In his article, Dr. Phil makes it clear that we're modeling for our children, either by *contributing* or *contaminating*.

[Lakoff says] it is your moral responsibility to teach your child to be a happy, fulfilled person who wants others to be happy and fulfilled. That is part of what nurturing family life is about. It is a common pre-condition for caring about others.

There are still other nurturant values.

If you want your child to be fulfilled in life, the child has to be free enough to do that.

Therefore freedom is a value.

You do not have very much freedom if there is no opportunity or prosperity. Therefore opportunity and prosperity are progressive values.

If you really care about your child, you want your child to be treated fairly by you and by others. Therefore fairness is a value.

If you are connecting with your child and you empathize with that child, you have to have open, two-way communication. Honest communication. That becomes a value.

You live in a community, and the community will affect how your child grows up.

Therefore, community-building, service to the community, and cooperation in a community become values.

To have cooperation, you must have trust, and to have trust you must have honesty and open two-way communication. Trust, honesty, and open communication are fundamental progressive values – in a community as in a family.³

Progressives want ALL children, not only some, to be educated, they want ALL people, not only some, to have access to health care. Progressives want to re-engage the concept of the “common good”, to transform a selfish worldview based upon personal gain into a worldview that emphasizes that it matters how we treat the children, the creatures of the earth, and the future generations. Beneath the surface we are one. We may not speak the same tongue, but beneath the surface we are one.

There are thousands of policy positions that flow from these two worldviews. It helps me to get a handle on where the political right is coming from, and why the progressives need to reclaim the public conversation about morality, for the progressive version of morality is the solid, bedrock morality that this country was in fact founded on. The “American Dream” of opportunity, fairness and equality, fundamental respect, and the chance to make a difference – these are all progressive values. These are our issues. We can and should enter the town square reclaiming these values.

These are also, of course, theological issues. The strict father worldview purports that children are born bad. Fundamentalist religion, too, asks people to admit that they are sinners, unworthy in the eyes of God until made clean by being born-again. Unitarian Universalists believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Our Universalist ancestors received the name Universalist because they did not – would not – believe that

³ Lakoff 12-13.

a loving God would create some to be saved and others to be damned to eternal hell. They believed in Universal salvation.

A distinguishing feature of Universalism is the refusal to believe in the notion of original sin. Rather than understanding humanity as deeply flawed by the actions of Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, we accept that our lives are spread out before us full of possibility and promise, not smeared with the stain of sin. We are understood as inherently worthy beings, with personal responsibility for our behavior. This is another similarity with Unitarianism, in that the living of one's life is considered the measure of one's true character, as opposed to understanding the whole of humanity as predestined for either heaven or hell.

This congregation offers a place for nurturant values to be practiced every week, as people come together to do community-building and community service here. This is a place of religious freedom, where people are encouraged to think for themselves. I'm sure this church seeks to be a place where trust is the foundation, and a place where honest, open two-way communication is practiced. All of this makes sense, because ours is a tradition rooted in love.

It begins in our history with the perspective that God is a loving God, rather than a wrathful, judging figure. Therefore, we are not motivated by fear: fear of damnation or eternal hell. Universalists were motivated by love: the companionship of God, the care of God, the love of God. On the one hand, I have the image of people running to flee the flames of hell in fear, and on the other, I see the face of a flower, growing up toward the warmth of the sun. This image expresses well the theological difference.

As parents ourselves, or grandparents, or aunts or uncles or teachers or mentors or neighbors or simply here at First Church on Sunday mornings, we have many opportunities to affirm the inherent worth and dignity of the children. Frankly, there is no more important way to enrich the future than to help the children know that they are precious and remarkable wonders. But there are also other ways we can put our faith into practice.

Let us continue to encourage our political leadership to care for all citizens, so that we might yet truly become the land of freedom and opportunity and prosperity and trust and fairness and honesty for all. These values can be claimed by all of us, no matter what our party. We need to find the places we can come together and stop quibbling about the details. Let's move from "ME" to "WE", and lift our gaze from the debates that demean us and squander our energy and move out into the world and do some real good.

And let us remember that a larger love holds us all. Let us be encouraged to grow in love and service ourselves, not because we'll be judged if we don't, but because it's the right thing to do. We know that the reason we are alive is not to accumulate wealth or prestige or to frenetically work until we drop, but to stretch our hearts, to learn and grow and become more generous, more caring, ever more loving. This is what our Unitarian Universalist faith calls us to do.

Let us learn to trust each other, how to use for good our power, how to touch the earth with reverence. May we return again to our knowing deep in our bones that beneath the surface, we are one creation: interwoven, all connected, and that skies everywhere are as blue as the one in our corner of the world. May we enlarge our vision so that we live less as isolated individuals motivated by our own interests, but more as lovers of life called to task divine.

May love, like a carefully loaded ship, cross the gulf between generations, between political parties, and between theological divides, so that even when we don't speak the same tongue, we know ourselves, truly know ourselves, as *one*.

Amen.