

**Integration Where It Counts: A Sermon in Honor of
Whitney M. Young, Jr.**

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Reading

Putting people in jobs, giving people incentive to better their lot, putting shoes on kids' feet and books in their hands are self-liquidating investments - they pay for themselves . . . A typical on-the-job trainee returns his training costs in taxes within two years. Job Corps graduates, even if they never make much more than the minimum wage, will pay taxes totaling double their training costs. It costs five times more to maintain a man in prison than it does to keep him in school. Increasingly it becomes clear that the question is not "Can we afford it?" but "can we afford *not* to end poverty and deprivation?"¹

-Whitney M. Young, Jr., *Beyond Racism* (1969), 182.

Sermon

Whitney M. Young, Jr. was Executive Director of the National Urban League during America's tumultuous racial re-awakening in the 1960's. He was also a black man and a Unitarian. In his time as Executive Director, from 1961 until 1971, Young was both a well-known, and mostly well-respected (we'll get to this later) civil rights leader. He served on Presidential Commissions, regularly went to the White House to visit Presidents Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon. He overhauled the National Urban League (his tenure was so notable he is sometimes considered the "modern" founder of the Urban League), and published two books on race with specific plans to improve the economic and social welfare of black Americans. During this time he and his family attended three Unitarian congregations over the course of twenty years, in St. Paul, Minnesota, Omaha, Nebraska, and White Plains, New York. He also served on the Board of the UUSC and regularly spoke at Unitarian Universalist congregations and gatherings. He was an active Unitarian lay member.

Yet, Young was a complex and divided man due to social and racial pressures. As a nationally known public figure, and a black man, it was not easy being a Unitarian, a member of a mostly white, non-creedal, non-Christian religious faith. His black liegues

¹ *Beyond*, 182.

noted his Unitarian affiliation with theological and racial disapproval. He often maintained a dual membership in mostly black A.M.E. congregations (always with educated clergy), partly because of social pressure and attacks on his credibility, but mostly because he loved the music and community. He is well known for observing with some frustration that it "is easier to integrate the chorus line of a burlesque show than to integrate a church choir." If I can read between the lines, on Sunday morning Young yearned for intellectual content, religious breadth, spiritual depth, and soulful music.

In addition, Young himself was at times dismayed by the ponderous attempts of Unitarian Universalists to officially embrace integration at the denominational level. In 1963 our General Assembly voted against requiring congregations to integrate. (Congregational polity) Young told a friend that this vote "made me embarrassed to be a Unitarian It set our denomination back twenty years in the eyes of Negro leaders and even the Negro community."² Three months before his death in 1971, Young unofficially stepped away from (but retained his membership in) the White Plains Unitarian congregation so that he could have a "variety of Sunday morning experiences."

Professionally, Young was best known for his ability to "court" whites, to educate white corporations, foundations, and individuals about the realities of black America, and even more amazingly, to raise millions of dollars from them which the Urban League and other organizations poured into education and training programs for black Americans. Yet, this ability came with a personal and professional price tag. In 1970 a *New York Times* reporter published an article in the Sunday magazine on Young with the title "Whitney Young: Black Leader or 'Oreo Cookie'?" Ouch. "Oreo cookie" is slang for black on the outside and white on the inside (alluding to white sympathies or lifestyle). Militant civil rights folks referred to him as "Whitey" Young. His Unitarian affiliations did not help in this regard.

In a racist America, how does an educated, black individual authentically exercise choice and straddle both the black and white communities? As one reporter noted, "Bridge builders, are, by the nature of their work, neither on one side of the other. And Whitney Young could never be either a member of the 'power structure' or a true-blue 'soul brother'."³ His breadth of understanding and compromise (which every activist makes) has left him largely unappreciated by black and white America. As an urban congregation, and a mostly white church in a black neighborhood, we have much to learn from Young's life and vision.

Whitney M. Young, Jr. was born not far from here, in Lincoln Ridge, Kentucky, in 1921. His father, Whitney M. Young Sr., headed Lincoln Institute High School for blacks, in Lincoln Ridge, Kentucky. His father regularly found himself in the position of soliciting funds from white donors (think 1930 Kentucky here, Jim Crow, Depression), which he managed quite successfully. I imagine Whitney Jr. learned a thing or two about straddling race in America by watching his father. Whitney Jr., mother, Laura Ray Young, was a courageous and steady presence in his life, ready to engage in issues of injustice (again, think 1930 Kentucky here). His family valued education, so in 1937

² Dickerson, "Black Leader in a White Denomination: Whitney M. Young and the Unitarians," *The Journal of Unitarian Universalist History*, Vol. XXV (1998), 32.

³ William Raspberry quoted in *Whitney M. Young, Jr., and the Struggle for Civil Rights*, by Nancy J. Weiss (1989), 232.

Whitney Jr. entered Kentucky State College in Frankfort, where he met another entering freshman, our long-time member, George Malone.

George remembers Whitney as intelligent, likable, and hard working. They took biology together, and shared a lab book, which George still has (Whitney and George both signed their names in it). George also remembers another freshman in their class, a sweet young woman who "everyone was in love with." Her name was Margaret (nickname "Pookie"), and in 1944 Whitney and Margaret were married after Young returned from active duty during WW II where he earned three Bronze Stars. Later they became the parents of two girls, Marcia and Lauren.

When Young returned to America he earned a Master's degree in Social Work. In 1947 he began working for the National Urban League in St. Paul, Minnesota. In 1950 he became Executive Director of the Omaha, Nebraska Urban League, in 1954 he was appointed Dean of the Atlanta University of Social Work, and in 1961 he began his ten year tenure as Executive Director of the National Urban League. Whitney Young, Sr. said of his son as he advanced in the Urban League "It is a rare thing . . . for anyone to receive such complimentary letters from so many important people. We all have a few enemies . . . but, it seems that . . . you have manipulated things so skillfully that you made friends of potential enemies."⁴

The National Urban League was established in 1911 to help blacks with employment and social services. With his talent for raising awareness and funds, and his vision of the Urban League as a center for community needs based programming, Young revitalized what had been a conservative and waning institution. Imagine the complexity of raising funds from corporations and foundations (even local, state, and federal government) while at the same time advocating with unions, "against" these very same groups, for better wages and jobs. Fine line.

But Young was amazingly practical and clear. Although he suffered with racism, he was profoundly objective about issues of race and how to accomplish integration, which was his primary goal. Most of us don't know this, but Young is largely responsible for shaping a successful 1963 March on Washington. Whites were afraid of radicals, but Young swayed the respected and conservative Urban League Board to participate, which gave the march validity and money. He then directed speakers to share general expression of concern on unemployment and civil rights rather use the march to express a platform, deride specific legislation, or engage in civil disobedience, which he did not think, would be appropriate for this venue.⁵ His vision of the march created the environment for people of all races to see and hear many civil rights speakers including Martin Luther King, Jr. preach "I Have a Dream."

In his book, *Beyond Racism*, published in 1969, Young notes that "black America pays "more for worse housing" (and he offers compelling statistics to prove this). He notes that most urban universities only make contact with their local residents during "urban-renewal" when the residents meet the bulldozer ushering them out of the neighborhood. This is definitely a hotly contested issue today in the development of the hospital, university and zoo areas right here in Avondale and Clifton. Young favored the establishment of urban grant universities in large cities that offered inexpensive first class

⁴ quoted in Dennis C. Dickerson, *Militant Mediator: Whitney M. Young, Jr.* (1998), 20.

⁵ *Militant Mediator*.

education to urban students, and also offered resources on community governance and planning. This is sort of civic 101 and it makes a lot of sense.

He also wrote

Community control is not nearly as revolutionary as it sounds. White suburbanites take for granted their control of local school boards and school budgets. But big-city schools are run by central boards of education, predominately white, which place a low priority on the education of black children. Control of the schools - and of other ghetto institutions - would simply give to the urban poor the same prerogatives enjoyed by the suburban middle class.⁶

Think of our hard won and still tenuous Cincinnati Police Collaborative and all that it attempts to do with *community* oriented policing and *community* review boards. Consider how the city of Cincinnati suffers when the Hamilton County Commissioners have too much power and too little interest in (or appreciation of) the city. Think of how the zealous interest of the business community has at times thwarted the needs local of Cincinnati Public Schools. Local communities need local control. Young is right. He also wrote

We have to recognize this strength in White America and build on it. Blanket indictments of "whitey" won't bring freedom to the black man. Our job is to maintain contact with the decent, responsible white people in our society and help them to change the institutions that oppress us."⁷

He affirms "It is important that our pride be in black *accomplishment*, not just in blackness or in antiwhiteness."⁸

Thirty years later I read Young and I say, "Yes, and yes, and yes!" He makes so much sense. It is no wonder he could communicate with blacks and whites, rich and poor, corporations and individuals. And no matter what the issue, as Executive Director of the Urban League he was most interested in individual community programming to meet the needs of local residents, programs like job training and GED, which our local Urban League still promotes today.

This week I stopped by our Urban League of Greater Cincinnati, just a half-mile up the road from us in Avondale on Reading Road. Young's legacy is very clear in this new Urban League center. My tour director for the day, Sharron Miller, Vice President of Resource and Community Development and Funding, said "We serve the whole family." They run two GED classes a week with 30 participants and there is a waiting list at all times. Walking down a hallway I saw the most extraordinary photograph. It looked like it was taken in a community room or lounge. There was a black man in work clothes reclining on a couch with his eyes shut, and on top of his chest was a newborn baby, also sleeping. Sharron explained to me that this photo was taken twenty years ago

⁶ *Beyond*, 157.

⁷ Whitney M. Young, Jr., *Beyond Racism* (1969), 143.

⁸ *Beyond*, 254.

in Cincinnati at a local Urban League program entitled "Man Made." The program was for non-custodial fathers who wanted job and parental training so that they could contribute and be involved in the lives of their family. What a terrific innovative program. Its motto was "My Son, My Daughter, My Responsibility." Wouldn't Whitney Young be proud?

Sharron also told me that the program was discontinued after three years for lack of funding. I don't think Whitney Young would be surprised, but I think he would be disappointed. Just as during his tenure, Urban League programs live and die by the financial contributions of the community. Sharron explained to me that every year the Urban Leagues hustle for corporate, foundation, government, and individual funding to maintain their programming.

She showed me another classroom with computers called the "Technology Training Center." The Urban League wrote a grant for HP equipment, which they received. They used the computers to teach eight weeks of "Techno-Ed (Microsoft, PowerPoint), at no cost, to class participants. She told me that most class members have never turned on a computer before they come to the class, and we know how many viable jobs today rely on computer skills. She also told me that they might have to close the program for lack of funding. She told me that almost every program runs year to year because funding streams are such a constant issue.

I think of Whitney Young

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My favorite program at the Urban League is called SOAR (Solid Opportunities for Advancement and Retention). I will be openly biased. I love this program. It fulfills most of the things I believe in as a Unitarian Universalist and an American. SOAR is a three-week class that teaches students (18-65) from City Empowerment Zones like Avondale and the West End how to find and keep jobs. Students can be of any race. The Urban League also helps with job placement for students in the class. There are thirty people in the class and there is always a waiting list (do you see a pattern of interest and need?). The majority of class participants, male and female, are ex-offenders.

I talked to several class participants during their break. I asked them what they learned today. I was told they learned about self-esteem and the five reasons people get fired (good things to know!). Outside the building I talked to a group of woman in the class. They were so excited to be in this class. One woman said "I love it. It makes me happy." (Wouldn't Whitney Young be proud?)

She told me that for the last two days she had walked from Clifton to get there. I asked her if she was walking home after class, since it was raining. She said "Yes" because she didn't have bus fare. This class must really make this woman happy if she is

⁹ *Beyond*, 182.

willing to walk for a half hour in the rain to get there and back. While I rummaged in my purse for bus fare to get her home she told me that she loves to cook and dreams of opening a restaurant. Then she said "I am forty and I have never turned on a computer. After I graduate from the SOAR class I am going to sign up for Techno-Ed. I can't wait." I wished her all the best and wondered if the funding for Techno-Ed would be there when she needed it.

There is a forty year old black woman in Cincinnati, without enough money for bus fare, who is probably an ex-offender who wants to be a contributing citizen, and our Urban League of Greater Cincinnati is helping her hold on to her dream. How much would you give to help this woman hold on to her dream, to help us hold on to our dream of the earth made fair and all her people one? Well, this year, the Urban League of Greater Cincinnati asked this question to local congregations. They are hoping local congregations will give \$1,000 a year to the Urban League as a regular part of their budget. Twenty-five congregations have accepted this challenge, and I am proud to say the First Unitarian Church of Cincinnati is the first majority white congregation to pony up \$1000 to live the vision that we are one human family.

This year the \$1,000 comes from a special "Avondale" fund we have at First Church. It will be up to the members, you and me, to decide, if we continue this contribution next year. I believe we are called to continue this contribution, to straddle the divide between white and black, rich and poor in America, like Young did. I hope that we send out the message loud and clear that Unitarian Universalists are members of a religious community that values human dignity, diversity, potential, and justice. I like to think that we Unitarian Universalists could make Whitney Young proud to call himself one of us.

The fullness of Young's legacy was cut short by his untimely death in 1971 at the age of 49. We now have the opportunity to carry Young's torch, to promote integration, community needs-based programming that offers economic and social transformation right here in Cincinnati, to keep dreams alive, and to affirm we are one human family, and that we need one another now and always. May it always be so.