

Feeling as the Way Through a Great Barrier Into the Reality In Life

A Response Paper for Prairie Group

Justin Schroeder, November 2014

I am grateful to our colleague, Roger Bertschausen, for his paper, his reflections on what we might learn from the Schleiermachian influence on, and the marketing of, the Sunday Assemblies, and his insistence that “Congregational Reflection” has a critical place in our faith communities, as a living testimony to our valuing of personal experience, and then sharing publicly – in community - how those experiences shape our religious and spiritual understandings of self, community, and world.

Given that we are meeting not far from Ferguson, MO, the recent epicenter of an ongoing conversation about the militarization of police, gun violence, racism, the targeting of black and brown bodies, “Ferguson October” and more, it feels appropriate to tease out the threads that connect Schleiermacher, Roger’s paper, our Unitarian Universalist commitment to racial justice, and the heart break of what has happened in Ferguson and what continues to happen around the country in many communities of color.

In his paper, Roger writes that, “The focus of the ‘congregational response’ is on the sharing of feelings and experiences—the heart of the spiritual journey—not sharing intellectual ideas and questions.” Roger also suggests that these religious feelings – shared and interpreted in community (this could be done in Small Groups, I would agree, instead of in the Congregational Response) - can help us and those in our congregations live in more ethical, justice seeking ways. The imperative, explicit and implicit in Roger’s paper, is that if we are to be relevant during the rise of the “nones,” if we are to do justice work that is truly meaningful, then we must awaken our hearts and remember that we live in bodies – that our feelings and experiences are the heart of the spiritual journey.

I wish to elaborate on this idea, especially in light of our racial justice commitment as an association.

Like many of you, as I prepared for Prairie Group, the events of Ferguson, MO, were playing out in front of me. Daily, I searched out a variety of news sources and perspectives on what was happening. One particular piece, an open letter from Sybrina Fulton, the mother of Trayon Martin, to the Brown Family, stuck with me. She wrote,

“Honor your son and his life, not the circumstances of his alleged transgressions. I have always said that Trayvon was not perfect. But no one will ever convince me that my son

deserved to be stalked and murdered. No one can convince you that Michael deserved to be executed.

But know this: neither of their lives shall be in vain... While we fight injustice, we will also hold ourselves to an appropriate level of intelligent advocacy. *If they refuse to hear us, we will make them feel us.* Some will mistake that last statement as being negatively provocative. *But feeling us means feeling our pain; imagining our plight as parents of slain children.* We will no longer be ignored. We will bond, continue our fights for justice, and make them remember our children in an appropriate light. [Note: Italics added.]

If the foundation of religious experience is feeling, rather than ideas, theology, and even “intelligent advocacy,” than Sybrina Fulton is suggesting that those who are not listening (those whose hearts are wrapped up in arguments, judgments, defensiveness, and abstract ideas about this tragedy) will, by the power of the personal testimony of Sybrina Fulton and others, have a “religious experience.” Through this testimony, they might truly feel the suffering and grief of Fulton, Michael Brown’s family, and others. As Emily Owens writes in her article, ‘We Have to Make Them Feel Us: Open Letters and Black Mothers’ Grief,’ “Fulton asks us to slow down enough to feel: she asks us to feel the impact of a country obsessed with guns, to feel the impact of racism backed up by the state, to feel the impact of a boy’s execution in broad daylight by those sworn to protect, to feel the impact of every black boy who has ever been called dangerous. She asks us to feel, to mourn, and to yearn for a world in which black and brown children get to grow up.”

When we truly slow down enough to feel, or when the minister has created a worship container that lets us feel deeply, the boundaries and distinctions which separate us surely begin to collapse; we sense our utter connectedness and ultimate dependence on something greater than ourselves. We see that all children are our children; we know that we are our brother’s and sister’s keepers. When we start to feel deeply, how can we be indifferent to the suffering and rage of others, to our own suffering?

While I was doing the assigned reading, I was also busily devouring Rev. Mark Morrison Reed’s book, *Selma Awakening*. This quote, from the Rev. Leon Hopper, caught my eye, and is relevant to this Schleiermachiian thread:

The catch phrases ‘civil rights’ – ‘human freedom’ – ‘personal dignity’ – ‘equality,’ words which have so easily flowed from the lips of religious liberals, have now taken on a *feeling tone* as well as possessing their rational, logical meaning of old. It seemed as if the intellectualism of the pulpit and discussion group had broken through a great barrier to the reality in life, and thus, as a religious movement, uncovered a greater contact with life where most people live it – in pain – in struggle – in ignorance – and yet in hope.

In participating in Selma we, as a denomination, have found a new lease on life. What is really involved in the civil rights movement is a recognition that we are indeed *emotional beings*, and logic and reason alone do not bring trust or involvement. (Loc 3738 and loc 3732 in Kindle addition.) [Note: italics added.]

Feelings, feeling tone, contact with life where it is lived - not just life as logic and reason (ideas and theology) – this is what sustains the human heart, what creates religious experiences and impulses, and what can fuel our racial justice work. Without a healthy and non-defensive sharing of feelings and experiences – ours and others - without a recognition that we are emotional beings – without breaking through to the reality in life – our religious communities, no matter how progressive, will lean towards irrelevancy, especially as it relates to our racial justice, multi-cultural commitments. If we refuse to feel, we will make little headway in congregations as it relates to racial justice.

Indeed, many communities of color have been *feeling* us and *feeling* the impacts of whiteness for a long time. (Please note: By “us,” I mean the racialized white people who make up the majority of many our congregations, and who still control the majority of systems and institutions in the country). It’s time for us (as racialized white people) to truly feel the lives of those who have been racialized as black, brown, yellow, or red. In doing this, we might become more aware of our own whiteness – and what we have given away in exchange for whiteness. We might begin to see how the practices of whiteness (personal or systemic) are or are not in line with our faith and our values.

Having our churches and their ministry embrace this “contact with life” – “with life where most people live it – in pain – in struggle – in ignorance – and yet in hope” – can be our way home to spiritual and religious relevancy and deeper, more grounded racial justice work.