

Ferguson and Beyond

Cir L'Bert Jr. & Rev. Tim Temerson

UU Church of Akron

November 16, 2014

Cir L'Bert Jr.

Good morning

Two get us started Here are two jokes written by my eight year old daughter daughter Eva Grace

Q: What do giant monsters eat?

A: Fish and ships

Q:How do you get a baby to fall asleep in space?

A: You rocket.

I keep all of her jokes on document on my laptop because I know that one day they'll be a part of something bigger than their parts and she may be glad to have them.

I still remember my father listening carefully to my childhood story ideas and my sisters and I still have some of the writing, artwork, and printed materials from that era shepherded through time by my mother. My parents validated our intellectual and creative impulses knowing it would pay dividends of self love, respect, and independence as we journeyed through life

I grew up on West Thornton St in an area that has seen a steady decline for decades. Channelwood Village the housing project where I spent my childhood is now called an open air drug market by law enforcement.

Like many black Americans of their generation, my parents are well educated. Both having benefited from post Civil Rights successes in the East and pre-Reagan college tuition.

They recognized that the trends of de-industrialization and over-criminalization would affect the black community (particularly my generation) in ways resembling the Great Depression and Prohibition. These conditions halted or outright reversed many of the inroads made by Civil Rights.

They knew that preserving our sense of self worth would be difficult under an educational system that tended to focus on moments of our struggle rather than our success. They understood that our culture, still processing the images of the socio-economic system we call racism, fails to provide minority children with a vision for the future.

Seeing the obstacles we would face, my parents decided that homeschooling was a better option. Along with teaching us they modeled an active role in their communities, mentoring young people, working in churches, and in various local capacities, giving of their time, money, and creativity.

They valued diversity of experience and modeled a tolerant and inclusive lifestyle, teaching that a person's concern for your health was what really mattered in associations. Their openness allowed us to develop relationships outside our cultural norm. Friends who crossed boundaries of privilege to welcome me into their lives and mentors who used their privilege to help me discover another vision of the world and of the future than the one I experienced growing up in a housing project.

I carried this foundation of value and empowerment into adulthood and it has allowed me to continually improve myself and help to grow a family of my own, and positively affect my community.

When the killing of Michael Brown by Officer Darren Wilson occurred in Ferguson, MO on August 9th I was deeply moved. It followed the killing of John Crawford by

police in Beavercreek, OH, a day earlier, and many other incidents of police deviance before. These incidents form a narrative illustrating an institutional disregard for the value of human life, particularly this country's minority citizens.

For the young people of Ferguson, and the surrounding areas, the incident was the latest in a long string of documented abuse by law enforcement. They reacted by protesting the killing and these initial protests begun peacefully, were unreasonably met with a military-style response by the Ferguson Police department using armored vehicles, sound cannons, and less lethal rounds. Many protesters were injured and journalists were illegally barred from using aerial documentation.

Thanks to the internet, independent communication lines were formed and live footage became available. I stayed up nights helping to spread word about the events, copying encouraging quotes from books in my library, and helping the protesters stay informed of police movements. I was joined in my efforts by an inspiring amount of people all over the world, as well as many in our area, and our church. Together we used our voices and our solidarity to offer critical support to those in need.

By the second weekend I was exhausted and frustrated. I knew I could do more. Reflecting on my experience with positive role models and recognizing myself as having the will and physical means necessary for the undertaking, I saw it as my responsibility to show up in person.

My plan was to bring ears to listen, hands for work, our relevant knowledge and a vision of love and cooperation from our city to theirs. I was able to raise support from this church and a quickly formed coalition of non-profit ministries, artists, and activists. My co-worker and creative collaborator Josh,, Highland Square community organizer Allyzon, and local artist Max joined me on the trip. Their courage, support, and trust in our purpose was invaluable.

We arrived in Ferguson early Thursday morning to an eerie calm. Law enforcement personnel from multiple departments crisscrossed the area and shoppers made

there way through plaza parking lots filled with military vehicles. Acting on information from city aldermen we went to the Ferguson Public Library where local children were being tutored while their schools remained closed. It was a busy scene filled with volunteers, various national and international news outlets, and even here, a small contingent of armed policemen.

We were given the opportunity to work with local middleschoolers, sharing in their activities while listening to their stories and concerns. They reported that their community was normally peaceful, free of gang-violence and or heavy drug activity and despite this fact, police harassment and brutality was routine and severe.

Many of these incidents are in the public record in the form of civil rights complaints filed against the department. They feared that Wilson's killing of Michael Brown signified increased oppression, and that their lives would not return to any sense of normalcy

Drawing on the memory of my father's conversations I told them that as young citizens with a desire for a peaceful environment they are necessary for the progress of their own community and the wider whole, that their skin and hair is not the social problem being discussed in the media, that we can't afford to lose them and that they should explore, and exploit their own value rather than being exploited by others and succumbing to a culture of death and complacency.

The next day we visited the Canfield Apartments Memorial where the killing occurred and payed our respects. Nearby we met a local non-profit called Better Family Life who were in the midst of a food drive. All afternoon through early evening we delivered food to needy residents many of whom were cut off from essential transportation by an illegal improvised cordon set up by police around the neighborhood's surrounding West Florissant St.

That night, using tips from locals we were able to navigate the military blockade and participate in a mass march to the Ferguson Police Department organized by Pastor Gary Hill of St. Louis and members of Mike Brown's family, his cousin is the one holding the flag. During the march we saw firsthand the contempt for

protesters by law enforcement and the genuine feelings of purpose and unity present in the young actors in this growing movement for justice and equality in our society. The connections made from that shared experience have continued to this day.

Indeed the situation in Ferguson is ongoing and many more incidents like it have occurred since and will likely continue to occur. Since returning to Akron I've been in talks with national and local leaders about how we can take steps to heal the racial wounds, divisions, and disparities in our communities.

My experiences have led me to believe that these problems can be fixed and many of the answers lay in communities like this one.

Our first principle, which recognizes the inherent value in all life is a direct answer to a system that seeks to devalue life.

A tradition like this one built on cooperation and relationship across worldviews is what's necessary for people in communities facing profound disconnection from others due to cultural, economic, and legal separation.

I've witnessed the active, empowering love and acceptance shown to the young people of this church that fosters their growth into independent, purposeful individuals. I've experienced firsthand the welcoming and inclusive spirit of this congregation through the friendship and solidarity of Pastor Tim and the members of the young adult roundtable. That same unconditional love is what's needed in communities that face increased societal pressures due to minority status.

As aware people of privilege we can effect change with seemingly simple efforts. Many times, simply our friendship, our visible solidarity, and honesty can work wonders. We can use our privilege to open doors others cannot, pressure for change, and reach a wider audience than many of those at risk.

Overall the lesson I learned from Ferguson is this. Our common religion is life, our fellow members, our family, friends, and neighbors, our common prayers, our desire for a peaceful future, our shared rituals, are laughter and listening, and love our common message. It is possible to spread this message to others and I for one will join with anyone regardless of gender, race, physical condition, orientation, or worldview as long as you want to enrich and improve conditions here on Earth, our common church. Thank you for your time.

Rev. Tim Temerson

Thank you, Cir, for sharing your powerful story and your beautiful vision with us. It has been a joy and privilege to work with you in preparing for today's service.

I also want to tell you how much I admire your courage and your commitment in going to Ferguson last August. When we spoke by phone on the day you were leaving, I remember how determined you were to make your voice heard and to stand in solidarity with the people of Ferguson. I also remember your desire to bring some sense of hope, especially to the children of Ferguson, in the midst of a situation filled with so much despair. And finally I remember being so amazed and impressed at how calm you were as you were preparing to go. I was really worried about you and your safety, especially given law enforcement's willingness to use overwhelming force against protesters, and especially against young men of color. (And how proud I was when I was watching CNN that weekend and saw your image flash across the screen).

And as much as I admire your journey to Ferguson, I'm even more moved and inspired by the journey you are still making and your passion for reaching out and making a difference. I have been so inspired as you reflect on your experience not only in Ferguson but your own life experiences. As you shared with us today, your life has been touched and transformed by the love and support of so many, including and especially your wonderful family. You see that love and support as a blessing that has enabled you to grow and to thrive. But as you say so well, that privilege, that blessing carries with it a responsibility to act, to cross boundaries

that so often divide, and to build relationships of trust and love that can transform lives and transform the world.

And does this world of ours need to be transformed! Right now in this moment we are waiting for the decision of the grand jury as to whether Officer Darren Wilson will be indicted for killing Michael Brown, the unarmed black teen who, according to eyewitness accounts, was shot and killed with his hands in the air. I don't know what the grand jury will decide or what will happen in Ferguson after the Grand Jury's decision. But I do know that tragic events and terrible acts of injustice like the killing of Michael Brown will continue to take place across our country unless we find a way to transform structures of racism and oppression and the attitudes and assumptions that rationalize and leave those structures unchallenged.

As a person who has benefited his whole life from white, male privilege, I cannot begin to understand or even describe the power and pervasiveness of racism in our society. But if I may, let me share these chilling numbers with you. In a nation founded on the belief that all people are created equal, we live in a society riddled with inequality – inequality that is deeply rooted in racism and classism. African Americans are incarcerated at 6 times the rate of whites and many are incarcerated because of drug laws that clearly target communities of color while allowing most white drug offenders to avoid prison. In addition, people of color are targeted for traffic and other police stops at rates that far exceed those of whites and those stops, as we have seen in Ferguson and in so many other communities, often end in violence and tragedy. And finally, the poverty rate among African Americans continues to be three times higher than it is for whites and the poverty rate for African American children is between 40 and 50%, meaning that an African American child living in this country has a one in two chance of growing up poor. And by the way, those national poverty numbers are very similar to the numbers right here in Summit County.

So what do we as Unitarian Universalists and people of faith do? What is our responsibility in a society so filled with injustice and violence? The answer, I think, is that we listen to and follow the wisdom Cir shared with us this morning. We begin

by truly living and sharing the values of this faith – values of unconditional love and acceptance for all people. As Cir said so well, living and sharing those values is a direct answer to a system that devalues life and that does not respect the dignity and worth of every person.

And in living and sharing those values, we must reach out and show up just like Cir is doing. It isn't enough to talk about the problem or to profess our values on Sunday morning and then simply go home and move on with our lives. We've got to reach beyond these walls, to speak out, to help open doors, and to build relationships of love and trust.

Cir, you said at the end of your sermon that you are ready to work with anyone who is willing to enrich and improve conditions here on earth. I simply want to conclude by saying that we are also ready. Count us in. Together, we can make a difference.