MLK DAY 2016
WRITING AWARDS

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Carnegie Mellon University
Martin Luther King Jr. Day Writing Awards

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Celebrating Excellence in Creative Writing and the Spirit of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
Honorable Mentions
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College Prose
Understanding the Details
Kordell Leshon Collins

In primary and secondary school, I always looked forward to learning about Dr. King’s accomplishments in history class. It fascinated me to know end to learning how one man sparked one of the greatest protests in American history. I would always ask myself, “Why?” Why was there so much conflict between races? So much conflict that one man had to lead a movement to gain self-freedom for African Americans all because of one thing: skin color. I guess there can be many arguments to this particular question but I don’t believe that there is one genuine answer.

Dating back to the 18th century, slavery was evolving in the United States. The idea of slavery, as seen by the average American, is a black person working for a white person. Although slavery ended in mid-1800s the idea that blacks (and even other cultures and races different than that of the white man) are inferior to the white race has been passed down throughout subsequent generations (Children in History). Even in today’s society, prejudice is still inevitable. Take it from my personal experience. I went to a very small high school, and when you go to a school as small as mine, you tend to play more than one sport. I played sports and I was the only black kid on the team and, to be honest, I may have been the only black kid in the whole school. My mother is white and my father was black, but being a part of a (majority) white society growing up, I might as well been a pure African American because that’s the way people viewed me. So I just refer to myself as “black.” On every team that I was a part of, everyone was white, except me. You may or may not imagine the amount of pressure I felt day in and day out. Growing up in this generation, as you may know, it’s becoming more common for white people (particularly of my age) to use the N word in a “friendly” way. I was the only black kid and most, if not all of my white friends would use this word towards me. They told me that they didn’t mean it in an offensive way. So it was not a big deal to me; I didn’t feel threatened in any way whatsoever, but a situation arose that made me question with the use of this word. To put this into perspective, it was during a basketball game, and a black kid on the opposing team was a rather skilled player. He said something to one of my teammates,
(white player), and my teammate immediately retaliated with saying the N word and other derogatory phrases that are not appropriate for this essay. I witnessed this and could see the truth; my friend genuinely meant what he said. It gave me this awkward feeling because I was no different from that other kid and he uses the same term towards me. So is he really using this word derogatorily when he is talking to me? Why my friend was so blatant with this word is beyond my knowledge. Could it be jealousy or pure hate? The list could go on. This incident just goes to show that indifference between races is still relevant (to an extent) in today’s world.

I began thinking about this situation I came to the conclusion that I wanted to learn more about what it was like during Dr. King’s days compared to the 21st century. So, I called my Uncle Sonny, a forthcoming, authoritative man, to get some information. “Uncle Sonny,” I said, “How are you? It’s nice to talk to you.”

Uncle Sonny said, “I’m great, young man. How are you? Can I help you with anything?”

So I went on to ask him several questions. From listening to my Uncle Sonny, who grew up in central Pennsylvania, he did not face much prejudice during the time of the civil rights movement. But he stated that, “Understanding that racism is everywhere was instilled in us as young people and we knew what we could and could not do.” As you can guess this was the same for all blacks at this time.

My uncle was a strong follower of Martin Luther King, Jr., during his movement and stood behind everything that he was doing. I was interested in how he was influenced by Dr. King.

“So Uncle Sonny, did Dr. King give you hope that all of this injustice would be exterminated?”

He followed with, “Very much so. He gave us a profound outlook on life by opening up education opportunities and housing and employment—he gave us a chance at something.”

Uncle Sonny had the opportunity to hear King speak at the Pennsylvania State University in 1966, two years before his death. He noted that when you heard the man speak, it was like he just “gave you a sense of hope for better things to come.” Two years later, when Dr. King was killed, my uncle said that it was a “heart-wrenching experience, it was like someone in your family had died.”
But he also added, “This time in which Dr. King was here was an enlightening and very educational period of time.”

This information was great, but I felt like I needed more. I needed to know the other side of things—the point of view from a white person. So I visited my great-grandmother, Grandma Alice. Grandma Alice raised my mother for a short period of time and I admire her very much. She was willing to answer my questions and did so with integrity and honesty. Some but not all of my questions were similar to those that I asked my uncle.

“What were your views on Dr. King’s ideas?” I asked.

“What MLK did was good for the people. I was not sure of the impact that the protest would have, but I was glad that he was doing it.”

“How did you view the black minority?”

“Well, there was really no tension towards the black community that I knew of. I was not against them for any reason whatsoever.”

My great grandmother is a person who stands by the Bible and she made it clear that although she had no disregard toward a black minority, she did not believe in black and whites uniting in relationships (referring to Cane and Abel in the Holy Bible).

Grandma Alice lived in a town called Huntingdon, PA, which is also located in central Pennsylvania. She said that even though no tension between blacks and whites was evident in the area, there was a town about seven miles away of all white people who wanted nothing to do with minorities. It was the only town in the area where such hatred was relevant and it was almost like the South—or so my grandma would say. The South still had the mindset that blacks didn’t belong here unless they were working for a white man.

It’s obvious that racial injustice was present then. It is still present today. When I spoke with both of my relatives, there was some similarity in their response. In the areas that they both come from, there wasn’t as much hostility between races as some may think. There was separation, but not hatred. My Uncle Sonny and Grandma Alice expanded my knowledge on this matter, and I should thank them for that. From them I got a good sense of how Dr. Marin Luther King, Jr., changed America for the better. He showed the world that there is no superior race. He sacrificed everything he had to fight for the justice that needed to be served, and that was to gain equality.
This ink on this white piece of paper is black—why? Black and white complement one another, so why should they be separated?

Dr. King has left us a lasting legacy. Some say there will never be another leader who will leave such an impact as King. He shaped the future and opened doors that have led to racial equality everywhere. Yes, there may still be racial injustice in today’s world, but times are changing, and we as a country have come a long way. Racial indifference can be exterminated, but that cannot be accomplished by the hands of just one individual. Remember, the ink on your white paper is black...

Work Cited

High School Poetry
Blue eyes,
light skin,
pink cheeks,
thin lips,
freckles strewn across a face like stars,
yet to form constellations.

I do not look like the photos in
my Spanish textbook.

I wear a mask, accompanied
by the advantage of privilege,
yet it leaves me tied to the guilt
of abandoning an ethnicity that abandoned
me in Santa Fe, New Mexico,
eight months before I was born.

~

My name is a simple name.
My name is a common name.
My name is a teacher-pronounces-it-right-the first-time-
during-attendance name,
a souvenir shop keychain name.

I hate it.

I don’t want a name that is easy to spell
or easy to remember.
I want a name that’s exotic,
I want a name that drips from your tongue
like honey, that rings in the air like a chorus of trumpets.
Esperanza.
Maria.
Catalina.

I want a name to tell the secret
which my appearance disguises
and which my lips can never
seem to form.

~

I don’t know what to do with this part of me.
I don’t know where to keep it.
Perhaps I will loop its tendrils
around my rib cage where it will be safe,
or paint the letters on my wrist for all to see.

I have never been scared to claim something
that it is my own.
I’ve never been one to let people
take something that is mine,
or to abandon something
that I have.

But I don’t know if I can claim this.

I don’t know if it is mine to claim.
Authenticity

David Han

In preschool the blonde teacher with wrinkled skin like the film that forms on boiled milk
told me to dress up like an Indian for a school play.
I came home, then back, clutching the moccasins made for my father on the reservation where
he used to work, and the mud-colored wooden kachina doll that was now mine.
My classmates were dressed in brown paper garb, adorned with stick figure scribbles of deer
and hunters in black sharpie marker.
They wore chicken feathered Walmart headdresses to match their authentic Party City faux
leather shorts with long, brown, machine cut tassels.
One mockingly greeted another with a low-pitched “How.”
They noticed me, and said
Why aren’t you dressed right? That isn’t real Indian getup!
And I was banished from the room by the teacher,
her pruney trigger finger shooting at the door for disrupting the class.
I later found the handmade wooden doll cracked on the floor.
I guess its authenticity couldn’t match that of finger-paint brownface.
High School Prose
We’re Normal
Becca Stanton

1.
She licks the side of her coffee cup, wiping off the icy drops that spill down the side when she steps off the bus. She watches the traffic as she intertwines her cold fingers with mine. She breathes out of her nose, little clouds puff from her nostrils fogging the lid of her coffee with condensation. She leans into my shoulder. Her thick wool scarf itches at my neck and I ball up my free hand, trying to keep my fingers from freezing and falling off. I bury my face in her scarf and try to think of something other than the cold. She asks me if I know when the next bus comes in a quiet voice. I shake my head no without lifting my head to look at her. She laughs at me with a voice lighter than the snow landing on her eyelashes, and pulls our hands apart, wrapping her arm around my waist. She takes a sip of her coffee and the steam from the drink melts the frost on her cheeks.

2.
A big man in his late fifties tramps through the snow in big leather boots. He walks with a crunching noise. His breath heaves out through his mouth. I lift my head. She watches him carefully. His jean jacket is stiff and his cheeks are a harsh pink. He looks at me. My eyes are met with a sharp icy blue pair of eyes rimmed with red, irritated skin. His cheeks are cracked and weathered. He looks at her and me. His eyebrows furrow. I stand firm. I find the hand that rests on my hip and squeeze it for comfort. He pauses in his stride and she flinches.

3.
For a moment I want to pull away from her but I am not ashamed. I am not ashamed of her. I won’t be ashamed. I have been ashamed. I’ve hidden myself from the parents who loom over me. I changed her contact name and never sat too close to her when we watched movies at my house. The oak cross that leans against the fireplace mantle is heavy and revered and the little gold cross that dangles around dad’s neck glares at me. The mother and father, holding hands, glare at me and glare at her. Striking fear in my heart, they ask me only about boyfriends.

She holds my waist tighter in the snowy air, gripping with cold fingers as he trudges away. I watch him leave, shaking his head. She bumps her nose into my cheek, feeling all the fears and shame that I do, and whispers, “we’re normal.”
Talking About Cards
Cavan Bonner

I have known for a while that Unitarian Universalists have a tendency towards the middle class, as well as a tendency to be predominantly white. We are an unapologetically liberal religion, but this identity cannot always be entirely realized when we are coming from a position of relative privilege. As much as we want to better understand our world so we can better change it, the disadvantages of a small, self-selected circle in this process is apparent.

Recently I had a great discussion about a question that has been gaining attention among numerous UU communities. Among the attendees of a youth retreat that I had helped organize, we discussed the place of a game like Cards Against Humanity in our gatherings. Cards Against Humanity is best described as the graduated version of Apples to Apples. Or, perhaps the version of Apples to Apples that you might play before graduation. The humor is undoubtedly vulgar and lewd, and is mostly derived from laughing at how messed up the jokes are. But really, that is a sympathetic way of describing the game. As it turns out, what makes the game funny or hurtful varied greatly on personal experience with power and identity.

Evin, a minister that local youth work with to organize events, requested that we take the time to actually discuss the game. Her original education is in computer science, but like many religious professionals, found her calling later in life. She arrived a little before dinner with Raziq, who recently was hired as a specialist in youth ministry. I only just met Raziq recently, and when I first did I was under the initial impression that he was a youth on the verge of young adulthood, but Raziq is older than he looks. I mean this partially by his age, but mostly by his experience. He has finished college, worked as an actor and as a janitor, and has experienced what is all too typical for a young black man growing up in the South. Evin’s experience too, as a genderqueer adult, is another perspective not overly abundant in UU communities.

We formed the approximation of a circle around the deck of Cards Against Humanity that Evin and Raziq had spread out all over the floor. Evin began to sort through the cards while Raziq helped her out. Evin then began with a somewhat wordy intro on why we were discussing this, the politics behind it, the changes that are likely to come whether we like them or not. And I think beyond the formalities, Evin wanted us to see this as more of a conversation.
about a game of cards. When we talk about something sensitive like this, we can begin to scratch the surface of harder issues. Evin then pulled a card she had been eying from the pile. “Masturbating into a pool of children’s tears.” She paused. “This is what my great-grandfather did to my family.” Raziq pulled out another card. “Big black cock.” And he proceeded to tell us how a white nurse talked about his newly born cousin. Evin talked about the experience of being a genderqueer student and professional, Raziq talked about how he learned to play the game with friends in a way that confronts the racism.

Really getting to talking brought out a spectrum of opinions and experiences. Some volunteered stories when they had been hurt, many kept on coming back to what they enjoyed about it. A number of us found the game to be a harmless way to explore issues and biases through humor. This group, comprised primarily of adults, kept on going to back to a concern over censorship. Many of us had issues with the game, but these reasons varied. Some of us had anecdotal evidence, some of us brought trigger-rhetoric to the table, and some cited scientific findings concerning how biases are formed.

We didn’t come up with anything resembling a consensus about what we would like to do, even after over an hour of conversation, but that is the expected end result when UUs get to talking about something for the first time. In a community that I have found to be eerily homogeneous, what is hopeful to me about a conversation like this is seeing ministers and leaders who can welcome and provide for more than just the majority.

I had already read a number of articles about the game—its history and its controversy. Because of this, I cannot be certain if my opinions have been changed all that much. Yet something does change when we bring our lived experienced to the conversation, and Evin and Raziq have lived it in so many ways. I don’t think that just “living it” can or should decide the final result of matters, but an issue cannot ever really be decided in actuality unless those who are living the issue are there. With our smartphones we bear witness to the world, but I don’t think we can truly act until we have taken the time to do the talking.