

“The Tragic Gap”

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2020 has been quite a year. There have been so many things that have grabbed the headlines and dominated the US news – the novel coronavirus, the upcoming elections, the murders of black and brown citizens and calls for racial justice. All the while, an important event is happening this year, one that will impact the country for the next decade – the 2020 census. The census is a counting of all people in the country that is required by our Constitution. It was first done in 1790 and has been accomplished every 10 years since then, no matter what.

The census is important not only for knowing who and how many people are in the US, it is used to determine how many representatives in Congress each state has, which determines the number of votes each state gets in the Electoral College. Census numbers also determine a state’s portion of federal funding for housing, education, transportation, and many other elements of the infrastructure and social safety net. The census numbers are important for representation, power and money. If you haven’t participated in the census yet, please reconsider its importance.

You might recall that in 2018, the current administration proposed adding a question to the census about whether or not someone was a citizen. Eighteen states and many cities sued, claiming that asking about citizenship will suppress participation in the census and give a skewed count of who is in the country.

Later in 2018, the Supreme Court ruled that the question was not allowed; the Constitution requires that all persons be counted.

Who gets counted and how much they count for is not a new argument. In fact, it was one of the most contentious issues that the framers of the Constitution had to address when they gathered for the Constitutional Convention in the hot July of 1787. Knowing that congressional seats would be apportioned based on census numbers, the Southern states of Georgia, North and South Carolina, and Virginia – the states where owning enslaved people was legal – wanted to make sure that they maximized their number of seats in Congress, so wanted enslaved people to be counted. For context, at that time there were more than 500,000 people of African descent in the colonies, and enslaved people accounted for as much as 40% of the population of some Southern states.

Let's be clear that there was no state that proposed that enslaved people be allowed to vote; it was a matter of whether or not they would be counted. The Northern states didn't want those who were enslaved to be counted at all, which also would maximize the power of the North. The Southern states wanted enslaved people counted to maximize the power of the South.

This argument was settled by what historians call "The Three-Fifths Compromise." The agreement was that 3 of every 5 enslaved people would be counted, giving slave-owning states more seats than if they had not been counted at all and less than if enslaved and free people had been counted equally. This Three-Fifths Compromise gave the slaveholder states 1/3 more seats in

Congress and 1/3 more votes in the Electoral College and allowed them to dominate the new government until 1861--the Civil War.

These are examples of how democratic practices, like voting and the census, have been and can be used to institutionalize racism. In these examples lies our history of counting or not counting black and brown bodies in order to maintain white power and privilege.

Our US Constitution begins with a phrase easily recognized: We the people. These arguments about who gets counted are about one fundamental question: Who is “we the people?” Who are “we?”

In our country’s founding documents, the framers inscribed a vision of a government different from any that they had ever known.

From the Declaration of Independence:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

The white men of means who wrote this document set a moral standard of equality, freedom, justice, the common good, and happiness in life itself. Many of these writers, some of whom were Unitarians, also enslaved people. In their lofty vision for “we the people”, they did not include people kidnapped in Africa

and brought to the colonies against their will, or their descendants. They did not include the native people from whom they had stolen land. They did not include women. They did not include those without means. And that exclusion also extended to the right to vote. There was a huge discrepancy between the democracy that the founders envisioned and the reality that they lived.

Theologian Parker Palmer calls this discrepancy between reality and vision “the tragic gap.” In his book, Healing the Heart of Democracy, Palmer explores the origins, intent and foundation of democracy, calling us to return to a vision of what is possible if we hold tension in difference, bridge the divide, and create community.

Palmer’s tragic gap is tragic not only because it is sad and heartbreaking, although it is certainly those. The gap is tragic in the literary sense, the Shakespearean sense. It is tragic because the gap between reality and aspiration is an eternal and inescapable part of our human condition. No matter the progress we may make toward our dreams, there is always more to be done, we never achieve perfection; there is always a gap.

Being in the gap is difficult; there is disappointment and grief, heart-break and disillusionment. There is tension between what is and what could be. It is extremely difficult to live in that tension. You might recognize that tension; we are there now. Lately, the vast chasm between the ideal of justice for all and the reality of a system built to support white supremacy has been laid

bare for many to see. It has always been there, it is visible and public now.

Palmer says that to relieve the tension, we are usually pulled into one of two directions. Some of us see the reality of what is and fall into corrosive cynicism, an attitude that is mistrustful and pessimistic. I notice this in myself on days when I think, “Our politics are so divisive, how can anything possibly change. Why even bother?”

Others of us are pulled in the direction of the dream and fall into irrelevant or damaging idealism. We confuse the aspiration with the reality; we close the gap by making it disappear. I hear this in the words of those who say that white supremacy is what others do, and that we have made so much progress with racial justice. I hear this in claims that a few small changes in policing will fix a systemic and pervasive problem. Those of us who are white ignored or minimized the voices in communities of color that told us that all was not well; we resisted awareness about how big and tragic the gap actually was.

I had the privilege to protect myself: to ignore the gap because I didn't want my heart broken by reality, unaware of those who live in the gap because of the injustice that forces them there. In this time, there are daily reminders of how large that gap is and how much our hearts and lives are broken.

Although cynicism and idealism are different, they do the same thing – they pull us out of the tragic gap; they remove us from the difference between reality and what can be. They seem to relieve

the tension we feel, and they may even seem to repair our broken hearts. This is a false relief, one that supports separation, does not allow for growth or change, and causes injustice to continue.

Palmer invites us to acknowledge this gap between reality and aspiration; to live in it honestly and with an open heart, even if our hearts are broken. A broken heart can be shattered, or it can be broken open, ready to explore all that is within us in order to face reality and re-envision our dreams. With our broken hearts, we can acknowledge the differences between us, differences in so many things, including perhaps our dreams. In the gap, we can take risks and practice failure, we can know imperfection and compassion, find and give blessing and grace. In the gap we can envision a world where differences are valued, appreciated and welcomed; where assimilation is not expected or seen as desirable; where we imagine an infinite web that joins us, differences and all.

In this time, we, and by “we” I mean those of us who are Unitarian Universalists, we are being called to acknowledge a tragic gap in our denomination. We hold up our seven principles as aspirations to who we can be, to what is possible. And, yet, the reality is different from our principles. Those of us who are white have been pulled into awareness these past few years as UU people of color speak up – again – telling their experience of the gap between what we say we value and how we live. This, too, is part of our history. We are just like the founding fathers who were Unitarian, holding an ideal and not quite living it. In this time, we are being held accountable for the tragic gap, and called

to work toward bridging it. This is the third way – bridging the gap.

This month, our spiritual theme is courage. Perhaps we can learn from the example of Juliette Hampton Morgan about what courage is like in the face of the tragic gap between freedom for all and racial injustice. She was courageous enough to cross color lines of the times and worship with those different from herself. She was courageous enough to see the injustice right in front of her, and call it to attention. She was courageous enough to take a public position demanding justice even when it meant being shunned and threatened.

Juliette did not demand justice alone; she had a community, even though it was small at the time. And, there were many more to come who would follow her example.

We are not alone in the tragic gap. It is there that we find community, and in community I find hope. In that community, I experience that we are different, and I find others who share a vision of a world where difference is cultivated and valued. When I tend to despair, I am mindful of the interdependent web of all existence and remember that we, and by “we” I mean the broadest “we” imaginable that includes all beings, we are in this together.

As we celebrate this Independence Day weekend, may we hold on to an awareness of what is and a dream of what is possible. May we commit to the eternal work toward closing that gap together. May we build a country in which we all have life, liberty and can pursue happiness. All of us.

May this indeed be so.
