

Learning to Sing the Blues

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We can't deny the blues.

In order to practice compassion, as I was preaching last Sunday, we need to be willing to be open to the truth of what is happening. To be compassionate, we encounter the world without illusion. What we're talking about is a willingness to encounter and be with suffering. The Buddhist meditation teacher Sharon Salzberg says,

If we look at our own experience, it comes as a big surprise that suffering exists. . . . Yet we are brought up with the feeling that suffering is somehow wrong or to be avoided. We get the idea that suffering is unbearable and should not even be faced.¹

The UU minister Peter Boullata has described this sort of avoidance as having a particular resonance in Unitarian Universalism:

It's been my experience that Unitarian Universalists shy away from sharing experiences of loss and suffering, and are uncomfortable with needing or wanting or asking for help. I think many UUs don't like to publicly admit that we are anything but autonomous, self-determining masters of our own destinies.²

We all have our strategies and that try to avoid or deny suffering. I think much of our susceptibility to addiction arises from the attempt to avoid suffering. Salzberg says, "we live like children growing up in a dysfunctional family, where there is conflict but no one very speaks about it."³ But how is it that we can begin to drop these avoidance strategies? How can we learn that we can be with suffering and not be wholly overwhelmed?

These are fundamental questions. They are perhaps the fundamental religious questions. This summer, I attended online something called "The Festival of Homiletics." One of the preachers — and I can't remember who anymore — was talking about the growth of the Black Lives Matter movement this summer and the deaths and the "karen"'s suffered by Black and brown. He was preaching about "lament" and how we need to lament. It isn't just that we are sad or grieving. He

¹ Sharon Salzberg. *Lovingkindness: The Revolutionary Art of Happiness*. 25th anniversary edition. (Shambhala, 2020 [1995]). Kobo Edition.

² Peter Boullata. "More Love Somewhere: The Unedited Hymn." <https://peterboullata.com/2014/11/01/more-love-somewhere-the-unedited-hymn/>

³ Ibid.

called lament a form of resistance, and talked about lament as a resource, a source of inspiration and strength and persistence. We need to lament, he preached. I was saying *yes*, that feels right. And then my head hollered down to my heart⁴: but what does lamenting look like? How do you *do* it? And heart replied, *learn to sing the blues*. Ah, very good, very pithy. I feel like I know what the blues are, but I also feel like we have a responsibility to keep the question going: What are the blues?

The blues are about telling the truth about suffering. *Singing* the truth about suffering. And the truth is that the blues are rooted in and sprung from Black suffering. I asked a friend in community about the blues and she shared with me a drawing that the jazz pianist, composer, and arranger Mary Lou Williams made. Williams drew a tree as a way of illustrating the history of jazz. The roots of that tree are in suffering. On the trunk of the tree rising from those roots are spirituals, ragtime, swing, and bebop. And the blues — rising up from suffering, and providing a context for spirituals and the rest and continuing up into the branches of the tree and the leaves which all carry names of jazz musicians. The whole tree, rooting in suffering.

In his book *The Spirituals and the Blues*, the theologian James H. Cone says, “It is impossible to sing the blues or listen to their authentic presentation without recognizing that they belong to a particular community.”⁵ He says, “The origin and definition of the blues cannot be understood independent of the suffering that black people endured in the context of white racism and hate.” He describes the blues as the recognition of a fundamental existential situation. He says, “The blues are an expression of fortitude in the face of a broken existence. They emphasize the will to be, despite nonbeing as symbolized in racism and hate.” There’s the truth about the blues. It’s one of the things that the forces of structural racism urge us to avoid or deny or, most of the time, simply ignore. This is our culture, our country as dysfunctional family — a family in conflict, but not wanting to talk about it. Thank goodness that seems to be changing a little lately. We’re talking. Sometimes we’re screaming at each other, but that is just a way of preserving the conflict — I think we avoid actually talking about the conflict, talking about racism, because being open to the suffering at the roots of the conflict feels more frightening than escalating animosity and polarization and violence. Animosity and polarization and violence are easy. The blues is hard.

James Cone calls the blues “secular spirituals.” “They are secular,” he says, in the sense that they confine their attention solely to the immediate and affirm the bodily expression of black soul, including its sexual manifestations. They are spirituals because they are impelled by the same search for the truth of black experience.

⁴ I’m stealing some words here from a John Prine song called “Bruised Orange.”

⁵ James H. Cone. *The Spirituals and the Blues*. Orbis Books, 1992 [first edition Seabury Press, 1972]. Kindle Edition, 2012. (All quotations of Cone in the sermon are from this book.)

I think Cone is saying the spirituality of the blues is in their combination of openness to the conditions of oppression and violence that Black people face and the persistence, the tenacity, the creativity, the wonder and fortitude of a people continuing to be, continuing to assert their being and humanity nonetheless. For Cone, the spirituals (like “There Is More Love Somewhere”) and the blues are both about liberation. The spirituals are rooted in the experience of slavery. The blues are rooted in the experience of emancipation and the subsequent failure of reconstruction and the reassertion of white supremacy and oppression. Angela Davis writes that, “The spirituals articulated the hopes of black slaves in religious terms. In the vast disappointment that followed emancipation—when economic and political liberation must have seemed more unattainable than ever—blues created a discourse that represented freedom in more immediate and accessible terms.”⁶ The freedoms the blues explores most are the freedom to travel, and sexual freedom — both of which had been denied to enslaved black people.

In a sense, the blues are 100 years old this week. On August 10, 1920, the vaudeville singer Mamie Smith and the music group the Jazz Hounds recorded “Crazy Blues.” It was the first vocal blues recorded. It sold 75,000 copies in just a month or two, and kept selling. It made Mamie Smith famous and paved the way for blues women like Gertrude “Ma” Rainey and Bessie Smith and many more. Angela Davis points out that “One dollar, the cost of each record, was a small fortune then for the mostly poor black people who bought ‘Crazy Blues.’” The song starts out lamenting that “the man I love, he don’t treat me right.” But it starts to shift. Instead of just hanging her head and crying—which is the stereotype we have about what the blues is — instead of that, the woman in this song is going to be anything but passive about this or simply resigned to this. She sings:

Now the doctor’s gonna do all that he can

But what you’re gonna need is an undertaker man

She “ain’t had nothing but bad news” and by the end of the song, she’s going to get some drugs, and she’s going to “get myself a gun and shoot myself a cop.” She’s not just lamenting one guy who did her wrong; this blues comes out of a *societal* experience of oppression, and she’s going to confront the representative of the State that is treating her wrong. The pop culture historian David Hadju notes that

That a woman was singing made the song an acutely potent message of protest against the forces of authority, be they male or white, domestic or sociopolitical.⁷

⁶ Angela Y. Davis. *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday*. Vintage Books, 2011 [1998].

⁷ David Hadju. “A Song that Changed Music Forever.” *The New York Times*. August 8, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/08/opinion/sunday/crazy-blues-mamie-smith.html>

The blues women of the twenties and thirties defied the gender norms about femininity in the songs they sang and in the lives they led. Ma Rainey sang about women loving women. And blues women sang graphically about domestic violence, lifting that violence out of the private sphere where it is relegated by patriarchal white supremacy and out into the public eye. Angela Davis celebrates how “The women who sang the blues did not typically affirm female resignation and powerlessness, nor did they accept the relegation of women to private and interior spaces.” Davis argues that “Among black working-class women, the blues made oppositional stance to male violence culturally possible, at least at the level of individual experience.” The blues is lament as resistance and resilience. Cone says, “The blues are a lived experience, an encounter with the contradictions of American society but a refusal to be conquered by it. They are despair only in the sense that there is no attempt to cover up reality.”

Refusing to cover up reality, seeing reality without illusion means we will encounter suffering and pain. But this is also a necessary condition for liberation. Cone writes, “the blues people believe that it is only through the acceptance of the real as disclosed in concrete human affairs that a community can attain authentic existence.” Liberation isn’t about leaving this world behind — which is the stereotype we have can have about spirituals and gospel songs. The liberation we need is in lived human experience which doesn’t separate the spiritual from the secular.

Understanding the blues in this way, as truth telling about lived experience, as openness to the suffering in the world, as resistance to patriarchy and white supremacy, the blues is a commitment to liberation—salvation—in this world, this life. It is about the persistence of being human in a situation that denies or twists humanity. Cone “The achievement of being is an entirely historical reality, grounded and defined within the context of the community’s experience.”

The blues is the practice of resilient living in a broken world. Which means it’s not just a genre of music that is rooted in one historical moment — James Cone talks about the emergence of rap — the blues a way of being in a broken world.

What is the blues that you need to hear and listen to? What is the blues that you should be singing? How should these questions resonate differently in you if you are white? What I pray for you is this: May you have the blues. May you have a blues that helps you honor the brokenness in your own life. May you have a blues that helps you honor the brokenness in the life of your neighbor. May you set your roots down in suffering. May you have a blues that, in admitting grief and sadness, prepares you for joy.