Lessons from Kwanzaa

Arlington Street Church
December 28, 2008

Some would say – perhaps many would say – that it is not our place, a largely white, privileged congregation to kindle the candles of the kinara. In fact, Gail Forsyth-Vail, Director of Religious Education at our church in North Andover, wrote our reading today with a powerful and moving invocation against white folks lighting the *mishumaa saba*, the seven candles. She states, "As a white person, I can't be part of the remembering or the promise [represented by the candles]. I will not light the candles, for they are not mine to light."[1]

I must admit that her words gave me great pause. But I came to realize that we can kindle the *mishumaa saba* when we are clear that we do not do so in celebration of Kwanzaa. Rather we may kindle these candles when we do so in explicit and intentional solidarity with our African American sisters and brothers; we also kindle these candles in recognition of our role in the African American experience that we walked through in our reading this morning. Finally, we kindle these candles out of respect for our African American sisters and brothers.

As our reading so powerfully displayed, the African American history – the story of slavery, segregation and staggering suffering is our history too. Only we, through

[1] *Lessons From the Kwanzaa Candles*. REACH Archives, http://archive.uua.org/re/reach/worship/kwanzaa.html.

our Euro-American ancestors, were on the other side of the oppression equation – on the side imposing the oppression and sustaining the suffering of that African American experience.

So we honor the kindling of the kinara – just one small piece of the Kwanzaa celebration – with a sense of rememberance and solemnity, respect and restoration - and most especially - in a spirit of atonement toward our African American sisters and brothers.

The holiday of Kwanzaa was created by a Black Studies professor, Dr. Maulana Karenga, in 1966. His objective was to create a uniquely African American holiday that embodied African traditions that were denied African Americans by the race-based slavery system in which they were entrapped for generations.

Kwanzaa means "first fruits of the harvest" in the *Kisawili* language, which is the most widely spoken language in Africa. Traditionally, the first fruits of each harvest were dedicated to ancestors, those whose hands first made the harvest possible. Kwanzaa reclaims, articulates and vivifies traditional African values that had never been accessible to slaves and their descendants.

Each candle in the kinara – the seven candle holder – represents a value or principle that is essential to African American history, identity and restoration. Even if we are

not African American, there is a lot that the candles of Kwanzaa have to teach us.[2]

The Black candle, in the center of the kinara, represents the celebration of black identity and the entire black community – both in the Motherland and its diaspora. It evokes the unique and special qualities that each person brings to the whole family or community. It is a candle of the present, of today.

The red candles are struggle candles. They represent the profligate bloodshed of the African American past and tend to be seen as the remembering that Gail Forsyth-Vail referred to. The red represents the color of blood but also – most significantly - the color of courage.

The green candles are vision candles. They represent the hopes and dreams - the promises of the future that come from knowing, honoring and living the principles expressed by the green candles.

All seven candles help African Americans to remember the long struggle against injustice and against unfairness. They also represent the promises that unfold as African Americans covenant to work with each other against this injustice, in all of its forms.

The Kwanzaa candles also help white Americans to remember. They encourage Euro-American whites to learn

[2] *Ibid.*

what it means to be white in the United States, to learn the practices of our forebears that have resulted in our privilege and historic financial advantage. They also encourage us to claim our present – to learn and to know what personal gifts we bring to the struggle against injustice. They ask us, "What are we willing to do to help in the fight against unfairness?"

Before we kindle the kinara, we need to know a little bit more about what Kwanzaa is – and what it is not. It is not a religious or a political expression. It is a cultural, a family and a community-based celebration. The kinara, the candleholder itself, is a symbol of continental Africans, the parent generations of African Americans.[3]

If we were celebrating Kwanzaa today, the kinara would be surrounded by traditional African symbols that provide context and meaning to the overall celebration. The kinara would be resting on a woven straw mat, a *mkeka*, that symbolizes tradition and welcome. Also on the *mkeka* and the larger table would be *mazzo*, fruits and vegetables that are the result of collective labor and a symbol of harvest joy. Ears of corn, *vibunzi*, are set for each child in a family – families with no children set out one ear of corn to represent their communal obligation to well-being and healthy upbringing of all young ones.[4] It takes a village.

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[3] *New Year's to Kwanzaa: Original Stories of Celebration.* Haven, Kendall. Fulcrum Publishing, Golden Colorado (1999). 223-224.
[4] *Ibid.*

A libation – usually of water – is shared in a *kikombe cha umoja*, a community unity cup or chalice. This occurs at the end of the celebration. Also on the last day of the celebration, *zawadi*, gifts reflective of the *nguzo saba*, the seven principles are exchanged. These are not purchased but are either homemade or family objects of meaning or history.

Now let us kindle the Arlington Street Church kinara. Susan Thomas will lead us.

SUSAN:
Umoja (oo-MO-jah) is the black candle of unity. It is the first candle to be lit, and it kindles all other candles in the kinara. In doing so, it unifies all of the other principles.

> In kindling this candle may we always remember the call to unity, may we remember how it has been denied in the past and promise to never repeat that; may we receive the gift of unity with grace and gratitude.

Kujichagulia (koo-gee-cha-goo-LEE-yah) is the first red candle. It means self-determination – the fundamental need to define oneself, to name oneself and to identify the common interests of family and community. It also recalls the most basic indignity suffered by African American slaves and their descendants.

> In kindling this candle may we always remember the basic right to self-determination, may we remember how it has been denied in the past and promise to never repeat that; may we receive the gift of self – determination with grace and gratitude.

Ujima (oo-GEE-mah) is the first green candle. It symbolizes collective work and responsibility – the obligation to the past, present and future in how we interact with our community, society and world. It complements its red counterpart calling for community-building even as self-determination is actualized.

> In kindling this candle may we always remember the call to collective work and responsibility, may we remember how it has been denied in the past and promise to never repeat that; may we receive the gift of collective work and responsibility with grace and gratitude.

Ujamaa (oo-JAH-mah) is the second red candle. It symbolizes the importance of cooperative economics, the backbone of African American survival for centuries and the current call to meet common needs through mutual support. It offers a stark alternative to the crass capitalism that enslaved African Americans.

> In kindling this candle of cooperative work and economics may we always remember the call to cooperative work and commerce, may we remember how it has been denied in the past and promise to never repeat that; may we receive the gift of collective enterprise with grace and gratitude.

Nia (NEE-yah) is the second green candle. It means purpose. It is the call to search inside oneself to set personal goals that are beneficial to the community – the collective vocation of building and maintaining community in order to restore the injustice or having served others' purposes for centuries.

In kindling this candle of purposefulness may we always remember the gift of purposefulness, may we remember how it has been thwarted in the past and promise to never repeat that; may we receive the gift of purposefulness with grace and gratitude.

Kuumba (koo-OOM-bah) is the final red candle. It symbolizes creativity – creativity to build and sustain a strong and vibrant community. It also reminds of the creativity that was denied African Americans for centuries.

In kindling this candle of creativity may we always remember the gift and call to creativity, may we remember how it has been denied in the past and promise to never repeat that; may we receive the gift of creativity with grace and gratitude.

Imani (ee-MAH-nee) is the final green candle. It means faith; to believe with all of one's heart in one's people, parents, teachers and leaders – in the righteousness and victory in the struggle. It is the lifeline that sustained the community throughout history and that will impel it into its future.

In kindling this candle of faith may we always remember the power of faith, may we remember how its expression has been denied in the past and promise to never repeat that; may we receive the gift of faith with grace and gratitude.

Let us now gaze upon the kindled kinara in silence. Let us remember our own family histories. Let us renew in ourselves the commitment to bring all we have to bear in the struggle against all forms of injustice and oppression.

SILENCE

Now please rise in spirit or body and sing together Hymn #147 *When All the Peoples on the Earth.*

The African American experience is the American experience too. Today we have acknowledged that common history not by celebrating Kwanzaa, but by kindling candles of history and promise that we share.

Like Unitarian Universalism, Kwanzaa is uniquely American in its creation and practice. Its purpose is to celebrate, deepen and reify a sense of community among disparate peoples whose one common link is their African heritage and American experience.

Let us all feel grateful for Kwanzaa, which is a powerful example of how a long-oppressed and subjugated community can reclaim its past and in the process reshape and strengthen its own future.

May it be so.

Amen.