

Sermon Kwanzaa and Unitarian Universalism

For: All Faiths Unitarian Congregation

By: CL Minister Alberita Johnson 12/31/2023

Greetings Family, today is the last Sunday and last day of the year 2023, it is also the 2nd to the last day of Kwanzaa, which is an annual celebration of African-American and Pan African culture that is held from December 26 thru January 1st.

Kwanzaa is based on African harvest festival traditions from various parts of Africa, including West and Southeast Africa. And although religion may play a part in the festival it is not a religious festival.

Today, we will explore how UUist had a major impact on the evolution of Kwanzaa, particularly here in the US.

We begin with What's the News? Or Habari Gani? In the Swahili tongue.

The response is to name the principle for that particular day of the Kwanzaa week.

*Today's principle is **Kuumba** (koo-OOM-bah): Creativity, the sixth principle.*

Dr. Maulana Karenga, professor and chairman of Black Studies at California State University, Long Beach, created Kwanzaa in 1966. It was after the Watts riots in Los Angeles that took place in the [Watts](#) neighborhood and its surrounding areas of [Los Angeles](#) from August 11 to 16, 1965. And Dr. Maulana was searching for ways to bring African-Americans together as a community.

As I look upon you all I can see that many of us grew up or were young adults in 66.

I am sure many of us can recall hearing references to the Watts riots, I did as a girl.

It was during the time that the civil rights movement was at its height and, some would say, it was more like a revolution, a time of great change and upheaval.

The enormity of injustices upon large segments of our population were fighting to be heard and free while an old guard held firm to a form of life that spiraled into inhumane treatment of other human beings for far too long.

This I knew was factual, as I watched on our black and white tv, images of people who looked like me, my family and neighbors being hosed, dogs released on them and beaten, I knew there were people to fear.

And I knew they would do just about anything to stop me from being fully human, and yes I also was aware of people who did not look like me, my family and my neighbors who marched locked armed in solidarity with us. And I am now aware and extremely pleased that many of them were UU's.

So how did UU's play a part in the evolution of Kwanzaa? Well a few years ago I came across an interview with our own Unitarian Universalist Dr. Mtangulizi (mmm-tan-goo-lee-zee) Sanyika who shared an account of how Unitarian Universalism connects to Kwanzaa with Rev. Dr. Paula Cole Jones. Point here...Dr. Cole Jones was instrumental in the development of the 8th Principle.

Dr. Sanyika's interview begins with the Black Empowerment Controversy in Unitarian Universalism. Something that I knew little about.

However this interview will shed some light on what was happening within UUism during that time and how it impacted Kwanzaa.

It is almost 60 years ago in the infancy of our merger and things are changing rapidly. Remember the UU merger was in 1961. Just in time for race relationships in America to enter the civil rights movement. And then a shift from traditional civil rights advocacy, associated with the civil rights movement, to the black power movement.

Black Americans, like Stokely Carmichael, one of the original Freedom Riders worked tirelessly to emphasize not just the rights to participate in a supposed democratic society, but the right to control one's own space, and destiny, where you live, and the quality of services that you receive, and so forth.

Now I am aware that many white people feared Stokely Carmichael; he was not threatening to me. It was just the opposite. I feared the white man that feared Stokely more than anything else.

You see friends, my youthful mind constantly wrestled in an attempt to comprehend what was happening and why people were so angry, and I knew the message Stokely preached was good and wondered why others thought otherwise.

But it didn't take long to understand...It's Freedom, he dared speak of freedom...to be, to live fully into the inherent worth and dignity of personhood which just happens to be our 1st principle. The inherent worth and dignity of all persons.

Stokely was considered a threat because he spoke of a shift from civil rights, which had been the dominant way that most liberal blacks and whites in America related to the conditions of black people, he spoke a new emphasis a new narrative and black people

began to speak and act on it, many saying...quote, *“we will take responsibility for our own development.”*

Now this was a powerful shift within the African American Community. I can remember the shift as we found our worth and dignity.

It's as if it was yesterday, and we sang and shouted it to the world...for me it was the day I heard James Brown, sing..."Say it Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud" Oh how we loved that song it spoke to our soul in a way that few songs had done. So at my very astute age of 8 years I without hesitancy raised my small fist high as I could and proclaimed my truth to the world.

I am black and I am proud!!!

I had no idea back then that a simple raising of my fist signifying Black Power had so much power that two Olympic athletes would be shunned and labeled because they raised their fist in solidarity. Likewise I was surprised that Black Lives Matter signs, buttons and movement that started in 2013 after the murder of Trayvon Martin by the hands of a white man who was fearful and suspicious of a black teenager who was visiting with his dad at the time of his death would cause such nonsense that folks would respond with police lives matter, all lives matter and of course the unwritten sign white lives matter more than black lives.

And yet I am encouraged, because of you, family. Particularly my white siblings, several of you are reading and going to classes and workshops to learn the truth of our history and the devastating long lasting results of racism in America.

Even though black history, my history is now being watered down here in Florida in order not to be offensive as if that in and of itself is not offensive to black people and those who advocate for truth. It appears in my opinion that some authorities are so naive that they actually think that black people are just going to forget the atrocities perpetrated against us and never speak of it.

However I rejoice because in the 60's till now white people continue to support us in our fight for personhood. By fighting, white institutional racism in the totality of society. This was and still is the message and support received from white siblings while we shifted to try and emphasize the development of our own communities back in the 60's.

So let me briefly go over a timeline of what happened within UUism during the Black Power movement of the 60's and 70's:

- In October 1967, the Black Unitarian Universalist Caucus (BUUC) was formed and funding was sought from the UUA
- In May 1968 the UU General Assembly voted to only *partially* fund and help form the Black Affairs Council (BAC), that was developed by the Black Unitarian Universalist Caucus, or BUUC. Unfortunately the UUA was experiencing its own crisis and partial funding and shortened funding period was offered instead and this became the catalyst of the Black Empowerment Controversy within the UUA.
- However BUUC moved forward and used the funding that was received inside of the Black Affairs Council to support the goals of empowerment and self determination, by working with local community empowerment organizations.
- And one of those organizations was a political education organization in Newark, NJ that had several committees and one of them was called the Committee for a Unified Newark
- The Committee had at its base seven principles, called Nguzo Saba, which became the basis for the celebration, we call Kwanzaa.
- It does not end there, BUUC and the Black Affairs Council also organized the Congress of African People, a successor to the old black power conferences.
- At the Congress of African People held in 1970, Alex Poinsett a UU and journalist for Ebony magazine wrote an article, about Kwanzaa that was published in Ebony
- It was during this time that Kwanzaa took off and began to permeate workshops in politics and education, in the arts, in economic development, and in religious thinking, the seven principles kept circulating inside of the National Black community.

It is safe to say the UU system that black UU's had put together, successfully seeded an important institution in the life of the African American and Pan African communities of which we took part of today.

Just imagine if they were fully funded.

I believe so much more could have been done. Really it was the late 60's and the entire world was watching, as they are today, while our democracy continues to decline and it appears the world is heading to WWII.

In 2017 at the request and formation of Black Lives of UU or BLUU funding and support from the UUA was not denied. And I am confident that the funds are and will continue to uplift and support the lives, contributions and successes of the BIPOC communities particularly Black UU's.

As I close my friends we are at the threshold once again. Will we do the right thing and support the many people and organizations who are other/ed for simply existing in the

same space as those who would consciously and unconsciously harm them in word, and deed.

If so perhaps then we can rightfully move forward to include solidarity in our charity.

You see, solidarity is key to Kwanzaa.

Kwanzaa is a celebration of community, of the village, of the tribes of a nation of peoples of inherent worth and dignity who celebrate the interdependent web of all.

I opened this morning with a question, Habari Gani? **Kuumba** (koo-OOM-bah):What's the News? **Creativity**

I encourage you today, to not only reflect on **Creativity**, **Kuumba** as we have lit the Kwanzaa candle for the 6th day but to reflect on all the principles of Kwanzaa.

I invite you now to join me today and recite them together, you will find them on pg two of your OOS. After I name the principle in Swahili and English, please recite together the statements that follow.

The Seven Principles (Nguzo Saba) of Kwanzaa are:

Umoja (oo-MOH-jah): **Unity**

Because success starts with Unity. Unity of family, community, nation and race.

Kujichagulia (koo-jee-chah-goo-LEE-ah): **Self-Determination**

Is to be responsible for ourselves. To create one's own destiny.

Ujima (oo-JEE-mah): **Collective work and responsibility**

To build and maintain our community together. To work together to help one another within our community.

Ujamaa (oo-jah-MAH): **Collective economics**

To build, maintain, and support our own stores, establishments, and businesses.

Nia (NEE-ah): **Purpose**

To restore African American people to their traditional greatness. To be responsible to Those Who Came Before (our ancestors) and to Those Who Will Follow (our descendants).

Kuumba (koo-OOM-bah): **Creativity**

Using creativity and imagination to make your communities better than what you inherited.

Imani (ee-MAH-nee): **Faith**

Believing in our people, our families, our educators, our leaders, and the righteousness of the African American struggle.

*Habari Gani? What's the News? **Kuumba** (koo-OOM-bah): **Creativity***

Tomorrow as we begin the New Year let us remember that with Kuumba/creativity and imagination that our communities can be made better than what we inherited.

May it be so, Amen and Ashe.