

“Body to Body: Harm and Healing on the Path to Racial Justice”

Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval

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Reading

“Healing” by Adam Dyer

Don’t speak to me of “healing” racism,
or “wounded souls” or the “painful hurt”
until you are willing to feel the scars
on my great-great-grandmother Laury’s back.

...

So, please don’t speak to me of “healing”
because you cannot know what healing means
until you know the hurt.

Sermon Part 1

“...[Y]ou cannot know what healing means until you know the hurt.”

With our theme of “attention” this month, I ask you this morning to turn your attention with me and one another to a topic that is admittedly painful. And, I believe that when dealt with honestly, we can also find hope in facing this pain. I appreciate you journeying with me and also believe that it is vital, that people’s lives depend on our returning with commitment and with love to this conversation of how to confront and undo white supremacy.

Resmaa Menakem is a licensed social worker and therapist in Minneapolis and has years of experience studying and working in the field of trauma and somatics, or healing through the body. His book, *My Grandmother’s Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies*, offers an approach to addressing the persistence of white supremacy that takes us out of our heads and into our bodies. He

insists that ending white supremacy will not come from social and political action alone or from primarily addressing the ideology of white supremacy. Instead, our physical bodies offer us both a clue to the history that has shaped us and a key to transforming ourselves now and for generations to come.

Recently, there was much national attention on two events that took place in the state of Texas. One was the trial of the officer who shot and killed, Botham Jean, while he was watching television in his own apartment which the officer mistook as her own. Just 11 days later, a Forth Worth, Texas police officer shot and killed Atatiana Jefferson while she was in her own home. These events - and any time a Black person is pulled over by police whether in Texas or Vermont - are shaped by a history steeped in violent harm and trauma passed on from generation to generation.

Menakem lays out a historical timeline of the United States that traces this history of trauma through a somatic lens, that is, by focusing on the body. He divides the past 1,500 years or so into five somatic eras:

The Middle/Dark Ages (500 through 1500)

The Native American Decimation and European Colony Era (1550 through 1610)

The Enslavement Era (1619 through 1865)

The Jim Crow Era (1877 through 1965)

The Neo-Crow Era (1966 through present)

If we want to understand more deeply how racism and white supremacy have been perpetuated from generation to generation here in the United States, we can look at each era through the experience of people's bodies.

What I find especially important in Menakem's work is that he insists that this legacy of harm and trauma actually originated in historical trauma present in Europe which shaped the psyches and bodies of European colonists.

The Middle or Dark Ages in Europe were characterized by violence inflicted by white bodies onto other white bodies. Weapons of the Medieval period were designed to take out an opponent with brute force, piercing flesh and crushing bones, and in some cases keeping one's opponent in torturous conditions for hours or even days.¹

¹ "Medieval Weapons That Maimed and Killed," January 22, 2019, <https://www.history.com/news/medieval-weapons-knights-middle-ages>.

Medieval literature is filled with descriptions of the torturous punishments created for those who committed crimes. By many standards, this was a brutal period.

These conditions shaped the psyches and bodies of English colonists who then made their way to the “New World.” We can only imagine now the kind of trauma that was held by those who then journeyed across the ocean to start a new life on this soil. And, we have to wonder, how much of this pain has really been dealt with within white communities over all these years?

For most native people who encountered Europeans for the first time, the outcome of those encounters were devastating. Some European explorers did have cordial relationships, and in some cases the relationships were tense and even deadly. As many of us know, it was diseases carried by Europeans that were largely responsible for taking so many Native lives and decimating those communities. And the history of displacement and erasure of culture has certainly left its own somatic trail of trauma for native communities.

During the Enslavement era, the English became the dominant colonizers of the “New World” and participated in the slave trade which brought Africans to North America for the purpose of forced labor. It was in this period that racialized identities were constructed with “whiteness” and “blackness” given meaning as “superior” versus “inferior” in order to establish power and domination ascribed to particular bodies over other bodies. In this period, we find the origins of what Menakem calls “white-body supremacy.”

Menakem points out that the nature of slavery in colonial North America changed greatly from the seventeenth to eighteenth century. Originally, laborers were important not only from Africa but also from Scotland, Ireland, and England. These workers were called bondsmen or indentured servants and would be granted their freedom after a specified number of years of serving their wealthy landowners. In the late 1600s and early 1700s, white and black laborers - indentured servants and slaves - worked and lived together on plantations. In several early worker revolts, black and white people rose up together against plantation owners.

These revolts posed a threat to the power and supremacy of wealthy white landowners.

You then begin to see a “divide-and-conquer” strategy.

Menakem writes, “Black bodies were deliberately presented as straw men for white bodies to blow their ancient historical trauma through. What had been white-on-white (or, usually powerful-white-on-less-powerful-white) trauma was transformed, in carefully calculated fashion, into white-on-Black trauma, which was then institutionally enforced.”²

In the Jim Crow Era, once slavery was outlawed, white-body supremacy was put into practice through other acts of violence, most notably the lynching of nearly 3,500 Black people over seven decades. And, it was also through segregationist policies that the message was reinforced that white bodies are superior to Black bodies.

In what Menakem calls the “Neo-Crow” Era, segregation became illegal but the perniciousness and persistence of white supremacy has carried on. The “War on Drugs” led to the unprecedented mass incarceration of Black people which continues today, including in disproportionate numbers here in Vermont. White supremacy is evident in the continued killing of Black people by law enforcement. It is also evident in our restrictive and dehumanizing immigration policies and treatment of migrants at the border and in detention centers.

In this broad-sweeping overview of the last 1,500 years or so, we cannot forget that it comes back to the lived, bodily experience of millions of us. The harm perpetrated and perpetuated as trauma has lived on in the flesh and bones of each of us.

In his book *Between the World and Me*, Ta-Nehesi Coates writes, “But all our phrasing —race relations, racial chasm, racial justice, racial profiling, white privilege, even white supremacy—serves to obscure that racism is a visceral experience, that it dislodges brains, blocks airways, rips muscle, extracts organs, cracks bones, breaks teeth...You must always remember that the sociology, the history, the economics, the graphs, the charts, the regressions all land, with great violence, upon the body.”³

This awareness and paying attention is what Adam Dyer calls us to in his reading exhorting us to first know the hurt so that we can more fully know what healing means.

We need to feel this hurt in a visceral way.

² My Grandmother’s Hands, 69.

³ Ta-Nehesi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015) 10.

Last weekend, I had the opportunity to see an incredible play put on by JAG Productions in White River Junction. In case you don't know, JAG Productions is a theater company with a mission of catalyzing compassion, empathy, love, and community through shared understandings of the humankind through the lean of the African-American experience. The play, *Esai's Table*, begins mysteriously and surreally, with four black men meeting each other for the first time all at the will of an eccentric character, Esai Wallace.

I won't go into too many details (the play is headed to Cherry Lane Theatre in New York City and you might check it out there), but the climax of the play arrives as it becomes evident that the three young men summoned by Esai Wallace are dead. We then hear the story of how each of them has died in separate incidents of gun violence.

As they finish their stories, the tension builds and for a few moments they are each letting out the pent up rage and anguish and despair at the realization of their traumatic endings as they cry out and pound on the floor and the walls.

We, the audience, were invited to be present with the embodiment of their rage. To know their hurt. And, let me tell you, it was palpable.

Depending on whether we inhabit a Black body, or a white body, or the body of a police officer, or another racialized body, we have different work that we need to do.

For Black people, the hurt that Adam Dyer refers to is very well known. It is inescapable. It is tied to the legacy and history of racialized trauma that I described earlier.

Other non-white people have experienced their own histories of racialized trauma in this country as well, and for many immigrant groups, racialized trauma that has origins in other settings beyond the United States involving war, displacement, and genocide.

For white people, the work is not just to learn to empathize with the lived experience and historical trauma of Black people and people of color. It is also to know what lives in your own bodies and how to respond to your own body in a way that stops pain from being passed on continually and unexamined.

We will turn to this theme in the second part of today's sermon later in the service.

Now, I invite you to join in singing, Meditation on Breathing.

Sermon Part 2

How does racialized trauma and white supremacy live in our bodies?

Here's a story. A story I don't feel good about, but it is a real story from my own life.

The other day I was out for a run. I like running without listening to music because I am more attentive to my surroundings and to my own body and how I'm feeling when I don't have head phones in my ears. (That's just my own preference.) Usually, this means I am attentive to the interesting pattern of clouds in the sky or the call of a particular bird. I'm also able to be more aware of cracks in the sidewalk or a car coming around a corner. On this particular day, I was running in the street in a residential section of Montpelier and I noticed someone, a black man, standing outside of a house. He had a phone in his hand and his arm was raised to about eye level as if he was looking at something on the phone. The slight tensing in my body was almost immediate. The questions in my mind came just as quickly, "Who is that? Does he live there? Why is he pointing his phone at that other house?" The implicit question being, "Am I in danger?"

I noticed these thoughts arising and the tension in my body. I kept breathing and I kept running. I said "hello" to the man as I passed. He said "hello" back. And, I thought, "Wow, Joan. That's some racist bullsh*t that lives in you."

I also know that there are layers upon layers of societal messaging that have taught my body to respond this way in the presence of someone with a Black body. It is in the air we breathe, and it shapes what we call implicit, or unconscious, bias. Being a clergy person does not exempt me from this bias.

Our bodies carry this bias as it has been infused into us through the teachings of our families, schools, and media, and through our own lived experience. The logic and assumptions of white supremacy are all around us.

While looking at historical trauma casts us into broad groups and sweeping historical trends, it comes down to each of us and the work we do to better understand ourselves in the moment and to make different choices. No single person here or

anywhere is to blame for the pain we are all living with and yet we all have a responsibility to learn about and address this pain starting with ourselves.

For me, this history of learned bias is complex. It includes a lot of internalized racism and the self-hatred I witnessed within members of my family and the Filipino community I grew up in. Knowing our own history is an essential part of resisting and undoing white supremacy now.

We can also learn how to tune in and pay attention to the sensations in our bodies and to settle our bodies in times of distress or conflict. In this way, we learn how to metabolize and process our own pain rather than avoiding it or passing it on to others.

In his book, Menakem describes a process for settling the body he calls “the five anchors.” These techniques may be familiar to you if you have done any work with trauma, whether that’s your own or others’.

Anchor 1—soothe yourself to quiet your mind, calm your heart, and settle your body. Anchor 2—notice the sensations and emotions in your body instead of reacting to them. Anchor 3—accept the discomfort instead of trying to flee from it. Anchor 4—Stay present and in your body as you move through the unfolding experience and respond from the best parts of your self. Anchor 5—safely discharge any energy that remains.⁴

This may sound like a simple process, but it is one that requires a great deal of attention and intention. It is an important process for any kind of tense or challenging situation you may find yourself in, and it is especially important when you’re confronted by a racially-based situation that causes uncomfortable emotions to arise.

The upcoming series here at church on Interrupting Hate and Addressing Unintended Bias would be a great way to practice paying attention to your body as part of this work of dismantling white supremacy.

Some of you, I know, have practiced at becoming more attuned to your body whether that’s through mindfulness practices or yoga or dance. For some of you, this may be new.

Paying attention to our bodies helps us to remember how deeply personal racism and white supremacy are. That these are not just concepts or policies or ideas. That racism

⁴ My Grandmother’s Hands, 168-172.

and white supremacy lives in each of us even though none of us on our own is to blame for the persistence of these painful and wounding aspects of our society.

We also know that through our bodies we can experience joy and resilience in the face of pain. For all of the historical trauma present in our communities, there are also histories of surviving and thriving in the face of this trauma. I had the joy of witnessing and being a part of this resilience on Friday night at a concert at the Barre Opera House. Ranky Tanky, a South Carolina-based band, put on a concert. Their music is inspired by the music of the Gullah people who have survived and thrived for generations in large part through the practices of music and community-building that they have developed. The audience on Friday night was able to experience some of that with the invitation to clap our hands and move our bodies with the band.

Being in our bodies and knowing ourselves intimately is part of the larger work we all have to do - to know our bodies and how to settle our bodies and how to be with other bodies in a way that does not pass on pain.

As I close, I invite you to tune into your body now. Do you feel any tension or clenching? What is the quality of your breathing? What would it be like to simply accept whatever sensations are present for you in this moment?

In the end, the attention we give to our own bodies puts us on the path to mending our own hearts. In offering attention in this way, we come to know not only the pain that is present but also the deep wells of joy and resilience.

Susan Raffo of The People's Movement Center says, "Healing is about taking the time to notice what gets in the way of feeling connected to your life, your community, and your sense of possibility. Healing, at its core, is about slowing down so that we can better listen, to ourselves and each other."⁵

May we each listen closely, know the hurt, and move with courage towards wholeness of mind, spirit, and body in the making of our Beloved Community.

⁵ as quoted in *My Grandmother's Hands*, 199.