

**Just Look Out the Window**  
Rev. Kenneth Read-Brown  
First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)  
Unitarian Universalist  
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**Readings**

from “Masters and Master Works: On Black Male Poetics,” by Afaa Michael Weaver

... the choice now for black male poets is to embrace this space where they can ask themselves this question of what constitutes beauty and ask it in terms of their own lives, and not those lives weighed by the suppositions of group identity. Time has moved on, and if black male poetics is to assume a more manifest place, even as poetry itself is marginalized in exponential leaps in every waking second, then black male poets must explore the beauty of the quality of being human. Assume that humanity and not the task of proving the same. Black male poetics must upend and suspend the idea of race.

*There is now no more greatness for a black male poet to assume other than a commitment to reality and the investigation of that reality arising from a deeper self-awareness. Racism is not dead, but we are now in a vortex of confluences, where the black male poet can opt to free himself from freeing the race.*

Harlem (2) by Langston Hughes

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up  
like a raisin in the sun?  
Or fester like a sore –  
And then run?  
Does it stink like rotten meat?  
Or crust and sugar over –  
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags  
like a heavy load.

*Or does it explode?*

*kitchenette building* by Gwendolyn Brooks

We are things of dry hours and the involuntary plan,  
Grayed in, and gray. "Dream" makes a giddy sound, not strong  
Like "rent," "feeding a wife," "satisfying a man."

But could a dream send up through onion fumes  
Its white and violet, fight with fried potatoes  
And yesterday's garbage ripening in the hall,  
Flutter, or sing an aria down these rooms

Even if we were willing to let it in,  
Had time to warm it, keep it very clean,  
Anticipate a message, let it begin?

We wonder. But not well! not for a minute!  
Since Number Five is out of the bathroom now,  
We think of lukewarm water, hope to get in it.

## **Sermon**

Pulitzer Prize winning poet Gwendolyn Brooks, who lived most of her adult life on Chicago's South Side, once wrote that "If you wanted a poem, you only had to look out of a window. There was material always," she wrote, "walking or running, fighting or screaming or singing."

Of course, much depends on the location of your window, doesn't it?

Walt Whitman's windows included the ever-busier streets of polyglot 19<sup>th</sup> century Manhattan as well as the hospital wards of Washington during the Civil War.

Emily Dickinson's windows were the windows of her home in quiet Amherst, Massachusetts.

We might note, though, that many others have lived in Amherst, Washington, Manhattan, or the South Side of Chicago and have not produced immortal poetry. So yes, you can look out almost any window and see the makings of a poem – whether in the human activity of a Chicago street or, for that matter, the turkeys and deer, pines and oaks outside my own window. But only a few can make a great poem.

Gwendolyn Brooks' best known poem – and a great one it is – is a short one. (She once said that though she appreciated people's appreciation for this poem, she did wish that more folks realized she had written a few others as well!)

In any case, this poem, "We Real Cool," grew from her passing by some young men hanging out in a pool hall. She saw them – through the windows of her eyes we might say – as many others saw them. But then she imagined herself into their lives and wrote this poem:

We Real Cool  
*The Pool Players*  
*Seven at the Golden Shovel*

We real cool. We  
Left school. We

Lurk late. We  
Strike straight. We

Sing sin. We  
Thin gin. We

Jazz June. We  
Die soon.

The poem speaks for itself. No elaboration needed. Just notice how it builds to that last line... where the power of the poem rests...

As Elizabeth Torrey and I prepare to lead our upcoming poetry class, focusing on the poetry of two great African American poets of the twentieth century, Gwendolyn Brooks and Langston Hughes, I've been immersing myself in their poetry – poetry with which I've heretofore had, sadly, only a passing acquaintance at best. And I have found it to be a crash course not only in their poetry, but in some dimensions of the twentieth century African American experience as well.

I would put it this way. Just as Gwendolyn Brooks affirmed that all she had to do was to look out her window to find the makings of a poem, I have discovered that her poetry and the poetry of Langston Hughes has been a new window for me into the experience of African Americans.

For in case you hadn't noticed, I'm white. I grew up in the suburbs. I've lived my life in predominantly white communities. Like other white people, most of you, I've had the luxury of not having to think about race if I chose not to. When I look out my window I see the woods and other homes much like ours, not a gritty urban landscape or a landscape of rural poverty. And most of the time I don't think of myself as white. I'm just a human being, right?

Well, yes. But it is because I'm part of the dominant white culture that I can comfortably (mostly comfortably) choose whether or not to think about race, including the color of my own skin.

But if you're of non-white complexion, you don't have that option in our society. Your color – whether black, brown, yellow, red – defines you in the eyes of the dominant culture.

If you are a person “of color” you are likely reminded of your color again and again – perhaps less so now in 2009 than in 1909 or 1949 or 1969 – but still, reminded... perhaps when you apply for a bank loan or a job, or walk down the street in a mostly white neighborhood. You are reminded.

Of course I don't know this from personal experience. But others – our poets notably included – testify to the experience of being a person of color in a white-dominated society. And so, reading their poetry becomes an important window into their view of the world for the rest of us.

Listen: Written in the 1950s, this poignant poem of truth, “Theme for English B” was part of Langston Hughes’ collection, *Montage of a Dream Deferred*. Listen:

The instructor said,

*Go home and write  
a page tonight.  
And let that page come out of you –  
Then it will be true.*

I wonder if it’s that simple?  
I am twenty-two, colored, born in Winston-Salem.  
I went to school there, then Durham, then here  
to this college on the hill above Harlem.  
I am the only colored student in my class.  
The steps from the hill lead down into Harlem,  
through a park, then I cross St. Nicholas,  
Eighth Avenue, Seventh, and I come to the Y,  
the Harlem Branch Y, where I take the elevator  
up to my room, sit down, and write this page:

It’s not easy to know what is true for you or me  
at twenty-two, my age. But I guess I’m what  
I feel and see and hear, Harlem, I hear you:  
Hear you, hear me – we two – you, me talk on this page.  
(I hear New York, too.) Me – who?  
Well, I like to eat, sleep, drink, and be in love.  
I like to work, read, learn, and understand life.  
I like a pipe for a Christmas present  
or records – Bessie, bop, or Bach.  
I guess being colored doesn’t make me *not* like  
the same things other folks like who are other races.  
So will my page be colored that I write?  
Being me, it will not be white.  
But it will be  
a part of you, instructor.  
You are white –  
yet a part of me, as I am a part of you.  
That’s American.  
Sometimes perhaps you don’t want to be a part of me.  
Nor do I often want to be a part of you.  
But we are, that’s true!  
As I learn from you,  
I guess you learn from me –  
although you’re older – and white –  
and somewhat more free.

This is my page for English B.

Then there is this from Gwendolyn Brooks' poem written in the 1940s, "Negro Hero," reflecting on the experience of black soldiers in World War II. Here is the final stanza:

Naturally, the important thing is, I helped to save them,  
them and a part of their democracy.  
Even if I had to kick their law into their teeth in order  
to do that for them.  
And I am feeling well and settled in myself because I  
believe it was a good job,  
Despite this possible horror: that they might prefer the  
Preservation of their law in all its sick dignity and their knives  
To the continuation of their creed  
And their lives.

Windows – for a privileged white man – into other kinds of lives, others experience.

Now, it must be noted that not all of Hughes' and Brooks' poetry is about the experience of racism; much is simply about lived black lives; much about lived lives period. So sometimes race and racism are significant parts of the poetry and sometimes less so. We have Hughes well-known "In Time of Silver Rain" for example; or Brooks' delightful "the preacher: ruminates behind the sermon."

Even so, the reality of race and racism in America is never too far away from their poetic sensibility and their sensibility as African Americans.

Yet all of this said... Langston Hughes lived from 1902 – 1967, and Gwendolyn Brooks from 1917 – 2000: Is the perception of race and racism in their poetry out-of-date? Have things changed since they wrote most of their poems? Yes, of course they have. Most obviously in terms of what people of any color and background can now more realistically hope for their lives and the lives of their children. For example, Hughes had written this in his poem "Children's Rhymes" from *Montage of a Dream Deferred: By what sends / the white kids / I ain't sent: / I know I can't / be President*.

So, yes, much has changed. But not *enough* has changed. The legacy of slavery and white racism is too long and too deep even to be transformed entirely by the election of a black president. There *are* still barriers to break down. Poetry is one way these barriers between people, and barriers to opportunity – barriers to dreams deferred – can be broken down.

Langston Hughes said as much in so many words: "There are many barriers people try to breakdown. I try to do it with poetry." As he did. As Gwendolyn Brooks did.

One recurring theme in both poets, especially Hughes but also Brooks, is the dream... and the barriers to the dream for those in our nation of darker skin.

The two poems Elizabeth and I shared for the second reading both had to do with dreams in the context of race and racism and poverty. In *kitchenette building* Brooks considers whether a dream (which "makes a giddy sound, not strong / Like "rent...") can survive the daily struggles of grinding poverty, when the more immediate hope is for a little "lukewarm water" in a shared bathroom.

And Hughes mused famously on "What happens to a dream deferred?":

Does it dry up  
like a raisin in the sun?...  
Maybe it just sags  
like a heavy load.  
*Or does it explode?*

He wrote those lines years before a preacher spoke of his dream from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. He wrote those lines a decade before the explosions of the 1960s. Prescient lines.

Yet now the dream has indeed come closer to full realization....

For it is a *journey* we are on, a journey that in some measure has to do with how we understand what we perhaps too glibly call the American Dream. The Voting Rights Act was a step on the journey toward that dream. The election of Barack Obama was a step on the journey toward that dream.

...a journey toward a dream that has to do with material prosperity, yes, but only to the extent that one grounding for our deeper dreams of equality and freedom is that everyone be secure in their next meal, in a roof over their heads, in an equal education for their children, in access to health care.

But the deeper roots beneath that ground of the American Dream are in the shared ideal, what has sometimes been called the American creed of equality and freedom – yes, too often honored in the breach, but a shared ideal nevertheless, with the promise wrapped within that ideal, within that dream, that each person might grow and flower in his and her full humanity, regardless of color or background.

Afaa Michael Weaver suggests in the reading we heard earlier ways in which black male poets can (and he affirms ought) now lean further in the direction of the dream fulfilled – not to pretend that racism no longer exists, but even so to “free themselves from freeing the race” in part by *assuming* our common humanity rather than feeling they have to prove it.

For we see that in much of Langston Hughes’ and Gwendolyn Brooks’ poetry, the effort is either explicitly or implicitly to prove or demonstrate the common and equal humanity of African Americans as compared with white Americans. And this was emphatically necessary in their time, and to an extent still in our time. But Afaa Michael Weaver is suggesting maybe not so much any more. (And I would expect that though he was focusing on black *male* poets in his essay, the message in some measure applies to women as well; but we’d have to ask Afaa Weaver that question.)

In other words, in poetry too, though we have come not the whole way to realizing “the dream,” we have nevertheless come a long way.

Where does all this leave us this morning? Perhaps simply with this: With the reminder that to survive and thrive in this ever smaller, ever more crowded world, a multi-hued, multi-cultured, multi-religious world... we need windows into one another’s lives – whether through poetry or otherwise – windows which help us to see and acknowledge and accept and celebrate the full humanity of all of our brothers and sisters on this precious, fragile home planet. So may it be.

**Benediction** - words of Paul Robeson with which to end and go forth:

*Sorrow will one day turn to joy. All that breaks the heart and oppresses the soul will one day give place to peace and understanding, and everyone will be free.*