

Notes of a Native Son

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A few weeks ago, I found myself at the beginning of a vacation driving through Los Angeles on the very afternoon of Michael Jackson's public memorial service. Had we not turned on the radio to listen to the news, it would have been just like any other weekday afternoon in Los Angeles—hazy and bright, with people going about their business.

But Eric and I are news junkies, so we found the local NPR station and the local AM news radio channel, and we listened away. Again and again, we heard the same snippets of the memorial service—Jermaine Jackson's tear-filled and completely off-key rendition of "Smile," Brooke Shields' fond remembrance of her late friend, and 11 year-old Paris Jackson's heart-tugging goodbye to her father.

But the part that got to me was the Rev. Al Sharpton's eulogy, in which he felt the need to tell the pop singer's children this: "There wasn't anything strange about your dad," Sharpton said, "it was strange what your daddy had to deal with."

Sharpton's remarks were made necessary by the public reaction to the death of this entertainer—a reaction that at once tried to make him a hero, a villain, a transformative figure in American race relations and a freak of the highest magnitude. No child, I would imagine Sharpton reckoned, deserves to hear her or his father ridiculed the way Michael Jackson was in the days and weeks following his untimely death.

And yet, Michael Jackson *was* more than a little bit odd, wasn't he? The chimpanzee, the amusement park, the sequined glove? Just a little?

It's easy, I think for many of us to judge him that way—easy for those of us who have lived lives in which we have been assured that our experiences were normal, that our experiences mattered; easy for those of us who were given the gift of childhood in which to grow and develop in the sheltered protection of a family, who were allowed to make mistakes and try on identities without the whole world watching and passing judgment.

Michael Jackson had none of these things. A child star who lived in the harshness of the spotlight despite his shyness, he retreated into a fantasyland of permanent youth. He even named his house Neverland after the far-away place in *Peter Pan* where one never had to grow up—even if that meant a life without growth, a life without the pleasures of adulthood and a life without love.

But even outside of the special circumstances of fame that Michael Jackson was faced with, he also grew up a young black boy in a nation in which the societally-approved roles for young black boys were few, and flashy, gender-ambiguous pop singer was not one of them.

It was sheer coincidence that my long-planned vacation to Southern California to visit family would happen to take place after the death of a celebrity who inspired such mixed emotions in the public. It was eerie that

those events happened long after I had planned to visit the themes of identity, marginalization and belonging in today's sermon, though.

Had James Baldwin not died in 1987, he would be celebrating his eighty-fifth birthday today, a fact that inspired me to revisit his groundbreaking autobiographical work *Notes of a Native Son*. This collection of essays was published by our very own Beacon Press in 1955, when Baldwin was only thirty-one years old.

I came to find that Baldwin's stories are neither immature nor dated, however. While some of them point to specific historical moments in our country's long, slow march of progress towards equality and justice, many of his observations could easily have been made not in 1955 but rather 1965, 1985 or even 2005.

Baldwin wrote from the painful place of being an outsider wherever he went—so much so that he sought refuge in France, it being easier to be explicitly labeled a foreigner than to feel like one in the country of his birth.

As a black man, Baldwin didn't have a place in white American society where he fit in. As a gay man, he lived at the margins of African-American society. As a man called to a life in the arts, he could not live up to his family's expectations that he become a Pentecostal preacher.

Baldwin lived a life of conflicting identities and never really found a place where he could unequivocally belong.

The psychological effects of life-long marginalization are hard to fathom for those of us used to being labeled "normal." Columbia educator L. Lee Knepfkamp, though, does work from a place that understands that each of us can at least partially identify with what it means to be on the margins.

Knepfkamp's exercise entitled "Mattering and Marginality" has become, with her permission, a standard part of Unitarian Universalist workshops on race and racism. I've done it more times than I can remember—and each time I come away with a new understanding about myself and about our society.

In the exercise, we are first asked to identify situations in which we mattered and then those in which we were marginalized. It then asks us to think about the settings of those situations—who were the others involved, where did it occur? When we've identified these settings, she asks us to share how we knew we mattered or that we didn't, and how that knowledge made us feel. Finally, we are asked to identify how this mattering—or marginalization—made us behave. How did we react to the actions of others?

This work is best done in small groups, where ample time to process the reactions and hear from everyone is possible, and I hope that we, as a congregation, might take the time to do it together sometime. I'd like to share with you some of my own experiences that were brought up by this work.

Mattering: When is it in our lives that we matter? How is it that we know that what we are saying and doing is making a difference—penetrating the thoughts and experiences of those around us? How do we know that we are being taken seriously, that our experience and knowledge is valued as equal to the experience and knowledge of others? How do we know that our perception of events and our feelings about them are accepted as whole, as normal reactions to a world in need?

How do we know we matter?

For me, in the situations in which I knew I was valued, people showed me basic respect. They asked me questions, and actually answered when I responded to them. They talked to me as if they knew I was listening. Sometimes, they changed their behavior or language or opinions as a result of discussing things with me. Often, they listened when I spoke, answered questions that I asked, and shared their opinions and values with me, knowing that I would respond with compassion and honesty. All of these things have let me know that I mattered in countless situations throughout my life.

How do we feel when we matter? What are the emotional and psychological results of knowing that someone else cares about you, values your input, or respects your opinion? I can only answer this for myself. When I matter, I feel engaged, energized, responsible and invested in the relationships I am building. Letting me know I matter makes me care—it makes me want to spend more time and more energy in that place and with those people.

And how do we behave when we matter? For most of us, having other people value us sends a challenge to us to behave with integrity, to behave as if we are worthy of mattering. For myself, when I know I matter, I take great care to act respectfully. I seek to draw in more people—to let others know that they, too, matter. When I know I matter, I try to make my actions transparent—to let others into my thought processes and allow them to affect them. I make myself more vulnerable, and often become more productive as a result.

Most of us matter a lot. We're used to it. Whether because of our own hard work and choices that have led us to earn the respect of others, or because of accidents of birth or upbringing that gave us access to the dominant power structures in our society, we matter. Hopefully, this is a place where we matter more than we don't, and that is expressed to us often and in useful ways.

Marginality: Sometimes, despite our best efforts or our clearest logic, we are marginalized. Each of us has had the experience of knowing that what we do just doesn't matter. What are the signals of marginality? How do we know we're being ignored, or lied to, or circumvented or just plain disrespected? How do we know when we are being defined as "other," as marginal, or as just not enough, be it "not good enough for the choir," "not old enough to have had real experiences," or "not man enough for the job."

For some, this takes the form of having our experiences and feelings constantly questioned. What is said sounds like "that's not the way things really work here," "oh, you just interpreted that wrong—we didn't mean it that way," or "let's go back to the way things used to be." What is heard is quite different. What is heard is "your experience is not normal," "your perception doesn't really matter—what matters is our intent," or "things were so much better when we didn't have to worry about your perspective." For some, it takes the form of subtle—or not so subtle—messages that our input is just not needed.

For me, I know I am being marginalized when people ignore or talk past my questions, when people question my understanding of issues I've worked for a long time on, when people lie to me.

How does this marginalization make us feel? How do you feel when this happens to you? I will admit that I feel angry, shut out, tense and sad. I tune out of discussions when I feel that people don't want to hear what I

have to say. Letting me know I don't matter sends me the message that I might as well not even try. I might as well not even care, and I certainly shouldn't open myself to further hurt from those who seek to shut me out.

Marginalization also triggers certain behaviors, behaviors that are just as counter-productive as mattering behaviors are productive. Here again, I can only speak for myself. I've been known to, in a pique of irritation at being marginalized, actually be counter-productive to the goals of a group or meeting. There, I admit it—I'm not always able to put aside my own hurt feelings and work for the good of a group that doesn't care about me. Am I the only one? I didn't think so.

We can imagine, then, how people who deal with marginalization every day might come to behave; the things that people come to believe and feel when faced with constant marginalization just because of who they are. We can look to James Baldwin, or to Michael Jackson, to learn some of these things. We know that marginalization eats away at one's soul, at one's very core, leaving a hollow ghost or an empty shell behind.

When I first stood before you as your candidate for minister over two years ago, I spoke of creating what I called a "ministry of mattering."

Here, on the cusp of plunging into our third year together as minister and congregation, I'm fairly sure you understood what I meant. So I think it's time to ask us to go further.

This year, let's also create a ministry of belonging.

No matter what identities people come here with, let them know that here—within the walls of this Fellowship—they have a place where they belong. No one should feel the isolation expressed by James Baldwin, no one should be called a "freak" like Michael Jackson was by so many in his life and after his death.

This ministry of belonging relates to what I did with the other part of my July—the part not spent in Southern California. It was spent at SUUSI, the Southeast Unitarian Universalist Summer Institute, at which about 1000 people gather for a week of multigenerational UU fun and exploration.

It was at SUUSI, you see, that I first realized my own call to the ministry. Working with youth there, I was part of the staff that helped create an environment in which teenagers could be exactly who they were, and where they could be loved for exactly who they were.

I didn't understand until I saw it in action how radical a notion this is in a society where teenagers are generally told—time and again—that there is something wrong with them, where even the most normal youth question whether they're normal, whether they fit in.

At SUUSI, we flipped that on its head, and it made a dramatic difference in the lives of those young people.

There and then, I realized that the work of being a minister meant making such a place for people of all ages.

Let's do it together. Stay tuned for more in the coming year.

In the meantime, let's let everyone know that here, they belong. Here, they matter. Here, they can be themselves. Here, in this place made holy by those who come seeking refuge from the hurts of the world, in this place made sacred by the community that comes together within its walls. May it be so, and blessed be.