The New Jim Crow
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In the mid-19th century in America, a movement to abolish slavery began to gain strength and numbers. Some of our Unitarian and Universalist forbears were part of that movement. They worked to convince their own fellow religious liberals; they wrote for newspapers and magazines, they spoke in public and in private. They knew the price of ending this appalling institution of dehumanizing cruelty would be very high, but for them as for so many of the Abolitionists, their faith demanded no less.

In the late 1950s and the 1960s, the Civil Rights movement to end the legalized segregation and discrimination that had been nicknamed the "Jim Crow" system grew into a great nonviolent power for justice. Some of our Unitarian Universalist predecessors, and some who are still with us, joined in that movement. Like this congregation's first called minister Aron Gilmartin, they answered Dr. King's call to Selma, they wrote and spoke, they went South to work in voter registration efforts. They argued, sometimes, with some fellow UUs, who thought they were moving too fast, risking too much, being too political. They kept on, as did so many others in that movement which was so powerfully grounded in spiritual commitment, because their faith demanded no less.

Suppose you knew, right now, this morning, that a racially discriminatory system exists throughout the United States that sweeps huge numbers of poor people of color, mostly young men, into a criminal justice system that has been carefully tuned to deny them justice, get them into prison, and exercise control over them for the rest of their lives, disenfranchising them, marginalizing them economically, and subjecting them to daily, unbelievable indignities. Suppose you knew that a vast network of laws and customs has built up around that system to protect it and keep people from even questioning it. What would our faith demand?

That's the situation that Michelle Alexander says we are in today, in her book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness.* The book has been adopted as the Unitarian Universalist Association's "common read" for this year, a book as many of us as possible can read and engage with together. Alexander argues, with detailed documentation, that the War on Drugs declared by President Ronald Reagan in 1982 and continued with enthusiasm by every Administration since, has spawned a system of mass incarceration that has replaced the Jim Crow racial segregation laws as a new system of social control aimed at poor people of color, especially young African American men. This is the "New Jim Crow," and she believes it has created a permanent under-caste in contemporary America that is every bit as racially defined and intentional as in the old legalized system of segregation.

A group made up of members of our Racial Justice Committee, Immigration Task Force, and a book club of church friends is forming to sponsor this Common Read project here at MDUUC, and I read the book recently myself. There's no way to do Michelle Alexander's careful study and analysis justice in a worship service—and this isn't a lecture. So I won't try to prove her point for her; I strongly encourage you to read the book. Let me sketch out just a few key ideas:

The War on Drugs at its beginning used the language of "law and order" and "getting tough on crime," because politicians in both major parties found that language got votes among rural and urban working-class white people. Huge investments were made in the form of grants, subsidies, and access to military-style equipment to encourage local law enforcement agencies to participate, and most of those departments aimed their new weapons and techniques squarely at poor urban communities of color.

The result is that huge numbers of young men of color have been swept into the criminal justice system. Changes to the judicial process have turned minor drug offenses into felonies, and created huge incentives to accept plea-bargains. After release, most of these ex-offenders are not allowed to vote in many states, are denied benefits such as food stamps, public housing, or unemployment insurance, are barred from many jobs and can be legally discriminated against for most others. Every aspect of their life is subject to supervision, and any slip can land them back in prison.

The numbers Alexander cites from numerous reports are staggering: In 1985, 41,000 people were in prison or jail for drug offenses; today, that number is approximately five hundred thousand. More than 31 million people have been arrested for drug offenses since the drug war began. Three-fourths of the people imprisoned for drug offenses have been black or Latino, even though whites are just as likely to use and sell illegal drugs. In urban communities of color, typically more than half and sometimes as many as 80% of African American men are either incarcerated or under law-enforcement supervision. She writes, "More African-American adults are under correctional control today—in prison or jail, on probation or parole—than were enslaved in 1850."

There's a warning about this book from Cornel West, in the Foreword he wrote for the book's current edition: "Once you read it," he says, "you have crossed the Rubicon and there is no return to sleepwalking. You are now awakened to a dark and ugly reality that has been in place for decades. . . ."

He's not kidding. This book is hard to take in. Everyone I've spoken with who has read it talked about seeing something we really don't want to be true. Not everyone is convinced of Alexander's argument. Each one has found ourselves acknowledging some especially challenging point: Recognizing that the U.S. justice system we are so proud of has been more than complicit in creating the new racial under-caste. Realizing that we could easily imagine

people we know, maybe people we grew up with, deciding to plead guilty to a crime rather than risk a trial and a longer sentence, even if they are innocent. Struggling with the feeling that crime has to have serious consequences, and simultaneously with the harshness of the Drug War's tactics and punishments, and its racially unequal prosecution. Feeling the sadness of not being surprised. Being angry at the awful familiarity of the whole thing.

There's so much to talk about in this book, and I truly hope we'll have a lot of folks join in reading it. What I want to focus on now, though, is what Alexander says is the common root which made slavery, and Jim Crow, and now mass incarceration possible, and which we must address if we want to do anything about it. She writes: "If the movement . . . to end mass incarceration does not meaningfully address the racial divisions and resentments that gave rise to mass incarceration, and if it fails to cultivate an ethic of genuine care, compassion, and concern for every human being—of every class, race, and nationality—within our nation's borders, including poor whites . . . the collapse of mass incarceration will not mean the death of racial caste in America. Inevitably a new system of racialized social control will emerge. . . ."

The War on Drugs got started while I was looking, and I didn't see what was really going on. I didn't notice what the policies were really accomplishing, because I didn't really think about the people who were most likely to be affected. I thought abstractly about drugs, and the ineffectiveness of prohibition, and the need for treatment and rehabilitation instead of punishment. The coded rhetoric about "crime in the streets," and how much worse crack was than powder cocaine slipped right past me. It didn't involve anybody I knew—so I didn't pay that much attention.

That's what Alexander says made the institutions of mass incarceration possible: So many people, especially white liberal people who would have fiercely resisted any explicit attempt to create a system of racialized social control, just didn't see it coming, because we didn't know the people who were going to be disproportionately affected. They weren't us. That's the blind spot, the crime of innocence that James Baldwin accuses his country of: We are indifferent to the fate of the drug war's target population, because we don't really think of them as real human beings. As us.

That same blind spot is being exploited for votes again in the incarceration of undocumented immigrants that has become such a feature of Department of Immigration and Customs Enforcement practice in recent years. Our Immigration Task Force has been working with groups who offer compassionate support and advocacy for ICE detainees here in Contra Costa County, and again one of the most formidable barriers to changing these policies is that so many Americans don't really know who the detainees are; we do not think of them as "us."

If we "cross the Rubicon," as Cornel West says, if we decide that we can't allow the appalling system of mass incarceration to continue unchallenged, we will need to remember that the

antidote is living in our religious and spiritual heritage. One of the most basic shared truths Unitarian Universalists have affirmed for generations is that there is no "them;" there is only "us." One undivided human family, all from the same source, all sharing the same fate. That may sound like a flip, "love is all you need" kind of response, totally inadequate to address something as huge, complex, and deeply entrenched as the system of mass incarceration. It's a lot more complicated than that.

If our blindness to one another, that terrible innocence, is what allows systems like the War on Drugs to have such disfiguring effects on our human family, then any work to dismantle it and heal the wounds it has caused has to come directly from abandoning that willful blindness. "We are not free until they are free," Baldwin writes to his nephew, and he's talking about us. Yet truly seeing each other, embracing our human kinship, does not mean imagining in some fuzzy way that we're all alike. We are *different*, and we are children of one family.

What I hope our children take away from the story Leslie shared today is that Deena, whose daddy broke the law and is in jail, is not some strange or scary kind of person; she is "us." She could be any of the children here; she could be anyone they know from school. She's a child; something in her life is very hard, and maybe different from ours, yet we care about her and we hope she'll be happy one day. That's not too hard, really, when it's in a story with simple drawings. It's harder, for *us*, the parents, when it's the real kid next door, or the real child they share a table with at school.

It's harder, if the call to respect the inherent worth and dignity of every person means learning to respect people we have learned to fear and to pity. It's harder if the call to justice, equity, and compassion means working side by side with people who actually have done something wrong, something our life experience tells us they deserved to be punished for. That's what it might mean, if we want to join in ending the racial caste system of mass incarceration. It's harder than feeling sad for a little girl. And it's what our faith asks of us. Nothing less will do.

The good news is that there is no power on earth greater than our ability to look at another human being and see them, not as just like us, but as different—and precious. When we can do that—there is nothing that can keep us from raising our voice in the joyful justice song of our one undivided human family. And when our life flows on in that endless song, anything is possible.