

# WEAVING

**Jen Deaderick**

Originally Delivered at the  
Unitarian Society of Hartford, CT,  
Fall, 2001

“There ought to be a room in this house to swear in. It’s dangerous to repress an emotion like that.” –Mark Twain

In the fall of 2001, I attended the World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerances, held by the United Nations Human Rights Commission in Durban, South Africa. I attended on behalf of the Unitarian Universalist United Nations Office. During the course of the conference, the five delegates from the Unitarian Universalist Association stayed in the same B&B. In addition to myself, we were: the Rev. Olivia Holmes, Director of International Relations at the UUA, the Rev. Mel Hoover, Director of Faith in Action at the UUA, Amy Owen, a woman from Wisconsin new to Unitarian Universalism who is getting her Master’s Degree in conflict resolution, and Kathy Shreedar, head of the Holdeen India Program.

Every morning we would breakfast together on the tiled patio of our stunning B&B, with views of the ocean stretching before us. One morning, the sun was shining. This was unusual. South Africa was just coming out of Winter, so days were often dark and cold and drizzly. I decided to sit out for a while and watch the Weaver birds.

At the back of the patio was a tree absolutely filled with the nests of Weaver birds, hanging down, clinging to the branches.

Now, the Weaver birds weave their nests. They pluck long palm fronds and weave them together with their beaks, poking and pulling. It’s a fascinating process to watch, and I spent some time at that. The birds were flying around, lemon yellow feathers gleaming, zipping back and forth between the palms and the nests, frantic. These were the male birds, you see, and spring was springing. Soon, the female birds would be coming by, to check out the nests. If the males wanted to mate, they’d better weave, but fast. So the beaks pulled and poked, pulled and poked.

Clearly, this was how humans had learned to weave baskets, from sitting and watching this.

You see a lot of baskets in South African cities. Not in use, but for sale. Women sit on blankets on the sidewalk, or on the boardwalk by the ocean, and they sell baskets. Baskets made from reeds, and fronds and electrical wire, of different colors and shapes and patterns.

But you wouldn’t see a basket for sale that looked like one of the weaver birds’ nests. While the nests are naturally beautiful, they would be considered sub-par if made by a human. They are slightly misshapen, and the fronds stick out every which way. The female weavers don’t care, they just want a safe place for their eggs. As humans, however, we took the weaving concept and ran with it. Not only did we need to improve the design, creating

baskets that were so tight they could hold water, or evenly meshed enough to sort grains, but we needed the baskets to look good. We added patterns, and figures, we recorded stories, right in the weave of the basket.

The human need for order.

And I use the word “need” very intentionally. Without order, the human race would not have survived. We have few natural defenses, and our ability to organize has allowed us the opportunity to create safety and stability for ourselves.

Now, it is a strange coincidence that the first request for my sermon about the World Conference Against Racism should come from Hartford. Before I left for the conference, I was thinking a lot about the Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, which was written in this very town.

At the very beginning of the book, Huck has decided to return to the Widow Douglas’ house, after running away before, because Tom says Huck can’t be in his “band of robbers” unless he goes back. But life with the Widow is hard for Huck:

“She put me in them new clothes again, and I couldn’t do nothing but sweat and sweat, and feel all cramped up. Well, then, the old thing commenced again. The widow rung a bell for supper, and you had to come to time. When you got to the table you couldn’t go right to eating, but you had to wait for the widow to tuck down her head and grumble a little over the victuals, though there warn’t really anything the matter with them – that is, nothing only everything was cooked by itself. In a barrel of odds and ends it is different; things get mixed up, and the juice kind of swaps around, and the things go better.”

Huck becomes more comfortable with the widow’s way, but then his father returns and turns it all upside down again. Which happens a lot in Huck’s life. Which is why he’s not like Tom, confident, cocky Tom. Tom’s childhood doesn’t get rocked by these things. He creates the Band of Robbers for a little excitement, but Huck ends up disappointed because all of the robbing and crime is in Tom’s imagination. Except for the occasional turnip.

Then when Huck escapes from his father, after the courts have failed him and he ends up in the custody of this man who is least safe for him to be with, he becomes dependant on stealing, and disguises and trickery. This Civilization is all well and good for the Widow, and for Tom and Judge Thatcher and Miss Watson , but it doesn’t seem to be working for Huck. Nor is it working for Jim, who has been a slave since birth, and has escaped as well, and is heading down the river with Huck. Yet he and Huck have long conversations about the morality of what they are doing. The rules of the civilization they observe from the outside tug at them, even while they see the flaws. They also know it would be safer and easier to be on the inside. Jim, however, has no chance of being on the inside. Only Huck does. Huck can renounce his wildness and be admitted, because he can be White. Huckleberry Finn. He’s Irish. This book was written in 1885, but is taking place around the late 1840’s. A time when the Irish in America were being courted by the slave states as allies. The Irish were considered as low as dogs by the English, but now in America they were going to get to be part of the club. The White club.

One of the parts of our human need for order is our need for social order. One of the things that was made most clear at the Conference is that every society has not only a bottom rung, reserved for a particular group of people, but also a whole middle order, kept mollified about their varying lack of power by the reassurance that they are at least not at the bottom rung.

In this country, some of us get to be White. Which is primarily defined as being “not Black” There are rules you have to follow to be in this...is it too heavy handed to say “band of robbers?” You can’t have rhythm, you can’t dance right, you have to clap on the beat. You have to try to forget where you came from.

When I think about being poor and white in America society, I think of the Jets in West Side Story. We first get introduced to them as the “greatest” “When you’re a Jet you’re the top cat in town, you’re the gold medal kid with the heavyweight crown.” Later, we discover that their “mothers all are junkies, their fathers all are drunks.” Naturally, they’re punks. They are “problems” in a system that bounces them around from attempted solution to attempted solution, until it finally gives up on them. “Krupke we’ve got troubles of our own”

They’re failing at their Whiteness. The clothes aren’t feeling right

The New York Times, before the Conference even started, dismissed it in its editorial pages as useless because it was going to be “messy”

Well, I nearly died when I saw that. Messy??? Of course! How could any attempt to address Racism as a global issue not be messy? Racism is messy. The order we have falsely imposed on humanity has created a mess. Not that messy has to be bad. The nests of the weaver birds are messy. But they are strong. They can hold and cushion the eggs.

The basket that we’ve created lets a lot of eggs drop. And the conference, as a basket, had a lot of holes in it. A lot of wonderful connections were made, and work was done. My African-American friends who attended were giddy about what they had experienced. Africans and descendants of Africans came together in joyous and important discussion. The Dalits, also known as the “untouchable” caste in India, were not officially recognized in the documents, but they made their existence known worldwide. Hundreds of groups had a similar experience.

But the Jews. Well. My friend Sybil Kessler, who attended for Hadassah, the women’s Zionist organization, wrote in her piece about the conference: “I learned in Durban that it is lonely to be the one ruining the party...” Jewish groups were shouted down, literature praising Hitler was distributed outside the gates of the conference. My friend Barry Joseph, of Global Kids, also Jewish wrote in his piece about the conference about the fear he felt there, which as a lifelong New Yorker, was an unaccustomed fear.

Do we always need to have outsiders? Can we build a basket to hold all the eggs? Let’s not worry right now if the basket is messy, let’s just make it strong. Then we can make it beautiful.

The United Nations has woven a basket. It ain’t pretty, it ain’t all that strong yet. But it’s a beginning. Let’s make the basket hold water. Now, in the midst of this international crisis,

let us turn to the UN as we never have before, and integrate it into our lives. This is the moment to seize, to make our country a full part of the world.