

Kwanzaa
UUFP

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Harbari Gani. You say: Nia, because it's the fifth day of Kwanzaa. We've just spoken Swahili to each other. But a word of caution is in order. One should be careful when saying words in a foreign language. You should make sure you know the meaning of what you are saying.

I asked you what's the news? You replied, dutifully I might add, "a sense of purpose." In the celebration of Kwanzaa, each day has a particular focus, or principle. And each principle has a particular action associated with that principle. I'll come back to the action associated with Nia in a bit. But first I want to elaborate on Kwanzaa and then tie it to Unitarian Universalism and *our lived* lives, here, together.

This year represents the 46th celebration of Kwanzaa, which was first introduced in southern California in 1966. It was the time of the civil rights movement and the Black Power movement. I was 14 and just beginning to pay attention to the world around me. It was about the time I had the inevitable arguments with parents about what was appropriate and acceptable. If not then, then shortly there-after, I had a fro out to here and was espousing views that made my parents uncomfortable.

It was a time I began to embrace some version of Black nationalism and the need to celebrate my blackness, in defiance of the cultural norms that denigrated African-American heritage and culture. Those were important years in my life, a time when I began to develop a world view that I carry to this day. Time, however, has a way of smoothing rough edges.

Dr Maulana Karenga, born Ronald Everett in 1941, the youngest of fourteen children must have had his world view affected by his family who had to have worked hard as farmers in Parsonsburg Maryland. He was a very good student and became a professor in the department of Black Studies at California State University, Long Beach and the director of the Kawaida Institute for Pan African Studies in Los Angeles. .

After meeting Malcolm X, he became more political and sought to create a celebration that honored ancient African cultures and to inspire African Americans. He sought to encourage reflection and study of what he termed African traditions and (no doubt, some of you will particularly appreciate this) "common humanist principles." He created Kwanzaa, from the Swahili phrase "matunda ya kwanza," which means "first fruits of the harvest. I understand he added an extra "A" at the end so he would have 7 letters, one for each of his children.

On each of the seven day celebration a different candle is lit. Each represents a principle important to sustaining family and community. The seven principles are: **Umoja** (*oo-MOH-ja*), *meaning* unity. The action associated with umoja is: building a community that holds together. **Kujichagulia** (*koo-jee-cha-goo-LEE-yah*) means self-determination and the action is speaking for yourself and making choices that benefit the community. **Ujima** (*oo-JEE-mah*) means collective work and responsibility and the action is helping others within the community.

On the fourth day, the principle is **Ujamaa** (*oo-JAH-ma*) meaning cooperative economics. The action associated with ujamaa is supporting businesses that care about the community. Next is **Nia** (*nee-AH*) meaning a sense of purpose. The action: setting goals that benefit the community.

Kuumba (*koo-OOM-bah*) means creativity and the action is making the community better and more beautiful. Lastly, **Imani** (*ee-MAH-nee*) is the seventh principle, meaning faith. The action associated with faith is believing that a better world can be created for communities now and in the future.

When you remove the Swahili words, these seven principles seem very much to be grounded in a humanist perspective. Perhaps for that reason, these are things, I imagine, we could all sign up to support. But, like our Unitarian Universalist principles, a mere belief in the goodness of these principles is ultimately of little value. It's the action that counts.

The kinara, a candelabra of sorts, holds seven candles. Three are green and placed on the left, the three on the right are red and the one in the middle is black, representing the color of his people. The green symbolizes the fertile earth of Africa. The red represents the blood that has been shed in a quest for freedom. These three colors have long been popular in various parts of Africa. An additional reason Karenga chose these colors was to tie the celebration to Marcus Garvey, seeking to remind us of the Black Nationalist movement he led.

On the evening of the sixth day, December 31st, which just so happens to be New Year's Eve in the popular culture, a feast is had. Families gather in their homes, churches or community centers to celebrate the "fruits of the harvest." Traditional African dishes are served and dishes using ingredients that have come to these shores from the mother land. Such as sweet potatoes, sesame seeds, collard greens, peanuts or ground-nuts as they're sometimes called, and spicy sauces.

The unity cup is an important symbol in the celebration of Kwanzaa. Celebrants drink from this cup in honor of their African ancestors. Before drinking, each person says "harambee," or "let's pull together." Generally, on the last day, January 1st, educational and cultural gifts are given to the children.

I have chosen to not conduct a Kwanzaa celebration with you, although I understand you have done them in the past. I did conduct a Kwanzaa service when I was at All Souls in DC, as they have a significant percentage of Black members. For me, it feels inappropriate for us to engage in a celebration designed to honor African Heritage with a congregation that is so predominately white. I feel the same way about leading a celebration of Passover, although I have and would be happy to participate in such celebration. I believe it is important to be sensitive and to honor the right of others to have their particular celebrations...join in if invited but allow people the right to their celebrations.

That said, I think there is something of significance to this celebration. As noted by Karenga himself, this is fundamentally a celebration of "common humanist principles." As such, these principles are very UU-ish. There is a focus on individual responsibility and a recognition of the importance of the role of the family in our collective well being. And maybe most important of all, there is an unswerving dedication to what best serves the community as a whole and it's future stability.

Nia, the fifth day of Kwanzaa is focused on a sense of purpose. The action that's identified to support that sense of purpose is "to make our collective vocation the building and developing of our community in order to restore our people to their traditional greatness." Now, Unitarian Universalist may have never lost their traditional sense of greatness, so we can set that piece to the side.

And bring our full attention to what Nia calls us to do. First, it calls us to have a purpose, an identifiable purpose. We are asked to not just hang around, we are asked to not just be a member of the community, or even to simply *be* a community. We are asked to have a purpose.

We are asked not only to have a purpose. We are called "to make our collective vocation the building and developing of our community." Lets break that down into its pieces. Karenga tells us that "common humanist principles" calls us to have a collective vocation.

Vocation has to do with work. The dictionary gives us three definitions: a particular occupation, business, or profession; a calling. 2. a strong impulse or inclination to follow a particular activity or career. 3. a divine call to God's service, a religious vocation. He's telling us that we need to work together. Not just come together but to work together.

In addition, he tells us that our purpose, in working together, is the building of and developing of our community. He says that our purpose in being in community, our vocation of community, is to focus on the building and developing of, our community. And we are to do this so that we can restore our people to their rightful, their traditional, greatness.

I've said it before and I genuinely believe it: Unitarian Universalism has embedded in its foundational values and principles, all that is required to build the beloved community. Contained in our very fiber, is the opportunity for greatness. Greatness not simply to gratify our individual and collective egos, but greatness that serves and supports a better world.

And I've said this too, before, and you will no doubt hear it again, and again and again. Our values and principles alone are simply not strong enough to bring about a beloved community. Beliefs alone are never strong enough to create change.

It takes effort, work, it needs to be a vocation, a calling. It requires that we take action, that we *do* what's required to live our principles, to live them in demonstrable ways. To honor each other's inherent worth and dignity, to allow ourselves to be supported by, to be encouraged by others does not come easily. Spiritual growth takes effort, it does not come for free, it is not just given to us. We have to put in the time and we have to put in the effort.

Let us take Unitarian Universalism seriously. Let it work its mysterious magic on us and through us. Let us be the vessels of a new beginning, laying out an alternative path to life. Let us be the builders of a beloved community. And let us have the dirty hands and calluses, the bruised egos and the joy, to prove we've done the work.

May this be our new year's resolution. Happy new year. Harambee.