

KWANZAA: A Time For Reflection

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Unitarian Universalist Congregation of
Central Nassau
December 28, 2003

CALL TO WORSHIP (William F. Schulz)

Come into this place of peace and let its silence heal your spirit;
Come into this place of memory and let its history warm your soul;
Come into this place of prophecy and power
and let its vision change your heart.

OFFERING (Arthur Foote II)

Freely have we received of gifts that minister to our needs of body and spirit.
Gladly we bring to our church and its wide concerns a portion of this bounty. I
invite our ushers to come forward to collect today's offering for the service of our
church.

LIGHTING OF THE MUSHUMAA SABA (Kwanzaa Candles) in the KINARA (Candle Holder)

The Kwanzaa candles are seven—three red, a black, and three green. The black candle is a celebration of being black, of the unique and special qualities each person brings to the whole family or community. It is a candle of the present, of today. The green candles are vision candles—candles of hopes, dreams, and promises for the future. The red candles are struggle candles, past candles, candles the color of blood, candles the color of courage. All seven candles help African Americans to remember a long struggle against injustice, against unfairness, and to promise each other that they will continue to work together against injustice. (Gail Forsyth-Vail, DRE, Andover, MA)

KUCHUQUZA TENA NA KUTOA AHADI TENA: Reassessment and Recommitment

This is an opportunity for us to reflect on our own lives and recommit to improving ourselves and making our community a better place to live and, in our case, worship in. Please turn to reading # 463 in the back of your hymnal. Let us read in unison:

My heart is moved by all I cannot save;
So much has been destroyed
I have to cast my lot with those who, age after age,
Perversely, with no extraordinary power, reconstitute the world.

INVOKING THE KIKOMBE CHA UMOJA (Unity Cup)

This cup symbolizes unity and is used to pour Tambiko (libations)

We acknowledge our ancestors who come from all over the world by pouring libations in the direction of each of the four winds. In so doing, we are reminded that we are one family. In so doing, we promote the spirit of oneness.

SERMON KWANZAA: A Time For Reflection

Kwanzaa is an observance and a celebration of African American heritage that celebrates family, community, and culture. It began here in this country and is now celebrated by millions of people of African descent across this nation and across the world. It is now also celebrated by people from all over the world who honor the heritage and traditions of our African ancestors. Today we as a congregation observe and celebrate Kwanzaa. The period of celebration is December 26th through January 1st. Kwanzaa is based on the “Nguzo Saba,” a value system comprised of seven principles that Mike shared with us earlier. In case you wondered, I should tell you that each of the seven days corresponds with a principle in consecutive order and that is why we honor “Ujima” today.

When asked to lead a Kwanzaa service I thought about its relevance to our religious movement and to our community. I know that Kwanzaa is new to many of us. I am just beginning to understand it. I had to do a lot of research to understand what this holiday is all about. It is curious—a holiday without any religious, political, or heroic ties. And yet, I know that Kwanzaa has much to teach us, whether we are African American, or not. We honor the struggle for justice by speaking a history, the story of a people that is not told often enough. Personally, I am pleased that we honor Kwanzaa today. In so doing, we begin to reach out to the community of those who celebrate Kwanzaa each year. It is a step in the direction toward understanding each other, accepting each other, and respecting each other. After embarking on that course, we can better turn our attention toward the work of saving our world.

One thing I want to say before we look more closely at Kwanzaa—the matter of cultural appropriation. I want you to know that Kwanzaa is still new to me too. I embrace Kwanzaa, and have added it to my list of special days. But I do not presume to get everything right. It is a new tradition for me. So, in observing and honoring Kwanzaa, together we will do the best we can. We understand that it simply cannot be exactly as it was designed. Nor should it be, for it was designed for a particular people who experienced great injustices. Unfortunately, this country and indeed this world have not yet sorted itself out in terms of balancing the scales of justice. And so the struggle for justice and equality continues. And many of us are involved in this struggle in our demand for justice and peace. Today we here at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Central Nassau honor this tradition. It is easy to feel that it is not really ours—that it belongs only

to a particular people. I say, though it was created for African Americans, it really belongs to all people. To one human family. That is why I now honor the tradition of Kwanzaa and embrace it as my own. That is why we today observe and honor Kwanzaa.

A little background (from many sources, including the Internet):

Kwanzaa was created by Dr. Maulana Ron Karenga in 1966 on the campus of the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA), where Dr. Karenga was Chair of the Black Studies Department.

Dr. Karenga is a leading theorist of the Pan African Movement, which advocates and encourages the uniting in practice and spirit of the diverse peoples of the African Diaspora. Dr. Karenga created the holiday during a time when African Americans had embarked on a search for cultural identity and re-definition—themes that are not unfamiliar to Unitarian Universalists.

In the immediate aftermath of the Civil Rights struggle, African Americans confirmed that, while a part of the larger American society, African Americans had a distinct culture within the American experience. Kwanzaa is one of the vehicles that was created to celebrate the uniqueness of that distinction. Dr. Karenga felt that Christmas is a European construct that combines the Celtic Pagan Yule figures and symbols of Kris Kringle, Saint Nicklaus, and the Evergreen with the birth of the Christian religious figure Jesus. Historically these same concepts had been foisted upon Africans through the institutions of slavery and colonialism. Kwanzaa was created to serve as a Pan-African alternative to Christmas that would serve to foster unity among African peoples.

Kiswahili was chosen as the language of Kwanzaa because it was developed by the people of the ancient empire of Ghana as a trading language to help promote communication between the diverse tongues and cultures doing business in the region. It is a living symbol of Pan-African unity. Kwanzaa gets its name from the Kiswahili phrase: “Matunda Ya Kwanzaa,” loosely translated as “The First Fruits,” and is a modern adaptation of the ceremonial harvest celebrations that were observed by ancient African societies through the African continent. Those you might be familiar with include: Egyptians; Nubians; Ashanti; Akan; Yoruba; Thonga; Swazi; Matabele; Lovedu; Gaa and the Zulu societies. Very modest gift giving is encouraged in contrast to the commerciality of Christmas.

The seven basic symbols of Kwanzaa are based on the harvest:

- The Mkeeka (Place Mat)
- The Kinara (Candle Holder)
- The Mazao (Fruit and Vegetables)
- The Vibunzi (Ears of Corn)
- Zawadi (Gifts)

Kikombe Cha Umoja (Unity Cup)
Mishumaa Saba (Seven Candles)

The Mkeeka, the place mat, symbolizes tradition and history and represents the foundation of knowledge and understanding. It is made of straw to express our humility before The Creator as well as our connections to the Earth.

The Kinara, the candleholder, is usually made of wood, and is placed on or near the Mkeeka. It symbolizes the people of Continental Africa, our parent people. It also symbolizes the ancestry of our people, and our principles.

The Mazao, fruit and vegetables, are usually placed in a wooden or earthen bowl and represent the fruits and reward of productive labor.

The Vibunzi, the ears of corn, represent children. Children are acknowledged as the future of the community and ensure that the community will survive.

The Kikombe Cha Umoja, the unity cup, symbolizes unity and is used to pour libation in the direction of the four winds thus acknowledging the ancestors.

The Mishumaa Saba are the seven candles that are placed in the Kinara. Three red candles, three green candles and one black candle represent the Bendera Ya Taifa which is the Pan African Liberation Flag developed by the Honorable Marcus Garvey.

The candles are placed in the Kinara from left to right as follows: 3 red candles symbolizing the blood that has been shed by African peoples as a result of slavery, colonialism, and liberation struggles. 1 black candle placed in the middle, and representational of the Africans, symbolizing unity. 3 green candles represent the sanctity and richness of the earth.

With the exception of the middle black candle which is lit on the first day of Kwanzaa, they are to be lit from left to right, one each corresponding day.

I believe that we should live our Unitarian Universalist principles throughout the year as a matter of course. When we look at them closely we find that the Nguzo Saba, the principles of Kwanzaa, are very Unitarian Universalist in nature. We cannot have too many good principles to live by and so I invite you to join me in beginning to incorporate these seven principles into our daily lives. It is all about building community.

Traditionally, we would end our celebration with “Harambee” which means “let’s all pull together.” This is part of the legacy that was left by Dr. Jomo Kenyatta and the Mau Mau movement which resulted in the liberation of Kenya from the British colonialists. Dr. Kenyatta became the first President of Kenya as a result of this rebellion. But, while we want to know these stories, we are not going to dwell on

them today. That will be a part of the studies we hope to embark on in the areas of economic and racial justice.

But we are where we are at this moment in time. Although I know that there is still much work to be done as individuals, and as a congregation, I also know that this Kwanzaa service is one important step in the right direction. It is a step in our journey towards promoting the kind of understanding and harmony that might lead to justice and peace, beginning right here in this community. It is a step towards our vision of being a welcoming and diverse congregation. For now, this learning stage that we find ourselves on affords us a place where our diversity is celebrated, respected, enjoyed, and appreciated. It really began with our “in-reach,” looking at ourselves, seeing who we are, as well as knowing who we wish to become. This effort will certainly impact our outreach to our neighboring communities and to our larger world.

For that, I am pleased. And I am proud.

Let's All Pull Together. Harambee!

TAMASHI LA TUTAONANA: The Farewell Statement

I know that we have neighbors all around us, who celebrate this holiday. This is a time when they take pride in their past and plan for their future. I am sure that folks who passed our corner right here at Stewart Avenue and Nassau Blvd. saw our sign about this service and now know that there is a congregation that wants to learn. Wants to stretch in understanding. Wants to bridge the gaps.

Perhaps we will worship together in greater numbers next year. Perhaps we will have that feast sometime. It is something to work towards as we reach out. This is a congregation that I believe cares enough to put some “real” time into the larger community. Let's get busy...

HARAMBEE! AND WORDS OF PARTING

Peace and Blessings upon each of us,
known and unknown,
both within and without these walls.
Let's all pull together.
HARAMBEE!