READING from Michelle Alexander, author of The New Jim Crow

Ever since Barack Obama lifted his right hand and took his oath of office, pledging to serve the United States as its forty-fourth president, ordinary people and their leaders around the globe have been celebrating our nation's "triumph over race." Obama's election has been touted as the final nail in the coffin of Jim Crow, the bookend placed on the history of racial caste in America.

Obama's mere presence in the Oval Office is offered as proof that "the land of the free" has finally made good on its promise of equality. There's an implicit yet undeniable message embedded in his appearance on the world stage: this is what freedom looks like; this is what democracy can do for you. If you are poor, marginalized, or relegated to an inferior caste, there is hope for you. Trust us. Trust our rules, laws, customs, and wars. You, too, can get to the promised land.

Perhaps greater lies have been told in the past century, but they can be counted on one hand. Racial caste is alive and well in America. (March 9, 2010)

“Strength to Love”
Rev. Bruce Southworth

In celebrating the birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr., I want to consider the announced title for his sermon for the Sunday after his assassination on April 4, 1968 in Memphis, Tennessee.

But before that, amid all the new talk and possible action about gun control in our country, I want to tell you what I found out about the rifle used by James Earl Ray to kill Dr. King. He shot from a rooming-house window overlooking the pool of the Lorraine Motel, less than a hundred yards from the balcony where King had stood.

The rifle was a Remington Game Master Model 760, popular as a hunting weapon, and was similar to the rifle Ray had used in the army. These rifles were made from 1952 to 1981 – 1.03 million of them. They have a slide pump action and use bullets of varying kinds. Ray used a 150 grain, hollow-point bullet "which exerts 2,370 foot-pounds of force at 100 yards" – sufficient for killing a deer. Remington wrote about
its fastest non-automatic big game rifle: “Accuracy is there: crisp trigger and precision rifling, helping you put that buck in the freezer.” Fans claim accuracy within an inch and quarter at 100 yards. James Earl Ray had added a telescopic sight to add to his precision.

On a chat forum, an aficionado of this weapon writes,

“The Remington 760 is a fine rifle…. Another states, “Excellent for deer and moose, and it should do the job nicely on just about anything you’d care to hunt.”

“[Use] 110 grains for small varmints up to 220 grains for Grizzly bear. You’ll probably want something in the 150 grain range [that’s what James Earl Ray used] for large whitetail deer and something in the 180 grain range for moose.”

And another: “A well-maintained used Rem 760… will provide you with, easily, a 300+ yard deer, or 180 yard black bear rifle.”

Then another: “I have all three, AR’s, AK’s and a Remington pump. All 3 will do the job they were designed for. You have to figure out exactly what you need either of them to do and go from there. The AR would be the most accurate, the AK would be the most reliable, but an old pump Rem. is …” and then the post disappears.

Another poster writes on a chat forum: “They… strike me as ‘zombie insurance.’

What’s not to like:

-Pump Action
-10 round capacity with the aftermarket Brownells mags
-A "Real" caliber
-Near Un-Ban-Able platform”

One last poster:

… super accurate with the peep dad put on it. I think it would make a great battle rifle as is. It’s light, accurate, they are cheap to buy, I prooley will pick up another magazine or two. I would like to get a extended magazine for it. Does anyone make one? One other thing. It’s not a swat looking type weapon but gives up little to one. Its a innocent looking popular deer type rifle. Wont draw attention to you like a AR or AK and others would. That alone could mean something some day.

So, lots of thoughts are out there across the country about the Remington Game Master Model 760…

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Going back to Dr. King: For the Sunday after his assassination, his sermon never delivered was titled, “Why America May Go To Hell.” For a year and more, he had shifted – expanded – his message beyond the struggle for civil rights in our nation. He had declared that our nation faced the triple evils of “racism, materialism, and militarism.” He spoke of US imperialism and economic exploitation. He was speaking about the need for a human rights movement larger than civil rights, and about the World House, where we all share in the abundance of Life and where we make real the Beloved Community.

In Memphis that day he was killed, Dr. King was witnessing for economic justice as he participated in a labor strike with the sanitation workers.

Our society, he had sadly declared, was a “sick society.” With regard to, “Why America May Go to Hell,” “King did not think that America ought to go to hell, but rather that it might go to hell owing to its economic injustice, cultural decay and political paralysis.” (“Dr. King Weeps From His Grave,” Cornel West, NY Times Op-Ed, August 25, 2011)

The reality of our American gun culture, NRA lobbying, popular sentiment for some measures of registration, licensing and training, and President Obama’s leadership – all these may or may not lead to a change, but I have no doubt that Dr. King would join in the “fierce urgency of now” and in seeking profound changes.

This morning, in thinking about Dr. King’s vision, I have been encouraged to share something about Michelle Alexander’s best-seller The New Jim Crow. Some of our members read and discussed it last year as a common-read. The Unitarian Universalist Association this year is suggesting the same for all our congregations with a study guide added.

The subtitle is Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness. Initially 3000 hardbacks were published three years ago. As a paperback, more than 175,000 copies are in print, and it has been a NY Times best-seller for ten months in paperback.

Michelle Alexander, an African American, is a former project Director of the Racial Justice Project in the Northern California division of the American Civil Liberties Union. She now teaches law at Ohio State University, a graduate of Vanderbilt University and Stanford Law School.

She reports on the prison and criminal justice system in our nation, which she describes as having created a new racial caste system. Our prisons, with mass, disproportionate incarceration of black males, have become a systemic, oppressive social control mechanism that creates even more crime (p. 8) and has failed to put an end to the War on Drugs while creating in effect a new Jim Crow… the legalized racial
segregation and subjugation that plagued our nation for so long. She methodically addresses popular myths and misconceptions, questions things such as affirmative action, so-called “color-blindness” and a post-racial society, and invites discussion toward seeing what is all about us.

Dr. King’s radical call for social revolution anchors her vision.

Michelle Alexander reports,

- “In less than 30 years the US [prison] … population exploded from around 300,000 to more than 2 million, with drug convictions accounting for the majority of the increase.” (p. 6)

- A disproportionate numbers of inmates are black and Hispanic, despite whites being a substantial majority of drug users, but far less likely to be arrested, tried, and convicted or imprisoned. (pp. 98-99)

- “Nearly one-third of black men are likely to spend time in prison at some point, only to find themselves falling into permanent second-class citizenship after they get out,” frequently denied job training, food stamps, public housing, and student loans and excluded from voting and jury duty. (“Drug Policy as Race Policy: Best Seller Galvanizes the Debate,” Jennifer Schuessler, NY Times, March 6, 2012)

- Crime rates are declining and prison costs sky-rocketing. (“Drug Policy as Race Policy: Best Seller Galvanizes the Debate,” Jennifer Schuessler, NY Times, March 6, 2012)

- “The United States imprisons a larger percentage of its black population than South Africa did at the heart of apartheid.” (p. 6)

- Our incarceration rate is greater than Russia, China, and Iran.

- More blacks are now “under correctional control... – in prison or jail, on probation, or parole – than were enslaved in 1850, ten years before the Civil War began.” (p. 180)

The War on Drugs: Michelle Alexander reminds us about Alberta Spruill.

... a fifty-seven year-old city worker from Harlem, is among the fallen. On May 16, 2003, a dozen New York City police officers stormed her apartment building on a no-knock warrant, acting on a tip from a confidential informant who told them a convicted felon was selling drugs
on the sixth floor. The informant had actually been in jail at the time he said he’d bought drugs in the apartment, and the target of the raid had been arrested four days before, but the officers didn’t check and didn’t even interview the building superintendent. The only resident in the building was Alberta, described by friends as a “devout church goer.” Before entering, police deployed a flash-bang grenade, resulting in a blinding, deafening explosion. Alberta Spruill went into cardiac arrest and died two days later. The death was ruled a homicide but no one was indicted. (pp. 75-76)

Hearings were held. Dozens of black and Latino victims reported similar encounters with SWAT teams; not much changed. That year, 40,000 SWAT attacks were undertaken across the country. Community policing seemed to turn to military policing.

Darryl Pickney in the New York Review of Books observes, “The decision to wage the drug war primarily in black and brown communities rather than white ones and to target African Americans but not whites on freeways and train stations has had precisely the same effect as the literacy and poll taxes of an earlier era. A facially race-neutral system of laws has operated to create a racial caste system. ("Invisible Black America," Darryl Pinckney, New York Review of Books, March 10, 2011)

Studies show all races use drugs and reveal that young white men are most likely to be using and selling drugs though African-American men are locked up in prison systems at a rate 20-50 times greater than that of white men. (p. 7)

Racial preference for arresting blacks is widespread. Most of us are familiar with the New York Police Department’s “stop and frisk” policies with blacks clearly subject to unwarranted, harassing treatment; courts are now upholding challenges to these practices.

Emma Faye Stewart’s story begins Alexander’s chapter on The Color of Justice.

Imagine you are Emma Faye Stewart, a thirty-year-old, single African American mother of two who was arrested as part of a drug sweep in Hearne, Texas. All but one of the people arrested were African Americans. You are innocent. After a week in jail, you have no one to care for your two small children and are eager to get home. Your court-appointed attorney urges you to plead guilty to a drug distribution charge, saying the prosecutor has offered probation. You refuse steadfastly proclaiming your innocence. Finally, after almost a month in jail, you decide to plead guilty so you can return home to your children. Unwilling to risk a trial and years of imprisonment, you are sentenced to ten year
probation and ordered to pay $1000 in fines, as well as court and probation costs. You are also now branded a drug felon. You are no longer eligible for food stamps; you may be discriminated against in employment; you cannot vote for at least twelve years, and you are about to be evicted from public housing. Once homeless, your children will be taken from you and put in foster care.

A judge eventually dismisses all cases against the defendants who did not plead guilty. At trial, the judge finds that the entire sweep was based on the testimony of a single informant who lied to the prosecution. You, however, are still a drug felon, homeless and desperate to regain custody of your children…. (p. 97)

“Alexander cites a 2002 study conducted in Seattle that found that the police ignored the open-air activities of white drug dealers and went after black crack dealers instead.” (“Invisible Black America,” Darryl Pinckney, New York Review of Books, March 10, 2011)

The prison-industrial complex with its vast costs is financially crippling, as well as morally appalling. “Chris Christie, the Republican governor of New Jersey, in a speech in June, called the drug war ‘a failure.’ Warehousing a prisoner for a year in his state costs $49,000, he said, compared to $24,000 for inpatient treatment.” (“The War We Aren’t Debating,” Michael Massing, New York Review of Books, November 6, 2012)

“Sen. James Webb (of Virginia) noted that the United States houses one fourth of the world's prisoners. ‘With so many of our citizens in prison... there are only two possibilities,’ he observed. ‘Either we are home to the most evil people on earth or we are doing something ... vastly counterproductive.’” (A New Jim Crow? The tragedy of America’s jails, Ellis Cose, Newsweek, Jan 27, 2010, 7:00 PM EST)

The racial history in our nation is horrific. And court action and laws have proven to be insufficient as change/reform agents. In the nine years following the Brown v. Board of Education Supreme Court decision in 1954, integration did not proceed with any speed. Not one black child attended an integrated school in South Carolina, Alabama or Mississippi. (p. 235) Alexander reminds us that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 required a mass social movement; just what we need again to address the deepest racial structures that still abound and the New Jim Crow. (p. 265)

Dr. King spoke of a revolution in values and clearly seeing what is going on. “Our only hope today lies in our ability to recapture the revolutionary spirit and go out into a sometimes-hostile world declaring eternal hostility to poverty, racism, and militarism. With this powerful commitment we shall boldly challenge the status quo and unjust mores….”
Throughout her powerful book, Michelle Alexander also speaks of revolutionary vision, one in which the underclass of every hue is also included, acknowledged and respected as among those abused by our economic system and wounded by racism.

These ethical imperatives are grounded in the human Spirit, and the spiritual imperatives that guide our lives. Dr. King spoke of the "network of mutuality." Jesus called the rich man a fool not because of his riches. He was a fool because he did not realize his dependence on others.

King observed, "In a real sense, all life is interrelated. All... are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.... I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be. This is the interrelated structure of reality... The rich man tragically failed to recognize this." (Strength to Love, King, p. 70)

King goes on to say that the rich man was a fool because "he had an unconscious feeling that he was the Creator, not a creature." (p. 71)

If he were speaking theologically, King would have spoken about continuous revelation - the sacred appears in this world even now, a living sacred spirit in moments of Love and Justice.

Something miraculous can happen when children, leading a march in the face of lines of police with attack dogs and fire hoses, march onward, and the lines of police part down the middle to stand aside to the left and to the right, even when ordered to release the dogs and to turn on the hoses.

He would have spoken about Co-creativity with the divine, our partnership, which is our freedom. "Beyond time is... Spirit, beyond life is Life." (Strength to Love, King, p. 95) Segregation, he said, was a result of "spiritual ignorance" and so is the new Jim Crow.

Strength to love. How do we get all the way from here – from the midnight of the soul – to morning? Misplaced faith won't do. Idolatry of self, or material goods, or of science, or political or economic theories won't do.

I take strength from Dr. King, his example, his faith, his failings, his humanity, his strength to love, his being an ordinary person. A faith in tender-hearted and tough-minded women and men. A faith in the transformed nonconformists and the creatively maladjusted. A faith in the light shining within – a divine light, even in one's oppressors. A faith in our partnership with the Spirit of Life and Love and Justice. God's way, Life's way.
Michelle Alexander invokes a call for All of Us as One, but not to ignorantly embrace color-blindness…. “A commitment to color consciousness … places faith in our capacity as humans to show care and concern for others” (The New Jim Crow, p. 243) for who they are – how society treats those who vary, so wonderfully diverse. She advocates that we “celebrate what is beautiful about our distinct cultures and histories, even as we blend and evolve.” (p. 244)

She says, “That was King’s dream – a society that is capable of seeing each of us, as we are, with love. That is a goal worth fighting for.” (p. 244)

Dr. King never got to preach that sermon on “Why America May Go to Hell.” I imagine that he would have offered prophetic critique and Life-giving hope.

The moral ground of the Beloved Community that King continually affirmed includes the conviction that amid any differences, “we are all made of the same basic stuff… molded in the same divine image…. In a real sense, all life is interrelated. The agony of the poor impoverishes the rich; the betterment of the poor enriches the rich. We are inevitably our brother’s [and sister’s] keeper; [we are one family.] Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”

His summons:

Now let us begin. Now let us rededicate ourselves to the long and bitter – but beautiful – struggle for a new world. This is the calling of the children of God, and our brothers and sisters wait eagerly for our response. Shall we say the odds are too great? Shall we tell them the struggle is too hard? Will our message be that the forces of American life militate against our arrival as full persons, and we send our deepest regrets? Or will there be another message, of longing, of hope, of solidarity with their yearnings, of commitment to their cause, whatever the cost? The choice is ours, and though we might prefer it otherwise we must choose in this crucial moment of human history.” [April 4, 1967 speaking at The Riverside Church, NYC]

The abolition of the New Jim Crow awaits our awakening. As Dr. King declared, “We are now faced with the fact that tomorrow is today. We are confronted by the fierce urgency of now….”