

WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE TO TELL ME WE DON'T MATTER?

A Sermon offered by Shauntee Daniels, Worship Leader

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Unitarian Universalist Church of Annapolis

“It’s impossible to talking anything resembling discretion or judgement to a colored woman. They are all essentially child-like, and even hard experience does not teach them anything.”
Henry Louis Mencken, the Sage of Baltimore

It’s taken black women a long time to realize our value and our worth. Because for generations, white men, white women and few misguided black men, thought they knew what was best for us. We Black women were never given permission or allowed to speak or think for ourselves.

Since I began working with the Baltimore National Heritage Area more than ten years ago, there was always discussion of the organization, the moving and becoming stewards of the H.L. Mencken House. It seemed like a good idea to me at the time. After all the Baltimore National Heritage Area’s mission is to preserve and promote Baltimore’s historic and cultural resources for tourism and educational programming. I really like what I do because Baltimore is rich in history, it’s gritty, it’s has small town charm with a big metropolitan heart. And it always provides fodder for a UU sermon

The three story rowhouse is located at 1524 Hollins Street. If you know Baltimore, you’ll know where I’m speaking of. If you don’t let me give you some background. Hollins Market –one of the eight historic public markets established during the early 19th century. The Mencken’s house sits across from Union Square on a quiet block of other three story rowhouse. The Hollins Market area is an average Baltimore neighborhood that has seen better times. Mencken lived in this house for much of his life. He moved to downtown during his brief marriage Sara Powell Haardt. When Sara died after only five years of blissful marriage. He returned to 1524. Where he resided with his oldest brother August the second until his death in 1956. During his life in Baltimore he authored thirty plus books, was an editor of several well-known newspapers including the Baltimore Sun. He had no more than a high

school diploma. He was and still is revered for his command of the English language. He was direct and didn’t pull any punches. He claimed to be agnostic and found politicians and organized religion to be a complete waste, both would be the downfall of civilized nations. For movie buffs, his character was portrayed by Gene Kelly in the movie based on the book of the same title, *“Inherit the Wind”*, with Spencer Tracy. The dramatization of the Scopes Monkey trial...where a teacher is on trial for teaching the evolution of creation, Darwin’s theory of evolution. There’s no mystery why H.L. Mencken was interested in covering the story for the Baltimore Sun. It’s my understanding, that many UU’s and journalist, have a strong admiration for the Mencken. His strong opinions on free-speech, science and rational thought—though that might be questionable at times.

More about the house, so the house was once a museum in a collection of many house museums throughout Baltimore. Then the city leased the house to the University of Maryland for student housing. After that arrangement ended, the house sat derelict and abandoned for several years. Then, the city received a healthy endowment from Mr. Max Hency, a wealthy benefactor living in Hawaii. At the bequest of Mr. Hency, the house was to be restored and open to the public, for scholars and students wishing to be enlighten by visiting the place where Mencken once lived and wrote his prose.

Let me tie this all up and give you the rub. I knew nothing of Mr. Henry Louis Mencken. Maybe I had forgot, or they didn’t bother to refer to him in my History or English courses. He wouldn’t be the first not to be mentioned, especially if the person was controversial, black or woman.

So, as it goes, we were negotiating our lease to become occupants of the house. Every time I mentioned our office would be moving to the H.L. Mencken House, I would get the strangest looks from folks. One of my co-workers was even

appalled we would even consider such a deal. After months of the snide comments and side glances. I began to dig deeper into what could be so disturbing for me to work in this house. After all we would be the stewards of the house, reduced overhead, means more money to run our cultural preservation and education programs. How bad could it be! What was I missing? Then my colleague dropped a book on my desk, he said this might help you understand. The book...The Diary of H.L. Mencken. As a woman of color, it was soon obvious to me. Mencken took free speech to the limits without regard for anyone. He had a very, very complicated dark side. Taken from the pages of his personal diary. "The diaries express Mencken as an anti-Semite, a paternalistic racist, a mean-spirited critic of colleagues who considered him a friend, and a Germanophile who never denounced Hitler but ranted against Americans participation in World War II. From the very same diary came these horrific thoughts in black and white, (no pun intended). "deeply ingrained conviction that black people were by their very nature inferior to white," **Mencken wrote in his diary: "It's impossible to talking anything resembling discretion or judgement to a colored woman. They are all essentially child-like, and even hard experience does not teach them anything."**

Oh NO! let me catch my breath! I was going conduct the heritage area business from 1524 Hollins Street. This was not a legacy I wanted to preserve. This was someone who clearly thought I lacked the intelligence, to do no more than cleaning, cooking, serving and comforting him following the stroke that left him speechless and partially paralyzed. It was pretty darn clear why I got snide looks and comments.

Oh yes, this 19th century admired writer and pundit laid the groundwork for the racism that permeates our society today. The Libertarian Magazine Reason recently publish an article stating "Mencken Speakers rarely mention Mencken's name at their meetings, except for random recitals his earliest works: *The Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche* (1908), whom the alt-right see as a great visionary, and from *Men Versus the Man: A Correspondence between Rives La Monte, Socialist, and H. L. Mencken, Individualist* (1910), debate in letters.

Mencken explores Social Darwinism, eugenics, heredity, and race. In the most offensive passage, Mencken defines "the American negro" as "a low-caste man," and that the "superior white race will be fifty generations ahead of him." If you really examine the writings of Mencken, you're almost subject to emotional whiplash. Mencken wrote in 1910, " **The Negro brain**, is not fitted for the higher forms of mental effort." This from the same man who probably did more to help black writers, such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Langston Hughes, and James Weldon Johnson—get into mainstream print than any other white magazine editor of his day. Mencken wrote blistering attacks on the horror of lynching, the injustice of segregation, the stupidity of the Ku Klux Klan. And yet, even in his wistful memoir "Happy Days" he drops race bombs: casually implying that it was implausible that a cop could hit "a bad nigger too hard." But then, in 1948, just two weeks before the debilitating stroke. His final column in The Sun championed the cause of black and white tennis players who had been arrested in Druid Hill Park for playing on segregated courts, calling the park board's ban on interracial play "irrational and nefarious" and lamenting that "the spirit of the Georgia cracker" could be found in Maryland. We've come a long way since Mencken his first stroke on a typewriter. But his acidic words still influence our society today. Now nearly sixty years later white nationalist Richard Spencer and fellow enthusiasts, embodies Mencken ideology.

Next year we will celebrate 100 years that women had the right to vote. White suffragettes rebuffed including black women in the movement. African American abolitionist, suffragist Francis Watkins Harper noted that she could not rely on white women to prioritize the concerns of their nonwhite sisters. "... in 1865 the December issue of the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*. explained that white women had been staunch supporters of securing "freedom for the Negro." However, in light of emancipation. [SLIDE #3] White suffragette Elizabeth Cady Stanton quipped the Negro is no longer "lowest in the scale of being," and "it becomes a serious question whether we had better stand aside and see 'Sambo' walk into the

kingdom first.” Mencken wasn’t lonely at the top, he had plenty of company.

Dr. Kimberlee Williams Crenshaw, notes in “Mapping the Margins: “Feminist efforts to politicize experiences of women and antiracist efforts to politicize experiences of people of color’ have frequently proceeded as though the issues and experiences they each detail occur on mutually exclusive terrains. Al-though racism and sexism readily intersect in the lives of real people, they seldom do in feminist and antiracist practices. And so, when the practices expound identity as “woman” or “person of color” as an either/or proposition, ...(She goes on to say): “Because of their intersectional identity as both women and people of color within discourses that are shaped to respond to one or the other, the interests and experiences of women of color are frequently marginalized within both.”

How long should black women be ignored and undervalued. Oh sure, society will make room for us at the table when they need to count numbers. As a black, lesbian woman. I am not one of these identities, I am all three. You cannot count one without counting the other. In the scheme of things, ironically the Black Lives Matter movement was founded by three young women of color; To address the killing of young black men by police.

We have been so focused on doing the right things standing solidarity against police brutality against young black men. But who dares to think the blue brotherhood would brutalize and victimize black women? Are we still the lowest rung of society? Are we not valued? [SLIDE #4] We were only worthy to be mammies, right on up to the Civil Rights movement. The only jobs we were considered qualified to do is to be domestics taking care of white folks’ children, cleaning their homes. Cooking and serving food to the white middle and upper class. As they stood with their cocktails speaking of the condition of the Negro. Practically invisible. Afterall we had no discernment for the serious. Are you talking about me? I’m in the room!

My life is complicated. Me and others like me walk several intersecting paths. Does anyone know how hard it is to carry my baggage? We don’t need

sympathy. We want empathy, inclusion, recognition, and to be heard, to have our multiple identities realized within the constructs of BLACK LIVES MATTER.

I can’t imagine what it must be like to lose a child to gun violence. The pain must be horrific to bear. I think of Michael Brown, Freddy Grey and Tamir Rice. We know their names; and many others. Black women being shot by police...why aren’t we calling out their names? Do they not count?

Gun violence in our schools, churches, synagogues and malls have distracted us.

We are not saying HER [SLIDE #5] name. Do we not see these black lives being stolen from their mothers’ arms, too? When I heard about Sandra Bland, I often think that could have been me!

We as UUs are encouraged to see the whole picture. You don’t get to pick and choose which causes, people and gender you stand with and for. We stand for all Black lives. **I get it’s** hard. It’s hard for us too, standing in so many spaces of identity. I am required to be vigilant and aware that this black woman’s body has much to bear. And so should you if you are standing with me. Every time you hear a young black male was murdered by the blue brotherhood... more than likely there’s a woman lying nearby. My point is not to say that the lives of young black men don’t matter; of course, they do. But we know their names and we say their names in a litany but black women, and transgender women are dying too; and it’s as if they never existed. Remember their names, Say Her Name.

We’re schedule to move into the house at 1524 Hollins street in October. I have decided to lean in, embrace the move. The funds the heritage area will save in rent will be invested into our outreach and educational programs. The Mencken legacy will benefit the boys and girls of Baltimore Get a load of this, my office will occupy the room where Mencken died. When the dust settles, I plan to sit down at my desk with a strong cup of UU coffee in Mencken’s former bedroom, the family crest still remains embossed in the plaster. I will speak to the ghost of Mencken. And I’ll say Henry Louis Mencken, your pin was mighty, your words like acid and the actions of those like you permeate our society in 2019.

] I sort of wish you were alive today; I'd be curious to know what your opinions might be? But from this very desk, I'm going to make a **LIAR** of you and those who think like you. I'm going to do my best to help make the city you loved, be worthy of living in and visiting. I'm going to make sure that black women are celebrated and remembered. I'm going make it personal my mission to remember the names of the women, transgendered and men that have lost their lives to racism and bigotry.

Yes Mr. Mencken, hard experience has taught me EVERYTHING.