

## **Revelations from the Spectrophotometer**

### **April 18, 2010**

I love rainbows and have always been intrigued by the melding of their colors. Rainbows can be seen and never captured. We all learned that at a very early age. I am sure that most of us at one time went hunting for that elusive pot of gold at the end. Each time we moved closer the rainbow moved farther ahead. We couldn't catch it and never will, but it was kind of fun trying.

As we got a bit older we stopped attempting to reach its end, and saw something else, its color and beauty, the way it varied in intensity and size. I loved the positive, biblical symbolism of the rainbow. Catholics, Protestants and Jews everywhere, even Unitarian Universalists can't help but think of the story of Noah and the Ark " and envision that weary old man peering out of a wooden porthole, bobbing along a flooded planet in wooden homemade craft filled with all the creatures of the earth, minus the termites, of course, who must have found their own mode of transportation or Noah never would have gotten to dry land.

Finally Noah hears ... "I shall set my bow in the cloud and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth." Scientists and artists can tell you about the formation and color composition of the rainbow, and we have accepted the fact we can never catch and keep one of nature's most marvelous creations. But we wonder at its beauty and can't help but feel a bit uplifted by its presence, no matter where our theology has led.

The rainbow's colors and all the hundreds of shades, visible and invisible to the naked eye, are found in all the pigments of human skin; in all the colors an artist can mix, on the living creatures of the earth and in the splendor of the universe. It is something we seldom think about, but this observation, for me, became more than conjecture one day while mixing paint at the hardware store, where I worked.

We had just installed a new color matching computer, just put any color you wanted to duplicate into the light sensor and it would print out the formula for mixing that exact color. The spectrophotometer was very precise in its measurements as it was calibrated to 1/96th of an ounce of pigment.

Earlier in the day, a customer had asked me to mix for her a shade of beige that was original and unique. She couldn't find one she liked in the color samples, so I asked her to come back later while I experimented with some alternatives. Beige, I thought, how about Caucasian skin color and I stuck my arm into the sensor! I was so intrigued by the printout that I recruited a few other employees as guinea pigs when the boss wasn't looking. Every printout was different, on very dark skin or light skin, on the Irish Immigrant who was working from a visa as the store's receiver, the young African American teenager working through the summer break from college, the father of 3 from Thailand, and the Mexican cashier who had just moved into town. I coerced them all into becoming a part of my experiment and all of the individual printouts recorded

varying degrees of exactly the same three colors no matter what color skin was passed under the sensors ... Lamp Black, Yellow oxide and Red oxide, mixed in a white tint base!

It was true and I could prove it! We all came from the same rainbow, we are all one, yet we are all different. Later on that afternoon, the customer left the store very happily, with her own mix of beige, from the color of her own arm. In all probability, that exact color would never be duplicated again, it was her unique shade, to be displayed on her living room wall, yet it was also very much a part of the universal spectrum of colors that are embedded in each and everyone of us.

How did it happen that we missed this fact, that we chose to isolate and sort ourselves by colors and ethnic groups that ignored the common ground we all share? After spending 6 months in Belfast Northern Ireland in 1982 I had my answer. A group of six Catholic and six Protestants theology students left for Belfast to create a joint recreational center for catholic and protestant kids at the junction of the Falls Road and the Ormeau Road where the two sectors met.

We were told it would not work. And it didn't. It was there that we discovered 3 year olds throwing rocks and insults at each other; where fully armed soldiers carried guns in the streets to keep the sectors separated and where neighbors closed their doors to one another. We soon discovered that the ongoing 600 year war would never end until the children were brought up without the prejudices of their parents. We had tried to make a difference and when we left, maybe converting a few to the idea that things could change, we still had the enormous job of confronting the damage the adults had done to their children generation after generation.

There is no more greater religious service that we can perform here for our own children as members and friends of this congregation, than to consciously and deliberately educate them to the realities of the human rainbow...understanding that change begins with us, by confronting our own biases and prejudices about race creed and color. We cannot deny that all have biases in some form or another.

Today racism still rages in every community in many forms and it is our obligation to be a part of the solution, through education and organizations such as Derricks, but first being willing to open our minds to our own personal misconceptions and misunderstandings.

My own insights into the complexities of racism began with a machine that refracts color into categories, hues of like rays of light that came together as one network of the same shades of Lamp Black, Yellow oxide and Red oxide, mixed in a white tint base! It told me that we truly are one...we just have to learn to believe it!

It is no better said than in the poem, *First they came*, attributed to Pastor Martin Niemoller, following the [Nazi](#) rise to power and the purging of their chosen targets, group after group.

"THEY CAME FIRST for the Communists,  
and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Communist.

THEN THEY CAME for the Jews,  
and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew.

THEN THEY CAME for the trade unionists,  
and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a trade unionist.

THEN THEY CAME for the Catholics,  
and I didn't speak up because I was a Protestant.

THEN THEY CAME for me  
and by that time no one was left to speak up."

May our voices be heard...our love expressed, our children enlightened and may our  
church remain a place where justice lives...

So be it

Amen

Rev Holly Baylies© 2010

First UU, Syracuse, NY