

The New Jim Crow

Mass Incarceration in the Age of **Color-**
by Michelle Alexander **blindness**



Format

1 x 90' session
(or 2 x 45')

3 x 90' session



Introduction

[*The New Jim Crow*](#): *Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* by Michelle Alexander (The New Press) has been selected as the 2012-13 Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) Common Read. Alexander, an attorney who is a civil rights advocate, a litigator, and a professor at Ohio State University's Moritz College of Law, asserts that crime-fighting policies and systems in the United States, such as the "war on drugs" and the incarceration system, disproportionately and intentionally affect people of color. She describes multifaceted, lifelong discrimination and disenfranchisement that affect people who are branded "felon."

Michelle Alexander's stated goal is to begin a long-overdue conversation about a racialized caste system in the United States that has manipulated fear and taken advantage of indifference. This discussion guide provides a framework for responding to Alexander's compelling and unsettling book. Readers are invited to share their reactions and reflections in a safe and trusting community. Discussion groups will explore concrete ways to respond to Alexander's call for the spiritual work of building a movement to dismantle a system that has tainted us politically, legally, economically, culturally, and, above all morally. Participants engage with heart as well as mind as they look at assumptions, intentions, and ways of doing racial justice work.

This discussion guide is adaptable for congregational, cluster, or district programming for adults of all ages and life stages, for campus groups or young adult groups, or for cross-generational groups. Two formats are offered:

- A single, 90-minute session
 - * Can be expanded for a two-hour session
 - * Can be offered in two parts to accommodate a 45-minute Sunday forum format
- Three, 90-minute sessions
 - * Can each be extended to two-hour sessions by lengthening the amount of time for conversation, discussion, and sharing

Single Session

Goals

- Provide a framework for responding to Alexander's book
- Invite readers to share their reactions and reflections in a safe and trusting community
- Explore Alexander's call for undertaking the spiritual work of building a movement to dismantle the new Jim Crow and consider how we might begin this work

Materials

- Chalice, candle and lighter or LED battery-operated candle
- Newsprint, markers, and tape
- Copy of *Singing the Living Tradition*, the UUA hymnbook

Preparation

- Write these covenant points on newsprint, but do not post:
 - We agree to speak from our own experiences and perspectives.
 - We agree to listen respectfully to the experiences and perspectives of other people.
 - We agree to pay attention to the group process, making sure that everyone has the opportunity to speak and to listen.
 - We agree to use this time as an opportunity for ethical, religious, and spiritual discernment, rather than as a time to debate politics or public policy.

Description

Chalice Lighting/Opening Reading (5 minutes)

Light the chalice and share the poem, "Telling," by Laura Hersey, used with permission. For more information about Laura's poetry and other writing, go to her [website](#):

What you risk telling your story:

You will bore them.

Your voice will break, your ink will
spill and stain your coat.

No one will understand, their eyes
become fences.
You will park yourself forever
on the outside, your differentness once
and for all revealed, dangerous,
the names you give to yourself
will become epithets.
Your happiness will be called
bravery, denial.
Your sadness will justify their pity.
Your fear will magnify their fears.
Everything you say will prove something about
their god, or their economic system.
Your feelings, that change day
to day, kaleidoscopic,
will freeze in place,
brand you forever,
justify anything they decide to do
with you.
Those with power can afford
to tell their story
or not.
Those without power
risk everything to tell their story
and must.
Someone, somewhere
will hear your story and decide to fight,
to live and refuse compromise.
Someone else will tell
her own story,
risking everything.

Creating a Covenant (10 minutes)

Post the covenant points you have written on newsprint. Propose them as guidelines. Ask if any points need to be clarified, added, or amended. Note changes on newsprint. When the covenant is complete, invite participants to voice or signal agreement.

Introductions and First Impressions (15 minutes)

Tell participants you will invite each person to introduce themselves and take a sentence or two to speak of one idea, impression, or question that was provoked by reading the book. Allow silence for two or three minutes for people to find their words. Then, invite each person in turn to speak briefly uninterrupted, asking them to name only a single point. Mention that for this conversation and any others, each person reserves the right to pass.

Discussion (15 minutes)

Read from Alexander's introduction:

What has changed since the collapse of Jim Crow has less to do with the basic structure of our society than the language we use to justify it. In the era of colorblindness, it is no longer socially permissible to use race, explicitly, as a justification for discrimination, exclusion, and social contempt. So, we don't. Rather than rely on race, we use our criminal justice system to label people of color "criminals" and then engage in all the practices we supposedly left behind. Today it is perfectly legal to discriminate against criminals in nearly all the ways that it was once legal to discriminate against African Americans. Once you're labeled a felon, the old forms of discrimination- employment discrimination, housing discrimination, denial of the right to vote, denial of the educational opportunity, denial of food stamps and other public benefits, and exclusion from jury service- are suddenly legal.

Lead a discussion using these questions:

- How does what Michelle Alexander presents fit with your understanding, your experience, or what you previously knew about race and racial control in the United States?
- What pieces of information – or ways of looking at information – were new to you?
- What insights did you gain from the book?
- Do any of the objections you can imagine being raised to her thesis mirror thoughts and ideas that you personally hold?

(Optional break for 45 minute forums. If you are doing this in two sessions, begin the second session with a summary of the discussion from the first.)

Sharing (30 minutes)

Invite participants to share some of the feelings evoked by this knowledge. Ask, “Has the evidence Alexander presents of a racialized caste system, a new Jim Crow in the United States, given you new perspective? Does her work confirm the existence of a system of which you were already aware? What stories or experiences, recent or perhaps long in the past, have come to the fore for you? When have you been silent, or turned away, from evidence of this system?” Allow 2 or 3 minutes for participants to consider their responses, and then ask them to share, one at a time, without interruption. If there is time, invite participants to respond to what others have shared. Remind them that the group has covenanted to speak from personal experience and perspectives, rather than challenging the validity of another’s experiences and perspectives.

Conversation (10 minutes)

Invite the group to consider how this conversation can be continued in your congregation, group, community, or family. What partners in your local community might you work with to bring information about the new Jim Crow to public attention? What contribution might you, your congregation, your group, or your community make to building the movement Alexander

visions is necessary to dismantle this racialized system of social control? Present a range of possible actions:

- Invite others to read *the New Jim Crow* and organize more discussion groups, perhaps including those from other faith communities and civic or community organizations.
- Explore the resources on [New Jim Crow page](#) on uua.org. Watch Michelle Alexander's address to General Assembly 2012 and/or arrange for a showing in your congregation or group.
- Find out which partners in your local community you might work with to bring information about the new Jim Crow to public attention and begin to build partnerships. Consider scheduling a time to view the 75-minute General Assembly 2012 workshop, [Partnering Congregations and Community Organizations](#), for inspiration and how-to information developing and sustaining partnerships for justice.
- Find out which organizations and faith communities in your area are serving and supporting young people of color and building coalitions with those groups and partner in their work.
- Join advocacy efforts for ending mass incarceration (including three Strikes legislation and mandatory minimum drug laws). Find out more about those efforts through the [Standing on the Side of Love](#) website. (This [April 2012 blog post](#) presents an example of an action that brought together several community partners.)
- Start a prison ministry program in your congregation. Read [Uncommon Community: One Congregation's Work with Prisoners](#), by John Speer, (Skinner, 2008) for ideas on how to begin.
- Explore Restorative Justice as a paradigm for social change and healing justice based on right relationship. A number of Unitarian Universalists congregations are working with this model, which they call Building Beloved Community. Find out more about this model at the [Restorative Justice Colorado](#) website.
- Purchase [The New Jim Crow study guide](#) published by the Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference, which represents a cross section of progressive African American faith

leaders and their congregations in the United States. Use the chapter by chapter guide to engage more fully the questions raised by Alexander's book.

- Organize a group to [read and discuss](#) the 2011-2012 Common Read book, [Acts of Faith](#), to learn more about involving youth and young adults in interfaith racial justice work.

Closing (5 minutes)

Extinguish the chalice and share Reading 579, "The Limits of Tyrants," by Frederick Douglass.

Three Sessions

Goals

- Provide a framework for responding to Alexander's book
- Invite readers to share their reactions and reflections in a safe and trusting community
- Explore Alexander's call for undertaking the spiritual work of building a movement to dismantle the new Jim Crow and consider how we might begin this work

Session 1

Materials

- Chalice, candle and lighter or LED battery-operated candle
- Newsprint, markers, and tape
- Copy of *Singing the Living Tradition*, the UUA hymnbook
- Optional: Computer or digital projector and speakers

Preparation

- Write these covenant points on newsprint, but do not post:
 - We agree to speak from our own experiences and perspectives.
 - We agree to listen respectfully to the experiences and perspectives of other people.
 - We agree to pay attention to the group process, making sure that everyone has the opportunity to speak and to listen.
 - We agree to use this time as an opportunity for ethical, religious, and spiritual discernment, rather than as a time to debate politics or public policy.
- Optional: Download [video](#) (4:54) of Michelle Alexander presenting the thesis of *The New Jim Crow* while speaking at General Assembly 2012. Queue the clip and test the equipment.

Description

Chalice Lighting/Opening Reading (5 minutes)

Light the chalice and share the poem, "Telling," by Laura Hersey, used with permission. For more information about Laura's poetry and other writing, go to her [website](#):

What you risk telling your story:

You will bore them.

Your voice will break, your ink will
spill and stain your coat.

No one will understand, their eyes
become fences.

You will park yourself forever
on the outside, your differentness once
and for all revealed, dangerous,
the names you give to yourself
will become epithets.

Your happiness will be called
bravery, denial.

Your sadness will justify their pity.

Your fear will magnify their fears.

Everything you say will prove something about
their god, or their economic system.

Your feelings, that change day
to day, kaleidoscopic,
will freeze in place,
brand you forever,
justify anything they decide to do
with you.

Those with power can afford
to tell their story
or not.

Those without power
risk everything to tell their story
and must.

Someone, somewhere
will hear your story and decide to fight,
to live and refuse compromise.
Someone else will tell
her own story,
risking everything.

Creating a Covenant (10 minutes)

Post the covenant points you have written on newsprint. Propose them as guidelines. Ask if any points need to be clarified, added, or amended. Note changes on newsprint. When the covenant is complete, invite participants to voice or signal agreement.

Introductions and First Impressions (20 minutes)

Tell participants you will invite each person to introduce themselves and take a sentence or two to speak of one idea, impression, or question that was provoked by reading the book. Allow silence for two or three minutes for people to find their words. Then, invite each person in turn to speak briefly uninterrupted, asking them to name only a single point. Mention that for this conversation and any others, each person reserves the right to pass.

Sharing (35 minutes)

Share the video of Alexander speaking at General Assembly 2012 or read from Alexander's introduction to the book:

What has changed since the collapse of Jim Crow has less to do with the basic structure of our society than the language we use to justify it. In the era of colorblindness, it is no longer socially permissible to use race, explicitly, as a justification for discrimination, exclusion, and social contempt. So, we don't. Rather than rely on race, we use our criminal justice system to label people of color "criminals" and then engage in all the practices we supposedly left behind. Today it is perfectly legal to discriminate against criminals in nearly all the ways that it was once legal to discriminate against African Americans. Once you're

labeled a felon, the old forms of discrimination- employment discrimination, housing discrimination, denial of the right to vote, denial of the educational opportunity, denial of food stamps and other public benefits, and exclusion from jury service- are suddenly legal.

Invite participants to react to Alexander's thesis and to share some of the feelings and thoughts this new knowledge evokes in them. Ask:

- What pieces of information – or ways of looking at information – were new to you? What insights have you gained?
- What stories or experiences, recent or perhaps long in the past, have come to the fore for you?

Allow 2 or 3 minutes for participants to consider their responses, and then ask them to share, one at a time, without interruption. If there is time, invite participants to respond to what others have shared. Remind them that the group has covenanted to speak from personal experience and perspectives, rather than challenging the validity of another's experiences and perspectives.

Conversation (15 minutes)

Invite participants to respond to what others have shared. Remind them that the group has covenanted to speak from personal experience and perspectives, rather than challenging the validity of another's experiences and perspectives.

Closing (5 minutes)

Extinguish the chalice and share Reading 579, "The Limits of Tyrants," by Frederick Douglass.

Session 2

Materials

- Chalice, candle and lighter or LED battery-operated candle
- Newsprint, markers, and tape

- Covenant from Session 1
- Copies of *Singing the Living Tradition*, the UUA hymnbook, enough for participants to share
- Optional: computer or digital projector and speakers

Preparation

- Optional: Download [video of Michelle Alexander](#) speaking at General Assembly 2012, telling the story of how she awoke to the reality of a racialized caste system (11:30). Queue the clip and test the equipment.

Description

Chalice Lighting/Opening Reading (5 minutes)

Share these words of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., from his address, *Remaining Awake through a Great Revolution*, delivered at the National Cathedral on March 31, 1968:

I am sure that most of you have read that arresting little story from the pen of Washington Irving entitled "Rip Van Winkle." The one thing that we usually remember about the story is that Rip Van Winkle slept twenty years. But there is another point in that little story that is almost completely overlooked. It was the sign in the end, from which Rip went up in the mountain for his long sleep.

When Rip Van Winkle went up into the mountain, the sign had a picture of King George the Third of England. When he came down twenty years later the sign had a picture of George Washington, the first president of the United States. When Rip Van Winkle looked up at the picture of George Washington—and looking at the picture he was amazed—he was completely lost. He knew not who he was.

And this reveals to us that the most striking thing about the story of Rip Van Winkle is not merely that Rip slept twenty years, but that he slept through a revolution. While he was peacefully snoring up in the mountain a revolution was taking place that at points would change the course of history—and Rip knew nothing about it. He was asleep. Yes, he slept through a revolution. And one of the great liabilities of life is that all too many people find themselves living amid a great period of social change, and yet they fail to develop the new attitudes, the new mental responses, that the new situation demands. They end up sleeping through a revolution.

Light the chalice and review the covenant from Session 1.

Sharing (35 minutes)

Say:

In her address at the UUA General Assembly, Alexander quoted the Rip Van Winkle passage from Dr. King, and remarked that rather than sleeping through a revolution, we have been sleeping through a counter-revolution, one that has reinstated a racialized caste system under a different form. How did we sleep through this counter-revolution?

Show the video clip of Michelle Alexander or share these words from *The New Jim Crow* (p. 175):

When the system of mass incarceration collapses (and if history is any guide, it will), historians will undoubtedly look back and marvel that such an extraordinarily comprehensive system of racialized social control existed in the United States. How fascinating, they will likely say, that a drug war was waged almost exclusively against poor people of color- people already trapped in ghettos that lacked jobs and decent schools. They were rounded up by the millions, packed away in prisons, and when released, they were stigmatized for life, denied the right to vote, and ushered into a world of discrimination. Legally barred from employment, housing, and welfare benefits- and saddled with thousands of dollars of debt- these families were shamed and condemned for failing to hold together their families. They were chastised for succumbing to depression and anger, and blamed for landing back in prison. Historians will likely wonder how we could describe the new caste system as a system of crime control, when it is a system better designed to create- rather than prevent- crime.

Ask again: “How did we sleep through this counter-revolution?”

Invite participants to each share a story from their life experience, or a story they have read and/or heard that points to the existence of a racialized caste system in the United States, enforced through the legal and law enforcement mechanisms that support the “War on Drugs.” Allow 2 or 3 minutes for participants to consider their responses, and then ask them to share, one at a time, without interruption. If there is time, invite participants to respond to what others

have shared. Remind them that the group has covenanted to speak from personal experience and perspectives, rather than challenging the validity of another's experiences and perspectives.

Conversation (15 minutes)

Invite participants to respond to what others have shared. Remind them that the group has covenanted to speak from personal experience and perspectives, rather than challenging the validity of another's experiences and perspectives. Mention that for this conversation and any others, each person reserves the right to pass.

Discussion (30 minutes)

Lead a discussion about the broad impact of this system, using some or all of these questions to guide you:

- How does the system of racialized social control hurt our country?
- How has this system impacted poor and low-income whites? How has it impacted more affluent whites? More affluent people of color?
- What impact has the "War on Drugs" had on your community, your city or town, your state, and the nation? How is it reflected in the political and social discourse where you live? How is it reflected in the economic circumstances and systems in your area?
- What impact has the election and presidency of Barack Obama had on the way we understand and talk about race in the United States?

Closing (5 minutes)

Invite participants to read responsively Robert Eller-Isaac's A Litany of Atonement, Reading 637 in the UUA hymnbook. Extinguish the chalice.

Session 3

Materials

- Chalice, candle and lighter or LED battery-operated candle
- Newsprint, markers, and tape

- Covenant from Session 1
- Copy of *Singing the Living Tradition*, the UUA hymnbook

Chalice Lighting/Opening Reading (5 minutes)

Share Reading 502, “Now is the accepted time,” by W.E.B. DuBois. Light the chalice and review the covenant from Session 1.

Discussion (30 minutes)

Explain that this discussion session will focus on how your congregation or group might begin or continue the work of dismantling the New Jim Crow. You will consider first the moral and theological grounding for the work, and then the assertions Alexander makes about building a movement. Begin by sharing this quote from Alexander’s book (p. 238):

...we need to talk about race openly and honestly. We must stop debating crime policy as though it were purely about crime. People must come to understand the racial history and origins of mass incarceration- the many ways our conscious and unconscious biases have distorted our judgments over the years about what is fair, appropriate, and constructive when responding to drug use and drug crime. We must come to see, too, how our economic insecurities and racial resentments have been exploited for political gain, and how this manipulation has caused suffering for people of all colors. Finally, we must admit, out loud, that it was because of race that we didn’t care much about what happened to “those people” and imagined the worst possible things about them. The fact that our lack of care and concern may have been, at times, unintentional or unconscious does not mitigate our crime- if we refuse, when given the chance, to make amends.

Lead a discussion using these questions to guide you:

- Our Universalist heritage and our Unitarian Universalist first principle teach that every single person is of value. How can our faith help us to overcome the inclination to simply not see what is happening to young people of color in our society?
- How has fear of crime been exploited to make the victims of the war on drugs “other” in your community? To what extent has political and social discourse created categories of

“us” and “them” which allows those who are not caught up in the criminal justice system to view those who are as lesser human beings?

- What would it look like if your congregation or group did work of ministering to those who are caught up in the criminal justice system – and their families? What would make it safe for families to share their struggles? What would make it safe for individuals to share their own experiences with the criminal justice system?

Sharing (25 minutes)

In her book, Alexander says that protecting affirmative action has been the preferred strategy of those who fight for racial justice, rather than trying to end mass incarceration. This has had unintended consequences:

There is another, more sinister consequence of affirmative action: the carefully engineered appearance of great racial progress strengthens the “colorblind” public consensus that personal and cultural traits, not structural arrangements, are largely responsible for the fact that the majority of young black men in urban areas of the United States are currently under the control of the criminal justice system or branded as felons for life. In other words, affirmative action helps to make the emergence of a new racial caste system seem implausible. It creates an environment in which it is reasonable to ask, how can something akin to a racial caste system exist when people like Condoleezza Rice, Colin Powell, and Barack Obama are capable of rising from next to nothing to the pinnacles of wealth and power? How could a caste system exist, in view of the Black middle class?

Invite participants to respond to Alexander’s assertion regarding the effect of broad-based strategic decisions by racial justice groups and coalitions to support affirmative action rather than advocate for the end of mass incarceration. Ask:

- How did you come to work for racial justice? What form has that work taken?
- How is Alexander’s book changing the way you view your own racial justice work – both your work to date and your work going forward?

Wait two or three minutes and then invite participants, as they are moved, to share their thoughts and reflections one at a time without interruption. Remind them that the group has

covenanted to speak from personal experience and perspectives, rather than challenging the validity of another's experiences and perspectives.

Discussion (25 minutes)

Alexander calls upon people of conviction and faith to build a movement that provides a moral force to begin to dismantle the racialized caste system that has invaded many aspects of our society today. Ask: What contribution might you, your congregation, your group, or your community make to building the movement Alexander envisions is necessary to dismantle this new racialized system of social control? You may wish to post blank newsprint to record participants' contributions; you might ask a volunteer to note ideas while you facilitate discussion.

After about 10 minutes of discussion, present a range of possible actions:

- Invite others to read *the New Jim Crow* and organize more discussion groups, perhaps including those from other faith communities and civic or community organizations.
- Explore the resources on [The New Jim Crow page](#) on uua.org. Watch Michelle Alexander's address to General Assembly 2012 and/or arrange for a showing in your congregation or group.
- Find out which partners in your local community you might work with to bring information about the new Jim Crow to public attention and begin to build partnerships. Consider scheduling a time to view the 75-minute General Assembly 2012 workshop, [Partnering Congregations and Community Organizations](#), for inspiration and how-to information developing and sustaining partnerships for justice.
- Find out which organizations and faith communities in your area are serving and supporting young people of color and building coalitions with those groups and partner in their work.
- Join advocacy efforts for ending mass incarceration (including three Strikes legislation and mandatory minimum drug laws). Find out more about those efforts through the [Standing on the Side of Love](#) website. (This [April 2012 blog post](#) presents an example of an action that brought together several community partners.)

- Start a prison ministry program in your congregation. Read [Uncommon Community: One Congregation's Work with Prisoners](#), by John Speer, (Skinner, 2008) for ideas on how to begin.
- Explore Restorative Justice as a paradigm for social change and healing justice based on right relationship. A number of Unitarian Universalists congregations are working with this model, which they call Building Beloved Community. Find out more about this model at the [Restorative Justice Colorado](#) website.
- Purchase [The New Jim Crow study guide](#) published by the Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference, which represents a cross section of progressive African American faith leaders and their congregations in the United States. Use the chapter by chapter guide to engage more fully the questions raised by Alexander's book.
- Organize a group to [read and discuss](#) the 2011-2012 Common Read book, [Acts of Faith](#), to learn more about involving youth and young adults in interfaith racial justice work.

Decide on which course(s) of action to take going forward and solicit volunteers to help move those actions along.

Closing (5 minutes)

Extinguish the chalice and share reading from Marion Wright Edelman's forward to the 2007 [Children's Defense Fund](#) Report, [America's Cradle to Prison Pipeline](#):

The Pipeline is not an act of God or inevitable; it is a series of human choices at each stage of our children's development. We created it, we can change it... What it takes is a critical mass of leaders and caring adults with the spiritual and political will to reach out and pull children at risk out of the Pipeline and never let go and who will make a mighty noise until those in power respond to our demands for just treatment for children. This will not happen unless we come together and do the hard work to build a movement to save all our children and nation's soul.