

## **CELEBRATING BLACK HISTORY MONTH**

*what it means to an inclusive, progressive, accepting, but still predominantly white movement*

Over the years, I have often been asked why Unitarian Universalism has not been more successful in attracting minorities, especially blacks. Even though we are welcoming, accepting, and even interested in being multicultural, few of our congregations are even close to representing the multicultural diversity of our society. I know some of the reasons for our lack of racial and ethnic diversity, both historically and in current practice, but I am somewhat at a loss as to why we don't do more to break down the boundaries. The issues involved are more complex than might initially appear, but at least in theory most UU congregations would welcome greater multicultural diversity. Interestingly, we are much better at attracting and keeping GLBTQIA persons, but we also have been more intentional in becoming Welcoming Congregations for GLBTQIA persons in the last 20+ years.

Some say it is our music, too often composed by old dead white guys, others that we are just too stiff and chronically Caucasian. Others are put off by our lukewarm approach to social justice and our tendency to talk an issue to death without actually doing much to change the situation. A few still remember the struggles around black empowerment within the Unitarian Universalist Association back around 1970 when, due to a lack of funds, promises to fund Black programs were not kept. Some think it is our tendency to keep doing things the way we always have rather than opening ourselves to changes that might make us more attractive to a multicultural constituency. For whatever reasons, we have not been very successful at becoming more multi-culturally diverse since I have been a UU. Over the years I have become resigned to the reality that at least for now, we remain Chronically Caucasian. Though I would like to see us be even more inclusive and more accepting, I believe that we are making a difference for those who come into our congregations and I am inclined to continue working on our strengths rather than worrying about our weaknesses.

With that said, I would like to take the rest of my time this morning sharing some thoughts about Black History and the role UUs have played.

The first 20 Black slaves came to the colony at Jamestown in 1619, long before any part of my family came to the new world. Hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, of African men, women, and children were captured, enslaved, and brought to America to work for their white owners. There is no part of the story of slavery that is fair or just, no matter how many good and decent owners there may have been who treated their slaves as valuable servants and human beings. To be taken from freedom and sold into lifelong captivity, to have all rights taken away is horrible injustice. To be sold away from family at any time and to have little or no hope of ever gaining freedom is unbelievably cruel and inhuman. And yet, this was the law and practice of our nation, with protections for slave owners and slave holding states lasting until the Civil War. Allowed by the Constitution and Federal and State laws, Slaves were property.

The first organized convention of Universalists, meeting in Philadelphia in 1790, passed a resolution opposing slavery, declaring that “We believe it to be inconsistent with the union of the human race...to hold any part of our fellow-creatures in bondage. We therefore recommend a total refraining from the African trade, and the adoption of prudent measures for the gradual abolition of the slavery of the negroes in our country, and for the instruction and education of their children...” (*The Larger Faith*, Charles A. Howe, Skinner 1993)

Various Universalist Ministers and Lay People worked against slavery, and the Universalist General Convention passed resolutions and took actions through the 1820s, 30s, 40s, and 50s. During the Civil War the Northern Universalists supported the Union, while state conventions in Georgia, South Carolina, and Mississippi disclaimed any subordination to the General Convention. The Universalists did not formally split, however. (*The Larger Faith*)

Eminent Unitarian Minister, William Ellery Channing, spoke out against slavery in his treatise, *Slavery*, in 1835 and in his address at Lenox in 1842. By the time of the latter address he offered a blistering denunciation of slavery which he had come to see as America’s great national evil. (*William Ellery Channing*)

In 1851, Unitarian, Theodore Parker addressed his colleagues on the evils of the Fugitive Slave Law which required northerners to turn slaves over to the government for return to their masters. Parker admitted to offering sanctuary to fugitive slaves and declared that he had had to arm himself, writing sermons with a loaded pistol on his desk in order to “defend the innocent members of {his} own church.” (*Theodore Parker*)

After the Civil War ended, Northern Universalists supported the Civil Rights Act of 1866 and the 14<sup>th</sup> amendment. Many Universalists volunteered with the Freedmen's Bureau. (*The Larger Faith*)

Even after the Emancipation Proclamation by Abraham Lincoln, and after the bloodshed of the Civil War, the freedom of Blacks was only relatively better than it had been. Voting, access to education and jobs, ownership of property, and the right to participate in life on an equal footing with whites was still a distant dream. Justice for blacks was rare. Blacks were not welcome in white stores or neighborhoods or even churches. Jim Crow laws proclaimed equality via separation, and separation surely remained. Only equality and justice never seemed to catch up with the separation.

It was the Civil Rights movement, 100 years later, under The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., which brought about real progress. The turbulence of the 1950s and 60s resulted in progress in college admissions, integration of education and neighborhoods and in the spirit of our nation. Today the racism of neo-Nazis, the Ku Klux Klan, and Aryan Nation religions and political organizations, as well as the maintenance of privileged positions by ordinary whites is still hampering efforts to insure full racial equality. The struggle for civil rights goes on.

Unitarian Universalism struggled with black empowerment in the late 1960s and early 70s. In disagreement over how racism should be addressed, competing groups within the movement brought about a serious crisis over funding which still impacts our movement. In the last few years, the Journey Toward Wholeness program and other anti-racist-anti-oppression efforts have sought to bring Unitarian Universalism to a more intentional position of active anti-racism. Rev. Mark Morrison-Reed looks at the struggle for racial equality within Unitarian Universalism in his 2011 book, *Darkening the Doorways*.

Slaves and free blacks have done far more to make our nation strong than the history books usually recall. George Washington Carver is remembered for his work with peanuts, but how many other great black women and men have we learned about in our studies? Even though most blacks had little access to education until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there have been many who have succeeded against all odds to bring progress in the field of medicine, various sciences, and in all of the arts. We owe far more than we know to black men and women.

Frederick Douglass is one former slave whose name is widely remembered across the United States. He taught himself to read, escaped from slavery, became an influential speaker in the abolitionist movement, edited his own black newspaper in Rochester, New York, and became an advisor to Lincoln and several succeeding Presidents. At great risk to himself, he told his story and published his autobiography, eventually writing two more

volumes as his life situation and perspective changed. His 2<sup>nd</sup> autobiography, “My Bondage and My Freedom” tells Douglass’ story.

Other voices well worthy of our remembrance include many men and women who left their marks on our nation and the world. With many thanks to the University of Georgia African American Studies website, hear a few more brief profiles:

Sojourner Truth was born Isabella Baumfree in 1797, a slave in Hurley, New York. Sold, resold, denied her choice of husband, and treated cruelly by her masters, she ran away in 1826 leaving all but one of her children behind. Her freedom purchased for \$25, she moved to New York City in 1829 becoming a member of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. After the death of her son, she took the name Sojourner Truth as she traveled to tell the truth about slavery, she became nationally known as a speaker on human rights for slaves and women. She set out on June 1, 1843, stopping to stay where she was offered lodging, speaking to any audience about the evils of slavery and injustice toward women. In 1864, President Lincoln invited her to the White House. She later served as a counselor for the National Freedmen’s Relief Association, retiring in 1875 to Battle Creek, Michigan. She died in 1883. (*UGA African American Studies.htm*)

Heralded as the “Moses” of her people, Underground Railroad conductor Harriet Tubman became a legend during her lifetime, leading some 300 slaves to freedom during a decade of freedom work. Denied any childhood or education, she labored as a woodcutter, field hand, and loader of barrels of flour. In 1844 she married John Tubman, a freeman, and in the summer of 1849 she decided to escape from slavery. Her husband refused to go with her, but she set out anyway, heading north to Pennsylvania. A year later she returned to Baltimore to rescue her sister. Under the Fugitive Slave laws, rewards offered by slave owners for her capture totaled \$40,000. During the Civil War she was sent south to spy for the Union Army. After the war she returned to Auburn, New York where she married a Union Soldier and supported suffrage and other causes. Born a slave in 1821, Harriet died in 1913. (*UGA African American Studies.htm*)

Born into slavery in 1856, Booker T. Washington was the most prominent spokesperson for African Americans after the death of Frederick Douglass. He sought social betterment for African Americans through economic progress. Working in the coal mines as a youth, he attended school when he could, and entered the Hampton Institute in Virginia in 1871, graduating in 1875. He taught in West Virginia before entering Wayland Seminary. In 1881 he founded the Tuskegee Normal School in Alabama. When he died in 1915, the school had 1500 students and 180 faculty members. (*UGA African American Studies.htm*)

James Langston Hughes was one of the original writers of the Harlem Renaissance. Born in Joplin, Missouri in 1902, he began studies at Columbia in 1921, leaving after a year to work on a freighter and traveling to Africa and living in Paris and Rome. Returning to the

U.S., he graduated from Lincoln University in 1926, publishing his first book of poetry, *The Weary Blues*, the same year. He also published the essay, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” which became a defining piece for the Harlem Renaissance movement. During the next four decades, Hughes, wrote novels, poetry, short stories, plays, autobiography, and nonfiction works. Known for hearty humor as well as bitter criticism, he died in 1967. (*UGA African American Studies.htm*)

When Hank Aaron retired from baseball in 1976, he held the world record of 755 homeruns, after having broken Babe Ruth’s record of 714 on April 8<sup>th</sup>, 1974. Along the way, Aaron also surpassed Willie Mays, who retired in 1973 with 660 homeruns, 3,283 hits, and a lifetime batting average of .302. Both Aaron and Mays followed in the footsteps of Jackie Robinson, who in 1947, was the first black major leaguer, playing for the Brooklyn Dodgers and earning the Rookie of the Year award that year. Today it is common to see blacks on every major sports team. In 1936, when U.S. runner Jesse Owens won 4 gold metals at the Berlin Olympics, it struck a blow against Hitler’s Aryan ideal. When Joe Louis knocked out German boxer Max Schmeling in 1938, it was a blow to white supremacy in Nazi Germany and the U.S.

As the 20<sup>th</sup> century opened, pianist Scott Joplin, the King of Ragtime, was making his mark. By the late 1920’s, jazz horn player and scat-singing vocalist, Louis Armstrong was making a mark in music and by mid-century he was a star, having appeared in over fifty films. In the 1930’s, jazz vocalist Billie Holiday was one of the most sought after singers in Harlem’s clubs. Lena Horne has been called the first black female star. Beautiful, poised, and politically active, the sultry singer was a World War II pinup girl, a movie star, and a symbol of success for black women. In the 1930’s Duke Ellington became the king of swing; renowned jazz bandleader, composer, and pianist, Ellington left his mark on American music over 5 decades. Another great jazz musician, pianist and vocalist, Nat King Cole, had made his mark by the mid-1940’s. Jazz trumpeter, Miles Davis gave birth to the cool, reaching his most productive period in the 1950’s, but continuing to develop into the 1970’s. Each of these amazing women and men left their mark on the world. Each of them fought their way to the top even in the midst of prejudice, outright racism, and sometimes drugs and violence. By the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, blacks had made significant contributions to virtually every field of endeavor.

W.E. B. Du Bois, born in Great Barrington, Massachusetts in 1868, wrote, *The Souls of Black Folk*, published in 1903. Du Bois was the first African American to receive a Ph.D. from Harvard. Sociologist, historian, novelist, and activist, Du Bois, “argued against the conciliatory position taken by Booker T. Washington ...and called for a more radical form of aggressive protest—a strategy that would anticipate and inspire much of the activism of the 1960s. (Back cover, Barnes & Noble Classic edition, *The Souls of Black Folk*)

Du Bois combined an illustrious academic career with his work for full rights for African Americans. He worked to found the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in 1909. In 1934 he resigned from the NAACP to protest their goal of accommodation with white society. Increasingly disillusioned with life in the United States, he visited Europe and the Soviet Union. In 1961, he announced that he had joined the Communist Party and emigrated in Accra, Ghana, where he died in 1963 at age 95. (*UGA African American Studies.htm*)

In his essay, "Of our Spiritual Striving," Du Bois, wrote:

*After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,--a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,--an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.*

*The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,--this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face.*

*This, then, is the end of his striving: to be a co-worker in the kingdom of culture, to escape both death and isolation, to husband and use his best powers and his latent genius. (The Souls of Black Folk, p. 9)*

Another important African-American figure in 20<sup>th</sup> century history is Paul Robeson. Born in Princeton, New Jersey in 1898, a graduate of Somerville High School and Rutgers University, Robeson was a talented actor, an amazing singer, and a champion of civil rights for blacks. Settling in London, he won international acclaim in the 1930s. A supporter of unions and a board member of several African American organizations, he was ostracized over communist sympathies during the McCarthy era. His passport lifted by the state department, he was unable to travel for many years. Robeson devoted much of his intellectual effort to civil rights, but died virtually forgotten in 1976. Robeson's story is told in his 1958 autobiography, *Here I Stand*.

Living our principles and the values of compassion and justice which stand behind them can help to shape the free nation that we all desire. Remembering the efforts of those great and courageous women and men who happened to be black can help to remind us of the journey yet remaining. The class differences in our society continue to expand, and too many blacks remain economic slaves. Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, the Little Rock Nine, Paul Robeson, Martin Luther King, and so many others risked their lives to bring freedom and justice. The call to march for freedom and justice continues to challenge us today. May we continue to hear and respond to the call until there is equal opportunity for all and we live in peace and freedom!

Amen, Shalom, Salam, and Blessed Be!