

## **BLACK HISTORY MONTH?**

Over the years that I have been a Unitarian Universalist Minister, I have generally recognized Black History Month, sometimes with a single service but also in some years multiple services during the month of February. I did this because Black History is an important part of our National History and because the history of Slavery, the Civil War, Emancipation, Jim Crow laws, and the Civil Rights Movement are important parts of our development as a Religious Movement. Although our religious ancestors were usually on the progressive side historically, there were also times when some of their actions and motives may have been less than pure. That being said, the matter I want to address today looks more to the future of our movement.

We have a very small percentage of blacks and other persons of color in what is otherwise a middle to upper class aging white religion. It is not that we intend to keep anyone out on the basis of age or shade of skin, but we do mostly expect newcomers to like the way we do things, the music of old dead white guys, and a more democratic rational kind of religion. We value diversity, at least intellectually, but we are in fact one of the least diverse religions. We tend to be middle to upper middle class professionals and political liberals as well as religious liberals, we are not prone to get overly excited in our services, and we spend a lot more time discussing things than actually doing things. And when the time comes, I will be right there with you in the discussion of heaven rather than floating in the clouds listening to the harps.

Younger ministers and members coming into our movement are not as interested in joining demonstrations or writing letters as were earlier generations. They are more interested in a spiritual experience which is often closer to what liberal Christian churches might offer than to the humanist lectures and oboe solos that were popular in many of our 20<sup>th</sup> Century congregations.

The Civil Rights issues that energized UUs a generation or two ago are no longer the same as what energizes us now, although GLBTQ civil and marriage rights still will get most of us going. The way that we try to make a difference has changed quite a bit though with internet and e-mail campaigns replacing much of the letter writing. Today there may be more virtual demonstrations than actual ones. It is clearly a different world.

I think most of us would agree that there is still rampant racism, injustice, and inequality, but it is at a more subtle level, harder to challenge directly. The book club recently read *The Warmth of Other Suns, the Epic Story of America's Great Migration*, by Isabel Wilkerson. This amazing narrative history, which we will also discuss at an upcoming UU Thursday at the end of the month, chronicles the racism of both South and North and the movement of blacks from the South to the North during much of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century seeking more humane working conditions and freedom. The book also describes how the overt racism in both North and South has subsided with legal progress but still remains in more subtle forms even today.

The more subtle forms of racism, often expressed in occurrences of white privilege or white male privilege also infect our own Unitarian Universalist institutions at every level. Heavy handed efforts to excise them via forced confessions through some of the early UU Journey Toward Wholeness programs of the 1990s have fortunately been toned down to include more respectful recognitions of the efforts made by white liberals to bring about change. Even so, our movement continues to attract only a very small percentage of persons of color. It is due to this reality that I put the question mark on today's sermon about Black History Month.

Why should we continue to recognize Black History Month when its current impact on Unitarian Universalists and the UU movement is currently negligible? Several of my colleagues in the Bay area got involved with the recent demonstrations after the failure of grand juries to indict police officers after the deaths by shooting in Ferguson and choking in New York. I certainly support concerns about profiling and injustice for persons of color, but I was not surprised by the actions of either Grand Jury.

I was also concerned that the uproar would be short-lived while the underlying injustices and racism would be untouched. We have it seems quickly returned to the national status quo with the corporate media going on to report all the criticism of President Obama and worry about which older white men would be running for President in 2016 on the GOP side. In California, we continue to obsess over the drought while renewed denial of global climate change follows the drop in oil and gas prices. Did we humans always have such short memories or is it just that more of us are suffering from attention deficit disorder?

Change is one of the hardest things for humans. We so quickly fall into patterns. The 2<sup>nd</sup> annual anything must conform to the previous year because that's the way we have always done it! UU churches, though our religion is at least theoretically most open to change, are no exception when changes are first suggested. We like new ideas, which we might ponder for years, but we don't actually like to change from those things to which we have become accustomed. Change is hard, change can be messy, and it comes at the cost of the stability, the certainty which seems so reassuring. So why would we actually want to change when we are comfortable?

Sometimes change is necessary for individuals and for organizations. The ancient people of Israel had become comfortable in Egypt and were doubtful about following Moses into the desert on the way to the Promised Land. Our ancestors in Europe and elsewhere only came to America when it got too hard to stay in their own native lands, some making several smaller moves before venturing across the ocean. There is always a risk in making changes, letting go of the familiar patterns, lives, realities.

After the Civil War, the South created the Jim Crow era laws based on the doctrine of separate but equal, even when equality was so clearly not reached. Jim Crow allowed the South to remain the same, to avoid the real changes that came when slaves became full persons with civil rights. In both North and South, full equality remains elusive, but enough visible progress has been made to ignore the underlying reality. In modern American society, Sunday mornings remain the most segregated of all times, as blacks go to black churches and whites go to white churches.

As racial profiling, unbalanced police responses, unequal convictions and sentencing, and a host of other societal inequalities continue to illustrate, we are far from being a colorblind or color balanced society. Since Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr's, death, progress has been terribly slow. Only the change to more accepting younger generations has really made much of a difference, but the injustices and inequality are still rampant.

So what is a mostly white, aging religious community to do? We certainly helped the cause of Civil Rights in the 60s. Rev. James Reeb and Viola Liuzzo died for the cause of Civil Rights with the march to Selma. We have continued to support Civil Rights for half a century since Selma, but there aren't many of us that have the energy to march and the issues are much harder to find. We can make ourselves feel good by putting on our yellow love shirts and demonstrating for something during General Assembly each year or we can keep looking for ways to make more of a difference to end racism, ageism, classism, and the abuse of the environment. As a small group we must work together with other groups to be heard and to really make a difference. We must not give up, but we must adapt.

It probably is still good to recognize Black History Month in our congregation at least once during February, lest we forget the victories won and the progress made in our society. It is also important that we recognize how much there is yet to accomplish, that this journey isn't nearly over yet.

Before I close this sermon, I do want to take a quick look back at our Unitarian and Universalist involvement in matters of race in US history:

The Universalists first took a stand against slavery of blacks in the United States at the Philadelphia Convention in 1790, though prominent Universalists had opposed it publicly as early as 1773. Unitarian luminary Theodore Parker spoke and wrote against Slavery in the 1840s. Several statements were crafted and efforts made in opposition to slavery by both sides of our movement. Many Unitarians and Universalists worked to support the underground railroad and help free slaves. Blacks were welcome in our churches and were accepted as equals, but few Blacks have chosen to

be Unitarian Universalists. Many Unitarian Universalists joined demonstrations and marches during the Civil Rights era. Many UU ministers heeded the call to March from Selma to Montgomery, and Rev. James Reeb was beaten and died from injuries he suffered. Unitarian Universalists have been involved with Black History in the United States in significant ways. Throughout our national history, Unitarians and Universalists have been involved in efforts to bring justice and end slavery and unfair treatment of Blacks.

A few years back, we elected a Black UU Minister, Bill Sinkford, to be President of the Unitarian Universalist Association. At General Assembly 2005 in Fort Worth, he said this:

*"But it is still the case that the most frequently asked question I receive as I travel the country is how we can become more racially and culturally diverse. My response, always, is that the objective of finding a few more dark faces to make our white members feel better about themselves is not spiritually grounded. Nor will it be successful. Racial and cultural diversity will, I pray, come to Unitarian Universalism. But it will come as we become known as a faith community that strives to live our open hearted theology, and a faith community that is willing to be an ally in the struggle for justice."*

—William G. Sinkford, President, Unitarian Universalist Association, General Assembly Fort Worth, TX (June 2005).

Whether we remember Black History Month or not, we are called to respond to the injustices in our society. Some of those injustices continue to be played out within our congregations and association. Even though our current congregational study action issue, approved by General Assembly last summer, is about Escalation Inequality, precious little has been done to even allow our less wealthy members to even attend General Assembly. Few congregations provide even the registration fees to their delegates, and most attendees at General Assembly pay their own way, a matter that can easily cost \$1000-1500 or more per person for registration, housing, meals and airfare. I am only able to go because of my professional allowances.

As a congregation, we have not been budgeting money for anyone other than the minister to attend the most important UU meeting each year. Even though each congregation is entitled to a number of delegates to General Assembly, it is a meeting of those who can afford to go.

This Journey Toward Inclusivity and Full Acceptance in Unitarian Universalism still has a long way to go. Our UU Principles call us to practice justice and acceptance, but we have not bridged the growing divide between the rich and poor, nor are we attracting many persons of color. We cannot rest on what we accomplished in the past, we must strive to do more in the future! So the challenge that I leave you with is this: to build a community that is open and accepting to all persons, to continue working for racial justice in our society, and to make our community more interesting to the diverse variety of people who might walk in our doors!

So may it be! Amen!