

WHY WE STILL NEED BLACK HISTORY MONTH

With the world we live in currently a mess, with little respect for the personhood of anyone on the lower end of the strata of society, it isn't all that hard to see why we would still need Black History Month. Most of the Blacks in the United States have a longer heritage in this country than either side of my family, though my ancestors mostly were here by the late 1800s or very early 1900s and one may have been Native American. All my life, as a white male, I have enjoyed a level of privilege that most persons of color will never enjoy. In all my years, and more than 40 years of driving, I only recall being stopped by police anywhere about 4 times and two of those times were a week apart in Utah after putting oversize tires on my pickup which threw off the speedometer. The third time was while driving an old car in a nice neighborhood with a taillight out. And the fourth time was for driving across New York with a headlight out.

Until recently, and at least since the Cold War ended, I have taken for granted that progress has been coming, sometimes slowly and haltingly, but still coming to these United States. As an educated white male hailing from and continuing among the suburban middle class, I did not try to deny the various forms of racism still prevalent in our nation, but neither did I do enough to change its impact. I wanted to believe that we were closer to equality than ever before, that we were far past slavery and even the Jim Crow era. The election and very successful Presidency of Barack Obama came as a high point to many of our anti-racism efforts, and yet the racism beyond efforts to block every Obama initiative became clearer and clearer until it was unleashed in a flood by our new President's campaign and early Executive Orders.

Frederick Douglass, freed slave and renowned orator of the 19th Century, whose thoughts have received a strange resurgence of interest by a

White House that seems not to know that he died some 122 years ago tomorrow. The ignorance within the current White House also seems not to have captured a real grasp of Douglass's thoughts, which can provide an interesting commentary on our current times. These words, from Frederick Douglass before emancipation:

“In thinking of America, I sometimes find myself admiring her bright blue sky — her grand old woods — her fertile fields — her beautiful rivers — her mighty lakes, and star-crowned mountains. But my rapture is soon checked, my joy is soon turned to mourning. When I remember that all is cursed with the infernal actions of slaveholding, robbery and wrong, — when I remember that with the waters of her noblest rivers, the tears of my brethren are borne to the ocean, disregarded and forgotten, and that her most fertile fields drink daily of the warm blood of my outraged sisters, I am filled with unutterable loathing.”

— **Frederick Douglass, Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings**

And again, this Question posed by Douglass:

“What, to the American slave, is your Fourth of July?”

I answer: a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him, your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your denunciation of tyrants, brass-fronted impudence; your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings, with all your religious parade and solemnity, mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy—a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages.”

— **Frederick Douglass**

Born a slave in Maryland in about 1818, Douglass escaped slavery in 1838 and went on to become one of the most important Abolitionists. Douglass wrote and spoke of his own experiences of the cruelty and injustice of the institution of slavery and was rewarded to see its demise though he lived well into the Jim Crow era. He continued to speak out and write for justice throughout his life. His words provide a telling commentary on those who continue to seek to suppress and block the votes of minority citizens of our nation. Again words of Douglass, here is support of the black vote:

“If the negro knows enough to fight for his country he knows enough to vote; if he knows enough to pay taxes for the support of the government, he knows enough to vote; if he knows as much when sober, as an Irishman knows when drunk, he knows enough to vote”.

– Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*.

And now, one last quote with an even broader perspective providing a deeply telling commentary for this moment from Frederick Douglass:

“The American people have this to learn: that where justice is denied, where poverty is enforced, where ignorance prevails, and where any one class is made to feel that society is an organized conspiracy to oppress, rob, and degrade them, neither person nor property is safe.”

A wise man whose words return to life some 6 score of years after his death to challenge the injustice of our time. Slavery may have been abolished with the Emancipation Proclamation of President Lincoln, but racism soon returned in the absence of justice and equality in the *separate but equal* dictum of the Jim Crow era. The Civil Rights Movement helped to break down and overturn most of the remaining Jim Crow laws, but racism has risen again in several somewhat milder but still virulent and too often deadly forms.

I began with the premise that we still need Black History Month, but in truth we still need much more than the brilliant tidbits of Black History that have been included among those things remembered. Many have argued in recent writings and speeches that this Nation, including the White House itself were built with the labor of Black slaves, suggesting that this great nation could not have succeeded to such a great extent without the work of millions of Blacks. I believe that there is much truth in those arguments built on real facts.

The lies told and retold by millionaires and billionaires now holding power in the Executive and Legislative Branches in this country continue to fuel the widening divisions between progressives and

conservatives and also between rich and poor, women and men, black and white, straight and Gay, Christian and Muslim.

It is actually amazing, considering how little of real meaning has been accomplished, how successfully this administration has widened and deepened the divisions in this country as well as between this country and the rest of the world. And supporters of Trump seem to eat up every self-promoting pronouncement tweeted or reported about how much he has done and is doing to fulfil campaign promises. It is utterly baffling to me, that people not only voted against their own self-interests to elect Trump, but that they continue to believe everything he says he has accomplished, mostly in the face of mounting evidence to the contrary! I expect that it would cause significant amounts of cognitive dissonance to turn away immediately, but people, listen to the facts, and I don't mean the alternative facts!

(Take breath!) Okay, we can't deal with everything today. Barring impeachment, we will have years to deal with the rest. And even impeachment would leave us with serious problems in the White House and Congress.

Today, we focus on the issues around Black rights. The very right to vote was suppressed in some places with provisions of the Voters' Rights Act not in play and with the growth in voter ID laws paired with efforts to make it harder for voters to get acceptable IDs and with early voting and polling places limited especially in minority areas. There are many questions about this election that may never be answered. Trump had promoted the idea that it was rigged, until it turned in his favor. Who really benefitted if it was? I for one, wish the courts had allowed recounts in at least three states.

So far, it looks as though women, the poor, minorities including Blacks, and Muslims will lose the most, but people depending on Social Security, Medicare, the Affordable Care Act, and various other programs may be next in line. If the protections of EPA rules and banking controls are removed, we may all suffer.

We cannot afford to forget the struggle for civil rights. The Black Lives Matter demonstrations may be a bit disorganized and lacking in clear goals, but they have been very successful in motivating people and that motivation may be the very thing that we most need. The Women's March was amazingly successful, and I hope future efforts will be even more so. A march of scientists is coming on Earth Day and other marches are being organized. We dare not give in to corporate control of our society. We need consumer protections. We need truth! We need free and independent media. We need a President and Representatives that truly listen to all of the people! We need justice and compassion!

Black History Month may not cover some of the more controversial leaders or represent all Blacks, but it serves to remind us of how many ways we are indebted to black scientists, inventors, theologians, politicians, business leaders, humanitarians, Doctors and Nurses, and others who happened to have a darker shade of skin. Black History Month helps to work against the mythic portrayal of American History as being almost entirely dependent on white men. We also need Latinx History Month and Native American History Month, and of course Women's History Month to help fill in the whole picture. Adding an Immigrant's History Month wouldn't be such a bad idea either, to remind us that except for the Native American Indians, all our families are pretty recent immigrants to North America. The more deeply one looks into American History, the more slanted the elementary and high school textbooks appear, but it is said the victors re-write the history.

Within our own Unitarian Universalist history there have been some episodes of racial tension that we like to ignore. Though we have always been majority white, we have not done all that we might to invite and include persons of color into our movement. In the late 1960s there were some efforts to create a black caucus and put in place some special programs for Blacks. A commitment was made to dedicate a million dollars to one of the Black Groups related to Unitarian Universalism, but

then there was a shortage of funds and they didn't get the money. A number of Blacks left the movement in the aftermath.

Now there is a new Black organization within Unitarian Universalism, the **Black Lives of UU Organizing Collective** which has recently been promised \$5.3 Million by the Board of Trustees of the Unitarian Universalist Association. Black Lives UU says that it was:

Formed in the wake of several conversations among Black UUs at the July 2015 Movement for Black Lives Convening in Cleveland, OH - the BLUU Organizing Collective works to provide support, information & resources for Black Unitarian Universalists. We also work to expand the role & visibility of Black UUs within our faith.

Knowing some of the history of the previous efforts and the problems caused by unfulfilled promises along with current concerns about UUA shortages, I was a bit concerned when I heard about this decision which seems all too likely to repeat history if there are shortfalls. I hope that this works out far better than the previous efforts.

Within this congregation we try to be welcoming to all persons of good will who wish to join us. Whatever color or age or sex or sexual orientation or level of ability, we try to be welcoming. As a small congregation, we aren't going to satisfy every need but we try to welcome all persons equally. We have talked in the Program Council about supporting Black Lives Matter and we will talk about supporting Black Lives UU.

These are not happy times for religious or political liberals and progressives. Each day seems to bring new insults, assaults, and challenges. As Unitarian Universalists we are called to respond from the values of our Principles in accepting others, working for justice and truth, protecting the earth, and doing all that we can to love others. In matters of race our movement has not always done its best to accept and love others. Today we have another chance to work together with persons of all shades of skin to build a better, healthier and more

accepting world. May we make that goal our Black History Month commitment and may we ever strive to shape a world more just and more loving! So may it Be!

Shalom, Salaam, Blessed Be, Namaste, and Amen!