

A UU History of Racism  
Rev. Frieda Gillespie  
2/1/19

In 1998 I was a member of a UU congregation in Carrollton TX. I had confessed to the minister there that I wanted to become a UU minister and he had offered me opportunities occasionally to preach. One Sunday I preached about racism. A couple attended that were members of another local UU church. They were Asian. They spoke to me afterwards and said how important they felt it was that white people talk about racism with each other. "If we talk about it," they said, "white people feel guilty and defensive." This is such an important insight. In our reading from Rev. Morrison-Reed's memoir, why did this woman Mark encountered tell *him* her story and why at that moment? This is a crucial question and the answer I think reflects an important issue for white people. Here's why I think she told Mark: black people care about this and white people don't. I believe, and I have no way to know for sure, that in that time of vulnerability and intimacy where Mark had been of service to her family in crisis, she felt an opening to share a painful story to someone that she thought would care because he is black. The story is just as painful whether she tells it to a white person or a black person, but the unspoken racism in our white culture prevents her from initiating a conversation with a white person about it. Why would the white person care; why would she want to share it?

The fundamental question is whether racism is only a problem for black people or does it crush the souls of white people as well? And if it does, why don't we talk about it?

In an article about the UUA's efforts to combat modern slavery, Kimberly French "sorted through the reasons Unitarian Universalists

rightfully take pride in our history of standing up against slavery—and through the reasons not to take too much pride.

French says we rightly claim many nineteenth-century abolitionists: Samuel J. May, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Julia Ward Howe, Theodore Parker, and Sylvanus Cobb Jr., among others. Many Unitarians and Universalists of the time followed their leadership, often at great personal risk. Parker himself hid and defended fugitive slaves, helped finance slave insurrections, and delivered fiery antislavery sermons. In 1850 a federal grand jury indicted him for obstructing a federal marshal in the case of a fugitive slave in his congregation. In 1843, inspired by Sylvanus Cobb's efforts, the United States Convention of Universalists passed a resolution “to bear testimony against the slavery of the African race. . . .”

Yet, most Boston Unitarian ministers supported the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which set up federal commissioners to catch and return escaped slaves. And many of the Boston Brahmins at the core of Unitarian membership were, in fact, industrialists who profited enormously from slavery: New England textile mills used slave-grown cotton from Southern plantations. As abolition gained ground among Unitarians, many industrialists left the denomination. Many Southern Unitarians—who owned slaves—also withdrew.”

During the late 1800's and early 20<sup>th</sup> century there were several black ministers who joined the Unitarian or Universalist movements and worked to create churches. They were not well supported by the denominations because they didn't have faith that a black Unitarian or Universalist church would be sustainable. It was a serious error in judgment. And it was a long time before African American ministers again graced our movement.

During the Civil Rights movement in the early nineteen sixties, many of our members and ministers stepped up to help sometimes putting their lives on the line. Rev. Morrison-Reed writes in his memoir, “On March 11...a headline caught my attention:

## THREE CLERGYMEN ARE CLUBBED IN SELMA, ALA.

“Three white ministers who came here to join a civil rights march were beaten with clubs last night by five white attackers. One was near death in a hospital...All three were members of the Unitarian Universalist Association...”

Reed says, “Unitarian Universalism was my religion, and those three ministers were my people. One of them, James Reeb, died soon after the attack. The Unitarian Universalist Association Board of Trustees, which was meeting in Boston, adjourned and traveled to Selma along with hundreds of Reeb’s colleagues to memorialize Reeb and march with Dr. King. Two weeks later, another Unitarian Universalist protestor, Viola Liuzzo, a white Detroit housewife and mother of five was shot and killed. These events galvanized white liberal support for the civil rights movement, propelled people into action, and assured the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act shortly thereafter.”

Currently, the UUA has been active in India fighting modern day slavery. Again, [Kimberly] French found, UUs have much to be proud of: For two decades the UU Holdeen India Program has been at the vanguard of a new abolition movement.

Contemporary antislavery activists have praised the denomination. “Three groups have been our biggest supporters—blacks, Jews, and UUs,” Charles Jacobs, director of the American Anti-Slavery Group, said at the 2003 General Assembly. “You are an abolitionist church.” And Kevin Bales, a leading slavery researcher and a Quaker, told French: “I have to congratulate UUs. I’m a little embarrassed to say there’s no Quakers Against Slavery. And through UU Holdeen, you’ve been there already for a long time, doing things that really mattered almost before anyone else became awakened.”

Our Unitarian Universalist movement lost one of its prophetic African American ministers, Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley who died of cancer on December 10<sup>th</sup>, 2007 at the age of 57.

What made Rev. Bowens-Wheatley so appreciated and loved by clergy and lay people alike was her unwavering vision of a multi-racial denomination. As one of the few African American Unitarian Universalist ministers her vision and ideas have and will continue to be very important to that goal.

One of Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley's many contributions was to edit a collection of conversations about racism which was published in a book called *Soul Work: Anti-racist theologies in dialogue*. This was the result of a conference sponsored by the Unitarian Universalist Association of African American, Hispanic, Native American and white theologians and ministers. They each presented a paper for the others to respond to. James Cone was one of the participants. He teaches theology at Union Theological Seminary and has been one of the strongest voices for anti-racist theology otherwise known as Liberation Theology in our country for the last thirty years or so. In his paper he laments the fact that white theologians don't talk about racism very much if at all. He proposes four reasons for this and although we are not academic theologians, I would like to you to see if any of these fit us in some way.

The first reason is the most damning. It is the fact that we don't have to have to. Since white people have a position of power in all aspects of society, there is no motivation to talk about it or even notice it.

The second reason is that talking about white supremacy arouses strong feelings of guilt in us that we don't want to feel.

The third reason is that we don't want to engage with the rage people of color have about the harm that has been done to them by white people.

And the fourth reason is because we are not prepared for a significant redistribution of wealth and power that would be needed to make things right and just in this country.

Those reasons seem straight forward to me and I'd say Cone hits the nail pretty much on the head. I'd say that these are the reasons we don't engage in real dialogue with other ethnic groups and cultures in our community or in our churches. All of these reasons have the common denominator of fear--an unwillingness to be discomforted or shaken up.

I wonder though if there couldn't be an approach that goes beyond those feelings of fear; that would allow us to be more open and build bridges between our "European-centric" way of being and other ways of being.

Part of the confusion we have is that we don't realize that racism *is* our problem too. How much attention do we give to the question: What does living in a racist society do to those of us in a position of power and privilege? How is our mind and heart distorted and anesthetized so that we can accept this societal structure? And what does it mean for us to live in so much fear of so many of our neighbors?

The Rev. Rebecca Parker addresses this in her paper. She says, "To come of age in America as a white person is to be educated into ignorance. It is to be culturally shaped to not know and not to want to know the actual context in which you live." What context is she referring to? Instead of living in reality—all of the realities of our lives, we choose those which support our "goodness" our "all-whiteness." We do not willingly admit our ability to do harm. Parker says that "at some level we know that our pristine garden has been created by what has been exiled and exploited. This primordial violence lies beneath our sense of privilege and security. We are fearful of this deeper violence being exposed. We feel helpless in the presence of our own violence."

Martin Luther King said, "We have deluded ourselves into believing the myth that capitalism grew and prospered out of the Protestant ethic of hard work and sacrifices. Capitalism was built on the exploitation of black slaves and continues to thrive on the exploitation of the poor." He also said: "I am convinced that if we are to get on right side of the world revolution, we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin the shift from a "thing-oriented" society

to a "person-oriented" society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered."

Parker recommends work on several fronts. Remedial education is a way to reclaim our knowing. There are lots of resources available to learn about the history of our city our state or our country through the eyes of people of color. We need to be willing to know that history. And to know what is really going on in our community today.

The second is becoming an engaged presence on political and social fronts, *noticing* and bearing witness to injustice and adding our voice in solidarity to those who would make positive change. Activism builds bridges.

Lastly and most importantly is the soul work that Parker recommends to reclaim and heal the fragmentation of our being. She says, "Whites need to accept the personal task of spiritual healing rather than project onto people of color our own loss of humanity, asking people of color to carry the burden of this loss."

What is our motivation to do something about this today or any day? It is the very love of and desire for a full life not a partially suppressed or fragmented one, but one which includes all of our neighbors and revolts against the kind of violence that separates us from them. We cannot accept the insulated, walled garden of ignorance and fear when there is a real, full and vibrant life awaiting us, a life where we are needed and wanted.

African American writer Zora Neale Hurston writes, "Sometimes I feel discriminated against, but it does not make me angry. It merely astonishes me. How can *any* deny themselves the pleasure of my company! It's beyond me."

Rev. Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley wrote: “Deep in my heart, I do believe that this too can change. Behold, there is a new spirit among us, expanding our horizons. New forms of culture are breaking out all over. Do you see it? Do you hear it? Do you embrace it? Keep the faith!”

May it be so.