

“‘Twelve Years a Slave:’ Not Just a Movie”

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Unitarian Universalists in Reston
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You may recognize this listing as the title of a current block-buster movie about a free black man from up-state New York who ends up in slavery on southern plantations. It is also the title of an article in a Universalist newspaper of 1853 which recently caught my eye. Our Unitarian and Universalist ancestors frequently discussed slavery, not always in opposition. Perhaps some of this deeper ambiguity about taking a stand on racial justice has contributed to more recent challenges around racial diversity in Unitarian Universalism. Today we will consider the roots of the UU Empowerment Controversy which occurred a full century after antebellum slavery.

Reading: excerpt from *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker

(The Color Purple, a story depicting the low social position of southern black women in the 1930s, won the Pulitzer Prize for literature in 1983. Celie and Nettie are sisters and they write letters to one another and to God.... Following are fragments from their letters, where they speculate about who God is and if God has any interest in communicating with poor black women like them.)

Celie, tell the truth, have you ever found God in church? I never did. I just found a bunch of folks hoping for him to show. Any God I ever felt in church I brought in with me. And I think all the other folks did too. They come to church to share God, not find God.

Tell me, what your God look like, Celie... He big and old and tall and graybearded and white. He wear white robes and go barefooted. ... (He has) Bluish-gray eyes. Cool. Big (with) White lashes. ... he look just like them (white folks), Only bigger? And a heap more hair.

If God ever listened to poor colored women the world would be a different place, I can tell you. ... Once us feel loved by God, us do the best us can to please him....

God loves everything you love... and a mess of stuff you don't. But more than anything else, God love admiration..... not vanity, just wanting to share a good thing. I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it.... I been so busy Trying to chase that old white man out of my head.... (that) I never truly notice nothing God make, not a blade of corn, not the color purple, not the little wildflowers. Nothing. like Shug say, you have to git man off your eyeball, before you can see anything at all.

Sermon: “‘Twelve Years a Slave:’ Not Just a Movie”

In this month of February, we consider the theme of Diversity, a hallmark of free religion. Diversity, representing the many ways in which we humans are born into this world, in matters of skin color or gender or physical and mental capacity or economic class or sexual identity. In free religion, diversity is welcome, not only diversity of theology, but also diversity of social characteristics. Humans' many categories of identity are not used as a basis for creating systems of power. Truly living by our Seven Principles, the core articulation of Unitarian Universalist values, we move beyond many of the common methods by which the dominant culture defines power in

placing rich over poor, male over female, pink over brown skin, straight over gay, and more. This month, I have suggested that we consider diversity from a denominational view. Today let us consider the human feature of skin color and the tensions and paradoxes that have arisen --- even within liberal religion --- over matters of race relations. Let us focus in particular on the story of an event called the Empowerment Controversy of the late 1960s.

How attributes of skin color create power structures has been highlighted in several recent movies. One of the more compelling productions this movie season is *12 years a Slave*. This is a wrenching view of slavery in pre-Civil War America. The movie is based on a book of the same title, written by Solomon Northrop. As the movie opens, Northrop is a free black man, a musician, living in up-state New York in the early 1840s. He is kidnapped and sold into slavery south of the Mason Dixon line. He spends nearly twelve years in captivity before he can find a way to escape. Back in freedom, he wrote about his experiences. The movie offers a new, bald depiction of the institution of slavery: Slavery, this notion that one human being can own another, the unequal power structure based on the color of a person's skin. Northrop is beaten, humiliated, forced to whip a fellow woman slave over a bar of soap. It's not even the actual hard work that seers the most: it is the notion that one person may have power over another, master depriving slave of free will, independence, and integrity. Indeed, black persons in the south had good reasons to believe that God was a blue-eyed white man, with a 'heap more hair.'

Some of you know that I have a passion for Unitarian Universalist history. I'm currently researching the life story of a Universalist woman, a contemporary of Northrop and the first woman to be ordained to ministry, Lydia Ann Jenkins. In looking for Lydia, I read many newspapers of the mid-nineteenth century: it's fun, reading about Unitarians and Universalists back then. You can imagine my surprise not long just after I saw "Twelve Years a Slave" the movie that, on skimming a newspaper published by the New York State Universalists, I saw a headline of the same name: there in the edition of August 20, 1853, was an article called: "Twelve Years a Slave." I had a weird double-take: Reston movie listings, 2014, or New York Universalists, 1853? The article, a review of Northrop's new best-selling book, points out how Universalist readers were in the know of current social issues and current literature. It also reminds us that northern Universalists were deeply engaged in anti-slavery and abolition work. For example, in 1840 Universalists held their first anti-slavery convention, in Lynn, Massachusetts and in 1845 over three hundred Universalist ministers signed a petition against slavery. Unitarians were equally ardent abolitionists: Samuel J. May, minister in Syracuse, worked closely with major abolitionists such as William Lloyd Garrison and Stephen Douglass, and Boston minister Theodore Parker was said to keep his granddaddy's shotgun above the desk in his study to defend slaves he was helping to freedom on the underground railway. Many of our forefathers and foremothers in liberal religion were deeply involved in radical social reform in mid-century: they worked tirelessly to rid the world of discrimination, just as modern Unitarian Universalists do in today's social justice programs.

Still, back then tensions over race persisted, even within our liberal religious heritage. While individual Universalists and Unitarians were radical reformers, neither of our parent denominations endorsed official positions opposing slavery. There was too much at stake for many individuals, whose income depended in one way or other on slave labor: mill owners, the shipping industry, the textile industry. Individual reformers may have assumed radical positions regarding

slavery, but the institutions --- the denominations --- did not. There was a parallel in women's rights: for as cutting-edge as Universalists and Unitarians were in women's equality, women's rights received no institutional endorsement, in spite of the fact that the denominations were the first to ordain women, in the 1860s. (From the 1920s through 1960s women were again all but cut out of access to ordination.)

Officially, as we know, slavery in this country ended in the 1860s. During the hundred years after the Civil War, the nation opened up significantly in attitudes toward race relations, but still tension, conflict, strife, and discrimination based on skin color persisted. As denominations, Unitarians and Universalists pretty much went along with general social attitudes around race, that is, they were not particularly cutting-edge.

Thus, when Unitarians and Universalists merged in 1961, the same tensions around race, grounded in individual liberty versus institutional stance, present a century earlier were still in the air. For example, congregational polity and resistance to authority prevailed in 1963 when the General Assembly rejected a resolution that would have required congregations to rid their bylaws of clauses allowing racial discrimination in congregational life. At the same time, many Unitarian Universalists as individuals rallied in support of Martin Luther King. Stress around race escalated when UU minister James Reeb was murdered in Selma in 1965 during a march with King in support of voting rights. Another white UU, Viola Liuzzo, was killed soon thereafter during another march. These events were not only important catalysts in legislative changes in this country; they also 'marked a sea change' in Unitarian Universalism's engagement with race. Race riots around the country escalated emotional energy all the more. Still, it was unclear how the denomination would respond to social racial turmoil. What place did the administration of an affluent, liberal, mostly white denomination have in responding to social upheaval based on skin color?

Then in 1967 a devastating controversy within Unitarian Universalism erupted, made all the more divisive by the murder of King in 1968. This Empowerment Controversy, as it came to be known, divided UU families, it turned some away from Unitarian Universalism, it left scars that have still not healed, over forty years later. This unresolved Controversy, some suggest, is one reason that still today this denomination does not have a clear vision for healthy relationships in matter of race, with people of many skin colors.

The Story of Empowerment

So let me tell you about the Empowerment Controversy because many people do not know this story. It also explains an important event in our past and illustrates how an unresolved tension continues to influence denominational identity. My sermon is informed by the writing and the person of my colleague the Rev. Mark Morrison-Reed, who calls this story the 'Empowerment Tragedy.'

Curiously, in the aftermath of events in Selma, the involvement of blacks in Unitarian Universalism mellowed. In 1967 black membership was at 1 %: black members did not feel integral to this white liberal movement. The denomination organized a meeting in 1967 at the Biltmore Hotel in New York City to discuss their concerns. Influenced by wider cultural unrest, several dozen blacks walked out of the meeting to create their own group, which came to be called

the Black UU Caucus --- BUUC --- to protest the white liberal mindset. Black UUs were caught between two social norms: the fairly complacent liberal approach to the culture around them, or the increasing demands for special attention to particular constituencies, not only blacks but also women. From BUUC, they also create BAC --- the Black Affairs Council --- which demanded one million dollars from the UUA to support intentional programs for Unitarian Universalists of color. Religious liberals who had previously been fairly compliant broke open the door of dissent: unfortunately, they did not know how to disagree effectively. Their attempts at self-determination were confusing. The denomination was torn between supporting the demands of one particular group facing immediate cultural strife, and asking them to wait through a fairly lugubrious democratic process which would significantly delay their requests. Blacks and whites alike were divided on this basic dilemma of supporting an individual group in crisis, or proceeding by democratic method. Tensions rose, opinions became heated. For example, African American Whitney Young, from White Plains New York, who would eventually head the Urban League, accused white UUs supporting the black demands as promoting racism of a different type, a racism that said that blacks needed to be humored and pacified.

Things in the UUA were in a mess. So what did UUs do? --- they created another organization to 'solve' the problem. To help the races work together, in 1968 they created Black and White Action (BWA). And then Martin Luther King was killed and the mess got worse. At the Cleveland General Assembly in June 1968 there was bitter debate as these two groups, BAC and BWA, competed for funding. The funds were awarded to BAC --- that is, the black-focus group ---- to the tune of \$250,000 over a four-year period. On the heels of King's death, the UUA feared the guilt if they did not endorse the black organization.

By the next General Assembly, in 1969 in Boston, there was yet more rancorous argument over the use of the million dollars. Long story short, half the assembly walked out of the official convention hall to form a dissenting General Assembly at Arlington Street Church. Then the new UUA President, Robert West issued many spending cuts across the denomination and rescinded some of BAC's funding. Still consumed with rage and emotion over King's death, BAC left the UUA, not only because of the funding cutback but also because many in the black community were intentionally focusing on black culture and relationships. It was all very hurtful. The consequence of this inability to disagree effectively meant that through the '70s the denomination suffered significantly from low racial diversity. It was as if the denomination had lost part of its soul.

My colleague, Rev. Morrison-Reed, was a young black UU during this controversy. It tore apart his family and he still weeps when he recalls the hurt. He regretted the walkout by BAC: it made things much worse: "Good leadership knows about institutional inertia and that conflict is both inevitable and necessary to trigger change. But change is time-consuming and without leadership, it is almost impossible. A group (cannot) move ahead when half is moving one way and the other half another... When relationships are abrogated, change cannot succeed.

One bright spot is that the Empowerment Controversy did teach Unitarian Universalists how to respond better to other issues in diversity, especially in the areas of recognizing women and persons of gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender identity. Open and honest dialogue at the beginning of diversity programs laid better groundwork for handling this basic paradox of honoring the particular identity and supporting the whole.

Since the 1970s the denomination has promoted various programs to address race. ‘Journey Toward Wholeness’ in the 1990s achieved moderate success but erred in its emphasis on white guilt. More recently many congregations have followed the curriculum ‘Building the World We Dream About’ to much acclaim. During the tenure of the first black UUA President, William Sinkford, his initiative placed many ministers of color in ministries, but a large proportion of these did not last long. UUs have made strides in race but the legacy of unresolved conflict still remains over forty years later.

Rev. Reed continues to regret that few are ready even now to seek reconciliation, which may ultimately be impossible. He wrote, “Why has there been so little movement toward reconciliation? Because they were all the good guys. They all claim the moral high ground. (They) constructed (their) sense of integrity out of righteous hubris... All sides felt victimized and misunderstood.... They were shocked that there was no longer room to hold a different opinion and follow another path, and still be in fellowship.....This tragedy happened because of the bigotry and mistakes of earlier generations of religious liberals, because society was forcing change upon religious liberals and change is difficult.... It (also) happened because of institutional immaturity..... No one who was involved felt understood or appreciated, much less honored.”

Lessons from this Controversy

What lessons may we take away from the Empowerment Controversy? For one, we are reminded that religious institutions are always influenced by social and cultural standards, and that the more radical, liberal religious orientations generally work to correct injustices within those standards. Our modern affiliation in Unitarian Universalism connects us directly back to the Solomon Northrups and the Frances Ellen Watkins Harpers, as well as the Theodore Parkers and Lydia Jenkins of history, those who worked for change of social injustices. We may also be reminded that, because of religion’s relationship with culture, as change happens in cultural habits, so change must happen in religious habits, particularly at the institutional level. A cultural norm or value that was accepted decades ago may not fly today. The Empowerment Controversy also reminds us that the best way to get past hurts of the past is to address them directly. It is never too late to create sufficient safe sacred space to speak openly and honestly with one another. Open and honest conversation --- which is the greatest gift of the movie *12 Years a Slave* --- can help us humans relate to one another not at the level of categories of identity but at the deeper level of inherent worth and dignity, as UUs first principle advocates. Authentic reconciliation is the best means of going forward into a heart-based, healthy future.

MAY THIS BE SO.

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