

I want to begin this morning with the words of someone I was in seminary with, Robbie Walsh. It's entitled "More Than We Deserve"

"I heard the Second Brandenburg Concerto played in honor of Bach's 300th birthday and I was swept away. I remember a story about the people who send messages into outer space. Someone suggested sending a piece by Bach. The reply was: "But that would be bragging."

Some say we get what we deserve in life, but I don't believe it. We certainly don't deserve Bach. What have I done to deserve the Second Brandenburg Concerto? I have not been kind enough; I have not done enough justice; I have not loved my neighbor, or myself, sufficiently; I have not praised God enough to have earned a gift like this.

Life is a gift we have not earned and for which we cannot pay. There is no necessity that there be a universe, no inevitability about a world moving toward life and then self-consciousness. There might have been ...nothing at all.

Since we have not earned Bach—or crocuses or lovers—the best we can do is express our gratitude for the undeserved gifts, and do our share of the work of creation."

Allowing for the fact that the definition of "the work of creation" can be interpreted in many ways, Unitarian Universalism has good reason to be proud of our current and historic role in sharing the work of creation. Our sharing in that work has come in many and divergent ways, often at a price.

Michael Servetus, is one of the early voices of our long tradition of questioning, challenging and arriving at answers deemed outside accepted boundaries of the status quo. Servetus, a Spaniard, was born in 1511 and died in 1553. After studying the Bible, he concluded there was no basis for the doctrine of the trinity. He documented his beliefs in a book called *On the Errors of the Trinity*. It got him in hot water with both the Catholic Church and John Calvin. Despite being in exile for 20 years, the Inquisition found him and burned him at the stake, with his book tied to his thigh. Today's Unitarians owe him a debt of gratitude for his unwavering pursuit of a liberal interpretation of Christian doctrine.

The anthem we heard the choir sing this morning asked, "Would you harbor me?" While some Unitarians answered "no" to the question, relative to the issue of slavery, a goodly number, answered "yes." John Quincy Adams, sponsored numerous petitions to keep the issue of slavery open to debate in the House of Representatives that had previously passed a "gag rule" to bar even the discussion of slavery. After nine years, the "gag rule" was finally defeated in 1844.

William Lloyd Garrison, published the “Liberator”, an anti-slavery newspaper. He wrote with passion and eloquence against slavery and on behalf of the rights of African Americans. In its first edition, he said "I do not wish to think, or speak, or write, with moderation . . .and I will be heard." Between 1831 and the end of the Civil War, Garrison published almost 2000 issues of the Liberator.

Rev. Theodore Parker, of Boston, called slavery “the great national sin”. He made many enemies as he lambasted both slaveholders and the Northern economic elite whose banks, mills and shipping businesses profited from slavery. In response to the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law, Parker became a militant abolitionist.

He went so far as to house and hide run-a-way slaves. He’s said to have written sermons with a pistol on his desk. Parker was one of the invisible six who supplied money and arms to John Brown in his battle against slavery.

Dr. Benjamin Rush, a Universalist, was a strong advocate of the abolitionist movement. He was the primary driver behind the successful passage of a denomination-wide resolution in opposition to slavery. The resolution, passed in 1790, stated in part “We believe it to be inconsistent with the union of the human race in a common Savior, and the obligations to mutual and universal love, which flow from that union, to hold any part of our fellow creatures in bondage.”

Closer to our own time and place in history, Unitarian Universalist ministers responded to Martin Luther King’s call for greater involvement in the civil rights movement. James Reeb, went to march in Selma and became a martyr. He was attacked, bludgeoned and killed by white thugs. President Johnson leveraged the death of this white minister to pass the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

We can claim these people as our own and speak of them with pride. We can also be proud of the fact that the Universalist were the first denomination to grant full rights of ministry to a woman. After graduating from Antioch College and eventually being accepted into the Canton Theological School of St. Lawrence University, Olympia Brown was ordained in 1863. She served churches in Vermont, Massachusetts and Wisconsin. In addition, she was the president of the Wisconsin Women Suffrage Association.

Sophia Lyon Fahs, didn’t become a Unitarian until late in her long life. She was born in 1876 and died in 1978. She attended the Presbyterian University of Wooster, Ohio, the University of Chicago Divinity School and received a MA from Teachers College in NY and a Bachelor of Divinity from Union Theological Seminary.

After raising five children, working at an experimental Sunday School at Teachers, and directing the Sunday school programs at different congregations, she became the best known Unitarian Religious educator of the 20th century. At the age of 60, she was hired by the UUA to be the editor of children’s educational materials.

Fahs wasn't the only high point in Unitarian Universalist religious education. In the 1960's, the UUA education staff began to investigate sex education materials for use in our congregations. With the help of health education professor Deryck Calderwood, the UUA published a groundbreaking sexuality curriculum entitled About Your Sexuality, now revamped and called Our Whole Lives.

The original premise was based on the notion that sex is a positive, enriching force, that some expression of it is normal at all ages and there is no one "correct" norm. The program sought to move away from a moralistic, judgmental narrative to a positive understanding of human sexuality. The program was tremendously controversial, but has become an important teaching tool for our young people.

Perhaps it's our Universalist heritage with the message that all people can have access to salvation that allows us to answer "yes" to the question, "Would you harbor me?" Or perhaps it's our Unitarian tradition, grounded in a willingness to question orthodoxy. Whatever it is, Unitarian Universalists have answered "yes" to the question, "Would you harbor a lesbian or a gay?"

Such an affirmative answer is certainly not shared by some religious belief systems. Have you seen the video of a preacher, I can't call him a minister, and the entire congregation hooting and clapping at the Apostolic Truth Tabernacle in Greensburg, Indiana? They shouted their approval of a young kid, maybe 6 or 7, standing in front of the congregation singing "ain't no homo gonna make it to heaven".

The U-Tube video went viral. It followed by a week or so a video of Pastor Charles Worley, in N. Carolina preaching to his flock. He told them he had figured out a way to get rid of all the lesbians and queers, by putting them inside an electrified fence and that even with food, they'd die out because they couldn't reproduce. I'm sure he'd tell you he was a Christian.

Unitarian Universalists in the early 70's started down the road of affirming gay, lesbian and bisexual people. At the General Assembly that year, they passed a resolution to end all discrimination against people of minority sexual orientation. In 1973 a resolution passed to create a UUA office on Gay Affairs. In 1984, the denomination voted to support ministers who conducted civil union services for gays and lesbians. In 89, the Welcoming Congregation Program was initiated.

The world did not all of a sudden become bright and rosy, but over the years, significant progress has been made. There was a time when openly gay ministers in our denomination could not get jobs. Now, there are congregations which hold high school proms for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender teens.

But these same congregations that can be open hearted with gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender teens, may well not be ready to accept bisexual and transgender ministers. Many congregations may not be ready for ministers with physical disabilities. They may not be ready to accept adult bisexual and transgender members, as equals.

Even those who are willing to accept people of difference may not be prepared to listen to their stories more than once. Or hear them speak to the issues they deal with on an ongoing basis. There is still much work to be done in our UU congregations.

We are not good at accepting people who call themselves Christians. We are not good at accepting people who work with their hands, or people who are poor. Or people without a college degree. We are not good at accepting people with poor social skills, skills evaluated against white, middle-class standards of social interaction. There is still much work to be done.

And as Rev. Michael Tino noted in the reading we heard earlier, “Walking on Eggshells” how often can someone like me, talk about issues of race, before they are labeled a one-issue minister? If the answer remains, as he suggests, in the single digits, we have work to do.

But as someone who comes from an historically marginalized population, I’m optimistic, but not naive. I am optimistic about our chances for positive movement. And I also understand how hard the work is and will be. I’m optimistic because of where we have come from. I’m optimistic because of our espoused values and beliefs.

I’m optimistic because we as Unitarian Universalist have embraced a slogan that is meaningful and powerful and calls us to action. I’m excited by the Standing on the Side of Love campaign. It’s a short, simple statement that carried a lot of heft if you truly believe it.

The sentiments expressed in the statement, Standing on the Side of Love, is what’s behind our willingness to engage in a Justice General Assembly in a few weeks in Phoenix Arizona. Many UUs wanted to boycott Arizona because of the oppressive laws that have been enacted to drive brown skinned people out of that state.

But the majority vote of the assembly last year called for us to go to Phoenix and align ourselves with those who have been marginalized. It called for us to develop interdependent working relationships with the local justice seeking people and organizations in opposition to marginalization and discrimination. It called for us to educate ourselves about the realities of life on the ground in Arizona, about the realities of life for immigrants and those who look like they might be immigrants.

Our history as Unitarian Universalist is one of a justice seeking people. Let us stay grounded in our history, let us stay true to this history. Let us be intentional in these efforts. Let us be diligent, visible and proactive in Standing on the Side of Love. And may we be successful.

Amen.