Reflections on a Dream January 15, 2012

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As we honor Martin Luther King's birthday, we are provided an opportunity to reflect on both his dream and the vision of Unitarian Universalism. Interestingly, there is significant overlap. Our UU faith tradition guides us to honor the dignity of all people. And it guides us in our quest for social justice.

We have a well earned reputation for our commitment to social and racial justice. We were abolitionists and suffragists in the 1800's and active in the civil rights era of the 20th century. Perhaps most notable, was the death of James Reeb in 1965. Rev. Reeb was an assistant minister at All Souls Unitarian in Washington, DC.

He left there to work full time in Boston on better housing for the poor. Reeb responded to King's call to march from Selma to Montgomery. While there, he and two other UU ministers were beaten with clubs outside the Silver Moon Café.

The Selma Hospital refused to treat Reeb, the worst injured. James Reeb died at a Birmingham hospital two hours away. President Lyndon Johnson capitalized on the death of this white martyr to help pass the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

John Quincy Adams, while in the US House of Representatives, gained a well earned reputation fighting against slavery. With great parliamentary skill, he managed to present a number of petitions to abolish slavery. Not only was he actively and openly anti-slavery, he petitioned congress to end slavery during a time the House had voted to have no discussion of slavery. Did you know that our House of Representatives, from 1835-44, voted repeatedly to gag any discussion of the issue of slavery?

After Adams' death, Rev Theodore Parker, a Unitarian icon, wrote: "The slave has lost a champion…America has lost a man who loved her…religion, a supporter…Freedom a unfailing friend…and mankind a noble vindicator of our inalienable rights". These words are particularly meaningful coming from a Unitarian preacher and abolitionist, who could reasonably be called a radical. He called slavery "the great national sin".

Parker made a lot of enemies; he attacked not only the slaveholders, but also the Northern elite whose banks, textile mills and shipping businesses profited from slavery. He's said to have hidden slaves in his own house, protecting them from the Fugitive Slave Law—which allowed slaves to be captured and returned. To ward off intruders, he's said to have written his sermons with a revolver on his desk. Theodore Parker thought this "great national sin" had to be met with force. He was one of the "secret six" who supported and helped fund John Brown's rebellion.

To be sure, not all our Unitarian ministers were active abolitionist. A founder of American Unitarianism, William Ellery Channing, author of the phase "I am a living member of the great family of all souls", did not believe humans could be held as property. Yet, he couldn't bring himself to call slave holders evil and feared disrupting the orderly conduct of society.

Thomas Jefferson, who attended but never joined a Unitarian church has been widely claimed as one of our own. A snap shot of his life painfully lays bare the plight of Blacks in this country, then and today. He talked about slavery as "having a wolf by the ears...ya can't hold em and you can't let him go; justice on one hand, self preservation on the other."

Jefferson was against slavery…and yet he was a slave holder. He believed slavery violated the sacred right of life and liberty…and that slaves should be freed and deported because they couldn't live on an equal footing with whites, who were innately superior. Just maybe, he was working to enhance the innate nature of blacks by fathering mixed race children. But more likely, it proves that rational thought, which he so highly valued, only goes so far.

Many Unitarians and Universalist were against slavery. And many profited from it, both directly and indirectly. Our past President, Bill Sinkford, once asked, "should we collectively acknowledge that some of the beautiful white clapboard Unitarian churches in New England were built with profits from the slave trade?"

As an avid genealogist, The Rev. David Pettee, Director of Ministerial Credentialing for the UUA, inadvertently discovered a Rhode Island ancestor was a slave trader, and others slave owners. This discovery has led him on quite a personal journey. His quest for understanding took him to the epicenter of the slave trade in Ghana, where his ancestor traded rum for Africans. His genealogical skills allowed him to find a descendent of an African enslaved by his family. His great courage allowed him to develop a relationship with this woman and her family.

David is quoted as saying: "To me, it's about humbly joining in the struggles with those who have been the subject of historical and systemic oppression—and no longer denying that we come from places and structures that have been historically complex and oppressive." If only we collectively had one quarter of his courage and willingness to live with truth.

The truth is, we as Unitarian Universalist, have had a disjointed and sometimes ugly history with issues of race. Author of *Black Pioneers in a White Denomination*, Rev. Mark Morrison-Reed, a life-long black UU writes, "Our history in regard to racial justice is brave enough to make you proud, tragic enough to make you cry, and inept enough to make you laugh—once the anger passes."

Our track record in growing and supporting Black ministers or would-be ministers is frankly not good. Time this morning does not allow us to recite the stories of black ministers who failed to gain institutional support for building churches in black communities. Or of those who were barred from ministering to white congregations. Or those whose careers where ship-wrecked either because they themselves were unable to re-configure themselves in the mold of white UU congregations or whose congregations were unable or unwilling to bend to accommodate the differences represented by a minister of color.

Our history holds stories of people like Ethelred Brown, Lewis McGee, Renford Gaines, Jeff Campbell, Eugene Sparrow, Maurice Dawkins and others. Recent data suggest daunting

realities for ministers of color in our denomination remain. The average tenure, I understand, for the first settlement of a white male minister is around 5-7 years. That number for ministers of color is closer to 2-3 years. There is something going on in our denomination around the issue of race that we need to better understand and fix.

There are those who suggest a significant part of the issue may be about more than race. It may be largely about theology and culture. In a book titled Soul Work, Rev. Rosemary Bray McNatt , minister of 4th Universalist in Manhattan, says Coretta Scott King told her she and Martin considered becoming Unitarians. But realized they could never build a mass movement of black people as Unitarians. McNatt says that beyond race, theology was a barrier. While naturally inclined toward liberal religion, King was unwilling to trust liberal religion as a foundation on which to battle for liberty, justice and dignity for African Americans.

McNatt tells her own story, as a Black UU minister, talking about God, only to be informed by a congregant that UUs had given up on the notion of God. It made her wonder how much we really mean what we say when we talk about inclusion and an interest in becoming an anti-racist religious community. It made her wonder how our congregations might respond to a liberal religion leaning Martin Luther King, "on that dark night during the movement after being bombarded with threats on his life and the lives of his family?"

She asks: "What if he had said…to one of us, that he couldn't go on anymore, that he was afraid? What if he had said, as he did say to God, I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But now I am afraid. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they too will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I've come to the point where I can't face it alone."

She wonders if the congregation would have prayed for him? She wonders whether the congregation would have seen him as weak, without character, perhaps too unenlightened to know any better than to rely on an interventionist God?

In the end, King chose a God he believed in. He chose a God who promised never to leave or forsake him. King chose a God you or I may not know or believe in, but a God who must be allowed into our midst, if we are to truly be an inclusive religious community.

If we are to truly be an anti-racist, anti-oppression and inclusive religious community, we have work to do. If we truly stand on the side of love, we have work to do. If we seek to have a genuine impact on this ailing world of ours, we have work to do.

If we are to do anti-racism work, we need to focus on who and what we are as individuals and as a denomination, not merely want to know more about those we define as "other". We need to understand the impact of our gender, ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, and class on our self definition. Who do we define as an extension of who we are, as being a part of our group and who do we define as different, or an outsider?

If we are to be anti-racist and anti-oppression, we need to understand how our norms and beliefs manifest themselves. What do we value and reward in our families, our communities, our church and work world? We need to be willing to be honest with ourselves, willing to see and engage the good and not so good of who we are.

But there's good news and it lies in our faith tradition. The good news is that our Unitarian Universalist faith tradition guides us to honor the individual. It guides us in our quest for social justice. Our faith tradition encourages us to seek the truth, not just the palatable truth, but the truth. It teaches us that we are part of an interconnected web of life.

The good news is that we already have all the tools we need to do this important work. The good news is that we are a bunch of bright, sometimes feisty, and determined people. Let us use what we have, what we know and what we believe in. There's work to be done.

This afternoon, we have a town meeting designed to focus on our year a head, our vision, what our priorities should be, how we might fund and implement those priorities. How shall we go about making those decisions? Will we keep our vision narrow because we've never *done that* before?" Will we be driven by "how it's always been done?" Will we be held captive to a segment of the congregation that says we can't expect too much, they're just volunteers?"

I ask us to think seriously and deeply about why we are here as a congregation? Do we want our claim to fame to simply be that we are a liberal faith group in an otherwise fairly conservative geography? Or, do we want to be able to say, "These are our principles and here is how we live out our beliefs. You can tell who we are by what we do."

We have a solid foundation here. But the question remains: what do we do with it?

Again, I say: Let us use what we have, what we know and what we believe. There's work to be done.

And may it be, shalom, salaam, ashe, and amen.