

According to the history channel, slavery started in America in 1619, when a Dutch ship landed in Jamestown, VA, with a cargo of 20 African slaves. Slavery was practiced throughout the American colonies in the 17th and 18th centuries.

Historians have estimated that 6 to 7 million black slaves were brought to and bought in, the New World during the 18th century alone. African slaves helped build a new nation into an economic powerhouse, based essentially, on free labor.

At the dawning of this nation, the US Constitution codified slavery by counting each slave as 3/5s a person...that is to say 3/5ths a human being, when compared to a white person. It also guaranteed the right to repossess any "person held to service or labor". [a euphemism for slavery]

Our constitution was written to allow slavery forever. It codified what has come to be called White Supremacy. It was manifested during the first half of the 19th century, when well over 100,000 Native Peoples were forced from their land and marched some 1000 miles west.

The Civil War was fought to maintain the union, not to free slaves. Ending slavery was an after thought, and helped to fill the ranks of the Union army. The emancipation proclamation of January 1, 1863, committed the government and armed forces of the United States to liberate the slaves in rebel states “as an act of justice, warranted by the Constitution, upon military necessity.”

By December 18, 1865, the Thirteenth Amendment had been ratified, which ensured that forever after “neither slavery nor involuntary servitude ... shall exist within the United States.”

But the legacy, of blacks being 3/5ths human, continued through Reconstruction, the Jim Crow racial caste system, and, 100 years later, the Civil Rights movement. And after fifty more years, many would argue, prompting the era of Black Lives Matter.

To date, no Amendment to the Constitution has granted that additional 2/5ths of humanity, that 2/5ths of personhood.

As Faulkner said: “The past is never dead. It’s not even past.”

I know the truth of that statement. I know it intellectually, I know it emotionally. I know it viscerally and in my bones. Only within the last 25 years or so, have I had conscious awareness that I've always experienced the world as unsafe. I've needed to be intentional in learning to experience the world differently.

You see, my grandfather was born in 1865. My grandfather may have been born a slave, somewhere in Mississippi (despite the Emancipation Proclamation). There are no records of his birth to my knowledge. Whether a slave or not, those were not good years for African Americans.

My dad was born in Bay St Louis, Miss, 1893. He was 60 when I was born. I grew up with his lived experiences. The past was not dead in my household growing up.

Dad never went past sixth grade. As the oldest child, he picked shrimp with his mother after his father died. Many a-time, I heard how he couldn't button his shirt because his fingers were too sore.

I heard about his experience with church. He had heard about the “good works” of the Catholics. One Sunday, after passing through the church doors, he discovered blacks sat on one side and whites on the other. He never crossed their door again. I’ve never known him to go to any church.

But he read the Bible every morning and night, before he prayed on his knees. I never saw him read any other book. But he read the morning and evening newspapers and watched the evening news programs. Plural. I think I inherited that trait.

The story he told that’s had the biggest impact on me was when he worked on the trains, feeding coal to the steam engines. Some event happened and he was blamed by a white engineer.

The head man asked dad about it and dad said he didn’t do it. The head guy said, “George, you’re a good worker, I don’t want to loose you. But I can’t take your word over a white man’s. All you have to do is apologize and we’ll make the whole thing go away”.

Dad told him he wouldn't lie and he'd rather "trust God and starve to death." Those words embedded in my psyche. "...rather trust God and starve to death". That story taught me about personal integrity. After many years, I now recognize it, as a black man claiming that added 2/5th of his humanity.

With a sixth grade education, dad learned to navigate the business world. He bid on contracts with the US Postal Service to close the gap between mail coming into town by train and the mail leaving town from the Post Office. He had contracts and employees in Mobile, El Paso, Kansas City and Schenectady, where my sister and I were born.

He kept his own books, did his own taxes and refused to use credit. He saw his job as a father to put food on the table and a roof over our heads. He was a reclusive homebody. He could be mean and abusive. I never liked my father.

But at about the age of thirty, as I was experiencing racism in the workplace, I began to see him differently. I wondered what he saw, what he experienced during his life? I pained for what might have been, what he might have accomplished if he hadn't been denied his full humanity. I still wonder.

My siblings and I learned about hard work, integrity and self-respect. We were held to high standards and taught to demand to be treated with respect.

My parents believed in integration. They understood what it took to be successful in the world. They taught us to be successful. Without ever saying the words, they trained us to be “good colored people, and a credit to our race”. We were to go forth and make a difference, to make room for those who would come after.

And we did. From a father with a sixth grade education and a mother who didn't finish high school, six black children were born into the world; five boys and a girl. Each earned a bachelors' degree. Five have post graduate degrees.

My eldest brother was an anthropology professor. The second eldest was the second, black, board certified plastic surgeon in the country. The third earned his BA at about the age of 40 and became an evangelical minister.

The fourth brother may have been a genius. He was the smartest of us all. He joined the largest law firm in the world after school and eventually established his own corporate law practice.

My sister was a school teacher, a computer sales person and throughout her life, a seamstress and clothes designer. I've worked in government, the private sector and had my own consulting practice before I found ministry.

Our collective success did not come for free. We all paid a price. Two brothers were alcoholics (both recovered), one died at 62; we've each had multiple marriages.

Mom was a direct contributor to our striving.

One of her sayings that had the greatest impact on me was "they're going to throw at you anyways, so don't give them any ammunition". I've spent the second half of my life trying to undo a need for perfection. I've not been fully successful.

I've spent many years trying to be aware of the things I did to protect myself in an unsafe world. I used proper attire and a good vocabulary to manage how I was seen; to let people know I expected to be treated with respect. I used my intelligence to signal I was not to be seen as inferior. I learned about wines and which folk to use.

And yet, my collective past and living in a black body has never allowed me to fully lose my self-protective survival skills. And I've never lost my drive to help create a better world, a more just world, a safer world.

I thought I had found an oasis when I first found a Unitarian Universalist church. The words that were used, the espoused principles were all familiar to me. In fact, they represented a way of life I had already committed to live. To find it in a faith community was a gift.

I struggled however to find the religion in the words and principles. Yet, I was committed to the way of life it represented; excited by what was possible. I knew it had the potential to change lives for the better. It had all the inherent ingredients to help eradicate racism and oppression.

After a year or so in seminary, I began to unearth the religion that lay beyond the philosophy of the principles. I may well have been pre-ordained, if you will, to find what I found. What I found, what I recognized, aligned with the energy work I had been studying for years.

My energy work had taught me to distinguish between emotions and sensations, thoughts and sensations. It taught me to notice the difference between living from a deep sense of self and being guided primarily by an ego in reaction to the external.

I found what Emerson had referenced as the “spark of the divine” within; within each of us. That God was not in the cosmos but to be found within. Not within our mental processes, but within our sense of self and our connection to the world.

I believe our religion calls for us to live our lives from the inside out. To be driven by that sense of the divine, not a conception of the divine.

I believe if we can find that inner sense of the divine, if we learn to live from that spark of the divine, we’ll all be allowed our full 5/5ths of humanity.

May it be so, ashee and amen.