

Its said every sword cuts two ways. For every glass that is half full, it is also half empty. That duality describes my reaction to Black History Month. As ministers we often feel compelled to speak to issues of the day and to recognize or celebrate various holidays, whether or not they are meaningful to us as individuals.

Truth be told, I'd really rather not be giving a sermon on or about Black History month. But I feel obligated to recognize that this is Black History Month. If it were only a single day or maybe even a week, I might not feel the same. But it is Black history month and frankly, I assume you as a congregation would expect me to talk about it.

In fact, I would be surprised if any of our 1000 or so congregations did not do at least one service this month built around Black History. And I believe, given the fact that Black people represent about one percent of Unitarian Universalists, such services are not likely to be primarily for the benefit of our black members.

Perhaps you can begin to see why I might have some ill ease with the subject. During this past Christmas time, I made a conscious decision not to do a service dedicated to the celebration of Kwanza. The obvious question that I had to answer was for whom would such a service be? I am not here to tell you that I made the "right" decision, merely that I did think about it and made the decision that felt right for me.

And I made the decision to speak with you today about Black History Month. It is important, and we, as Americans, do need to recognize that black people have played a significant role in our collective history. One could even say, America has been built on the backs and free labor of Black people.

As a Black man, I would presume, and it is a presumption, that my relationship and experience with Black History month is different from the majority of those of you in this room this morning. And I make no assumption that my relationship and experience is the same as those among us who define themselves as black or African American or people of color.

The issue of race in America is laced with minefields. It always has been and remains so today. That's why race is rarely talked about in polite circles in anything other than superficial terms. Since the issue of race is ultimately about power, how these issues are seen and experienced is often very different depending on which side of the table one sits on. And since race plays out in so many different ways and across so many dimensions, conversations about race are almost always complicated and tangled. And since race is our great unresolved National dilemma, such conversations often touch deep-seated emotional and psychic pain in us, at least when we have open and honest conversations.

Black history month touches pride and appreciation in me. It also touches deep-seated emotional and psychic pain. When the celebration of black history month first became popular in main-stream America, I was happy to finally see black people begin to get recognition for being scientist, mathematicians, and intellectuals. I was proud to see America finally recognize black people as something other than servants, entertainers, athletes and welfare cheats.

As the years have gone by, I have become quite jaundiced about Black History month. In fact, there is a way in which it touches my anger, even rage, at the way black people have been and continue to be treated in our American society.

Why do we have a thing called Black History Month? And just what is Black History? That there is something we can separate out and call Black history, says that black people have not been accepted into the ranks of history, normal history, American history; a history that has excluded black folks (and others deemed insufficiently white).

Given the current reality of American culture, it is good that there is a Black History month. It's a time when, mostly in classrooms, many in the country pay attention, and take note of the fact that blacks have been an integral part of the making of America. It's a time when we learn about people who've made significant achievements and are Black. It's a time when we learn about people of significance who've largely been ignored.

In fact, that was the notion behind the origination of black history month, which first started out as Black history week, initiated by Carter G. Woodson. A son of slave parents, who earned a doctorate degree from Harvard, attended the 50th anniversary of emancipation in Chicago in 1915. Excited by the thousands of African Americans who attended from all over the country, he decided to form an organization to promote the scientific study of black life and history.

He and other black intellectuals published The Journal of Negro History, which he hoped to use as a basis of a celebration. He chose February because both Abraham Lincoln and Frederic Douglas were already being celebrated during that month. But more important than celebrating two men, he wanted to expand it into a study of black history and a great race.

As early as the 1940s, blacks in West Virginia began to celebrate February as Negro History Month. The Civil Rights era and black power movement brought much more attention to the study and celebration and it became known as Black History month. Since the mid-1970s, both Democratic and Republican presidents have issued proclamations in recognition of Black History month.

It is true, that "we have come a long way". It is true, that scholastic books used on a regular basis in our classrooms do a much better job of identifying blacks and other historically marginalized people. It's true that we see blacks in positions of leadership in corporations, as mayors, we even have a black president. There is no doubt, progress has been made.

But let us not fool ourselves. A look at almost any metric of well-being in the US, be it wealth, health, education, life expectancy, blacks are disproportionately on the bottom end of the measurement. While I can't prove a correlation, I strongly believe it was no coincidence that after the election of our first black president, the next election cycle heard great cries from people who wanted to "take our country back".

The ugly truth is that blacks in America have always been separated out for distinctive treatment. From slavery, to Jim Crow laws, the GI Bill, redlining; disparate interest rates, disparate sentencing for the use of crack cocaine vs cocaine, to driving while black.

So what's black history and what is American history? How do we make the distinction? As long as we confine our assessment to individuals who can be identified as black, we can hold them up to learn about, as individual black people, who are worthy of being known.

But the moment we go beyond the individual and look at black history, we must also look at white history as a point of comparison. Within the context of our American experience, neither whiteness nor blackness means very much without the reference point of the other,

Ira Katznelson, professor of political science and history at Columbia University, and the author of "When Affirmative Action Was White: An Untold History of Racial Inequality in America," says:

"During Jim Crow's last hurrah in the 1930s and 1940s... policy decisions dealing with welfare, work, and war were repeatedly modified to exclude or treat differentially the vast majority of African Americans. Between 1945 and 1955, the federal government transferred unprecedented sums to support retirement and to fashion opportunities for job skills, education, homeownership, and small business formation..."

"The GI Bill was the largest targeted fully national program of support in American history. The country passed new labor laws that promoted unions and protected people as they worked... collectively [these programs] organized a revolution in the role of government that remade the country's social structure in dramatic, positive ways. "

"But most blacks were left out...At the very moment a wide array of public policies were providing most white Americans with valuable tools to insure their old age, get good jobs, acquire economic security, build assets, and gain middle-class status, black Americans were mainly left to fend on their own. Ever since, American society has been confronted with the results of this twisted and unstated form of affirmative action."

Is this black history or is it white history? I suggest it's simply American history. Its not enough that black folks learn their history to help lift them up, to help sustain them, to help them "be somebody". It is not enough that we learn about individual black people who stand out in their various fields.

White people, who represent the dominant culture, have to learn that same history; they have to learn the white side of black history. It is not enough that they learn about individual
Rev. Walter LeFlore

black people. It's not enough that they learn that black people have had a hard time in our country. They must learn white history. They must learn the socio, political, economic aspects of American history and it must include the realities of race, both white and black.

When the dominant culture teaches and learns the un-sanitized version of our history, the history that suggests only people of color have been left out, a very different image of America will emerge.

We in America like to think of ourselves as being tolerant. I question the truth of the statement. But more importantly, I question the very premise as something to be proud of. Tolerance has always struck me as a very low bar. If one is not tolerant, then one is in-tolerant. It leaves very little room for error. Even the very notion of tolerance seems minimalist: to put up with, to not reject. Tolerance is a far cry from inclusion and acceptance.

As a person from an historically marginalized group, I know first hand the difference between tolerance and inclusion, tolerance and acceptance. Its for this reason I have repeatedly harped on the notion. We can not call ourselves a welcoming denomination or congregation if we merely tolerate those who are different, those who believe in God and Jesus, those who are transgender, those who for whatever reason are culturally and socially marginalized. We do not truly welcome those that we merely tolerate. Tolerance is not acceptance.

Our standing on the side of love campaign is a wonderful sound-bite. But to live it is going to be hard work. To live it is hard work, for each and every one of us. Regardless of how we define ourselves, regardless of our position in life, there are those we have a hard time accepting as full human beings...only the details change.

Newton's law of physics says that an object at rest, stationary, will remain that way unless there is a force that prompts it to change. For many of us, we don't see our intolerance unless there is a force that prompts our perspective to change. Some of us are fortunate enough that an internal drive for the truth or our keen desire to stand on the side of love provides the necessary force for growth.

It is my deep hope that our Unitarian Universalist principles, our search for truth, our commitment to standing on the side of love, will move us closer to being genuinely welcoming of the stranger, to genuinely accepting one another, to genuinely living as an interconnected web of life.

May it be so. May my hopes and dreams come true.

Amen