

Our Living Tradition

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“I do not pretend to understand the moral universe.
The arc is a long one.
My eye reaches but little ways.
I cannot calculate the curve
and complete the figure by experience of sight.
I can divine it by conscience.
And from what I see I am sure it bends toward justice.”

So said Theodore Parker, the famous,
and in some quarters infamous,
Unitarian minister from 19th century Boston,
arguably best known these days for keeping a gun in his desk
while writing his sermons in the 1850s,
as he harboured Ellen and William Craft,
a black couple who were escaped slaves
who had become members of his church.

The Fugitive Slave Law had recently come into effect,
allowing southern slaveowners exceptional powers
to enter the northern states and retrieve their slaves.

Parker sent a furious letter to Millard Filmore, a fellow Unitarian,
who also happened to be the U.S. president who signed the law.

Though he detested slavery,
he felt he had no other option under the constitution.

“I do not pretend to understand the moral universe.
The arc is a long one. And from what I see I am sure it bends toward justice.”

A century later, Martin Luther King, Jr., polished Parker’s words
down to the quote many of us know today:
“the arc of the moral universe is long,
but it bends toward justice.”

I don't know about you, but there are days I doubt it.

Days when I look at the missteps and setbacks
on the path to justice, and I wonder
if we are making any progress at all.

But then other moments come along.
Moments that shake things up.
Moments that give cause for a cautious hope.
Moments such as the racial reckoning we are now in the midst of.

Moments that force us to pull back
and take in the longer, reassuring view.

And entertain the sacred possibility that, just maybe,
the arc does bend towards justice,
especially when people of conscience
devote themselves to making it so.

That is work that we, as Unitarian Universalists, are called to do.
It is work we have been doing for a long time.
And it is work that we have sometimes been very good at.
And at other times, not so much...

In this extraordinary moment we're in,
as we try to find our way,
individually and together, to bend the arc,
I believe we would do well, as UUs, to look back,
to examine our tradition's history in regards to race and racism,
and take some hard-won lessons
from the long stretch of the proverbial arc
that has led us to this present moment.

So, in the next few minutes, I'm offering you a crash course—
an attempt to cover the good, the bad, and the ugly.
But also the progress, and the promise in our story.

Much of this history is set in the United States.
But please don't discount it on those grounds.
For it has affected us, and our congregation, too.

Not least because this congregation
and the Canadian Unitarian Council were an integral part
of the Unitarian Universalist Association for many decades.

And the majority of the ministers
who have served this congregation in its 175 years
have, for better and for worse,
hailed from south of the border.

So, I offer you a quick survey of this history,
told through a series of anecdotes—
admittedly, without the nuance
or more fulsome treatment they deserve.

Each of these stories deserves
at least a single sermon on its own. But, alas.
That sermon series will have to come another day.

Our story in North America begins in New England
with the arrival almost exactly four centuries ago,
of radical Puritans who were deeply committed
to reforming the Church of England—so much so
that they set off to build a shining “City on a Hill”
in the “New World” in search of religious freedom,
or, as one of my profs said in seminary, in search
of freedom from people who didn’t agree with them.”

Of course, there was nothing new about this continent.
It was already home to numerous Indigenous civilizations.

The Puritans of Massachusetts Bay, as legend has it,
for their very survival,
quickly leaned on the kindness of these strangers—
the Massachusett and Wampanoag peoples of the area,
giving rise to the animating story behind American Thanksgiving.

What is so often left out
of that saccharine telling of the settler story
is that conflict quickly erupted as the colonists,
as colonizers are wont to do,

claimed more and more land and resources for themselves.

Within two generations, armed conflict broke out, with the death of thousands in what's known as King Philip's War in the 1670's.

To make a long story short, the encounter between the original inhabitants and European settlers pretty much went downhill from there.

While the first Unitarians in Canada were not among the early waves of French and English settlers, by the time they did arrive from Britain in the 1840s, these working-class and merchant-class people benefitted from the foundations of empire that were already prepared for them in Upper and Lower Canada, to the detriment, of course, of the Indigenous peoples already here.

(While Unitarians in Canada were not, in my understanding, involved in the creation or operation of the residential schools, I have heard anecdotally that there was a Unitarian residential school in Montana in the early 20th century.)

In terms of slavery, I'm not aware of Unitarians in Canada holding slaves, as the practice had been abolished in 1834, a few years before the first Unitarian congregations were established here.

In the U.S., the story is more complicated.

It is true that many Unitarians were active abolitionists. And that some were reluctantly so.

William Ellery Channing, sometimes called the Father or apostle of American Unitarianism, was one such person.

Raised in Rhode Island, his witness of slavery in practice in Virginia in the late 18th century affected him deeply, though he was slow to use the power of his pulpit against it.

Though he was the foremost preacher of his day

and enjoyed celebrity status far beyond Boston,
he remained a reluctant abolitionist
until he approached the end of his career.

He served as the minister of the Federal Street Church
from 1803 until his death in 1842.

In 1840, he argued with the board of the church,
wanting the church to host the funeral for his friend
Charles Follen, an outspoken abolitionist,
who had been killed in a tragic accident at sea.

The board refused. Follen was far too controversial.

It was effectively a confidence measure.

Channing offered his resignation.
The board did not accept it,
out of respect for his almost 40 years as their minister.

But Channing only preached one more sermon to the congregation.

Like many wealthy churches in the northern states,
the benefactors of the Federal Street Church
had financial ties to the slave trade.

That surely inhibited Channing, at times,
as he tried to hold the church together.

Lest we think ourselves set apart from this history,
we should remind ourselves
that after our own congregation was founded in 1845,
there were a number of fundraising appeals and tours
made by our earliest ministers—appeals made
to the wealthy donors of the congregations in the U.S.

I am not sure if any detailed accounting exists in archives anywhere,
but it would be more of a surprise to me than not
to learn that the earliest financial contributions to help us
buy land here in Toronto and build our first building
were not in some way tainted with the evil of slavery.

I want to pause here to reflect on how racism often shows up in our self-understanding as UUs. We so deeply want to be counted among the “good guys,” we want to know ourselves on the right side of history.

While that is a noble goal, I think it is misguided. Yes, there are powerful stories in our history of people doing the right thing.

But that is only part of the story. And it is a sign of our enduring privilege if we only acknowledge the positive stories, without also contending with what is embarrassing, painful, or even shameful from our past.

History, like people, is complicated. Most every person who’s ever lived is something of a mixed bag. A person who has done both good things and bad.

When we’re not able or willing to acknowledge our capacity for harm, we’re more likely than not to behave in ways that perpetuate harm, or simply fail to notice what is truly happening.

As is sometimes said, the only way is through. And so it is with our history.

Shifting now to a time that is in living memory for some of us, I want to tell you about the heady time during the Civil Rights Movement.

My friend and colleague Rosemary Bray McNatt, interviewed many years ago to help write Coretta Scott King’s autobiography.

Though Rosemary didn’t get the job, Ms. King told her during the course of their conversation, that she and Dr. King had seriously considered becoming Unitarians.

When Dr. King was doing his doctoral work at Boston University in the early 50s, he and Coretta visited Unitarian churches often.

In the end, they didn't feel they could build their movement from a predominantly white denomination. And they were likely quite right.

But the relationships endured.

When MLK put out a call to clergy everywhere to join him to march in protest of the police's use of force against non-violent protestors on what came to be called Bloody Sunday, some 200 UU ministers rushed to Selma on short notice, including John Morgan, the minister of this congregation in the 60s, who was sent there by our own board of directors.

(As I was logging in today, I was delighted to see that John's wife Jeannette is with us this morning. Jeannette, we're so honoured to have you here with us today.)

The situation in Selma was tense, and one young minister named James Reeb, was attacked and killed by a group of racists who deeply despised the presence of these white interlopers.

Reeb's death was a pivotal moment. LBJ, the U.S. president, sent roses to Reeb's hospital bed and directed a military plan to take his wife to him as he lay dying.

MLK preached at his memorial service.

And a couple of days later, when LBJ tabled the Voting Rights Act, he honoured the memory of James Reeb in doing so.

In the tumultuous times that were the late-60s, there was a palpable feeling of promise in Unitarian Universalism, the new religion created by the merger of our two parent traditions in 1961.

Our historically white denomination
was growing more racially diverse.

Until things came completely unravelled by the end of the decade
in a difficult chapter in our history known
as the Black Empowerment Controversy.

I can't do justice to this chapter in the time I have left today.

In short, in 1968, a major financial commitment was made
by the General Assembly, the body made up of delegates
from all of our congregations, including ours,
to support black empowerment initiatives.

A year later, it was clear those promises would not be kept.

For people of colour and their allies, this was a terrible betrayal.

For those in power, it was a matter of financial viability.

In the year since the promise had been made,
it became clear the outgoing president of the UUA, Dana Greeley,
had effectively left the denomination in financial ruin.

Some felt that was no excuse.

After all, the Unitarian congregations of New England alone,
the heirs of one branch of the Puritans from centuries earlier,
were sitting on valuable real estate and ancient endowments.

Throughout this chapter there were protests, walk-outs,
and competing factions seeking to move forward in some way.

In the end, it all just fell apart.
And many people of colour left,
some for a time, and some forever.

Over two decades would pass before Unitarian Universalism
returned to the deep work of racial justice.

The wound was that deep.

At the UUA General Assembly in Calgary in 1992,
delegates from across North America
passed a resolution calling on UUs everywhere
to support a vision of our “faith which reflects
the reality of a racially diverse and multicultural village.”

Over the coming years, that resolution
would lead to programming
to examine systemic racism within our tradition.

Almost a quarter of a century later,
this is work that is still ongoing.

And it has been a humbling journey,
not so much at times towards wholeness,
but through the hard slog of recognizing the ways
that we so often fall short of our ideals
and the values we profess.

Four years ago, in what is called the Hiring Controversy,
it became apparent in a widespread way
that in the formal structures of the UUA,
most of the power rested in white hands.

Though the then president of the UUA was Latino,
almost every other senior role in an organization
that had for two decades
been steadily working to become anti-racist was white.

This rightly prompted some deep soul-searching that continues.

And it has resulted in massive structural change at the UUA,
as people of colour have moved into positions of leadership
throughout the organisation.

I can attest to the powerful impact it is having.

For the past three years, I've sat on the MFC,
the Ministerial Fellowship Committee.

This is the body comprised of fourteen people,
half ministers, and half lay people,
who oversee the credentialing process
for all ministers in North America.

There is intentional diversity
built into the composition of this committee.

And for my time on the MFC,
we have been working to examine how bias and issues of power
play out among us and on an institutional level.

We have been working to transform our processes,
and to upend our sense of what “a minister looks like,”
because the answer we bring to that question
is so often a reflection of our own identity and experience.

While we have so far still to go,
I can confirm that the MFC is a safer place than it used to be
for people of colour, for people of different genders,
for people who are polyamorous, are differently abled,
or are from a poor or working-class background.

Our ministry is growing much more diverse.

Because we have been consistently confronting our role
in sustaining a culture of white supremacy
that has been rooted in a narrow view
of who can be a minister in our tradition.

I believe our faith is the better for it.

In the past couple of years, there has been an initiative,
in both the US and Canada branches of UUism,
to add an 8th Principle to the existing seven that guide our faith.

Though the language is still in flux,
the idea behind it is to make a deep commitment
to becoming an anti-racist denomination.

In Canada, this effort has taken the name

of the Dismantling Racism Task Force.

You'll be hearing much more about this in the months to come.
As we focus anew on our work for racial justice.

I know this has been a lot to take in.
And I know some of it may be hard to hold.
Sit with that feeling. Don't dismiss it too quickly.
Discomfort is where change comes from.

There is so much more to say.
And I feel I've only scratched the surface.

I've said nothing about the black ministers, going back decades, who found it impossible to find a foothold in our churches.

I've not mentioned the Unitarian writer
whose editorial in a Tulsa newspaper
sparked the racial violence we are now coming to know
as the Tulsa Massacre of 1920.

And I haven't even touched on the work of my predecessor,
The Rev. Mark Morrison-Reed,
who since retiring from this congregation in 2005,
has devoted so much energy to documenting
so much of our complicated and at times
deeply disappointing history around racism.

We often refer to Unitarian Universalism as a "living tradition."
It speaks to the ways our faith continues to evolve and grow.

Today I have named just a few
of our growing pains along the way.

Though we may wish it otherwise,
these experiences as also part of our living tradition.

My hope is that in naming them,
bringing them into the full light of day,
we might come to understand ourselves for who we are—
and not cling forever to an idealized version of ourselves.

Because if we can be real about who we are,
including who we've been,
even with all of our shortcomings,
we have the real possibility of actually becoming
the people we aspire to be.

A people, who having taken stock of our situation
are still able to say
that though the moral arc of the universe be long,
we believe it does indeed bend toward justice—
because we have seen it happen,
in ourselves, in our tradition,
and, hopefully, in our wider world, too.

So may it be.