

Our UU Roots
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In telling our story as Unitarians, Universalists, and Unitarian Universalists, we like to promote the positive side of our history. We like to think we have always promoted justice and equality. However, just like with any human history, there are times we have not lived the values we preached. For as many anti-slavery people in our history, we have equally people that owned slaves and fought for slavery. For as many people who fought for civil rights in our history, we have had people who worked against it. Unitarians and Universalists have a complicated history in regards to promoting the rights and dignity of people of color. We participated in white flight, just like everyone else and even moved our congregations to the suburbs. We ordained African-American ministers, but could not find a single congregation that would call them. We wanted people of color in our congregations, yet, we were not open to different worship styles, which may have opened some barriers. We did not have representatives from people of color in our National Associations or local church leadership.

World War II began to shift things for people. People began to see what was happening in Nazi Germany as a reflection of what was happening the United States.

First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Socialist.

Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Trade Unionist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me. - Martin Niemoller, prominent Protestant Pastor, outspoken against Hitler, spent time in Nazi Concentration Camp

It was these new ways of understanding the world, which created reports and studies of how to talk about race in our churches. We started looking at what we could do. We also started educating ministers in racism and gave them practical experience in resisting racism. This was the foundation that led to the overwhelming response of Unitarian Universalists to Martin Luther King, Jr.'s call to Selma.

As Mark Morrison-Reed recounts in his article in the UU World, “among the 30,000 who marched were about 500 UU lay people and 250 UU Ministers.” We showed up in Selma! And this continues to be a place of pride in our history. In fact, hundreds of UUs are making plans to go to Selma in March of 2015 for the 50th anniversary of that march.

Unfortunately, this highlight in history was followed by one of our lowest. It is called 'The Black Empowerment Controversy;' however, many feel it should be called 'The White Power Controversy.'

In October 1967, in response to the rising tide of violent protests and riots in the inner cities of America, a Emergency Conference of Unitarian Universalists was held. During this conference, a majority of African-Americans withdrew to form the Black Unitarian Universalist Caucus. This caucus was immediately seen as controversial and labeled 'reverse racism.' The Caucus made demands of the UUs assembled asking for African-American representation happen on the UUA Board of Trustees, Executive Committee, Finance Committee, and subsidies for Black Ministers. In addition, they called for the creation of a Black Affairs Council and for it to be financed by the UUA at \$250,000 per year for four years.

These were accepted by those present, but then rejected by the UUA Board of Trustees. After many different proposals on how the UUA would handle race issues, it was finally decided to fund a Black Affairs Council at \$300,000 a year. However, soon after this decision was made, it was discovered the UUA's finances were not sound and it could not fund what was originally promised.

In 1969 at the National UU General Assembly, the proposal to fund the Black Affairs Council was placed back on the agenda, but placed at the end of the three days. It was proposed by the Caucus that the item was urgent and needed to be placed at the top of the agenda. This did not happen. It was suggested again on the second day, and when again it did not happen, a majority of members from the Black UU Caucus left the assembly. In addition, to show solidarity, 400 white UUs left the assembly as well. This caused such deep wound in Unitarian Universalists that the UUA did not begin to touch racial justice or the events that happened until 1979.

Since 1979, Unitarian Universalists have been actively examining their own racial biases; developing programs to build understanding of anti-racism, anti-oppression, and multiculturalism; clergy are educated throughout the seminary experience on these issues. We have created openings in our national leadership. We have promoted programs to help congregations call ministers of color.

Most importantly, what we have built over the last five years is a reputation of showing up and being allies. We showed up in Phoenix, AZ when undocumented immigrants were being detained in inhumane conditions. We showed up in efforts to promote the Occupy Movement. We showed up in North Carolina in the Moral Monday protests to condemn the reduction in voting rights. And most recently, we have shown up in Ferguson, MO where police brutality is out of hand.

I have been reluctant to broach this topic in the pulpit. I was trying to find a way to make it relevant to the lives in this congregation and the more I struggled with this the more I became overwhelmed by what I was to do. Even in just preparing for today, the amount of information out there and being sure if I was quoting the right sources or promoting the right ideas was absolutely daunting. However, it became even more daunting that I wasn't saying anything. More and more, I keep hearing of this idea that white people feel comfortable waiting for more information, for waiting to be 100% sure, when in the meantime, more and more black men and women are being killed; more and more police are using extreme means of violence on peaceful protestors.

I know it is hard to discern what is fact and what is fiction, especially in this time of media sources that have no integrity in their reporting. However, recently UU ministers in the St. Louis area participated in a live web cast conversation about what is happening in the Ferguson area.

They report the following:

1. The protests happening are highly organized by a coalition of over 50 agencies.
2. One of these agencies, Don't Shoot Coalition, recently proposed rules of engagement to the law enforcement officials in the area. Some of those include:
3. The rules of engagement are not being honored fully by law enforcement agencies.
4. The UU clergy report the escalation of violence at the protests have been by law enforcement and arrests have specifically been targeting key leaders in the area, including clergy.

How is it we respond as UUs over 1900 miles away? One way is what Meg Riley suggests in her article in the Huffington Post, "Seven Ways to Prepare for the Ferguson Grand Jury's Statement," which is to find a perspective that speaks to you in this narrative that allows you to be present.

For me, there are several perspectives: There is the perspective of the mother of Michael Brown and imagining the pain of losing a child; of not feeling my child is safe as he or she walks the streets of the town we live in. There is the perspective of the clergy involved and how they are there representing as allies in this unfolding story as well as creating safe spaces for people to find comfort. Finally, I can also identify as a child of a police officer and imagine the struggle law enforcement is having in this narrative. I have sat and listened to the stories my father tells of his time being a Los Angeles Police Officer during and after the Watts Riots in LA. The idea is always safety, but that idea of safety can often be fueled by fear. Police officers lay their lives on the line regularly and encounter some of the most horrendous conditions of human society. Sometimes the influence of what they have witnessed can manifest itself in fear of what might happen. I know from listening to my dad, cops regularly tell their own stories or stories of fellow officers where a mistake was made and a life was lost or severely damaged.

I am by no means saying that police have the right to respond with brutal force, but I can understand how it can manifest itself through fear of the unknown danger. And our society's foundation since 9/11 has been based on fear.

Thus, why UUs have become a people who show up, because we are tired of being afraid and understand fear does not promote just societies. We may be over 1900 miles away from Ferguson, but we have ways we can make a difference in our own community.

We need to acknowledge our own privilege. What are the ways we have privilege that we may be blind to? I hope to continue the conversation by creating opportunities for us to look at and find out what privilege we may have.

We have community peace rallies every Wednesday. This is not just peace from war, but peace in all human relations.

We can show up when rights are being denied. We can make intentional decisions to offer correct information in situations like Ferguson. We can make efforts to make sure our own legal system is just and fair. Ferguson is not just about Michael Brown or police brutality, it is about structures of systematic racism that still permeate our society. We can make efforts to break that down. We can become allies to people of color. This means we learn from them how we can help; we listen to their stories and help them find places for their voices to be heard. Most importantly, we cannot be quiet and we need to show up wherever we are needed to move progress forward in breaking down systems of oppression.

What I need from you is to know how you want to engage these topics. Where do you find passion in this discussion? Email me or phone me and let me know.

May we hold close the following words from Rev. Dr. Howard Thurman:

“Keep fresh before me the moments of my High Resolve, that in fair weather or in foul, in good times or in tempests, in the days when the darkness and the foe are nameless or familiar, I may not forget that to which my life is committed. Keep fresh before me the moments of my high resolve.”