

Celebrating Unitarian and Universalist Black History

A Message for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation

By The Rev. CJ McGregor

Delivered on February 5, 2021

If you get your news from MSNBC and watch the show Morning Joe, you'll know that as a part of celebrating February as Black History Month the hosts ask their guests and commentators to name an African American that has inspired them and why. Many names came to my mind when I asked myself this question. Maya Angelou, MLK, Langston Hughes, Barack Obama, and others. There was one other person who inspires me. The Rev. Mark Morrison Reed. I had the pleasure of spending three days with Reed a couple of years ago and our time together changed my ministry. We met at a Minister's retreat. The night before the last day at a Minister's retreat there is always a program called the Odyssey. Not unlike our Odyssey program at all Faiths when I interview a member of the congregation, the program allows a Minister to tell their story. I recently re-read the book *Black Pioneers* written by Reed. He tells stories of his black family arriving at a white Unitarian church in the 1960's. The book chronicles the lives of black pioneers in a white denomination. Reed has a unique perspective as being part of the only black family to join a Chicago Unitarian congregation. In his book, *Darkening Doorways* he writes. "I saw so few of my hue that I could not help but be conscious of the only other African American in the children's choir."

Reed described his experience as person of color entering a congregation of white people. He says it wasn't until late in the twentieth century that Unitarians became uncomfortable with the absence of people of color in their congregations. Our history in welcoming people of color into our congregations is not one of honor. Reed describes this history as a "tale of systemic paternalism and prejudice induced failure of vision, of squandered opportunities, and of good intentions turning into tragedy more often than triumph."

Our Unitarian and Universalist Black history is shameful, disturbing, and enraging. A history that no one cared about, researched, or understood. This begs us to ask the question, Why was it left out? I wonder, Did we assume that Unitarians and Universalists were always so open and welcoming to African Americans? Reed asks, "Why in a denomination that revels in the hero worship of Benjamin Rush, Thomas Jefferson, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Lydia Child, PT Barnum, Susan B. Anthony, and Albert Schweitzer, to invoke a few, did we ignore our black forbears? Why this silence? Could it be that religious liberalism as an icon of enlightened progressivism simply could not survive a reckoning with this truth?" I've concluded that our history never talked about African Americans because even within a liberal religious faith, African Americans were invisible. They were not seen having as worth of visibility and as part of our story.

In order for us to claim our place on the right side of this issue today, we need to reckon with our past. So, here we go. The American Unitarian Association was founded in 1825. They weren't concerned whether people joined or not, they simply wanted to tell people about Unitarianism. Unitarians at the time were the elite and I'm sorry to say the prejudiced. There was no concern for a relationship with people and communities of color. One of the most radical Unitarian ministers at the time, Theodore Parker, once wrote, "An Anglo-Saxon with common sense does

not like the Africanization of America; he wishes the superior race to multiply rather than the inferior.” Would you believe that Parker was an abolitionist.? So, as a card carrying Unitarian, he believed that African Americans should be free, but kept down as an inferior race. Many Unitarians did not support abolition, reluctant to take a stand because their wealth from the cotton business needed the support of southern cotton growers, many supported slavery, some supported the return of blacks to Africa, and those ministers condemning slavery were denounced as traitors. And so, it seems for Unitarians of that time, African Americans had no rights, were property, not fully human, and had no story.

Mark Morrison Reed tells us, “The Unitarian Universalist church and others like it will remain largely segregated until there is a twofold transformation: one in society, the other within the church. First, on a societal level, it is essential that Unitarian Universalists and other liberal religionists never forget that political and economic freedoms are the mainstay of intellectual freedom, and that inequities and injustice subsequently undermine all freedom. This realization presses us to take seriously the cliché that until all of us are free, none of us is truly free. It is a “moral imperative,” then, that we commit ourselves to the establishment of a just society. The result of this endeavor will be the evolution of a society potentially more responsive to Unitarian Universalist values. Second, within the liberal church, the transformation would begin with the strengthening of our spirituality through an enriched story—a story that exposes our commitment to freedom, shakes up our class bias, sensitizes us to the needs of others, strengthens our sense of human connectedness, and, finally, inspires us to struggle with others for freedom.”

There were African Americans in our history that changed our denomination. Courageously they promoted the free church and liberal religion. It is good, as we celebrate black history, that we get to know of few of these people. Honor them, and honor their stories.

While the creation of Black Lives UU might seem to be a novel development in the history of both Black and liberal religion, African Americans have engaged with and been key figures in American religious liberalism since the eighteenth century. Gloster Dalton, a freed slave, was a founding member of the first Universalist church in the United States in 1785. Amy Scott, a free Black woman, was likewise a founding member of the First Universalist Society in Philadelphia in 1790. Egbert Ethelred Brown founded a Unitarian congregation in Jamaica in 1908 and then moved to Harlem, where he assembled the Harlem Unitarian Church in 1920. In 1947, Lewis A. McGee founded the Free Religious Fellowship in Chicago, a Unitarian church that is still in existence. Along with these pioneers, Black members of the denomination founded the Black Unitarian Universalist Caucus (BUUC) in the late 1960s in an attempt to make the denomination more responsive to the demands of the Black Power Movement. While that organization lasted just six years, it provided a model for the contemporary Black Lives UU movement.

For years, our UU communities were plagued with fear and aversion to talking about race. For years, our efforts to promote racial justice went underground, channeled into the safer code word of “urban ministry.” Little by little we’ve gotten our courage back. This is a long story for another day. Suffice it to say, it’s been hard, for everybody in our movement. But slowly we’ve learned that we really can talk about what happened—the hope, the resolve, the disappointments, the failures. We are still learning from the past, and learning that the past doesn’t have to control us. The beginning of community is truth telling. This is the promise and challenge of the Black Lives Matter movement. As long as we fail to hear people trying to be heard, as long as we

stay blind to the stories of those around us (including the tragic ones), as long as we stay silent about institutional bias and perversion, our days are numbered. If our faith is going to continue to be a vital force in our life and the life of our community, we need to stand up and listen. The right time is always now, lest we miss the moment, and are forced to receive the pathetic words – too late.

Looking back, the white UU minister David Parke says:

“I have never felt prouder of my church than I did on May the 26th in 1968 when our overwhelmingly White denomination said Yes to its militant Black minority. Yes, we said, we embrace you as Unitarian Universalists. Yes, we stand with you in your pain and rage as Black Americans. Yes, we accept your vision of a nation and a denomination led out of bondage by those having a direct experience of oppression. Yes, we trust you with the million dollars. Yes, we know what other programs will suffer, but we are willing to do with less because you have done with less for so long. When, I ask, have Unitarian Universalists, Black and White together, stood so tall? Not in my lifetime. Perhaps not ever.”

I leave you with the words of The Rev. Bill Sinkford. Sinkford was the first elected African American to the Presidency of the Unitarian Universalist Association. He writes, “In a faith community that is still predominantly white, the personal stories, the songs, of Unitarian Universalists of African, Asian, Native American, and Latina/o descent can be drowned out by the dominant melody. The risk is that those stories will remain unheard and invisible, encouraging our faith to hear its song as the song of white people only. Unitarian Universalism is changing. There are more persons of color and Latina/o adults in our pews. And, thanks to adoption and blended families, our religious education programs are home to far more children whose lineage traces to Africa, Asia, South America, and the indigenous cultures of the United States. We are committed to transforming this faith into one that is truly anti-oppressive and multicultural. The stories in this pamphlet are the faith journeys of African Americans who have found a home in this great liberal faith. We publish these stories with the hope that the UU choir will always include these voices. “Lift every voice.”

May the light of reason, the comfort of kindness, the depth of a growing spiritual life, the outreach of action, and the acceptance of our own goodness and potential always be our inspiration and the source of our continuing gratitude to our founders and to those who have carried the torch that we hold high.

May it be so.