

OUR STORY

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As you create a new vision, a new aspiration, a new story about race and diversity here at All Soul's, it may be helpful to know some of the foundational stories that have been built into the walls of Unitarian Universalism. Helpful not to have them determine your vision by any means. But helpful to know where we've been so that the way forward may avoid some of the spiritual pitfalls of our past.

Some of you may have heard these stories. A few here may have lived them. But even if this is your first hearing, they are a part of our faith's story and therefore important for you to know.

In spring of 2009, I spent a few days in Alabama with the Vision Legacy Tour, a pilgrimage to Selma, Montgomery, and other key sites in the Civil Rights struggle of the 1960's. Unitarian Universalist presence in these places in those times offers a compelling story, one we are proud to tell:

Selma, 1965. Black protestors demanding the right to vote try to march to the state capital via the Pettus Bridge, where they are met by fire hoses and beaten back. The day becomes known as "Bloody Sunday." Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. calls for White clergy to come stand with him and the local Black community; the UUA Board answers the call and travels as a group from Boston to Selma, where dozens more UU ministers join them. The Rev. James Reeb is killed by a group of angry Whites as he and two colleagues leave a diner in town, becoming a UU martyr. Dr. King gives the eulogy for Reeb at Brown Chapel. President Johnson, moved to action by the scenes of violence broadcast over network television from Selma, sends federal troops. With their protection, the marchers cross the Pettus Bridge and proceed to Montgomery. Photographs show the Rev. Dana Greeley, first President of the UUA, marching in the rank directly behind Dr. King and the Rev. Ralph Abernathy. Viola Liuzzo, a UU laywoman from Detroit, is killed outside Selma while transporting Black protestors, becoming the second known UU martyr in the Civil Rights movement. Within the year, Johnson signs the Voting Rights Act into law.

Dick Leonard was there in Selma and I commend his book, *Call to Selma*, to you.

Indeed, Unitarian Universalists have chosen Selma as a foundational story about our faith, and our faith's engagement with race. It is a success story. It makes us feel good. The issue was clear and our faith answered the call. Two of our number gave their lives in the cause of justice. We were just; we were brave, we were innocent; no wonder we retell this story to our children and to ourselves. There is a memorial to the Selma martyrs (including a young Black man, Jimmy Lee Jackson, who was the first killed in this particular chapter of the Civil Rights story) in the Chapel at our home office on 25 Beacon Street in Boston. I organized its dedication in my first year as President.

We are happy to claim many other stories with these same characteristics:

In the 1850s, Theodore Parker preaches from the Federal Street Church pulpit with a loaded gun by his side, lest officials try to arrest the fugitive slaves in the sanctuary.

In the 1950s, the First Unitarian Church of Chicago buys newspaper ads inviting people of color to visit and join the congregation, as they did.

Perhaps even my 2001 election as the first African American to head a predominantly White denomination may fall in this category of stories we are happy to tell.

Stories of courage, of success, of moral clarity, of being leaders on the cutting edge in the cause of justice. Stories that make us feel good about ourselves.

The difficulty is not in claiming these stories as part of our history, our identity, our definition of who we are as a religious people. Since the stories are true, we should know them and even allow ourselves to be proud. The difficulty is that there are so many other stories about our faith's engagement with race that we find harder to claim:

Unitarian involvement and profit from the transatlantic slave trade.

Widespread Unitarian and Universalist opposition to the abolition of slavery.

The refusal of the UU Church of Atlanta to admit Black members in the 1950s, ultimately leading the American Unitarian Association to close the church.

In the late 1980s and '90s, the failed attempt to launch new biracial congregations. Only one survives as an autonomous faith community. I had the

painful task of closing most of these when I joined the UUA staff in 1994.

The all too frequent rejection of candidates of color during the ministerial search process in our congregations, and the difficulties ministers of color have faced in building successful parish settlements.

And of all the stories we have difficulty incorporating into our identity as a people, perhaps the most important is the Black Empowerment Controversy that began in 1968. Anyone retelling a story of this complexity should feel considerable trepidation, confident only that their accounting of events will displease some, perhaps all. Here are the bare bones as I know them:

Following Martin Luther King's assassination in 1968 (just three years after the events in Selma), Black communities in American cities erupt in violence; national broadcasters bring the "riots" into the nation's living rooms. At a conference convened by the UUA to imagine a response to this violence, a caucus of Black Unitarian Universalists forms and makes demands of the Association.

The 1968 UUA General Assembly passes the caucus's demand for \$1,000,000 in reparations for Black economic development, to be administered by Black UUs. The tumultuous process leading up to the vote includes a walkout by many Black UUs, White allies, and youth. Not all Blacks join the walkout. In response, an integrated group (Black and White Action) forms and demands funding. Congregations and families, including my own, are torn between the "separatist" and "integrationist" approaches.

New UUA President Bob West (1969) faces a financial crisis as a result of Greeley administration policies and just more than half of the promised \$1,000,000 is ever paid. Many Black UUs, like myself, leave the faith feeling deeply betrayed. Unitarian Universalism, in most material respects, withdraws from engagement with racial justice. It was just too hard.

Coincidentally or not, these events ushered in a steady decline in reported congregational membership that lasted until the mid-1980s.

Feelings ran very high throughout the Black Empowerment Controversy. Dana Greeley literally pushed his way to the front of the line at a microphone so that he could speak against the reparations. People spat at one another. This was not who we thought we were. People on both sides of the controversy were so embittered that some individuals on both sides refused to enter 25 Beacon St. again until I became President in 2001.

You can see why we don't like this story. It is a story of conflict and failure, not success. We saw each other as enemies. The question of who stood on

the side of justice was a matter of genuine disagreement. And innocence could be claimed by no one. This story does not make us feel good and we do not want to revisit it.

I am not arguing that we should simply replace the Selma story, that story of triumph at the heart of our identity around race, with the Black Empowerment story, that story of conflict and failure, I do believe that we have to be able to claim both as part of our heritage, but neither is adequate on its own, or even paired with the other.

First, both of these stories suggest that race is a Black/White issue. They invisibilize render invisible the Native American, the Asian and the Latina/o communities which have been a part of “we the people” all along. We need a story that will allow us to move into a multi-cultural future where racial and cultural identity is often complex.

Second, these are stories from over 40 years ago. Younger UUs in the Millennial generation have grown up assuming racial diversity. Life in a multi-cultural community is normative for them. Even the stories of our triumphs in a Black/White world have little relevance for them.

Third, and most importantly, these stories provide insufficient spiritual grounding for the challenges and opportunities UUs face in the twenty first century. Today, issues of immigration and immigrants rights have to be on our screen. Today, thanks to transracial adoption and blended families, most of our church schools are significantly multi-cultural even if our pews are not. Today, the numbers of adults of color in our congregations have perceptively increased. Today, forty ministers of color serve our congregations, more serve in community ministries, and over forty seminarians of color are preparing for our ministry. Once these students are ordained and begin serving our congregations, the number of active parish ministers of color will approach 10%.

Some of our congregations have embraced this multi-cultural future. The blending of the mostly White All Souls Tulsa Church with the mostly Black New Dimensions congregation is a recent case in point. We need to make room in our story for not just past successes and failures, but the challenges of our current context. Making room will require changing some of our language of self-identity. To describe Unitarian Universalism as a “predominantly White faith” is accurate but not helpful. The phrase contains not one iota of our aspirations, and can lock us in a spirit-deadening acceptance of demographic determinism.

What is our story about Unitarian Universalism and race? And what story do we need? The South African Truth and Reconciliation process I learned about firsthand on a pilgrimage to Africa last November offers several

lessons. The South African people's commitment to discovering and telling the truth allowed them to move beyond apartheid without swinging into the chaos of retribution. In turn, UUs must own and tell both sides of our history, the triumphs and the failures. But this only sets the stage for the real work. As Mary Burton, one of the original Truth and Reconciliation Commissioners said to me, "I have to work at reconciliation every day of my life."

The religious voice was critical in South Africa. I felt privileged to meet leaders like Archbishop Tutu, who time and time again stood in the center of controversy and said, "We are one people and we can be reconciled." Several people I met said Tutu had been "a broken record" on this point, and the vision of the Beloved Community he held up finally prevailed.

Unitarian Universalists need to claim a story of struggle, an unabashedly religious story that can name our successes and our failures, our courage and our cowardice, our sacrifice and our privilege. That story will be aspirational, for at times we have retreated from the call of justice. Yet viewed over the long haul, we have always re-engaged. Our story of struggle is grounded in our faith, values, and tradition, taking the inherent worth and dignity of every person and the fundamental reality of our interconnectedness not as idle phrases but calls to action. This story of struggle will not only put our history in perspective, but also empower us to face the challenges of the days ahead.

The two current Unitarian Universalist stories have left us divided. Some of us, probably most, would choose the Selma narrative of success, but know in our hearts that our work is far from done. Others choose the Black Empowerment narrative and find it hard to honor the courage that is legitimately a part of our history. Even worse, among those in my generation, feelings are still so strong that even discussing our history feels dangerous. We need a story that can bring us together. The choice is ours. Here at All Soul's, the choice is yours. Your contribution can be great. And I wish you very well on living out this particular New Year's Resolution.

So may it be.

Amen