

Thought for Contemplation:

“We are all bound up together in one great bundle of humanity and society cannot trample on the weakest and feeblest of its members without receiving the curse in its own soul...” -Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (1825-1911, Member First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia)

**Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church
Portland, Maine
February 24, 2019
The Rev. Dr. Anita Farber-Robertson**

INGATHERING CHIMES

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

CHALICE LIGHTING

We light this chalice to call us together,

That it might:

call us to notice,

call us to listen,

to look,

to see all who are here,

And to remember all who are not.

Anita Farber-Robertson

CALL TO WORSHIP. *River Call* by Manish K. Mishra-Marzetti 

Between rocking the boat
and sitting down;
between stirring things up,
and peaceably going along,

We find ourselves
here,
in community.

Each called

from many different
journeys,
Many different
life paths,
onto this river road.

Some are here
because the rocking of
the boat has been too much:
too much tumult,
too much uncertainty,
too much pain.

Some are here with questions
about where the boat I going;
how best to steer it;
where this journey ends.

Others are here,
as lovers of the journey,
lovers of life itself.

Here in front
beside
behind

each a passenger;
each a captain;
doing the best we can.

“Rest here, in your boat,
with me,” the river calls;
“Listen to how I flow,
the sound of life coursing all around you.”

Let the current
hold you,
let the current
guide you;
the river that gently flows
through your soul,
Whispers:
“Come, let us worship.”

HYMN *We Are* # 1051

CHILDREN'S TIME

Lewis Latimer was born in Massachusetts in 1848. Lewis was the youngest of four children born to George and Rebecca, who had escaped from slavery in Virginia six years before he was born. His Dad was captured in Boston and brought to trial as a fugitive and defended by abolitionists Frederick Douglass and William Lloyd Garrison and was eventually able to purchase his freedom, with the help of a local minister.

Lewis worked to help support his family. Returning to Boston after an honorable discharge from the Civil War, he accepted a menial position at a patent law office. He taught himself mechanical drawing and drafting by observing the work of draftsmen at the firm. Recognizing Latimer's talent and promise, the firm partners promoted him from office boy to draftsman. He ended up designing a number of his own inventions, including an improved railroad car bathroom and an early air conditioning unit.

Working with Alexander Graham Bell, Latimer helped draft the patent for Bell's design of the telephone.

Latimer's deep knowledge of both patents and electrical engineering made Latimer an indispensable partner to Thomas Edison as he promoted and defended his light bulb design. Edison's light bulb had a problem with the filament burning out too quickly to be useful. Lewis Latimer invented an improved carbon filament design which he patented and which made the light bulb really practical. He published a book titled *Incandescent Electric Lighting: A Practical Description of the Edison System*.

He did all of that to make the electric light bulb possible, but the only one we hear about is Thomas Edison. Why do you think that is? (race)

He was a founding member of the Unitarian Church in Flushing, NY where he and his family were very active. He also enjoyed playing the flute, writing poetry and plays. In his spare time, he taught mechanical drawing and English to recent immigrants at the Henry Street Settlement House. AT A2U2 we also do something to support immigrants- Family Promise.

SINGING CHILDREN OUT

Come and go With Me #1018 

Zipper verses: freedom, justice, singing

CANDLES OF JOY AND SORROW

MEDITATION AND PRAYER

Musical Meditation

READING *I See her From Time to Time* the Rev. David Eaton, Senior Minister All Souls Unitarian Church,

Washington DC for 23 years. He passed away shortly after he retired. 

Many people left the church, and some for legitimate reasons. A lot left because they could not stand what I am talking about to you this morning.

Something wonderful and beautiful happened in the midst of it all. A woman, 62 years old, came to my office. She was crying, and I went over and held her in my arms.

She said, "I've got to leave the church."

I asked, "Why?"

She said, "I'm not comfortable anymore. It was all right before, with ministers who were white. There were a few blacks, but now there are too many joining the church. I'm not comfortable any more. I feel ashamed of myself."

She said, "I'm a liberal and I never thought that I could have racist feelings, but I do."

I said, "Well, you can try to change."

She said, "No, I'm too old for that. I can't change. When I go to church I want to be comfortable. But I'll send you money every now and then to try to help the church out." And she left.

I see her from time to time. She is out in one of the suburban churches. I see her through the corner of my eye. And if she sees me before I see her, she vanishes quickly. And I let her. But if I see her first, she smiles and we hug each other. She asks me how things are and we quickly part. But I appreciate her honesty.

OFFERTORY

READING *I Too Am Beautiful*, By Rev. Kristen Harper, Unitarian Universalist minister 

Read by Carol Hayden

My inner spirit wrote: "I have spent my life watching you, seeing your accomplishments, living the way I think you want me to. I have watched the way you move and the way you talk. I have listened to your story and learned your history. I have sat patiently as you explained your politics, your religion, your philosophy of life. I have walked with you on a journey of faith waiting for my turn to share, to explain, to lead."

Look at me-I am black and you are white, but I too am beautiful.

Look at my face, my hair, my clothes-they may be different but aren't they worthy of your gaze?

Look at my walk, the way my hips sway to the music in my soul,

The way my proud neck tilts to the sun, yes, look at me.

Look at my darkness, it contains light and love, rebirth and growth

Look at my pain, don't turn away

Look at the way you see me, I am human, I have tears and fears,

I have laughter and joy

Look at me and walk with me

I too am beautiful.¹

ANTHEM

Those Who are Us

Black Unitarian Universalists

the Rev. Dr. Anita Farber-Robertson

Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church

February 24, 2019

Readings: selected from *Been in the Storm so Long*, edited by Mark Morrison-Reed

It was 1779² in Gloucester, Massachusetts, when thirty-one men and thirty women gathered to sign the charter of corporation and created the first Universalist church in America. They called John Murray to be their minister, and the next year built a meetinghouse. That historic church is still there and thriving as a beacon of Unitarian Universalism. One of the brave and creative thinking people we can

¹ Kristen Harper, "I Too Am Beautiful," in *Voices from the Margins*, Jackie James and Mark Morrison-Reed, ed.; UUA 2012

² Jane Greer, *Gloucester's Revival*, UU World, Spring, 2006

thank for that treasure, is Gloster Dalton, a black man. Gloster Dalton was one of the first black people in what has remained an essentially white denomination.

Some fifty years later Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, a black woman of vision and power, would join the First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia. And there others, men and women.

How can that be, that the records show that two hundred and forty years ago Unitarian Universalism appealed to a black man in America, and nearly two hundred years ago is appealed to a black woman in America, and yet, here we are, still predominantly white?

One reason has been powerfully lifted-up by Mark Morrison-Reed, a recently retired Unitarian Universalist minister, a black man raised in this predominantly white denomination. Rev. Morrison-Reed has observed that the history of black people in Unitarian Universalism has largely been ignored and untold, as though the black lives in historical Unitarian Universalism didn't matter, and the inference from that absence which people can gather, is that they do not matter still.

I recall the challenging words of Kristen Harper, black woman, Unitarian Universalist minister:

...I have spent my life watching you, seeing your accomplishments, living the way I think you want me to. I have watched the way you move and the way you talk. I have listened to your story and learned your history. I have sat patiently as you explained your politics, your religion, your philosophy of life. I have walked with

you on a journey of faith waiting for my turn to share, to explain, to lead.³

It has been a long wait. Because of the scarcity of awareness of the presence of black people in Unitarian Universalism in general and in the history and development of Unitarian Universalism in particular, I have chosen over the years, to take the opportunity of Black History Month, as an invitation to explore Black History in Unitarian Universalism. After all, it is our history, and to know it, is to fully know ourselves.

Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, who I mentioned earlier, was a most remarkable, and I must say, outspoken woman. She was a suffragette and an abolitionist. She spent two years on the lecture circuit in Maine for the Anti-Slavery Society. She was a published poet, novelist and writer of short stories.

In 1858 she refused to give up her seat or ride in the “colored section” of the Philadelphia trolley, just about 100 years before Rosa Parks made the same decision.

Speaking at the 1866 National Women’s Rights Convention she said:

“We are all bound up together in one great bundle of humanity and society cannot trample on the weakest and feeblest of its members without receiving the curse in its own soul....

³ Kristen Harper, “I Too Am Beautiful,” in *Voices from the Margins*, Jackie James and Mark Morrison-Reed, ed.; UUA 2012

These are words with which we can still resonate today. Words that address struggles with which we are still engaged. Later in that speech, she concluded:

...if there is any class of people who need to be lifted out of their airy nothingness and selfishness it is the white women of America.”

Ouch. She was a woman ahead of her time. Sadly, those words still speak a painful truth more than 150 years later. She could envision the power women could unleash for justice if they worked and stuck together, black and white.

But I am speaking about her today because of her faith, her Unitarian faith, about which she was also passionate. Her faith and her work were not separate, but intimately intertwined, different strands of one brave and deeply ethical soul. I think we can be proud of the Unitarian heritage she carried and bequeathed to us. It was a faith that sustained her in her continuous work for justice. But she critiqued it too. When speaking of her beloved Unitarian faith she said:

“We want more soul, a higher cultivation of all spiritual faculties. We need men and women whose hearts are the homes of high and lofty enthusiasm and a noble devotion to the cause of emancipation, who are ready and willing to lay time, talent, and money on the altar of universal freedom.”

It is a compelling vision Harper lays before us- as powerful now as it was when she uttered those words, well more than one hundred years ago.

I think we want to be those men and women, those “men and women whose hearts are the homes of high and lofty enthusiasm and a

noble devotion to the cause of emancipation, who are ready and willing to lay time, talent, and money on the altar of universal freedom.”

I think we do. I do. And I know it is hard. It is hard to find the kind of spiritual depth and grounding that can hold us constant in living our values and pursuing our aspirations. We know that there are needy people out there. And we know we should help as we can.

But the truth be told, we know that we are needy too, that our souls and spirits sometimes flag, we may feel tired, drained ourselves, our own lives broken in ways sometimes large and sometimes small. Do you know what I mean? Have you been there too? Maybe you are there now. And yet, the call is real, the aspiration ours, the longing to make a difference ever present. Are you with me?

And so unfolds our story, the story of Unitarian Universalism, a story of people who sometimes did what Harper asked, people who were “ready and willing to lay time, talent, and money on the altar of universal freedom,” and sometimes did not.

In 1989, just 30 years ago, a survey was done of Unitarian Universalist preferences. Of Unitarian Universalists, taken as a whole population, 74.5% of UU’s listed “intellectual stimulation” as their most important desire from worship.

However, if you broke the data down, in that same survey, the African American Unitarian Universalists listed as their most important desire for worship as “celebrating common values.” After that came hope, then vision, then music, as the most important.

I was a UU at the time of that survey. In fact, I was a minister serving a congregation. And I remember the survey and hearing the result. Well, the result I heard, the one that was touted, was that UU’s considered intellectual stimulation as the most important quality they

desired from their worship. I do not remember hearing anything about differing populations within UUism. I did not hear anything about what African Americans wanted out of their UU experience. And I think of Mark Morrison-Reed and his observation about how we have rendered black Unitarian Universalists invisible. We have. In my time.

It is ironic, that in some ways, it seems to me, we who are white, have finally caught up with our black brothers and sisters. I think of a bumper sticker I once saw that said:

I was so far behind, I thought I was first.

I suspect that if we who are white asked ourselves today what is most important about UU worship, we would likely respond: “Celebrating common values.” And if it were not our first, it would be right there close behind. We were so far behind, we thought we were first.

If we had not silenced those voices, we might have addressed our deeper longings sooner, and we might have presented an environment that was safe and supporting to those who would share our values and our yearnings for a world built on love and justice.

Ours, my friends, is a checkered history. Checkered, I’d guess, in our personal lives, and therefore, not surprisingly, checkered in our institutional history.

The Rev. Mark Morrison-Reed said it well, when he spoke to the Unitarian Universalist Association’s General Assembly in 1993:

“Our (UU) history in regard to racial justice is brave enough to make you proud, tragic enough to make you cry, and inept enough to make you laugh, once the anger passes. We also have a future. Today’s talk (he said) is to learn from what was and

move on. To move on, will mean creating a vision for the future. May concern for our faith and love for one another guide our efforts.”

To cast a meaningful vision, one that will inspire and compel us to do what Frances Ellen Watkins Harper wisely noted is necessary build a just world, “lay(ing) time, talent, and money on the altar of universal freedom,” we must understand from where we have come, hard as it is, proud of our times of courage, disappointed at our fearfulness, sometimes embarrassed by how much it is we still have to learn, emboldened by how deeply we long for our own spiritual authenticity.

All through the 1800’s there have been African Americans belonging to our essentially white Unitarian and Universalist churches, in our pews, serving on our boards and committees, with more to offer than we were ready to receive. And it continued.

The sixties were a time of turmoil for the country and for Unitarian Universalists as we struggled with what it meant to be supporters and allies of the Black community. While UU’s stood on the front lines of the civil rights movement, we were brave, we were cowardly and we were confused.

We carried on, two steps forward one step back, and by 2014, the most recent date for which I was able to retrieve numbers, the **UUA had approximately 90 ministers of color, at least 40 of them African American.**

Are we where we wanted to be? Have we cultivated, in the words of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, all of our spiritual faculties? “... men and women whose hearts are the homes of high and lofty enthusiasm and a noble devotion to the cause of emancipation, who are ready and

willing to lay time, talent, and money on the altar of universal freedom.”?

We are working on it, Frances, bit by bit day by day. A little bit closer, a little bit wiser, a little bit humbler about how far we have to go. But we take up this rich and precious legacy as our own, and find within it, the love, the passion, and the ever-present flame that feeds and fans our fire of commitment. Thank you, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper. We owe you – and we owe ourselves.

May it be so. Amen.

Closing Hymn *Fire of Commitment* #1028

Benediction

Closing Music

♥ Indicates the author was a person of color