

Thought for Contemplation: "It is a terrible, an inexorable law that one cannot deny the humanity of another without diminishing one's own." -James Baldwin

Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church

February 23, 2020

INGATHERING CHIMES

WELCOME

OPPORTUNITIES FOR CONNECTION 11:00 am

CHALICE LIGHTING

We light this chalice glad for the morning
We light this chalice glad for our faith
We light this chalice glad for one another
And the time to be together once again.

Anita Farber-Robertson

CALL TO WORSHIP Come, Come, adapted from Rumi by Leslie Takahashi

Come, come, whoever you are

Come with your hurts, your imperfections,
your places that feel raw and exposed.

Come, come, whoever you are

Come with your strengths that the worlds shudders to hold
come with your wild imaginings of a better world,
come with your hopes that it seems no one wants to hear.

Wanderer, worshipper, lover of leaving we will make a place for you,
we will build a home together.

Ours is no caravan of despair.

We walk together;

Come, yet again, come.

HYMN *Come, Come* #188

CHILDREN'S TIME Rev. Anita

One day in Alabama, in 1968, as farmers worked in their fields, a small airplane swooped into view. The farmers looked up wonderingly as papers fluttered out of the plane, into the sky and came swirling down to earth all around them. The papers were flyers about the upcoming elections—flyers with a picture of an eagle and the names of the candidates the pilot of the airplane liked the best.

That pilot was John L. Cashin. He hoped those farmers would vote for the candidates of the National Democratic Party, a political party he founded to help African Americans run in Alabama's elections. He wanted the farmers, and everyone else, to know that these candidates, if elected, would use their positions in government to make life better and more fair for the farmers, their families, and all their neighbors.

John Cashin was not only a pilot, he was a dentist, too, and a husband, and a father of three children. He had run for mayor in his town, Hunstville, Alabama. He did not win. Later, he would run for governor of the state of Alabama. He didn't win that election, either, but then again, he had not expected to win.

In those days in Alabama, African Americans had little chance of winning public office. Even though about one third of Alabama's people were Black, the Alabama state government had no elected officials who were African American. Very few Blacks ran for election. Very few Blacks could even vote in elections. They were kept away by unfair laws—sometimes called "Jim Crow" laws—and by threats of violence by white people who did not want their black neighbors to vote. (adapted from the UUA website)

But John Cashin's persistence, insisting that Black People had a right to participate in leadership and government inspired other people

One of those was Carlton Smith. Carlton Smith is a UU minister today, in Mississippi. Because of the model of John Cashin, last year Rev. Carlton Smith ran for State Senate in Mississippi. I was very excited. He didn't win. It is still hard for Black people to win elections in this country because not all the Black people are allowed to vote and white people sometimes, even when the candidate is very qualified, don't want to vote for a Black person.

But we are working to change that one day at a time, one election at a time. We know it is possible. We elected Barack Obama President twice, because white people, and black people, and other kinds of people, recognized his qualifications

Song (seated) Go Now in Peace #413

(Children are invited to go to their program.)

OPPORTUNITIES FOR CONNECTION 9:00 am

SHARING OUR JOURNEYS KATRINA VAN BRUGH

MUSIC FOR REFLECTION

JOYS AND SORROWS

MEDITATION AND PRAYER

READING: Nikole Hannah-Jones, "The Idea of America," Essay in the *New York Times 1619 Project*

Before the abolition of the international slave trade, 400,000 enslaved Africans would be sold into America. These individuals and their descendants transformed the lands to which they'd been brought into some of the most successful colonies of the British Empire.

Through backbreaking labor, they cleared the land across the Southeast. They taught the colonists to grow rice. They grew and picked cotton that at the height of slavery was the nation's most valuable commodity, accounting for half of all American exports and 66% of the world's supply. They built the plantations of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison...They laid the foundations of the White House and the Capitol, even placing with their unfree hands the Statue of Freedom atop the Capitol dome. They luggered the heavy wooden tracks of the railroads ... that helped take the cotton they picked to the Northern textile mills, fueling the Industrial Revolution. They built vast fortunes for white people North and South...Profits from black people's stolen labor helped the young nation pay off its war debts and financed some of our most prestigious universities....

MUSIC

But it would be historically inaccurate to reduce the contributions of black people to the vast material wealth created by our bondage. Black Americans have also been, and continue to be, foundational to the idea of American freedom. More than any other group in this country's history, we have served generation after generation in ...a vital role: It is we who have been the perfecters of this democracy. Without the idealistic strenuous and patriotic efforts of black Americans, our democracy today would most likely look very different-it might not be a democracy at all.

Nikole Hannah-Jones, "The Idea of America," Essay in the *New York Times 1619 Project* edition, August 18, 2019 edition,

OFFERING

READING: I Cannot Sing by Edward Nathaniel Harleston reader: Miriam Congdon 11:00am

I cannot sing, because when a child,
My mother often hushed me.
The others she allowed to sing,
No matter what their melody.

And since I've grown to manhood
All music I applaud,
But have no voice for singing,
So I write my songs to God.

I have ears and know the measures,
And I'll write a song for you,
But the world must do the singing
Of my sonnets old and new.

Now tell me, world of music,
Why I cannot sing one song?
Is it because my mother hushed me
And laughed when I was wrong?

Although I can write music,
And tell when harmony's right,
I will never sing better than when
My song was hushed one night.

Fond mothers, always be careful;
Let the songs be poorly sung.
To hush the child is cruel;
Let it sing while it is young.

This poem is in the public domain. Published in Poem-a-Day on January 26, 2020, by the Academy of American Poets

ANTHEM

SERMON

A Truer Story

The Rev. Dr. Anita Farber-Robertson

When I was a freshman at the City College of New York, Carl was a big shot on campus. He was President of the Student Government. And the second semester of my freshman year I could watch Carl somewhere on campus almost every minute of the day. One hour he was on the tennis court. Another hour he was running track. Another hour he was fencing, or swimming. I was puzzled and asked an upper-class person about it, who laughed. "Oh yeah. That's Carl all right. You see, every semester we are required to take some form of physical education. Carl somehow missed the memo, or thought he was above it. He blithely went through all of his program without ever taking PE.

Much to his shock, he was told he would not be allowed to graduate unless he made up all of those classes he had missed.” So, Carl spent his last semester of college taking only physical education classes, one after another, to meet the requirements for graduation.

I have not thought of that story for more than fifty years. But I was thinking about all the ways in life we undermine or disregard our principles, principles of equality. Of everybody being equally of value, of justice and equity and the inherent worth of every person, and I thought of this story and its powerful illustration of an institution that did not compromise those principles because some “special people” are more equal than others. My respect for the school swelled, and in time, my respect for Carl, who acknowledged his culpability and accepted the consequence.... Eight hours a day of public exercise.

We have important and lofty principles, as individuals, as Americans and as Unitarian Universalists. Sometimes we live them, and sometimes, truthfully, they are aspirational. We are more able to live them when we encourage folks to call us on it when we don’t. And those times are almost always painful, personally and institutionally.

We have experienced those opportunities quite publicly in this country, with the Me-Too movement and Black Lives Matter. We also lived it within the Unitarian Universalist Association when, less than

three years ago, on April 1, 2017 UUA President Peter Morales stepped down after questions of racial bias in UUA hiring practices were raised publicly. Within the UUA it first generated outrage and defensiveness, and then a deep breath of self-examination and listening. More than seven hundred UU congregations engaged in White Supremacy teach-ins, including A2U2, and awareness and conversations deepened. As a result, a deeply moving and chastening book was published, *Centering*, a collection of essays written by Unitarian Universalist ministers of color about their experiences within our faith. It was sobering for its truth telling, out loud, and it was also a profound message of faith and trust and hope, that these ministers of color who loved our faith and believed in it, would trust it to hang in there and listen to their stories.

Sometimes, when we have been recognized as breaking covenant or violating our principles, we call the people who call us out, or in, traitors, bad friends. Sometimes we call them whistleblowers. Sometimes we call them prophets. And after they are dead, saints. But whatever we call them, we need them. We need them in our lives, our families, our institutions and communities. Be it in Unitarian Universalism or our United States of America, we need those voices. They are a critical part of the free and responsible search for truth and meaning. I like to call them the loyal opposition.

For too long the history of Black Americans has been minimized or invisible. This is true in our nation and our denomination. We can choose to stop the “business as usual,” which imagines the history of white America is the history of the United States and remind ourselves of the other players on our stage. We have stifled those voices for so very long. So much beauty, so much heart has been lost because so many have been suppressed without voice.

I cannot sing, because when a child,
My mother often hushed me.
The others she allowed to sing,
No matter what their melody.

And since I've grown to manhood
All music I applaud,
But have no voice for singing,
So I write my songs to God.

...

Although I can write music,
And tell when harmony's right,
I will never sing better than when
My song was hushed one night.

Fond mothers, always be careful;
Let the songs be poorly sung.
To hush the child is cruel;
Let it sing while it is young.¹

¹ Edward Nathaniel Harleston, *I Cannot Sing* selected verses

The suppression of the voices and stories of the people who were builders and shapers of our nation, means we only know a bit of who we are. We only have the partial harmony, selected verses.

Nikole Hannah-Jones recognizes this and holds it up, possibly shocking us in its starkness when she says:

Our founding ideals of liberty and equality were false when they were written. Black Americans fought to make them true. Without this struggle, America would have no democracy at all.²

In the presence of the 400th anniversary of the arrival of enslaved Africans on these shores, the New York Times inaugurated its 1619 Project. It explains:

The goal of the 1619 Project...is to reframe American history by considering what it would mean to regard 1619 as our nation's birth year. Doing so requires us to place the consequences of slavery and the contributions of black Americans at the very center of the story we tell ourselves about who we are as a country.³

² Nikole Hannah-Jones, "The Idea of America," Essay in the *New York Times 1619 Project* edition, August 18, 2019

³ Introduction, the *New York Times 1619 Project* edition, August 18, 2019

I am keenly aware that the forefathers of our nation managed to somehow write eloquently of freedom and the inherent right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness while engaging in the practice of holding people in slavery for their profit and comfort. These are often the same people to whom we turn as key thinkers of our Unitarian heritage. While Unitarian John Adams was anti-slavery and never owned slaves, Benjamin Franklin, James Madison and Thomas Jefferson did. These shapers of our nation and its proclaimed identity as a land of the free, must have had to do some incredible mental gymnastics to hold to those views while also holding people in bondage.

Jamelle Bouie astutely observes:

American democracy has never shed an undemocratic assumption present at its founding: that some people are inherently entitled to more power than others.

It is a fair question to ask of our Unitarian Universalist selves, having such a shared history and practice with our country- so often forgetting to tell the full story. We know that in the early years we refused to ordain Unitarian and Universalist ministers of color, and when we finally did, they were often not called to pulpits. Certainly, for many years in Unitarian Universalism men were understood as inherently entitled to more power than woman. Churches were

organized so that it was the women who provided the labor, and the male ministers and laymen who managed it. It was not easy for women in the ministry when I started forty years ago. That tide has turned. More women are entering the ministry than are men. They are finding positions. The issue of race, though subtle, remains. Do we still harbor, maybe unwittingly, the

undemocratic assumption present at (our) founding: that some people are inherently entitled to more power than others.

Although unaware, the belief that some people are inherently more entitled to power may impact who we invite into leadership, who we notice when they are absent, whose opinion we want to influence, whose approval we seek, whose contributions we recognize.

This country was built by people we have not acknowledged. What is true on that large macro scale of our nation, is likely true in our cities, towns and families. We have taken credit for accomplishments that were not fully ours. We have been sustained and supported by many, those we know and those we don't. How much grander are our achievements when we feel the power of the larger goal and know that we needed all the players on the team, pulling together to get us there. The successes are truly sweeter when we share the prize.

Let this be a time, once again, when we make a course correction, recognizing the true location from which we started, charting a course that will lead us toward the land we have promised ourselves, where power is shared and every person is precious.

Amen and blessed be.

CLOSING HYMN How Could Anyone? #1053

BENEDICTION

CLOSING MUSIC (please remain seated for the closing music)