

Intrigue and Mayhem

Rev. Deane Oliva ~ February 3, 2008

Thomas Jefferson was a self proclaimed Unitarian. On many occasions he wrote about his opposition to slavery. He was also a slaveholder. In 1994 General Assembly was held in the Thomas Jefferson District of the Unitarian Universalist Association. As part of the festivities participants were invited to a period costume Jeffersonian ball. The African Americans wondered whether they should come in rags or chains.

Oh, we are a confused denomination! We are one of the most liberal denominations in this era and yet we fester in a cloudy consciousness of confused values and practice. And it has always been so.

William Ellery Channing and Theodore Parker were arguably the two most influential Unitarians of the 19th century. Channing was an exemplar of Christian piety and a champion of human rights. He spoke passionately about the need for a reasoned approach to Biblical study and was the first spokesman for Unitarianism, delineating its basic beliefs in a masterful ordination sermon in Baltimore in 1819. For many years, however, he was uncommonly moderate on the question of slavery. Like other Unitarians of the time, he did not want to be divisive and since many Unitarians either had slaves or profited from the slave trade, he did not outrightly condemn the practice. However, as we heard earlier, when one of his protégés, Samuel May, confronted him on his silence, he honestly acknowledged the rebuke, thoughtfully considered it and changed his course. His initial public presentation, a pamphlet entitled *Slavery* published in 1835 condemned the sin but not the sinner. It was deemed a moderate attack on the institution, devoid of real firepower. As the years passed Channing leaned closer and closer to the abolitionist positions. Channing, our hero, had to be prodded in order to live his faith.

Theodore Parker, on the other hand, did not shun controversy. You may remember that Parker, along with Ralph Waldo Emerson, was instrumental in moving Unitarianism from a Bible based faith to one that questioned the factuality of the miracles and believed that God was immanent in matter and man. Spirituality was to be realized through introspection and intuition rather than through doctrine.

Parker denounced the Mexican War (1846-1848) as an attempt to expand slavery and led Boston opposition to the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which established a federal bureaucracy to catch slaves who had escaped to the free states. Most Boston Unitarian ministers either refused to oppose the legislation, or publicly supported it as a constitutional obligation and as a politically necessary concession to the South that would "save the Union" and "settle" the slavery issue. Some even argued that catching fugitive slaves was sanctioned by Scripture.

Parker chaired the executive committee of the Vigilance Committee, the principal Boston organization providing fugitives with material aid, legal assistance, and help in eluding capture. He hid former slaves and often preached with pistols at the pulpit.

During fighting in the Kansas territory, he raised money to buy weapons for the free state militias, and later became a member of the secret committee that helped finance and arm John Brown's failed attempt, in October 1859, to start a slave insurrection in Virginia. When Brown was arrested, Parker wrote a public letter defending Brown's actions and the right of slaves to kill their masters.

Charles Jacobs, President of the American Anti Slavery Group in an address to our General Assembly in 2003 told the following Theodore Parker Story:

Do you know the story of what Reverend Parker did when the Southern slave-catchers came to Boston? He took a group of Universalist men to the hotel where the slave-catchers were staying. And he surrounded them, jostled them, intimidated them, told them they had better, for their own safety, go back home and leave these slaves free. And they looked into Parker's eyes and at the Universalists with him AND -/THEY/- WENT/- BACK/-HOME! ¹

Our hero. And yet Parker asserted that the Anglo-Saxon "race" was "more progressive" than all others, European or non-European, and made many condescending and disparaging comments about the potential of "Africans" for progress.²

That was the 19th century. Perhaps the 20th century is different?

The first Afro American Unitarian minister, Ethelred Brown, was ordained 1912, although there were several others ordained as Universalists before him. Egbert Ethelred Brown was born in Falmouth, Jamaica, in 1875. He discovered Unitarianism one Easter Sunday:

I was a choir boy of Montego Bay Episcopal Church when the first ray of light broke through my Trinitarianism. It was Easter Sunday. We did not as usual sing the Athanasian Creed: it was recited alternately by the priest and the congregation. The strangeness of the Trinitarian arithmetic struck me forcibly—so forcibly that I decided then and there to sever my connection with the church which enunciated so impossible a proposition....

That very afternoon—mind you, that very Sunday afternoon—I visited my uncle and there on a table were the words The Lord our God is one God. It turned out to have been a copy of Channing's memorable sermon preached in Baltimore on the ordination of Jared Sparks. My uncle was a Unitarian, but he was not carried away with the idea of a possible youthful convert, and so it was only after much beseeching that he gave me the sermon. I took it home and read it and discovered that in America there were Christians who did not believe in the Athanasian Creed. A few days after my uncle sent me with a note to a physician, and in his study there was a library of Unitarian books including a hymn book which he gave me.... I followed up by reading other Unitarian literature and as a result I became a Unitarian without a church.³

Brown, wrote a letter addressed "To Any Unitarian Minister in New York City." It found its way, amazingly, to the Secretary of the Unitarian Fellowship committee who passed it on to President Southworth of Meadville Theological School. Southworth informed Brown that "there was no Unitarian Church in America for colored people, and that as white Unitarians required a white minister he was unable to predict what [Brown's] future would be at the conclusion of [his] training."⁴

¹ Jacobs, Charles "There are 27 Million Slaves: Where are the Abolitionists?" Presentation at General Assembly 2003, Event 2051.

² Grodzins, Dean "Theodore Parker" <http://www25.uua.org/uuhs/duub/articles/theodoreparker.html>

³ Reed, Mark Morrison *Black Pioneers in a White Denomination*, p. 36

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.37-38

Nevertheless, he was accepted as a special two year student. While waiting to enter the United States he started a Unitarian Lay Center in Montego Bay and upon finishing at Meadville he was ordained for that group. He sailed home and worked first in Montego Bay and later in Kingston; his work supported by both the American and Foreign Unitarian Associations. The Association sent out an evaluator, the Rev. Bygrave and his remarks are instructive;

The Rev. E. E. Brown is pronouncedly black which is somewhat of a handicap to him in his work, since those of his race who are fortunate enough to approach absolute whiteness are too proud "to sit under" any minister save "a white gentleman." He is fairly well educated, seems endowed with tact and great common sense, and is a speaker of considerable eloquence and force.⁵

Bygrave suggesting giving money for a building but eliminating payment for the minister, placing Brown in the position of "begging" or appealing for funds. Discouraged by intermittent funding, he decided to move with his family to the United States. In New York he started the Harlem Unitarian Church, became a leader in the community, was involved in many social issues, but always in the grips of poverty and prejudice. He died in 1956.

W. H. G. Carter was a contemporary of Brown's. In 1918 Carter founded the "Church of the Unitarian Brotherhood." Other Unitarians in Cincinnati knew about the church and its founder, the Rev. W.H.G. Carter, but turned their backs. They made no effort to forge personal connections, and offered no material support to the struggling congregation beyond a box or two of old hymnals. For two decades no one even bothered to inform the American Unitarian Association (AUA) in Boston of its existence. When the AUA finally did find out, in 1938, it sent the Rev. Lon Ray Call to investigate. Call's official report captured perfectly the tone and substance of mainstream Unitarian attitudes at the time toward blacks. It described Carter as "a kindly man, quite intelligent." It noted, however, that the neighborhood surrounding his storefront church was "poor and characterized by rowdiness" and that two local Unitarian ministers (one from First Church) who had spoken there agreed that the response they received was "not very intelligent." Call's conclusion: "I do not recommend Unitarian fellowship for Mr. Carter, or subsidy for his movement." Shortly afterwards the Church of the Unitarian Brotherhood closed down and its sixty or so members dispersed. Carter died in poverty in 1962 and was buried in an unmarked grave.⁶

But that is not the end of this tale. In 1998 when the Reverend Sharon Dittmar retold this historical tale to the congregants of the wealthy First Church of Cincinnati, one of the members rose to state "That's my grandfather you were talking about. I never thought I'd hear his name mentioned in a Unitarian church."⁷

From this statement came the realization that this congregation could not let this story drop. In January 2001 the First Church Cincinnati held a racial reconciliation weekend with more than 100 descendants of Beulah and W.H.G. Carter and their families. Now in place of the unmarked grave is a headstone that proclaims W. H.G. Carter "Pioneer Unitarian Minister."

That was encouraging. Let's continue, though to a very difficult time. When the American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church of America merged in 1961, the match seemed a perfect

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.44.

⁶ Whitford, David "A Step Toward Racial Reconciliation" *UU World* XVI:3 (May/June 2002): 24-30.

⁷ *Ibid.*

marriage with tremendous potential for spreading a relevant message of liberal values. The first president, Dana McLean Greeley, had expansive visions and untiring energy. He marched with Martin Luther King, worked for civil rights and peace, was active in interfaith activities, even sitting near the Pope at the Second Vatican Council. In his spare time he tried to raise the funds to match his vision but, unfortunately, after his eight years in office most of the denomination's unrestricted funds were used up. The UUA was financially weakened and programmatically overextended.

The 60s was also the era of the civil rights movement. By the end of the decade black power advocates challenged the status quo demanding their rights now. After the 1967 riots, the Rev. Homer Jack, director of the UUA Department of Social Responsibility, called an Emergency Conference on Unitarian Universalist Response to the Black Rebellion. Some 135 participants, including 37 African Americans, gathered at New York's Biltmore Hotel. Soon after the call to order, at the suggestion of some black members of the Los Angeles church, 30 of the 37 African American delegates withdrew to form a Black Unitarian Universalist Caucus. There, they developed a list of what they called "non-negotiable demands" to be submitted to the conference and, ultimately, the UUA Board of Trustees. The core demand was that the board establish a Black Affairs Council (BAC), to be appointed by the Black Unitarian Universalist Caucus (BUUC) and funded for four years at \$250,000 a year. The funds would go for grants to fight political repression and economic exploitation in the black community and support black cultural expressions and community education.⁸ When the full group reconvened the proposals were accepted although some participants had left in protest.

The next year the Black UU Caucus presented these "non-negotiable demands" to the General Assembly in Cleveland which resulted in a commitment by the assembly to black empowerment programs of \$1 million dollars over four years. However, by 1969 it was apparent that the UUA was broke and could not keep its commitment, instead offering only \$50,000 that year.

At the 1969 GA in Boston members of the Black Affairs Council physically seized the microphones and the Black Caucus walked out. Another group was formed, BAWA, the Black and White Alternative, who also requested some of these funds. For the next years BAWA and BAC were deeply divided, ardent opponents. A group of white supporters of the Black Affairs Council was formed, FULLBAC, but that also proved controversial –whites helping the blacks with self empowerment! The controversy was loud, in your face and acrimonious. With no money forthcoming, in 1970 BAC disaffiliated so that it could raise its own money. Legal battles ensued and by 1971 all three organizations, BAC, BAWA and FULLBAC had ceased to exist.

During this time, the UUA lost approximately 1000 African American members as well as retreated from all active involvement in the civil rights movement. Membership and morale dropped precipitously.

And where are we now? I take you to 2005.⁹

In June 2005 the Leadership Development Council, a youth leadership group met in Dallas before General Assembly. Unfortunately, the Youth Caucus staff did not make hotel reservations in time so that the youth were spread out among various hotels. The conference got off to a rocky start. The

⁸ Ross, Warren "The UUA Meets Black Power: BAC vs. BAWA, 1967-1971" World, March/April, 2000.

⁹ Much of this last section is taken from the Final Report of the Special Review Commission found at http://www.uua.org/documents/src/060322_finalreport.pdf.

Dallas church had envisioned the group to be merely a rental and were not involved in the planning; whereas the LDC leaders thought that they were going to be treated as special guests. Tension grew as expectations were not met. It was reported that interactions with parishioners was sometimes strained and even insulting. There were reports from the youth participants of harassment by local law enforcement officers and residents.

From Dallas the youth began arriving in Fort Worth for GA. However, there was a shortage of rooms in the immediate convention area and, once again the youth were scattered. There were several incidents in which youth of color were mistaken for hotel employees by GA participants and asked to perform menial tasks. Additionally, there were reportedly incidents in which hotel employees tended to the needs of white youth but ignored youth of color. Racial incidents continued to be reported. Some involved harassment by the police and local residents. The youth of color felt threatened at times and at meetings for youth of color, the stories of Dallas and Fort Worth were shared. The youth of color and their young adult leadership decided that the delegates at GA needed to know about their pain and brokenness and that the best course of action was to stop the GA and request that their stories be heard. Representatives of the group left to arrange for a chance to speak to the delegates. However, their timing was late. The Closing Ceremony had begun so there was no official way for the youth of color to address the delegates, increasing their tension and frustration.

Three young men of color left the Caucus meeting and headed to the convention center. There they began to perform a non-violent protest by requesting programs from the ushers and then either throwing the programs to the ground or tearing them first and then throwing them down. They repeated these actions several times in the convention hall so that the delegates would notice. One usher was concerned about their actions and asked another usher to determine the cause. Since the youth were not visibly wearing name tags, she also asked the other usher to determine whether they were UU youth or locals who had entered the hall. Some words were exchanged between the male usher and the youth as they continued their protest. These interactions began to attract the attention of others. A Youth Office staffer tried to intervene but only increased the tension as more people became aware of the protest and reactions. A minister intervened and challenged the three young men. Harsh words were exchanged and the young men began to exit the hall. The minister followed them into the lobby.

At about that time, the rest of the youth of color, having finished their Caucus meeting, arrived in the lobby of the convention center still determined to somehow address the delegates. It is reported that some youth and young adult leaders expressed their frustrations in the lobby. Other youth of color tried to find white allies and others in positions of power to assist the youth in finding a way to address the delegates. Some of the people of color leadership either happened upon the agitated gathering in the lobby or entered the lobby from the convention hall. As they tried to determine what had happened, the three young men and the minister entered the lobby from the hall. It is reported that they exchanged harsh words loudly and that the minister appeared to be following the three young men, who appeared to be trying to distance themselves from her.

In the lobby, some of the youth came to the defense of the three young men, telling the minister that they were UU youth and a part of the community. The situation continued to escalate with more and more people drawn into the crowd, including youth, young adults, adults, delegates, ministers, UUA staffers, and a member of the Board of Trustees. As some of the youth tried to disengage, one young woman made a comment that seemed to infuriate the minister. Words usually reserved for an urban street argument were exchanged at increasing volume. It is reported that both the minister and the

youth had to be restrained. At that point the UUA Moderator, Gini Courter, ordered the minister to distance herself from the situation several times. The minister eventually left the lobby. Gini Courter then negotiated for meetings back in the Radisson Hotel. The youth and supporters left the lobby for the hotel meetings.

As the youth and leaders attempted to use the elevators, another incident took place.

“THE ELEVATOR STORY”: A METAPHOR

A woman of African descent recalls riding in a crowded elevator with several emotionally exhausted youth and young adults of color on the final night of GA.

Two of the youth had just been involved in an incident with a white female minister outside of the Closing Ceremony. The elevator stopped, and as the doors opened, the woman heard a white woman yelling at the youth of color in the elevator, “If you people really want to be anti-racist, you will get off the elevator now and allow this poor man to get on.” The woman of African descent peered outside the doors and observed that the man in question was an older, black hotel employee with a food cart.

When she looked at him, she read shame and embarrassment on his face. Meanwhile, the white woman had boarded the elevator. The woman of African descent remembers a flood of emotion.” This episode reminded her of many of the negative, race-based encounters she’d experienced within the UU community over the past fifteen years. Soon after she learned that the white woman was a UU minister, which increased her discomfort.

The white UU minister recounts the same event. She had heard only that the dance had been canceled due to incidents of racism and the youth community feeling “broken.” Leaving the ballroom, she came upon an older, black hotel employee waiting at the elevator doors with a food service cart. An elevator arrived and a dozen YRUU youth hurried past him to fill it. This happened twice as she watched. The man told her that he’d been waiting for some time as this scenario repeated itself. The third time the elevator arrived and youth rushed to enter, she interrupted to ask if they would step out and let the man in. She recalls that the youth “were screaming at me that their world was broken.” She told them that if they were concerned about racism, they would care about *this* man. She reminded them that everyone at GA was privileged and urged them to look after the hotel staff. After boarding the elevator, she and the youth continued to dialogue until an adult woman of color said to her, “You need to stop now and go with your white community and talk about this.” This incident left her shaken. She was accustomed to speaking out for the underdog, she said. Although she too had attended the closing ceremony, “I had no clue what had happened with the youth or what I had gotten into.” She described this incident as “one of the more unpleasant experiences in my entire life.”

All of these stories suggest that we view the world through our own historical and contextual lens.. Let us be kind to each other and try again--and again, and again. Ours is a continuing story.