

# Remembering the Past, Transforming the Future

A Sermon by the Revs. John Parker Manwelland Phyllis Lenoir Hubbell

The Paint Branch Unitarian Universalist Church, Adelphi, Maryland

September 28, 2008

## Call to Worship

*We look this morning at our history, as Unitarians and Universalists, in welcoming the stranger to come among us, and in particular, people of color. We ask ourselves what this new day might mean, what it might ask of us.*

*In a poem called AOn the Pulse of Morning,@ written for the dawning of a new day in the history of our nation, on January 20, 1993, the poet Maya Angelou concluded with words which I hope may they speak to us as well, as we gather for worship at the beginning of a new year and a new era in our history as a congregation:*

Here on the pulse of this new day

You may have the grace to look up and out

And into your sister=s eyes and into

Your brother=s face. . .

And say simply

Very simply

With hope

Good morning.

## Readings

1

*Mark Morrison-Reed, an African American who served for many years as co-minister of the Unitarian Congregation of Toronto, first became widely known for his 1980 study of two early 20th century black ministers who found Unitarianism on their own and applied for affiliation with the American Unitarian Association. "Black Pioneers in a White Denomination," he called them. They were turned down, with the excuse that their black congregations would not "fit" into the culture of Unitarianism. Summing up, he wrote:*

The Unitarian church was not integrated because it chose not to be. The church housed ordinary people with grand ideas about themselves, and the denomination was run by

men who were no different. Often their understanding was limited and their vision too weak to see beyond the status quo or beyond the narrow appeal of the Unitarian church. They were captives of the American caste system.

## 2

*Unitarian Universalist minister David Rankin served for many years as senior minister of the Fountain Street Church in Grand Rapids. In a 1978 UUA meditation manual, he included this vignette:*

The waitress took the parents' order, and then turned to their small son.

*What will you have?* she asked.

*I want a hot dog!* . . . the boy began.

No hot dog! the mother interrupted. Give him what we ordered.

But the waitress ignored her.

*Do you want anything on your hot dog?* she asked.

*Ketchup!* the little boy beamed.

There was silence at the table.

Then the youngster said to his mother: *Mom, she thinks I'm real!*

## 3

*The Rev. Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley, a contemporary African American UU minister, died of cancer, much too young, two years ago. In her Birmingham Lecture in 2002, she made this observation, based on her experience in our UU congregations –*

In most of our congregations that I have been a part of or worked with, structures that create and sustain whiteness are normative. There is a presumption from some clergy and some laity that these canons . . . rooted in the European experience, are normative. These presumptions make it extremely difficult for culturally oppressed groups to find a place in our congregations.

## 4

*The Rev. Dr. James A. Forbes, senior minister of Riverside Church in New York City, delivered the Ware Lecture at the Cleveland General Assembly in 2001. After pointing out that recent census figures indicate that whites will before long cease to be in the majority in the United States, he asked, --*

Is that in any way unsettling? I mean, if you've been socialized to feel like you should be in charge of things; if you've always been called a majority; if you've always called the shots, if you've always actually defined what excellence is, defined what beauty is; if

you've always kind of relegated everybody else to a position of aspiring to be exactly what you are . . . does that make you feel uneasy?

## Sermon

**Phyllis:** It was on an Easter Sunday morning in the 1880s, in the Episcopal Church of Jamaica's Montego Bay, that a choir boy named Ethelred Brown found Unitarianism. As the congregation spoke the words of the creed, usually sung, Brown would later write,

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 [who was a Unitarian] and there on the 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. . . . I took it home and read it. . . and as a result I became a Unitarian without a church.

As an adult, in 1900, he resolved to connect with Unitarians in America. He wrote a letter addressed “To Any Unitarian Minister in New York City.” Somehow, it eventually reached Meadville Theological School. Its president replied, accepting Brown as a student, but observing [in Brown's words] that as 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 my future would be. . . .”

In time, Brown would find his way to Meadville, where his two years of study were among the happiest in his life. He was ordained as a Unitarian minister, in 1912.

With only token support from American Unitarians for the little congregation he had founded in Jamaica, Brown eventually emigrated to New York, in 1920, and founded a Unitarian congregation in Harlem. In talking after last Sunday's service with Paint Branch friend Burg Turner, I was thrilled to learn that the father of Burg's wife Joyce was one of Brown's supporters in this project. Joyce attended that church growing up.

Still lacking support from Boston, Brown appealed to local congregations, so irritating UUA secretary Sam Eliot that Eliot engineered Brown's removal from fellowship as a minister; Brown was reinstated only when he threatened to sue.

Brown dreamed of combining the intellection tradition of white Unitarianism with the spiritual depth and passion of the black church. Yet these strands conflicted even in Brown himself. Some years he offered traditional services, and in other years only lectures. He could draw crowds of up to 300, but his Harlem Community Church was effectively a one-man church with no preparation for who might follow Brown. The church died soon after he did, in 1956.

**John:** There are other stories of black ministers struggling to find a place in our faith tradition. People who had already found their way to our faith on their own, and came knocking on the door. Sometimes we turned them away, sometimes we reluctantly cracked it open. Always, the way was hard. The late David Eaton, All Souls minister for 25 years, used to recall how he was discouraged from becoming a Unitarian when he was in seminary back in the 1950s. “We like you, David, but we aren’t ready for you. You won’t be able to find a church.” That’s the message David heard. It would be another ten or fifteen years before All Souls found David, working in a university setting in Washington, and called him to be its minister.

I was on that search committee. We did not set out to call a black minister. We were adamant that we just wanted the best minister. But I think we knew, under our skins, that All Souls *needed* a black minister for the next stage of its journey, back then in 1969. The riots after Dr. King’s murder swept away much of 14th Street, just one long block from All Souls back door. If any church ever needed to reinforce its roots in the community, it was All Souls. In terms of such roots, and in terms of preaching and intellect and leadership, David *was* by far the best candidate, even though he was not then a Unitarian.

It was the Civil Rights movement in the 1950s and sixties which galvanized Unitarians and Universalists across the country. Our ministers went to Selma in greatly disproportionate numbers, in response to Dr. Martin Luther King’s appeal. The murders of two of our number who responded, the Rev. James Reeb and volunteer Viola Liuzzo, lent strength to a renewed commitment. Here at Paint Branch, many members joined in the sit-ins to desegregate restaurants and the maternity ward at Prince George’s Hospital. When Governor Spiro Agnew shut down Bowie State University because its students had demonstrated in Annapolis, they were locked out of their dormitories. Paint Branch families opened up their homes to the students. Members worked long hours in support of the Maryland Open Accommodations law, providing information to the Washington Post that was later incorporated into an editorial, lobbying.

**Phyllis:** Yet this very support for civil rights made it all the more painful for Unitarian Universalists when, in the aftermath of Dr. King’s murder, the Black Power movement began to challenge whites for leadership, and push them away. For too long, African Americans had very little voice in their own destiny. Even when they worked with well-intentioned EuroAmericans, it was they who had the money, they who had the

power, not Blacks. Yet much of that money and power had been amassed on the backs of slaves and their descendants who still attended the worst schools, lived in the worst neighborhoods, and had to settle for the worst jobs. The Black Power movement demanded a voice and repayment of a long overdue debt.

After the riots of 1967, Dr. Homer Jack, a white man who was then director of the UUA's Department of Social Responsibility, called an "Emergency Conference on Unitarian Universalist Response to the Black Rebellion." Meeting in New York's Hotel Biltmore, it drew 135 participants, 37 of whom were black. Thirty of the 37 withdrew to caucus. Their demand, endorsed by the full gathering, was that the UUA form a Black Affairs Council, comprised exclusively of African Americans to be funded at \$250,000 a year for four years, to support a broad range of activities to promote black cultural expression and empowerment.

Not all the blacks, however, joined in support; others joined in forming a competing group, which included white allies. A significant number of blacks and whites shared a vision of working side by side as equals to end oppression. This was Dr. King's dream. This was the heart of our first principle. The centuries of injustice and oppression couldn't be ended by resegregation.

The UUA Board refused to form or fund a Black Affairs Council. Feelings ran high. The board was divided. Vice-moderator Wade McCree, the board's only black member, a federal judge who would later serve as solicitor general, threatened to resign if the Board caved in to the Black Affairs Council demands. But white trustee Carleton Fisher said that if the Board didn't agree to their demands, we had "lost touch completely with the very ground of our faith as Unitarian Universalists." The Black Affairs Council urged its supporters to boycott the UUA Annual Fund.

Thus the stage was set for GA in Cleveland in 1968, meeting just two months after Dr. King's murder. UUA President Dana Greeley and the board urged the delegates to substitute a voluntary fundraising plan to raise the money the Black Affairs Council demanded instead of robbing existing programs. But the delegates voted, more than two-to-one, to form the Black Affairs Council and fund it as the New York conference had recommended.

**John:** The controversy wasn't over. At the Boston GA, a year later some proposed support of both the Black Affairs Council and its black-and-white competitor. The black group declared it would not accept any funds at all if the other group got even a penny. Voices rose. People seized microphones away from those who were speaking. Large groups of delegates stormed out, crossing the street to caucus at the Arlington Street Church. Finally, after anguished pleas, they returned. The delegates would eventually vote to fund only the Black Affairs Council, but defeated the Council's

candidate for president in favor of Bob West. West had supported the voluntary fundraising plan. On taking office, he found that the UUA was broke, even facing bank loans which were not reflected on its books. At West's initiative, the board cut the UUA budget by a third and stretched out its promised grant. His draconian cuts probably saved the UUA from bankruptcy – but it left many black UUs feeling betrayed, and the UUA looking unconcerned by the plight of black Americans.

To supplement its initial funding, the Black Affairs Council asked churches to invest in bonds. Paint Branch was among those who responded, investing thousands in 1969 dollars from its building fund – an initial proposal said \$10,000, others remember a final figure of \$40,000. All Souls invested too, along with many others. But controversy continued over whether the funds were being spent effectively. The Council's accounting was criticized. Its leadership split. All Souls and others brought suit to replace it. I was one of the lawyers, representing All Souls. Eventually, the Council was closed down, and the remaining funds – perhaps twenty cents on the dollar – were returned to those who had bought the bonds.

All this formed a wrenchingly painful chapter in the history of Unitarian Universalism. These were tumultuous, confrontational times. Though Paint Branch came through it relatively unscathed, friendships elsewhere were shattered, families and congregations were divided, and many people, including our current UUA president, Bill Sinkford, then a student, became disillusioned with our movement. The bitterness still lingers.

**Phyllis:** Beginning in the 1990s the UUA moved with increasing determination to combat racism and oppression of all kinds. At several General Assemblies, and in UU districts and churches, the UUA promoted anti-racism, anti-oppression programs under a succession of names, most recently the Journey Toward Wholeness.

From our 19th-century origins, there have been many individual Unitarians and Universalists who led the way. But for every Theodore Parker we probably had at least one John C. Calhoun, and in between a large majority opposed discrimination in principle, but did not become actively involved. We have come a very long way since the Civil War. But as today's stories suggest, it is only in recent decades that the *institutions* of our movement have begun to lead the way, and then only with much trauma and division.

Change is difficult, and it is painful – partly because we ourselves must also change. We still have far to go. All we can ask of ourselves, and the least which we must ask, is a lifelong commitment to make room in our minds and our hearts for change and growth.

The fundamental challenge of the religious life is to open ourselves to the “other.” The “other” is the stranger whether it is the newcomers who come through our doors on Sunday morning, or those “out there” who seem different. It is so easy to become comfortable with those who are “like us.” Our spiritual challenge is to welcome the stranger while recognizing that both we and they must change, and not just they, if we are to become one. We cannot expect newcomers to leave their culture at the door.

Those of us who are EuroAmerican have come a long way in welcoming people of color. We’re happy, now, to say we welcome them. But if a member of color or from an obviously different culture joins us, some of us may still feel uncomfortable. We may worry that we’ll inadvertently say something to offend. We may feel that we have nothing in common. We may suspect that “they” will want us to change. We may have fears and resentments we can’t even articulate to ourselves.

And those of you who come from a different racial heritage, may see that look in our eyes, that discomfort, that looking away that we may not even know we are doing. Certainly, you’ve seen it before. You may get tired of having to explain that the culture and language most people think of as normal in white America, isn’t your culture, isn’t your experience. You may despair at the slights you experience every Sunday that many of us don’t notice, don’t even see. Your friends may wonder why you attend that white church. You may, too.

What a hard journey we embark on together. Hard for everyone. But oh my friends, isn’t it the only journey that matters? Isn’t this the promised land we seek? Black and white and brown and yellow and every glorious color in between together? Sharing our stories of shame and hurt. Sharing our joys and our sorrows. Working together to reach that freedom land, to create that freedom land, where all are honored, all are respected for who they are, and what they’ve seen and done. Where we all own the table we sit at and all are welcome at the table. All bring gifts to the table. And all are fed.

**John:** There is an ancient story. A rabbi was speaking to his gathered students, seated around him in a circle. How can we know, he asked, when the night has ended and the day begins?

Is it when there is light enough, one asked, so that you can tell the difference between a cedar and an olive tree? The rabbi said, No.

Another asked, is it when there’s light enough to tell a sheep from a goat? No, that’s not it either, the rabbi said.

And so they all began to ask, When is it, then? How can we know when the day has begun?

The old rabbi paused, and then said: The night has ended for you when you can look into the eyes of your neighbor and see the face of your brother or sister. Then, and only then, has day begun for you.

It is then, and only then, that with Maya Angelou, we can look, and we can say, simply and with hope, “Good morning.”