

OPENING WORDS

“Come, Come,” adapted from Rumi by Unitarian Universalist minister Rev. 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 world 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 travel together;
Come, yet again come.

CLOSING WORDS

“Prayer,” from Rev. Bill Sinkford, former UUA president.

Spirit of Life and of Love. Great Mystery at the heart of things. Dear God.
These days when our confidence in easy progress has been shaken,
When our vision of the Beloved Community seems clouded in an uncertain future,
Be with us and help us be with one another.
Let us be clear in our commitment to welcome the human spirit
In each of us, as all that we are.
Spirit of Life, move in our hearts and help our lives take the shape of justice.
Move in our hands so that our actions point us toward the Beloved Community.
Move within us and among us
Let our voices sing your song
As we witness with our lives
That the power of love is stronger
Than the love of power
Let our voices sing your song
As we answer the call of love.
So may it be. And Amen.

READING

“A Message of Hope,” Rev. Bill Sinkford

The final message we would pass on is a message of hope. There is a reason that people of color have become Unitarian Universalists . . . from the very beginnings of this faith and still today. There is a fundamental hope in our values and our aspirations that speaks to persons across the boundaries of race and culture and language and economic circumstance and ability. It is the empowerment in our Unitarian legacy and the love of our Universalist promise that draw people to us and that keep us here.

It is our culture and not our theology that has been our biggest obstacle. And because that is true, our final message is a message of hope. We can change our culture if we have the will to do it.

RECOMMENDED HYMNS

#105 “From Age to Age”
#113 “Where Is Our Holy Church”
#290 “Bring O Past Your Honor”
#317 “We Are Not Our Own”
#468 “We Need One Another”
#558 “For Everything a Season”
#662 “Strange and Foolish Walls”
#1051 “We Are...”

Unitarian Universalism: The Good Parts Version

Have you ever watched a movie or read a passage in a book and had the feeling that you'd either seen or read it before? It's happened to me, and I'd like to tell you about one particularly memorable experience of that. It was while I was preparing for a "generative conversation" with my fellow MidAmerica staff members. Generative Conversations, by the way, are a practice we in our staff group engage in where once a month we consider something beyond our usual work-related "stuff" and have a conversation about it. The goal is to broaden our perspectives and give us the opportunity to explore topics that we might otherwise miss. Often, we'll follow the suggestions of our larger association and cover something like the UUA's Common Read. For this specific series of generative conversations, we were looking at the 2019-20 Common Read: *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States*, by Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz (or-TEEZ).

For this conversation, we were covering chapter four, "Bloody Footprints." As the title suggests, it's a pretty brutal chapter, chronicling the various atrocities committed by the earliest European settlers of North America.

One passage, in particular, caught my attention. It was about a pre-dawn attack on Mystic Fort in the Connecticut Colony that left over 500 members of the Pequot tribe dead. Here's a description from young reader's version of *An Indigenous Peoples' History* of what took place on May 26, 1637.

Pequots were living in two forts. In one fort were mainly Pequot men. In the other were primarily women, children, and elders. [Mercenary Captain John] Mason targeted the latter. Slaughter ensued. After killing most of the Pequot defenders, the soldiers set fire to the structures and burned the remaining people there alive.

This event is known as the Mystic Massacre. And though I had never heard of it by that name, I had the feeling that I'd read about it before. The story was similar to something I had run across while exploring my genealogy, something I'd been really getting into for a few years. I immediately logged onto my ancestry.com account and began searching for relatives that lived in the Connecticut Colony around that time. In a source called *The Genealogy of the Thrall Family to the Year 1862*, I found

this passage about my ninth great-grandfather, William Thrall, who was born in England in 1605 and died on August 3, 1679, in Windsor, Connecticut:

“Windsor was required to furnish thirty men for the offensive war against the Pequods, the names of only fifteen of whom can now be found.” William Thrall, our ancestor, was one of the fifteen. The great battle was fought on the 26th of May, 1637. The danger was imminent, and so complete the victory, that caused universal rejoicing throughout New England, and “a grant of land was given to each soldier and officer; and to this day the memory of an ancestor who was in the Pequod fight, is an honorable heir-loom of every Connecticut family.”

Whew. I was stunned. My ancestor was one of thirty men who committed an act that is now considered—by many scholars—to be genocide. In addition, he “was rewarded with 50 acres of land in Windsor.”

Not only that, but the practices used by the colonist during the Pequot War became the blueprint for the treatment of native peoples throughout North America. Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz (or-TEEZ) writes that “This way of war, forged in the first century of colonization—destroying Indigenous villages and fields, killing civilians, ranging, and scalp hunting—became the basis for the wars against the Indigenous across the continent into the late nineteenth century.”

Far from being a “an honorable heir-loom,” this chapter of my family’s history is a blood-stained relic, a blow to the “good parts version” of an unexamined belief of mine: that my ancestors were numbered amongst those we once lauded in the hymn “Bring, O Past, Your Honor”—“pioneers undaunted,” who, full of “frontier courage,” made their way across this land.

And yet, there are other parts of my ancestry that could be considered honorable heirlooms. For example, I recently discovered I am related to one Gerhardt Hendricks who, fifty years after the Mystic Massacre, signed

the very first protest against slavery on this continent. Here's what I found out about the "The Germantown Protest":

The 1688 Germantown Quaker Petition against slavery was the first protest against African American slavery made by a religious body in the English colonies. It was drafted by [four] Quakers [including Gerhardt Hendricks] living in Germantown, Pennsylvania, on behalf of the Germantown Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends to raise the issue of slavery with the Quaker Meeting which they attended. The men gathered and wrote a petition based upon the Bible's Golden Rule. "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you," urging the Meeting to abolish slavery. It argues that every human, regardless of belief, color, or ethnicity, has rights that should not be violated. This petition was the first American document of its kind that made a plea for equal human rights for everyone.

So, among the many thousands of ancestors of mine alive in the sixteen hundreds, I can find those whose actions were commendable, as well as those whose actions were contemptable. Just as "joy and woe are woven

fine,” so are honor and disgrace. Recently, I was reminded of just how important it is to acknowledge the certainty of this in our lives.

I was in Milwaukee for the Liberal Religious Educators Association’s Fall Conference. As part of our time in there, we visited the American Black Holocaust Museum, an enlightening experience for many reasons. One of the things I appreciated about the museum was that they called their docents (their guides) griots—a word for West African oral historians and storytellers. After our visit, Reggie Jackson, the head Griot at the museum, spoke to us at the conference. And here’s what I learned from him.

Griots tell stories in a variety of ways about a variety of topics. Some of those topics are very happy stories to tell. These are the stories of the triumphs of our people. But we are also required to be honest by also telling some of those ugly, those disappointing stories of the tragedies that they've suffered as well. It's always important to understand that the stories of the triumphs and the tragedies combined together give you a deeper understanding of the legacy of the people.

Triumphs and tragedies together give us a deeper understanding of our legacy. These words touched me as being profoundly true. I've seen it in my own life, in the lives of my ancestors, and yes, in the history of this faith tradition. So, here are just a few examples that go beyond the "good parts version" of Unitarian Universalism.

You might think that both Unitarianism and Universalism, two of the more progressive faith traditions in the United States, would have been unequivocally against slavery. But as "Faith Like a River: A Program on Unitarian Universalist History for Adults" tells us, "The debate about slavery in the United States proved contentious within both Unitarianism and Universalism."

By the end of the 1840s, the positions either promoting or discouraging antislavery action were well framed. Although most were opposed to slavery itself, not all Unitarians or Universalists supported the abolitionist position. Some preferred a more gradual approach to abolition, one that would assure financial compensation

for those who had invested in the purchase of slaves and avoid major economic and social disorder. Many involved in churches and other traditional institutions believed continued prosperity and stability relied on social order and the tactics of many abolitionists were simply too radical and disruptive. Many Unitarians and Universalists, reluctant to condemn all slaveholders as sinners, acknowledged mitigating circumstances such as treating slaves in a manner co-religionists could deem "kind."

In hindsight, this failure to support abolition by large numbers of Unitarians and Universalists could be seen as a disgrace, a tragedy. But it is part of our heritage, as surely as the honor and triumphs of people like Theodore Parker, a Unitarian minister who was part of The Boston Vigilance Committee, an abolitionist organization formed to protect escaped slaves from being kidnapped and returned to slavery in the South. The story goes that Parker wrote sermons with a pistol on his desk to protect runaway slaves.

While our tradition's history regarding slavery in this country has been known for some time, there's another chapter in Unitarian Universalism that has been uncovered—or recovered—only in the last few decades: stories of Unitarians benefiting from the Federal Government's Indian Boarding School Policy in the late 19th century.

Rev. Karen G. Johnston writes in a sermon entitled, “Holding History: Honoring Indigenous Communities,”

Perhaps you are like me, somewhere between surprised and shocked, to hear that Unitarians had their own Indian residential schools. It is not something I learned as a lay person or in seminary. However, it had been duly, and often proudly, recorded in contemporary materials that Unitarians were involved in the establishment and management of a number of such schools in the 19th century.

She goes on to quote Rev. Dana Stiver,

Early Unitarian writings indicate that many Unitarians propagated, or at least remained complicit in, the popular idea that westward expansion of the American frontier marked an advance of “civilization” over the “savagery” of Native peoples.

Indeed, Unitarian minister Henry F. Bond, who ran the “Montana Industrial School for Indians” with his wife, is recorded as saying this about the Crow students there:

They are all bright promising boys. How such good appearing fellows come of an ignorant, lazy squalid, orphaned race is a constant surprise to us. I shall dread the time, if that comes, when they slip back into their old abodes and possibly leave.

Bond’s words are a continuation of the “colonial narratives” that fueled atrocities like the Mystic Massacre, ugly stereotypes that “encouraged the view of natives as untrustworthy, bloodthirsty savages who needed to be reformed through conversion to Christianity.”

Yet another tragedy from our past. And while it may not qualify as a triumph, the UUA's solidarity, in the middle of the last decade, with the water protectors at Standing Rock in North Dakota, demonstrated a marked transformation in how white Unitarian Universalists interact with Indigenous peoples.

My final example is more recent. It involves not one, not two, but three General Assemblies, the annual gathering of Unitarian Universalists from around the country. (Much of this history that I'm about to share comes from the UUA Common Read for 2022-23: *Mistakes and Miracles: Congregations on the Road to Multiculturalism*, by Nancy Palmer Jones and Karin Lin.)

We pick up the story in 1969, where "a third of the attendees" at General Assembly "are people of color." For those of us who've attended GAs in the last decade or so will attest, the vast majority of attendees are likely to be predominantly white—way more two thirds. What was going on in the late 60s that brought so many people of color to this annual gathering of UUs?

My understanding is that the involvement of white UUs in the Civil Rights movement had caught the attention of people of color and brought them to our association. And the UUA had responded by earmarking one million dollars of its budget to the Black Affairs Council (BAC), money to be distributed in annual installments over four years. But in 1969, the delegates at GA voted to also distribute some of the money to another group, Black and White Action (BWA), an integrated organization. This was seen as a betrayal by the Black Affairs Council, resulting in a walkout by hundreds of black delegates, other people of color, and white allies. Many of those who walked out never returned. And the UUA has never again had a General Assembly where one third of the attendees were people of color.

Nearly thirty years later, the delegates at the 1997 General Assembly passed a resolution called "Toward an Anti-Racist Unitarian Universalist Association," which, among other things, lifted "up the faith's successes and failures in the 'struggle for racial justice.'" Ultimately, "the resolution asserted that, to be true to the call of Unitarian Universalism, we Unitarian

Universalists must dismantle systems of hatred, discrimination, and supremacy rather than perpetuate them.” This resolution put the work of becoming an anti-racist, anti-oppression, multicultural institution at the center of the UUA. And these words from the Association’s Leadership Council during Rev. Bill Sinkford’s presidency, get to the heart of that work:

With humility and courage born of our history, we are called as Unitarian Universalists to build the Beloved Community where all souls are welcomed as blessings and the human family lives whole and reconciled.

Twenty years later, the Unitarian Universalist Association was still trying to live into this vision of the Beloved Community. A series of events in spring of 2017 revealed that the Association’s dream of becoming an anti-racist, anti-oppression, multicultural institution was still, for many people of color, just that—a dream. A flawed hiring process in the Congregational Life Staff Group, my staff group, revealed that the inner workings of the Association still, to a great degree, favored white candidates for leadership positions.

UUA president Peter Morales, along with two white male leaders, resigned their positions, and the UUA board appointed three black leaders to serve as co-presidents until June of that year, when a new president would be elected at General Assembly.

The three interim co-presidents Rev. Sofía Betancourt, Rev. Bill Sinkford, and Dr. Leon Spencer shared their report about the fallout of the hiring incident to the 2017 General Assembly. At the end, Rev. Bill Sinkford closed with these words:

The final message we would pass on is a message of hope. There is a reason that people of color have become Unitarian Universalists . . . from the very beginnings of this faith and still today. There is a fundamental hope in our values and our aspirations that speaks to persons across the boundaries of race and culture and language and economic circumstance and ability. It is the empowerment in our Unitarian legacy and the love of our Universalist promise that draw people to us and that keep us here.

It is our culture and not our theology that has been our biggest obstacle. And because that is true, our final message is a message of hope. We can change our culture if we have the will to do it.

We are currently living out this chapter of our faith's history. And it remains to be seen whether we have the will to do it or not, whether the outcome will be a tragedy or a triumph.

Nancy Palmer Jones and Karin Lin, offer this perspective on what it will take to create the Beloved Community we Unitarian Universalist aspire to. They write that

all humans have this streaky nature, a mix of beauty and brokenness..., [that] if taken into Unitarian Universalists' souls as core beliefs, this idea—that all of us humans are embodiments of beauty and brokenness—would indeed compel our Unitarian Universalist communities toward radical inclusion.

Honor and disgrace; triumph and tragedy; beauty and brokenness—all parts of our past, our present, and our future. The “good parts version” of Unitarian Universalism tells only half the story. Let us never be afraid to tell our whole story. For that will be the story of “the Beloved Community where all souls are welcomed as blessings and the human family lives whole and reconciled.”