

Self Evident

On July 4, 1858 the air was hot in the Music Hall of Boston. Though the windows were open the humidity in the pews was oppressive. The room was packed with men, women, and children uncomfortable and drenched in sweat. There were blue jays in the courtyard and children swimming in the Charles, teasing the congregants with freedom, with a promise for a carefree afternoon in the open air. But as Rev. Theodore Parker began his sermon no one stirred. No one thought of where they would be in an hour, or of the song of the jays, or of the children. Each of the congregants hung on with the absolute wonder, fear, and outrage that can only come when a prophet speaks of a revolution soon at hand.

Parker began his Fourth of July sermon with two quotations. First, he reminded his audience that “we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights; that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.” That this is what our founders said in their Declaration. And secondly, “Whatsoever ye would that such men should do unto you, do ye even so unto them.” That this is what Jesus said, in the seventh chapter of the Gospel according to Matthew, the twelfth verse.

Parker ended his sermon with the following poem written by Ralph Waldo Emerson:

And, henceforth, there shall be no chain,
Save, underneath the sea,
The wires shall murmur through the main:
Sweet songs of liberty.

The conscious stars accord above,
The waters wild below,
And under, through the cable wove,
Her fiery errands go.

For He who worketh high and wise,
Nor pauses in his plan,
Will take the sun out of the sides
Ere freedom out of man.

Parker entitled his sermon “The Effect of Slavery on the American People.” His point was not that 19th Century Slavery should come to an end but rather that it would come to an end. “Slavery must go down”, Parker says, “The course of Trade is against it; the course of Thought; the course of Religion; the course of Politics,—the course of History.” Implicit in this assertion is that if Unitarians, those congregants packing his pews, his people, want to stay on the side of history, they must reject the institution of slavery in all its forms. Parker’s call is for an acknowledgment that slavery, in its racialized, economic, and moral manifestations, enslave the master no less than the slave. And that master is not just the slave owner that cracks the whip but is every free man who does not speak against the unspeakable injustice.

Following his sermon Parker was run out of his church. He was discredited and systematically ostracized from his colleagues and fellow ministers. Parker was on the side of history, while the

Unitarians, by and large, were not. Though many voiced concerns with the institution of slavery, only Parker and few others openly branded themselves as abolitionists. It is a hard pill to swallow.

Currently I have heard many in our movement say that we have righted our sails. We are proud of our support of LGBTQ issues, our social justice roots, our passion for climate change awareness, our reason, our science, our liberalism. As a candidate for Unitarian Universalist ministry I have said many of these things myself and I believe we should be proud of our accomplishments. I fundamentally believe that Unitarian Universalism has the power to shape the world, that our movement has the language to profoundly change the national and global discourse if we let it. On behalf of the UN Office I am also filled with joy when I reflect on the work we have been able to accomplish in the last few years on bringing LGBTQ issues to the forefront of human rights discussion at the UN. Likewise, I am filled with humility when I reflect on the how closely the UN Charter mirrors our UU 7 Principles. I understand why we pat ourselves on the back. I understand why we claim in so many areas to be on the side of history.

However, once more I see us shrinking from the greatest human rights injustice of our era. Once more I see us Unitarian Universalists trivializing and obfuscating the most critical retardant of not only our own growth but the growth of our global community. That retardant is of course the issue of race, immigration, and contemporary slavery.

Before my call to the Ministry I worked within the criminal justice system. I worked on behalf of the American Friends Service Committee to provide legal guidance to men and women warehoused in the more than 3000 public and private prisons in America. I conversed with women at Bedford Hills about their experience giving birth behind bars. I placed my palm against the plexiglass to allow the crying adolescent on the other side to be reminded there are still people in the world that have not abandoned him. I read the bloodstained letter of the man driven past the point of insanity after nearly 16 years in solitary confinement. Likewise I worked with the state lawyers who treated the prisoners they represented like slabs of meat who were broken human beings incapable of feeling or repentance for their crimes. My friends, this is modern day slavery. And it is a heavily racialized system. According to the PEW Center For the States 2008 report (the latest to come out)

Even though white Americans constitute the majority of the US population and commit crimes at comparable rates to that of people of color, African Americans and Latinos overwhelmingly and disproportionately bear the brunt of mass incarceration. The result is that people of color constitute 60% of our prison population while remaining a distinct minority of our general population.

We incarcerate young African American men at a rate of 1 in 9 – higher than any other group of Americans.

We incarcerate Latinos at almost twice the rate of their white counterparts.

In conclusion the study states that, sadly, our criminal justice system perpetuates racial and economic divisions. If our children see minorities treated unfairly and nothing being done about it, stereotyping and injustice are carried into future generations.

This last point is the most important for our purposes this morning. This trend is not isolated in our institutions, this blatant racism and modern slavery is embedded and perpetuated in our culture and our interpersonal relations.

So what does any of this have to do with us here this morning? What on earth could this have to do with your UU Office and the United Nations? Yes Dylan, of course there are bad things in the world, but where can our faith fit in? Is it even in the purview of our faith to tackle the human rights issues of the world?

The short answer is that I believe the framework of our liberal faith is the best chance we as a global community have to changing how we discuss and how we make real a liberated world. In fact, I believe UU's can and should lead the charge for racial justice and the dismantling of the institutions of modern day slavery, including the current immigration system. But we first have some major kinks to work out.

As a liberal faith movement our problem is not that we don't care or that we aren't aware. We know we are living in a world of white privilege, and many of us would no doubt sign on to my argument that we are living both nationally and internationally in a modern day Jim Crow. We read the blogs, we view the documentaries, and we give sermons just like this one: we get a gold star in talking about how to start the conversation. Our problem is that in light of all our knowledge and wonderful intellectualism we do not know actually how to start the conversation.

The UU United Nations Office represents one platform that's already in place to start such conversations. I have worked as an intern for the UU United Nations Office for nearly two years and for each of those years I have helped organize an intergenerational spring seminar. The 2012 Spring Seminar focused on Race and Immigration and featured 5 panels and a plethora of other programming to help engage the national and global issues within those two categories. I was struck by, when given a structured environment and a diversity of opinions in the room, how fluidly UUs and non-UUs alike tackled the complex and emotional topics of Race and Immigration. As can be seen in our comprehensive seminar statement written as a call to action by the participants at the end of the seminar (which you can get a copy of by request) when approached with an openness, a humility, and a desire to embrace the spark of God in everyone, entire world-views and cultures can be shifted. The United Nations itself has shown less than satisfactory determination to effectively discuss the issues of Race and Immigration on the International stage. But through our UU faith at the United Nations we were not only able to have the necessary conversations but were also able to come up with key assertions to live the conclusions from those conversations in our daily lives.

In my mind the only way to dismantle the terribly unjust systems currently structuring our national and global immigration and criminal justice institutions is to change how people in power relate to race. The only way to change how people in power relate to race is to change the culture. And the only way to change the culture is to change the way we relate to one another.

Look around the room today, who do you see? Take a second to think about who your friends are, who you spend time with. Finally, think about who you go to church with, who you meet at coffee hour, and who you chose to sit next to this morning. No doubt you've done this exercise before. And no doubt you've been asked to grapple with your whiteness, your class, and other uncomfortable characteristics. But this morning I would like to take it one step farther. Like Parker I want push your understanding for what the role of our UU movement is in race and immigration worldwide. Hopefully I won't be run out of the pulpit or ostracized by my colleagues because of it.

Here is what I want you to know.

This morning I would like you to know that there is the spark of God in each and every human being. That to denigrate the wealth of beauty inherent in a person to the sum of their skin color is an act of enslavement. That to enslave others is to enslave ourselves. That we all are complicit in this global system of both institutional and cultural slavery. That to pretend we are not complicit is to deny what we see in the pews every sunday. That of course racial diversity in church does not equate global justice but that the only way out of this hole we have dug ourselves since the time of Parker is through open conversation with whoever we have been trained to view as the least of these. That holding board meetings and entire weekend seminars on increasing diversity in our UU congregations merely complicates and insulates the relatively simple goal. Which is dialogue.

We want to change the world.

The only way to do so is through living together in one world, talking together in one room, and singing together in one song. The UU United Nations Office is one proven way to begin the conversation. But if we are to truly live in a liberated world, truly be able to stand at a pulpit on the fourth of July and quote that all men are created equal without a guilty conscience, we must continue the conversation in ourselves and every day in our communities. We must live our values and live our faith. We must make eye contact with those who do not look like the people we grew up with, we must not tell our daughters that certain suitors aren't right to date just because of the social class they were born into, and we must ourselves be open to the gifts of God in every person and not just those who lift up our very particular brand of faith. Let us not ignore the legacy Parker and his contemporaries have left us with. "Slavery must go down", Parker says, "The course of Trade is against it; the course of Thought; the course of Religion; the course of Politics,—the course of History." The UU faith has the option to stand on the side of history, the only question is if we are brave enough to take it.

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For He who worketh high and wise,
Nor pauses in his plan,
Will take the sun out of the sides
Ere freedom out of man.

So be it, Amen.