

## **“Whose History?”**

Rev. Laurel Gray

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A few years ago I attended a workshop on youth ministry put on by our New England region staff. One of the things they were holding up as being important was what they called “radical hospitality.” It seemed like other people in the room knew what this meant, but it was a new term to me, so I asked for an explanation.

As they described it, radical hospitality was the assumption that everyone was already in the room or in the community. Meaning, that when we’re talking about how we create welcoming communities, we see accommodations and sensitivity not as something meant for “other” people, but a way of being that assumes a plurality of needs and experiences are already among “us.”

For example, radical hospitality would have us assume that there are people within our community who are survivors of domestic violence, so including trigger warnings before graphic content and assuming that we need to ask before touching someone’s body, including those things is already necessary, because those experiences are already part of the collective of who “we” are.

A lack of radical hospitality would have us assume that anyone who has had an experience or a need that challenges our status quo is “other.”

The Reverend Marilyn Sewell writes this about radical hospitality, quote, “Radical means “out of the ordinary,” “revolutionary,” even. So what would it mean to receive someone—a stranger—with a presence that was not just polite, but to receive them with revolutionary generosity?”

A practice of radical hospitality is revolutionary because it refuses a notion of “us” versus “them.” And in a world that rejects those who challenge the status quo, and treats them as the problem, assuming that the need for change already exists within “us” is, I think, radical.

February is, of course, Black History Month. And at noon during the Lunch and Learn that our Racial Justice Committee has put together, we'll be reflecting on the creation of racism within the United States.

So I'd like to take this lens that we now have, this practice of radical hospitality, and apply it to not only history at large, but our history as Unitarian Universalists.

Because when we tell the story of Unitarian Universalism, when we speak of our history and our origins, we are predominantly telling a history of white people. I know I am. It is most of what is held up as being important - William Ellery Channing and Hosea Ballou, Ralph Waldo Emerson and James Luther Adams.

But what if we apply this lens of radical hospitality to our history? How would it change the story we tell, or the questions we ask about the story we have been told? Whose history is it? Whose history has been removed? The sheer fact of Black History Month existing in the US is telling. Which stories were silenced that need to be woven back into our collective understanding of who "we" are not only as a country but as a religious tradition.

I think this is important. Because, as we talk about racial justice in our Unitarian Universalist congregations, there can be a focus on integration as the "solution" or the goal of racial justice work. To put it frankly, "we just want more Black people in our congregation" becomes an ideal, a vision of healing. But as Rev. Adam Dyer says so clearly, that kind of unity and welcome cannot precede truth telling. And it assumes that Black people have been missing from Unitarian Universalism, which is not true.

Instead of asking "how do we get more Black people or people of color to come to our church?" a question that assumes radical hospitality would ask "where are all the stories of Black UUs? How are Black people silenced or minimized within UU communities?"

It is a powerful thing for us to remember the history of race and racialized violence

together, especially for those of us who are white. Because we know that whiteness relies on invisibility to maintain power, relies on being what is “normal” and “given” to remain so. And telling the history of how that norm was constructed and invented, remembering the origin together, it unmask the artifice and the evil of this thing we call race. So I want to thank Jane and the Racial Justice Committee for inviting today’s learning and reflection.

And I want to encourage curiosity about the history of Unitarian Universalism. In preparation for today I started googling “Black UU ministers” and skimming my shelves for the books that specifically highlight Black lay people and ministers within our denomination’s history.

In my searching I found today’s reading by the Rev. Adam Dyer. It struck me so poignantly and powerfully not only because of its content, but because of its proximity. I know Adam. He’s a UU minister, probably only a few years older than me, and I suspect many of us have walked past his church in Harvard Square.

The history of race and violence lives within us not only as people of this country, but as people of this tradition. Black and white, the history of our social structure belongs to us all and it informs all of our living.

And I can tell you, in my searching for the stories of Black Unitarian Universalists, that so many spoke of pain, of rejection, of being treated like they don’t belong. Even those who had been ministers or leaders within their congregations for years. And many spoke of how they remain Unitarian Universalists not because of the welcome they received, but in spite of the welcome they did not receive. It was the theological core of Unitarian Universalism that formed their spiritual home - our covenant, our lack of creed, our insistence on inherent worth and a refusal of damnation.

These stories struck me because they are so markedly different from the stories I’ve heard from white UUs who speak of finding a UU congregation and feeling like they were loved and accepted.

The Rev. Dr. Kristen Harper said this, in 2017, about her experience as a Black UU:

“One reason I am a Unitarian Universalist is because it is a faith where I can bring all of the best of what I was taught growing up in my multi-faith family and because, as a religion grounded in principle and reflection, justice-making and righteous action are essential to our faith, not something ancillary.

My deep sadness as a Unitarian Universalist is that while this faith community has always been a space that welcomed my varied religious heritage, my blackness hasn't always felt at home here.

That is to say, I have never been able to take for granted that I would be welcome in UU spaces as a black woman. No matter how long I've been a member, what committees I've served on, or the number of times I've been a GA delegate, I've never been able to take for granted the sense of home and welcome and connection that I see my white UU siblings proudly proclaim.” end quote

We know from the Commission on Institutional Change Report that came out last spring, that the racism and White Supremacy that infuses our nation also infuses our denomination. Radical hospitality is a call to assume that we have work to do, because this history of violence belongs to all of us and our Unitarian Universalist community has always included Black people. So the Black experience is not “other,” is not something that requires special accommodation, it is something that has always been present among us.

As we go out into this next week, I invite you to get curious with me. I invite you to go looking for stories that you haven't heard before, stories that speak to the Black experience within Unitarian Universalism. Maybe you'll learn about who leads Black Lives UU, or maybe you'll learn about the Reverend Egbert Ethelrod Brown who was born in Jamaica in 1875 and founded the First Unitarian Church of Harlem in 1920, or maybe you'll order a copy of Voices from the Margins which is filled with readings and poems from Black and POC UUs. Maybe you'll listen to one of the great Rev. Mark Morrison-Reeds sermons, or read about Nicole

Pressley's leadership of UU the Vote.

When we think about the history of our country and our denomination, things that are deeply intertwined, I invite us all to ask this question: "whose story is missing?" And then I invite us to see what we can find. And when we think about the current narrative about our country and our denomination, I invite us to ask the same question. *Whose story is missing?*

Because radical hospitality is a call to revolutionize our understanding of who "we" are, a call to question assumptions of "otherness."

I came across the song Kala is about to sing in a resource that the Rev. Aisha Ansano, who preached here in December, put together as part of a White Supremacy teach in. The song goes like this:

Where you go I will go Beloved,  
Where you go I will go  
Cause your people are my people  
Your divine my divine

May it be so.

Amen.