

WHY WE STILL NEED BLACK HISTORY MONTH

Without reminders, it is all too easy to forget slavery and our Civil War, and Jim Crow laws and “separate but equal”. Just as the Holocaust of Jews in World War II has been challenged as fabrication, and the decimation of indigenous peoples in America has been all but forgotten, how soon would slavery disappear from the history books if we didn’t take time to remember? In a time of resurgent racism, we particularly need to remember and recognize what black women and men have given to our society. So today we are taking time to remember Black history. Blacks, African Americans, have contributed greatly to our history. We need to remember those great Americans who happened to have black skin as well as the history of slavery and discrimination.

The first 20 Black slaves came to the colony at Jamestown in 1619, centuries before any part of my family came to the new world. Hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, of African men, women, and children were captured, enslaved, and brought to America to work for their white owners. There is no part of the story of slavery that is fair or just, no matter how many good and decent owners there may have been who treated their slaves as valuable servants and human beings. To be taken from freedom and sold into lifelong captivity, to have all rights taken away is horrible injustice. To be sold away from family at any time and to have little or no hope of ever gaining freedom is unbelievably cruel and inhuman. And yet, this was the law and practice of our nation, with protections for slave owners and slave holding states lasting until the Civil War. Allowed by the Constitution and Federal laws, Slaves were property.

The first organized convention of Universalists, meeting in Philadelphia in 1790, passed a resolution opposing slavery, declaring that “We believe it to be inconsistent with the union of the human race...to hold any part of our fellow-creatures in bondage. We therefore recommend a total refraining from the African trade, and the adoption of prudent measures for the gradual abolition of the slavery of the negroes in our country, and for the instruction and education of their children...” (*The Larger Faith, Charles A. Howe, Skinner 1993*)

Various Universalist Ministers and Lay People worked against slavery, and the Universalist General Convention passed resolutions and took actions through the 1820s, 30, 40, and 50s. During the Civil War the Northern Universalists supported the Union, while state conventions in Georgia, South Carolina, and Mississippi disclaimed any subordination to the General Convention. The Universalists did not formally split, however. (*The Larger Faith*)

Eminent Unitarian Minister, William Ellery Channing, spoke out against slavery in his treatise, *Slavery*, in 1835 and in his address at Lenox in 1842. By the time of the latter address he offered a blistering denunciation of slavery which he had come to see as America's great national evil. *(William Ellery Channing)*

In 1851, Unitarian, Theodore Parker addressed his colleagues on the evils of the Fugitive Slave Law which required northerners to turn slaves over to the government for return to their masters. Parker admitted to offering sanctuary to fugitive slaves and declared that he had had to arm himself, writing sermons with a loaded pistol on his desk in order to "defend the innocent members of {his} own church." *(Thodore Parker)*

After the Civil War ended, Northern Universalists supported the Civil Rights Act of 1866 and the 14th amendment. Many Universalists volunteered with the Freedmen's Bureau. *(The Larger Faith)*

Even after the Emancipation Proclamation by Abraham Lincoln, even after the bloodshed of the Civil War, the freedom of Blacks was only relatively better than it had been. Voting, access to education and jobs, ownership of property, and the right to participate in life on an equal footing with whites was still a distant dream. Justice for blacks was an oxymoron. Blacks were not welcome in white stores or neighborhoods or even churches. Jim Crow laws proclaimed equality via separation, and separation surely remained. Only equality and justice never seemed to catch up with the separation.

The Civil Rights movement under The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., brought about more real change faster than the massive efforts of the preceding 100 years. Again we need to remember our history, for today Blacks and other persons of color are again losing ground as whites hold onto positions of power and privilege as if they had some divine right. The turbulence of the 1950s and 1960s saw real progress in college admissions, integration of education and neighborhoods and in the spirit of our nation. Today the resurgent racism of neo-Nazis, the Ku Klux Klan, and Aryan Nation religions and political organizations, as well as the maintenance of privileged positions by ordinary whites is hampering efforts to bring real equality. The struggle for civil rights goes on.

Unitarian Universalism struggled with black empowerment in the late 1960s and early 70s. In disagreement over how racism should be addressed, competing groups within the movement brought about a serious crisis over funding which still impacts our movement. Beginning in the mid 1990s, the **Journey Toward Wholeness** program sought to bring Unitarian Universalism to a more inclusive position of active anti-racism. The latest effort to address racial concerns is the **Black Lives UU (BLUU)** program, but I remain a bit concerned that BLUU doesn't seem to connect much with the rest of UUism.

In our rugged individualism, we have a tendency to forget that our nation was built on the backs of the slaves who labored next to the colonists from the earliest days. Slaves and free blacks have had a bigger share of responsibility for making our nation strong than the history books usually recall. George Washington Carver is remembered for his work with peanuts, but how many other great black women and men have we learned about in our studies? Even though most blacks had little access to education until the 20th century, there have been many who have succeeded against all odds to bring progress in the field of medicine, various sciences, and in all of the arts. We owe far more than we know to black men and women, and we ignore this to our own peril.

From 1955 to 1968, The **Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.**, was at the forefront of the civil rights movement using techniques of nonviolent direct action. King powerfully articulated the reasons that the hypocrisy of segregation must end before the United States could live up to the values of liberty and equality. King also spoke against the Vietnam War. King was a visionary leader, a modern prophet calling for justice. He was committed to the highest values of honor, justice, equality, and acceptance. He was a spiritual and religious man, finding comfort, encouragement, and empowerment in the life and teachings of Jesus. He was also a wise and worldly man, seeing that equality must not put the blacks over whites, but rather bring all persons to the status of equals.

Other voices well worthy of our remembrance include many men and women who left their marks on our nation and the world. With many thanks to the University of Georgia African American Studies website and other sources, hear a few brief profiles:

Sojourner Truth was born Isabella Baumfree in 1797, a slave in Hurley, New York. Sold, resold, denied her choice of husband, and treated cruelly by her masters, she ran away in 1826 leaving all but one of her children behind. Her freedom purchased for \$25, she moved to New York City in 1829 becoming a member of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. After the death of her son, she took the name Sojourner Truth as she traveled to tell the truth about slavery, she became nationally known as a speaker on human rights for slaves and women. She set out on June 1, 1843, stopping to stay where she was offered lodging, speaking to any audience about the evils of slavery and injustice toward women. In 1864, President Lincoln invited her to the White House. She later served as a counselor for the National Freedmen's Relief Association, retiring in 1875 to Battle Creek, Michigan. She died in 1883. (*UGA African American Studies.htm*)

Heralded as the “Moses” of her people, Underground Railroad conductor **Harriet Tubman** became a legend during her lifetime, leading approximately 300 slaves to freedom during a decade of freedom work. Denied any childhood or education, she labored as a woodcutter, field hand, and loader of barrels of flour. In 1844 she married John Tubman, a freeman, and in the summer of 1849 she decided to escape from slavery. Her husband refused to go with her, but she set out anyway, heading north to Pennsylvania. A year later she returned to Baltimore to rescue her sister. Under the Fugitive Slave laws, rewards offered by slave owners for her capture totaled \$40,000. During the Civil War she was sent south to spy for the Union Army. After the war she returned to Auburn, New York where she married a Union Soldier and supported suffrage and other causes. Born a slave in 1821, Harriet died in 1913. (*UGA African American Studies.htm*)

Born a slave in Maryland in about 1818, **Frederick Douglass** escaped slavery in 1838 and went on to become one of the most important Abolitionists. Douglass wrote and spoke of his own experiences of the cruelty and injustice of the institution of slavery and was rewarded to see its demise though he lived well into the Jim Crow era. He continued to speak out and write for justice throughout his life. His words provide a telling commentary on those who continue to seek to suppress and block the votes of minority citizens of our nation.

“The American people have this to learn: that where justice is denied, where poverty is enforced, where ignorance prevails, and where any one class is made to feel that society is an organized conspiracy to oppress, rob, and degrade them, neither person nor property is safe.” *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*.

Born into slavery in 1856, **Booker T. Washington** was the most prominent spokesperson for African Americans after the death of Frederick Douglass. He sought social betterment for African Americans through economic progress. Working in the coal mines as a youth, he attended school when he could, and entered the Hampton Institute in Virginia in 1871, graduating in 1875. He taught in West Virginia before entering Wayland Seminary. In 1881 he founded the Tuskegee Normal School in Alabama. When he died in 1915, the school had 1500 students and 180 faculty members. (*UGA African American Studies.htm*)

James Langston Hughes was one of the original writers of the Harlem Renaissance. Born in Joplin, Missouri in 1902, he began studies at Columbia in 1921, leaving after a year to work on a freighter and traveling to Africa and living in Paris and Rome. Returning to the U.S., he graduated from Lincoln University in 1926, publishing his first book of poetry, *The Weary Blues*, the same year. He also published the essay, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” which became a defining piece for the Harlem Renaissance movement. During the next four decades, Hughes, wrote novels, poetry, short stories, plays, autobiography, and nonfiction works. Known for hearty humor as well as bitter criticism, he died in 1967. (*UGA African American Studies.htm*)

W.E.B. Du Bois was born in Great Barrington, Massachusetts in 1868. He became the most respected and effective spokesperson for the full rights of African Americans in the decades before World War II. In 1888, Du Bois had earned an A.B. at Fiske University, then earned his M.A. and Ph.D. from Harvard, with 2 years of study at the University of Berlin in between. He taught at Wilberforce University, the University of Pennsylvania, and Atlanta University. Du Bois combined an illustrious academic career with his work for full rights for African Americans. He worked to found the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in 1909. In 1934 he resigned from the NAACP to protest their goal of accommodation with white society. Increasingly disillusioned with life in the United States, he visited Europe and the Soviet Union. In 1961, he announced that he had joined the Communist Party and emigrated in Accra, Ghana, where he died in 1963 at age 95. (*UGA African American Studies.htm*)

Mary McLeod Bethune was one of the most widely known African American women of the 20th Century. Born in 1875, a graduate of the Scotia Seminary in 1895, she taught at the Haines Institute in Augusta, Georgia, then at Kendall Institute in Sumter, South Carolina, where she met and married Albertus Bethune. In October 1904, she founded the Daytona Normal and Industrial Institute for Negro Girls in a small rented cabin. When white hospitals denied service to black patients and training for black nurses and residents, Bethune founded McLeod Hospital. The school grew into Bethune-Cookman College. Bethune also founded the Circle of Negro War Relief in New York City during World War I, was Vice-President of the Commission on Interracial Cooperation, and served two terms as President of the National Association of Colored Women, advising the Coolidge and Hoover administrations on African American issues. In 1935, Bethune founded the National Council of Negro Women, which she served as President until 1949. She died in 1955 after receiving 12 honorary degrees. (*UGA African American Studies.htm*)

Another important African-American figure in 20th century history is **Paul Robeson**. Born in Princeton, New Jersey in 1898, a graduate of Somerville High School and Rutgers University, Robeson was a talented actor, an amazing singer, and a champion of civil rights for blacks. Settling in London, he won international acclaim in the 1930s.

A supporter of unions and a board member of several African American organizations, he was ostracized over communist sympathies during the McCarthy era. His passport lifted by the state department, he was unable to travel for many years. Robeson devoted much of his intellectual effort to civil rights, but died virtually forgotten in 1976. Robeson's story is told in his 1958 autobiography, *Here I Stand*.

Charles Drew pioneered the modern process for preserving blood for transfusions. Born in 1904 in Washington, D.C., Drew won a scholarship to Amherst where he starred in football, track and academics. He attended McGill University medical school, where he became interested in research about blood transfusions. He did his residency at Montreal General Hospital, then joined the faculty of Howard University where he later was appointed head of surgery. Appointed head of the National Blood Bank during World War II, he furiously resigned over the government mandate that white's and black's blood be given only to their respective races. In 1944 he became chief of Surgery at Freedmen's Hospital in Washington, D.C, where he encouraged African Americans to enter the field of medicine. He died in a car crash in 1950. (*UGA African American Studies.htm*)

When **Hank Aaron** retired from baseball in 1976, he held the world record of 755 homeruns, after having broken Babe Ruth's record of 714 on April 8th, 1974. Along the way, Aaron also surpassed **Willie Mays**, who retired in 1973 with 660 homeruns, 3,283 hits, and a lifetime batting average of .302. Both Aaron and Mays followed in the footsteps of **Jackie Robinson**, who in 1947, was the first black major leaguer, playing for the Brooklyn Dodgers and earning the Rookie of the Year award that year. Today it is common to see blacks on every major sports team. In 1936, when U.S. runner **Jesse Owens** won 4 gold metals at the Berlin Olympics, it struck a blow against Hitler's Aryan ideal. When **Joe Louis** knocked out German boxer Max Schmeling in 1938, it was a blow to white supremacy in Nazi Germany and the U.S.

As the 20th century opened, pianist **Scott Joplin**, the King of Ragtime, was making his mark. By the late 1920's, jazz horn player and scat-singing vocalist, **Louis**

Armstrong was making a mark in music and by mid-century he was a star, having appeared in over fifty films. In the 1930's, jazz vocalist **Billie Holiday** was one of the most sought after singers in Harlem's clubs. **Lena Horne** has been called the first black female star. Beautiful, poised, and politically active, the sultry singer was a World War II pinup girl, a movie star, and a symbol of success for black women. In the 1930's **Duke Ellington** became the king of swing; renowned jazz bandleader, composer, and pianist, Ellington left his mark on American music over 5 decades. Another great jazz musician, pianist and vocalist, **Nat King Cole**, had made his mark by the mid-1940's. Jazz trumpeter, **Miles Davis** gave birth to the cool, reaching his most productive period in the 1950's, but continuing to develop into the 1970's. Each of these amazing women and men left their mark on the world. Each of them fought their way to the top even in the midst of prejudice, outright racism, and sometimes drugs and violence. By the latter part of the 20th century, blacks had made significant contributions to virtually every field of endeavor.

These and so many other Americans who happened to be black have contributed richly to our society and to the level of scientific knowledge, politics, religious life, and every field of endeavor. In the face of racism, fear, and ignorance, black women and men have made huge impacts on society and continue to do so. We would be so much the worse without them, we would be so much the better if we fully recognized and honored their accomplishments.

When will we live in a rainbow world that values and accepts all persons? Perhaps not this year, nor even in our lifetimes, but the acceptance of all others that we practice, the honoring of their inherent worth cannot help but make a difference. We Unitarian Universalists must never step back from our belief in the inherent worth and dignity of each individual, for this alone marks our commitment to true justice and real compassion. May we always practice acceptance toward all persons, opening our doors to all persons of good will without giving any thought to race, creed, sex or sexual orientation, judging the actions of individuals solely on the character of the action and its impact. May we never forget the evil perpetrated on blacks, Indians, women, Jews, Muslims, and other minorities as we seek to build a nation and influence a world with freedom, justice, and opportunities for all.

So may it be! Shalom, Salaam, Blessed Be, and Amen!