

***Sometimes I Feel Like A Motherless Child***

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**The Unitarian Universalist Society of Laconia, NH**

**My sermon this morning is in honor of Black History month.**

**We are fortunate to have a number of scholars, artists,  
and writers who are recently filling in some of the gaps  
in the historical record of our nation,  
a historical record that traditionally has been told  
through the eyes of white Euro-Americans.**

**It's important that we listen to the stories of those who have been  
invisible in our history books – as it is best we know the whole story.**

**Why do we need to know the whole story from so long ago?  
I agree with Confucius, considered the paragon of Chinese sages,  
who advised everyone over 2,500 years ago  
to embrace the whole of our past as well as the present,  
in order to fully be aware of the forces that interact with our present life.  
If Confucius came back to our world today,  
I imagine he most likely would be admonishing us  
for solely just looking forward,  
and not venerating, understanding, and cherishing our past as a guide  
for our current lives, and as signposts for how to proceed into our future.**

**Confucius said: "Study the past if you would divine the future."**

**So as part of Black History Month, let's look at three stories from the past.**

**The first one we just heard - the story of Harriet Tubman.**

**In her remarkable life, born into slavery and escaping,**

**And then, after escaping,**

**Harriet turned around and brought hundreds of slaves to freedom.**

**She was aided by the Underground Railroad,**

**a network of secret routes and safe houses.**

**As we heard from the story enacted this morning,**

**from Harriet's leading so many enslaved to freedom,**

**she was called "Moses," leading her people to freedom**

**in the North and some onto Canada.**

**Because of the cruelty she had experienced from her various masters,**

**Harriet desired to escape from bondage from an early age,**

**and free others as well.**

**She later said: "I had seen their tears and sighs,**

**and I had heard their groans,**

**and would give every drop of blood in my veins to free them."**

**She held a deep belief in being guided by her Lord,**

**whom, she felt protected her always.**

**We also heard within this story of Harriet's relationships**

**with the things of the earth, which she regarded as sacred:**

**-The stars twinkling, the blanket of night wrapping her, the wind whispering to her through the breeze.**

**She looks for signs along her way- such as an owl screeching,  
which she hears as a sacred sign to begin her first journey to freedom.**

**African American slaves may have had a similar understanding of reality  
as found in Native American thinking –**

***that many things have a kind of spirit and are capable of relationship.*<sup>1</sup>**

**Indeed, in Ysaye M. Barnwell’s song *Breaths*, found in one of our hymnals,  
we see this relationship continuing today  
within the African American tradition.**

**Barnwell’s song tells us “*to listen more often to things  
than to beings*” - and that this is *the ancestors’ way*.**

**Like Confucius, Barnwell urges us in her hymn to remember  
those who came before us – and to find them in common things all around us.**

**Harriet believed in the sense of the spiritual  
within the ordinary to guide her every day.**

**Held by her belief in God’s presence in her life,**

**Harriet would, after gaining freedom,**

**work tirelessly to end slavery and for women’s suffrage,**

**until her death in 1913.**

**A second story for us this morning is from the book *Master Slave Husband  
Wife*, by Illyon Woo, just published in 2023.**

**This is a story of a husband and wife from Macon Georgia, both enslaved,**

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<sup>1</sup> Tila Miles *All that She Carried*. New York: Random House, 2021, p. 267 (Kindle edition).

and their journey from slavery to freedom from 1848 -1852.

Ellen and William Craft forbidden to read as slaves

had heard these words from the *American Declaration of Independence*:

*"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, That they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that from these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."*

And the Crafts knew of the apostle Paul's words: "*God made of one blood all nations of men*"<sup>2</sup>

William and Ellen knew that they wanted such freedom and planned and orchestrated a daring escape.

The Crafts story is told from the actual records of the time.

Unlike Harriet Tubman, they did not walk to their freedom, but used disguises.

Leaving on December 20<sup>th</sup> 1848 from Macon, Georgia

and traveling by steamboats, carriages and trains,

they were disguised as a master and "his slave."

Ellen was a dress maker created for herself a "master's clothing."

She bound her breasts and wore a white shirt,

with a long vest and loose coat, slim-legged pants,

and a handsome coat to cover it all... She wore a gentleman's boots.

Her hair had been cut, which Ellen and William took with them,

to leave no clue of their leaving.

She donned a silky black cravat, and bandages around her chin, and hand,

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<sup>2</sup> Acts 17:26.

which was in a sling. She wore green-tinted glasses and an extra tall silk hat. Ellen had taken on the appearance of a wealthy, sick, rich, white young man – “a most respectable-looking gentleman” in her husband’s words.<sup>3</sup>

William dressed as he normally did as a slave except that he donned “a white, secondhand beaver hat, nicer than anything he had ever worn – the mark of a rich gentleman’s slave.”<sup>4</sup>

After many harrowing adventures, the Crafts safely arrived in the north. Once safely in the north, they bravely tell their story to gathering crowds. But with the passage of the infamous Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, where all Americans were charged with returning slaves to their enslavers, the Crafts were again in danger of being returned to slavery. Importantly, through their lectures and sharing about slavery and their lives, they found people who supported them in the north. Eventually settling in Boston, through their lectures, they found people to support them and the cause of ending slavery.

Rev. Samuel May, Unitarian minister, and famous reformer working to end slavery,

described Ellen as “beautiful, with no trace of African blood discernible in her features, eyes, cheeks, nose, hair,

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, pp 7-9.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 9.

but the whole is that of a Southern born white woman.  
To think of such a woman being held as a piece of property,  
subject to be traded off to the highest bidder, while it is in reality  
no worse or wickeder than when done to the blackest woman that ever was,  
does yet stir a community brought up in prejudice against color a thousand  
times more deeply  
that could be affected in different circumstances.”<sup>5</sup>

Thus, Ellen’s effect, being perceived as “white,” on audiences was “electric”  
and the Crafts received often thunderous applause  
and thus, support for ending slavery.

But, with the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850,  
many blacks left Boston, fearful of being captured by slave hunters.  
And the Crafts were targeted by their Macon Georgia slaveholders  
for return to Georgia.

In an amazing show of support for the Crafts,  
Bostonians rose to their defense  
after a warrant was signed for their capture,  
with the bounty hunters in town,  
searching for the Crafts. .

In the end, the Crafts were saved from being captured  
because of the efforts of citizens of Boston,

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p. 159

who shamed and threatened the very safety of the bounty hunters.

Fearful for their lives, the slave hunters ended up leaving Boston, going out the back door of their hotel, disguised as women, and eventually returning to the South empty-handed.

Even though this real threat had passed, the Crafts understood that they were still at risk of being sent back to the South.

They decided to leave our country and through another harrowing journey, travelled to Scotland, where they would raise their family.

Before they left, they were married by Rev. Theodore Parker, one of our famous Unitarian ministers.

A courageous act on the part of all three of them.

Threatened up to the moment they left American shores of being sent back to Georgia,

the Crafts were accompanied from Boston to Portland, Maine by Rev. Samuel May, Unitarian minister

who was willing to risk fines and jail for this courageous couple.

In thinking about this story of the Crafts, I wonder,

why, have most of us if not all of us, not heard about the Crafts before the publication of this book?

What is it about this story that makes it so difficult for us as a nation to remember?

The third story is the most difficult to read and then tell you about, because the slaves in this story did not escape, but remained in slavery until the end of the Civil War with the passage of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1865. I found Tiya Miles's book, *All That She Carried*, published in 2021, a remarkable book of historical writing - that I encourage everyone to read. Tiya Miles is an African American historian at Harvard University, and Radcliffe Alumnae Professor at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study. For *All That She Carried*, she was awarded the National Book Award. The book is a New York Times Bestseller.

*All That She Carried* is a haunting and difficult book to read, because of the recording of the great harms of slavery. Yet at the same time, it is a powerful story of love continuing within a family system across four generations, in spite of almost insurmountable obstacles.

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The suffering and painful journey through four generations of African American women is told through the discovery of one item – a cloth bag – passed from mother to daughter across several generations. From studying the history of this cotton cloth bag, Tiya Miles reveals the painful, complex world of slavery and its legacies.



**The world of enslaved women in the Antebellum South has been extremely poorly documented.**

**This volume uncovers a story new to most of us about what happened to enslaved women, and their children.**

**The story begins in the 1850s in South Carolina, where an enslaved mother, Rose, faces the selling of her daughter Ashley, because of the death of their owner.**

**Thinking quickly, Rose packs a cotton bag for her nine-year-old daughter, placing inside the bag a few items as tokens of her love for her daughter, in hopes that her daughter might survive.**

**As Miles wrote: *“ripping families apart was a common practice in a society structured by and indeed, dependent on – the legalized captivity of people deemed inferior.”*<sup>6</sup>**

**Tiya Miles asks us these questions surrounding Rose’s actions in filling the bag for Ashley:**

***How does a person treated like chattel express and enact a human ethic?***

***What does an individual who is deeply devalued insist upon as her set of values?***

***How does a woman demeaned and cowed face the abyss and still give love?*<sup>7</sup>**

**Miles provides her answers. She wrote: *Rose gathered all of her resources – material, emotional, and spiritual –***

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<sup>6</sup> Miles, All That She Carried. P. xiii

<sup>7</sup> Miles, xiii

*and packed an emergency kit for the future.  
She gave that bag to her daughter Ashley, who carried it,  
and passed it down across the generations.<sup>8</sup>*

Decades later Ashley's granddaughter Ruth  
embroidered on the cotton bag these words:

*My great grandmother Rose  
Mother of Ashley gave her this sack  
when she was sold at age 9 in South Carolina.  
It had a tattered dress, 3 handfuls of  
pecans, a braid of Rose's hair. Told her  
It is filled with my Love always.  
She never saw her again.  
Ashley is my grandmother.  
Ruth Middleton, 1921.*

Tiya Miles explores the possible meanings of each of the items  
Rose put into the bag.  
Clearly Rose packed for the uncertainty ahead for Ashley.  
Not unlike the uncertainty that people are facing today  
as political and climate disrupted refugees—  
forcing them to leave their homes in a hurry.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid

Rose's packing of the sack staked a claim for her family's continuation in spite of the turbulent times surrounding her.

As an enslaved mother Rose, like many like her, *feared for the separation, sale, beatings and deaths of her children*<sup>9</sup>.

Daughters in particular required special protection from the intimate horrors of slavery<sup>10</sup>.

Ashley was sold for \$300.

An impossible sum for Rose to afford.

She is forced to pack this emergency sack for Ashley.

She places the dress in the sack, then the 3 handfuls of nuts,

and cuts off a braid of her hair. Hair she isn't supposed to think of as her own.

And then, she fills the sack with her love.

The tattered dress perhaps was put inside to protect Ashley's body,

and *shield an enslaved girl's dignity*<sup>11</sup>.

In addition, a dress might serve as a disguise, if needed in the future,

and aid in Ashley escaping from slavery.

Rose must have also understood that Ashley could sell the dress if she needed to do so.

Next, Rose packed 3 handfuls of pecans -a concentrated source of energy – which Ashley could eat if needed or sell if she needed money.

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<sup>9</sup> Miles. P. 95

<sup>10</sup> Miles, p 98.

<sup>11</sup> Miles, p. 105

And Rose packed her own hair – perhaps as a symbol of Rose’s beliefs, similar to Harriet Tubman’s and Ysaye Barnwell’s beliefs, *in spirit’s power, the transcendent connection, and the importance of carrying on a sense of lineage.*<sup>12</sup>

Tiya Miles writes of the difficulties of writing about history of those who have had no way (no training, no status, no money) to leave a record of their lives.

She wrote that “*it is a madness, if not an irony, that unlocking the history of unfree people depends on the materials of their legal owners.*”<sup>13</sup>:

What remains behind are some items, such as Ashley’s precious sack, which was discovered fortuitously in a flea market in Nashville, Tennessee. The sack now resides on long-term loan to the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C.

These three stories have so much to tell us about the human condition, and our relationship to each other – the interdependent web of all existence of which we are each a part.

I have only touched the tip of the iceberg in telling these stories this morning.

All three stories are in the end, stories of love

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<sup>12</sup> Miles.p. 105.

<sup>13</sup> Miles, p. 57

**conquering what is terribly harmful, hateful, indeed destructive of the human spirit.**

**Today we must challenge those who dehumanize others, lessen others.**

**We need to have the courage to speak out against discrimination of any kind.**

**And these three stories are also, like Confucius, warning us**

**to not repeat what was done in the past.**

**There is a song in our hymnal “Sometimes I feel like a motherless child,**

**long way from home, long way from home.”**

**After reading these three stories and sharing them with you**

**singing this song will always remind me of Rose and Ashley,**

**of Ellen and William, of Harriet Tubman and the 3 million plus slaves**

**caught in American slavery’s unmerciful grip before Emancipation.**

**May we remember to be guardians of freedom –**

**so that no child, no parent, no one is separated from beloveds, nor enslaved ever again.**

**May no one ever again have to say, “Sometimes I feel like a motherless child.”**

**Not at our borders today. Not ever.**

**And may we continue to tell such stories of a fuller history of our nation**

**– filling in the gaps for future generations,**

**so that they have more of the truth**

**upon which to build their new lives.**

**Peace and love to you.**