Get Back on the Bus

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READINGS:

Our first reading this morning is by Whitney M. Young, Jr., a Unitarian Universalist and Executive Director of the National Urban League from 1961-1971.

Young writes:

"Instead of an asset, religion has been a liability in the struggle for social reform. The Church, until recently, anesthetized one of the major forces of social change: the American conscience. It provided people with a place where they could congregate regularly in a beautiful setting to hear pious platitudes and mouth meaningless clichés. Then it turned them loose to discriminate against their fellow (humans) the other six and nine-tenths of the week. Eleven to twelve a.m on Sundays has been the most segregated hour in America, and it has been easier to integrate the chorus line of a burlesque show than to integrate a choir in most of our churches."

Our second reading this morning is by Rev. Michelle Bentley, minister (in 1999) of the Third Unitarian Church of Chicago, quoted in the *Chicago Tribune*. Third Unitarian Church is located in a working class/poor African-American neighborhood in the city.

She writes:

"To say that you stayed here is not enough. I appreciate it. But we sit on the edge of an abyss and we teeter-totter. We have to be good neighbors."

SERMON:

In the two hundred years of UU history in America, there have been approximately 40 African-Americans ordained in our ranks. Today there are approximately 1,500 UU ministers. The UUA does not keep updated statistics on race, but by my estimates, approximately 25 of these ministers are African-American. That's just over 1%. For several decades now African- American Unitarian Universalist membership as a whole has hovered at just under 1% of total association membership. As Whitney Young said, "eleven to twelve a.m. on Sundays has been the most segregated hour in America."

It's tempting to ask "What's wrong with this?" Our racial statistics are no different from other white denominations. Besides, everyone has a right to decide where they worship on Sunday. Our theology does not appeal to everyone. We can not change 200 years of religious history and tradition, becoming something other than we are, in order to be diverse.

These statements are true, but they obscure the fact that some African-Americans who might like to come do not feel welcomed, and that African-Americans who do come can be frustrated by subtle exclusion. More importantly, these statements assume that we as an association have no corporate responsibility for change, when in fact, as Rosemary Bray McNatt explains, "nothing is more important than making justice real – here, where we are. Hard as diversity is, it is our most important task."

I know that many of you educate yourself on issues of race and class, and many of you also do tireless and profoundly healing social justice work in this community. But as a religious community, we are struggling to find our voice on social justice. Our quest is particularly poignant because we are an urban church. If you're like me, your commute to church takes you through a variety of neighborhoods: a few integrated neighborhoods, but mostly wealthy and white or working class/poor and black. America's legacy of slavery, classism, and racism calls out to me through my car window every day, and I am left asking myself "What does my faith call me to do?"

Last year I went to the Martin Luther King Jr. rally in Music Hall. I can't remember the name of our speaker that day, but I remember one thing he said, "To those of you

who are black, I'm telling you to pick up your pallet and walk. Pick up your pallet and walk. And to those of you who are white, I'm telling you to get back on the bus. Get back on the bus."

Last year during candidate week I met with the Board members and their spouses at the Homan House. During dinner I asked people for their impressions about the role of this church in the community. Is First Church a neighborhood church that intentionally draws members from the community, a church that is a good neighbor to the community, or something else? A lively and heated discussion followed, with members weighing in on all sides.

I mostly listened that evening, but this morning I am weighing in as well. All those commuting hours have called to me, pricking at my conscience and faith. My view out the window tells me to get back on the bus. So I have come to you this morning with the same message, "Get back on the bus." In the words of Rev. Michelle Bentley, "To say that you stayed here is not enough. I appreciate it. But we sit on the edge of an abyss and we teeter-totter. We have to be good neighbors."

Last year I taught a class on UU history at Northern Hills and added a section on African-American UUs. As I went through explaining our limited number of African-American members and ministers, and our well-documented history of institutionalized racism, one class member turned to me in exasperation and said "What about all our abolitionist and civil rights heros?"

It is true that Unitarian Universalism has many heroes in the struggle for racial justice. Gloster Dalton, a former slave, was a founder of the first Universalist church in America in 1779. The Rev. Moncure Conway, minister of this church and himself a son of slave owners, left this pulpit in 1862 and went back to Washington D.C. to find his family's former slaves and bring them to safety in Yellow Springs, Ohio.

In 1953, our own Carol Hull became the first African-American in this century to sign the membership book and integrate First Church. In 1965 Rev. James Reeb was beaten to death on the streets of Selma, Alabama for participating in Martin Luther King Jr.'s first march on Selma. During the same period, Viola Liuzzo, a housewife and Unitarian from Detroit, was murdered while helping with voter registration in the South.

Heroes are excellent role models, but they lose their value when we hide behind them. The need for Unitarian Universalist heroes in the struggle for racial diversity didn't end after the Civil War or the Civil Right's movement. If we claim Gloster Dalton as a hero, but never educate ourselves on issues of race, class, and power, Mr. Dalton's

legacy has been misused. If we honor James Reeb as a hero, but ignore his struggles, Rev. Reeb has become a token for our convenience.

It's not a question of whether or not we have abolitionist and civil rights heroes. We do. Many of them. The question is whether or not we act like heroes today.

When Margaret Young heard that her husband, Whitney M. Young, Jr., who I quoted earlier, was being honored by the UUA with the creation of a fund that would be used to support UU urban ministries, she told the UUA that she would wait to thank them until she has seen how generously it was supported. This is a woman who had been a UU for over twenty years. Surely her comment came from personal experiences of disappointment. She was not being difficult. She was telling her truth.

This is my great frustration with Unitarian Universalism. I love this association. I am passionate about it. I love and believe what it stands for: the dignity and worth of every person, acceptance of one another, and encouragement of individual journeys of spiritual growth. Then I read about our history with African-Americans and I became ashamed. Rev. Mark Morrison-Reed's book, *Black Pioneers in a White Denomination*, is the best book I have ever read about Unitarian Universalism. But it is very difficult to accept. The book is not angry, it just systematically tells the truth about a history of individual, congregational, and institutional racism, classism, neglect, and patronization.

While flipping through it last year I came upon a section I had never noticed before, a paragraph about an African-American Unitarian church that formed in Cincinnati in 1918, probably the only one of its kind in America at the time. The church was called "The Church of the Unitarian Brotherhood" and existed until at least 1936. The minister, William H.G. Carter, was prominent in the African-American community, but the local UU ministers, including the minister of this congregation, never told the American Unitarian Association about the existence of the church because they thought the church was in "the wrong neighborhood." When the AUA discovered it eighteen years later, in 1936, they explained that "the reaction [there] was not very intelligent." They also commented that it was located in a poor and rowdy neighborhood. As a result, the church received no support or funding, and eventually closed.

Morrison-Reed comments that we had no vision. We couldn't see ourselves as anything other than what we were. We told our African-American ministers they had to form their own congregations, but when they did, we didn't support them.

The situation with The Church of the Unitarian Brotherhood highlights a difficulty UUs face in attracting African-Americans: our class-bound structure. It is a well-documented fact that Unitarian Universalism is a faith for those in the upper middle class. UUs rank with Episcopalians as the wealthiest denominations in America. We are on the far end of the financially successful spectrum, most of us far removed from hands-on experiences with poverty, hunger, illiteracy, and sub-standard housing. As Seattle journalist Jerry Large notes, unlike members of blue-collar and ethnic communities, UUs are "not people who seek deliverance, but people who have the wherewithal to deliver."

In 1987 the UUA conducted a survey of African-Americans. Of course this survey does not describe every African-American UU. But it does highlight patterns. The survey noted that "the typical African-American UU lives in a large city and attends a large church. His income and educational levels are slightly higher than other UUs and he is likely to have been reared as a Baptist or Methodist."

The survey also noted something else of great interest. The major difference between African-American and white UUs was their attitude towards worship. The African-American UUs valued hope, music, and the celebration of common values. Most use the term God and were more inclined to pray.

However, the average white UU rated intellectual stimulation as their most important value – 74%. The African-American UUs rated intellectual stimulation at 47%, a difference of 27%. This does not indicate that African-American UUs are less intelligent. The statistics show that in fact they are more educated than their white counterparts. What it does indicate is that *they value different things in a worship service*: celebration, hope, and music, more than intellectual stimulation.

This is an interesting quandary for us. We are a faith that treasure intellectual freedom and growth. We are a faith that honors individualism and stepping to a different drummer. It's in our history, our roots, our traditions, our worship. Can we both attract African-Americans and maintain our traditions?

I say "yes." Maybe not many African-Americans, but more than come now, if we educate ourselves as a community on issues of race. My dream for this congregation is that we choose a path of education with the purpose of helping ourselves. We still live in a silently and subtlety segregated society. We have come a long way from separate drinking fountains, but still we have a long way to go before we find wholeness. I am not willing to passively accept this brokenness, in America or my faith life.

At the Unitarian Universalist General Assembly in 1992, delegates unanimously passed a resolution affirming racial and cultural diversity. It reads in part:

> Be it further resolved that the 1992 GA urges the Board of Trustees to the UUA
> to develop and implement a process involving a broad representation of congregations,
> organizations, and staff to realize this vision of a racially and culturally diverse UUA.

It was a landmark in Unitarian Universalism and atonement for a painful piece of our recent history. At the 1969 General Assembly in Boston there were disagreements on funding two UUA committees, one committee that favored black autonomy and power, and one that favored integration. You can imagine how inflammatory this was in the late 60s. When the funding for the committee favoring black autonomy and power was cut, half the delegates walked out.

The walkout was bitter. Some delegates actually spit on other delegates for walking out. I have had a hard time finding anyone, lay person or minister, who will tell me the whole story about GA in 1969. I know one person who didn't come back to GA until 1984. It was a painful, shocking, divisive time that shook the association. Within two years many African-Americans left Unitarian Universalism, and we have never recovered. We have less African-American members today then we did in 1968.

Both the UUA and First Church are at a cross roads. At First Church, our identity is that of an urban church. Yet, the neighborhood has changed in the hundred years since this congregation moved from downtown to an affluent suburb called Avondale. Why has First Church remained in a struggling urban area in an era of white flight? In dejected moments I hear members tell me First Church remained because it was too expensive to relocate or because you don't like change. That might be true, but I see more in you. I see a congregation that, for better or worse, is invested in Cincinnati and the community of Avondale. I'm not completely sure, you'll have to tell me for certain, but I believe I'm looking at a congregation that wants to get back on the bus, a congregation that wants to be good neighbors. If so, how could we do it?

To begin with, we would need to educate ourselves about our history, our neighbors, and the complexity of racism. In order to get us started I am facilitating a study group of the book *Black Pioneers in a White Denomination* on three consecutive Wednesdays in February.

Next, we would need to build support networks, among ourselves and with other groups, because social justice work is painstaking and discouraging. For example, the UUA can help with education and support through Journey Towards Wholeness (JTW), a program developed by the UUA in response to the resolution passed at the 1992 GA. JTW creates programs that help congregations with education, organization, and the creation of strategic plans of community involvement. I also like the premise of JTW, which maintains that "whether or not a group becomes multi-racial, there is always the opportunity to become anti-racist."

The next step is a future we intentionally decide. There is the opportunity for fundraising. My dream is that in the future we use a portion of our yearly canvass for social justice projects. Now I can hear members of the Finance Committee gulping, but please hear my out. The year I worked at Concord the congregation voted to raise the social justice portion of their canvass from 5% to 7.5%. That year, they increased their pledges and gave $30,000 back to the community.

There is the opportunity for community projects. This congregation has successfully complete Habitat Houses. What else could you do? Already a JTW committee has been looking into projects, perhaps a collaboration with the Urban League. My dream is that next fall First Church will host a workshop on race, similar to the overwhelmingly successful one done this year on the Religious Right.

We are also participating in the annual MARCC pulpit exchange. On February 14th, First Church will be one of a hundred black and white Cincinnati congregations paired to exchange ministers for a day. I will be going to First Baptist Church in Cumminsville and we will be welcoming their minister here. The opportunities are endless, social justice projects, a UU day care center at First Church, opening our doors on Reading Road. We just need to choose, not everything, but the opportunities that best suit us.
Sometimes I tell myself that this will never work, we should just stay as we are. The work doesn't really matter. Then someone else shows me the way. Last year I preached a sermon similar to this one at Northern Hills. At the end of the service we had a congregational dialogue, and a member stood up to speak, one of two African-Americans in the congregation.

He said, "I came today to hear you out, but I didn't expect much. I didn't think you'd get it. But you said a name today I didn't expect to hear. W.H.G. Carter, minister of the Church of the Unitarian Brotherhood in Cincinnati, was my grandfather. I've never heard another minister mention him. You don't know what it means to me to have him remembered." The day I left Northern Hills, Leslie gave me a picture of W.H.G. Carter with his family. It's in my office here, framed, a treasured gift.

I am the minister of First Unitarian Church today, and I owe Carter, myself, Leslie, and all of us, a better future. When social justice work scares me, and it does, I look into the faces of Carter's family. This summer I will be researching Carter. This work matters. It is the work of healing and wholeness, one person, one history, one story, one relationship at a time.

We all have a role in affirming and supporting a vision of an anti-racist, multi-cultural Unitarian Universalism. I know we can make a difference because you are my heroes, all of you. I came to First Church to get back on the bus. Will you join me? I can't go alone, because I will burn out. I need you. The bus is waiting. It's sitting there on Reading Road. Its doors are open. All we need to do is decide if our doors are open as well.