

# Stories From Our Black History

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Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Rappahannock

## Chalice Lighting by Rev. Mark Morrison-Reed:

“The central task of religious community  
is to unveil the bonds that bind each to all.  
There is a connectedness,  
a relationship discovered amid the particulars  
of each of our individual lives.  
Once felt, it inspires us to act for justice.  
The religious community is essential,  
for alone our vision is too narrow  
to see that all must be seen,  
and our strength too limited  
to do all that must be done.  
Together, our vision widens  
and our strength is renewed.”

## SERMON

"Outside, the gray, neo-gothic building that houses  
Meadville/Lombard Theological School  
loomed large, dark, silent, and ghostly,  
except for the light that shone from the window in the basement.  
On their way home my friends expected to see that light.  
They assumed that I was studying.  
What they didn't know was that on some nights  
I simply buried my head in my arms and wept as the stories unfolded.  
Sometimes, beneath the bare light bulb of my study carrel,  
all academic distance was lost.  
I couldn't believe the stories the documents revealed;  
I couldn't understand how our religious movement could have done such things.  
I couldn't even think about it.  
All I could do was curse and cry.  
The pain I felt for Ethelred Brown was a pain  
I would feel for others before finally realizing it was mine, as well."  
(p. 183, Black Pioneers in a White Denomination by Mark Morrison Reed)

Those are the words of Mark Morrison Reed.  
It was Mark at that basement study carrel  
on the campus of our Unitarian Universalist seminary in Chicago.  
He was doing research for what would later become this book:

## Black Pioneers in a White Denomination.

The Rev. Mark Morrison-Reed is one of the most prominent ministers in our movement. He is also one of the few who are African American. Ordained in 1979, he joined a short list of just 18 black ministers to have ever received ministerial fellowship in the long history of Unitarians and Universalists. Today, out of 1000 ministers, there are just about 40 who are African American.

Sometimes when we come together to talk about the racism embedded in our culture, our families and in our churches, we often want to keep the painful stories of the past in the past. We try to keep a comfortable distance between them and us. Yet, the past shapes our present lives more than we know.

Today I bring you stories from our Unitarian Universalist history. These are the stories of our Black History. We don't always do the best job of lifting them up over the white narrative, but they are an important part of our shared religious identity.

We have always been proud of our northern abolitionist ancestors. We love to tell the story about how the great Unitarian minister Theodore Parker had to keep a pistol in his desk drawer because his anti-slavery preaching was agitating the Boston industrialists.

But, as I pointed out in a recent sermon on the Emancipation Proclamation, "Black abolitionists and white abolitionists may have had the same goal of abolishing the inhumane institution of slavery, but their reasons were not the same. The African American struggle rose from their blood and bones and tears; from gut-wrenching anguish and a heart burning to be free. The white abolitionist felt a different kind of anguish. They saw slavery as a moral blight upon the white race. Just because whites hated slavery and just because they were putting their lives on the line to abolish it, didn't mean that they saw African Americans as brothers and sisters." (J. Ryu, 12/30/12 sermon)

Here is one of Theodore Parker's lesser-quoted ideas:

### READING 1

*"...But the negro is slow, a loose-jointed sort of animal, a great child."  
"Any Anglo-Saxon with common sense does not like this Africanization of America; he wishes the superior race to multiply rather than the inferior." (Life and correspondence of Theodore Parker: Volume 2, John Weiss)*

William Ellery Channing, another abolitionist who was the first to define Unitarianism in America, wrote in 1840:

### READING #2

*"I should expect from the African race, if civilized, less energy, less courage, less intellectual originality than in our race. There is no reason for holding such a race in*

*chains: they need no chains to make them harmless." (Darkening the Doorways: Black Trailblazers and Missed Opportunities in Unitarian Universalism by Mark D. Morrison-Reed)*

Yes, these men were simply echoing the sentiment of the times in which they lived. My purpose for lifting up these quotes is not to judge, but to help us to understand what happened to blacks in our movement, and what keeps happening.

Since the beginning, African Americans have been drawn to the Unitarian message of one God revealed to many different faiths, of Jesus as a human being and to the Universalist gospel of salvation for all people.

Just 20 years after Channing wrote those words about the African race, the Rev. Jackson, who was serving a liberal Baptist church just a few doors down from where the annual meeting of the Unitarians was taking place, came to address the assembly. Here is a report of that event from the October 1860 issue of the Christian Inquirer:

#### READING #3

*"Rev. Mr. Jackson, the colored minister of New Bedford, had been converted [to Unitarianism]. He had learned that the religion of Jesus was universal, and gave all the right and privilege of thinking for themselves. As he was perhaps the only colored Unitarian minister, he hoped they would hear from him patiently. He then presented the claims of his church, which was in debt, and desired that some aid might be afforded him to discharge this debt. After some further remarks, a contribution of \$49 was taken up, to which more was afterwards added to lift the debt on Mr. Jackson's church."  
(Christian Inquirer, 20 October 1860, p. 2.)*

The story goes that Rev. Jackson had learned of the Unitarian religion from Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, a free black woman born in Baltimore. She was an abolitionist, suffragist, and a poet and writer. Frances Harper was a member of the First Unitarian Church in Philadelphia.

Here are two of her writings:

#### READING #4

*"We want more soul,  
a higher cultivation of our spiritual faculties.  
We need more unselfishness, earnestness and integrity.  
Our greatest need is not gold or silver,  
talent or genius, but true men and true women."*

*"Bury Me In a Free Land"  
I ask no monument, proud and high,*

*To arrest the gaze of passers-by;  
All that my yearning spirit craves,  
Is bury me not in a land of slaves.*

On the Universalist side of our religious lineage, the first African-American ordained by that church was Joseph Jordan, who founded the First Universalist Church of Norfolk in 1887.

READING #5

*"I had been ordained as a Baptist minister.  
But after reading Thomas Whittemore's book,  
The Plain Guide to Universalism,  
I had a spiritual crisis.  
I could no longer preach the Baptist belief in Hell."*

In that basement study carrell on the Meadville Lombard campus in Chicago, the story that Mark Morrison Reed was reading was about Egbert Ethelred Brown. Brown had completed a 2-year course there in the early 1900's. Those were not easy years for Brown. He had left his family in Jamaica to be there, money was a constant struggle, and it seemed that no one really wanted him there.

READING #6

"President Southworth of Meadville Theological School informed me that the school did not conduct a correspondence course, and that therefore I would have to come to Meadville. And that as there was no Unitarian Church in America for colored people, and that as white Unitarians required a white minister he was unable to predict what my future would be at the conclusion of my training." (Black Pioneers, Reed)

Even with this pessimistic outlook from the denomination, Brown was passionate about the faith that he had discovered. He wanted to spread this good news to his people in Jamaica. In his own words, he explains why he was drawn to Unitarianism.

READING #7:

*"I was an inquisitive youngster and a truthful child. I was disposed to ask questions. I remember very distinctly the question which I asked my teacher after the scripture lesson on the falling of the walls of Jericho. "Why," I asked, "did God waste so much time when he could have brought down the walls on the first day?" My teacher was horrified. So much for my inquisitiveness. From accounts I heard later in life I have come to the conclusion that as a child I told the truth instinctively, or if you prefer the term, automatically. These two characteristics – inquisitiveness and truthfulness – had much to do with the choice I ultimately made to enter the Unitarian ministry."  
(from 10/17/2010 sermon by Rev. John E. Gibbons)*

For many years, Brown tried to build up a Unitarian Congregation in Jamaica, but received little support from the American Unitarians. Finally, he was forced to give up the mission in 1920.

Brown and his family moved to Harlem during those incredible years of its Renaissance and started the Harlem Unitarian Church. Despite his exceptional public ministry and support from many distinguished leaders of the time, little assistance came from his fellow Unitarians. The Harlem congregation closed after the death of Rev. Brown in 1956.

Rev. Brown was one of only 23 black men and women fellowshiped as Unitarians or Universalists between 1889 and 1993--a span of over 100 years. Even if they were fellowshiped, it was still very difficult to find a pulpit to preach from, and a congregation to lead.

"When Jeffery Campbell graduated from St. Lawrence University in 1935, the Unitarian Association told him that he could not serve a white congregation because he was black, nor could he work among the poor African Americans at the Suffolk Mission in Virginia because he had spent his entire life among whites." (Darkening the Doorways, Reed)

Campbell was finally granted Unitarian Fellowship in 1938, and he describes his visits to the American Unitarian Association (AUA) headquarters at 25 Beacon Street this way:

#### READING #8

*"...at 25 Beacon Street, church leaders would turn around in the hallway and walk the other way when they saw me coming."*

*"AUA President Frederick May Eliot would eye me sympathetically and say, 'my dear boy, the world is as it is but we are trying. Be patient a little longer.'*

*So far as official action is concerned*

*I could still have been waiting in the anteroom*

*for a quarter of a century." (Darkening the Doorways, Reed)*

Eventually, we did see an African American minister called to serve a Unitarian Congregation. In 1969, David Eaton, formerly a Methodist Minister, was called to be Senior Minister of All Souls in Washington DC. That church became the first congregation in our denomination to achieve a racial balance of black and white.

When he first arrived, membership at All Souls, which is located in the Adams Morgan section of the city, was largely white--90 to 95%. He and the church board created a new mission stating that All Souls would be a racially inclusive congregation. They lost about 100 members during that difficult transition time.

Directed by this new vision, the All Souls congregation decided to stay in that urban neighborhood, even as middle class white families were moving to the suburbs, leaving poorer African American families behind.

This was happening in cities all over the country. UU churches were abandoning their urban buildings and following their congregants into the suburbs.

One of those people who stayed with the All Souls Church was an African American laywoman named Gwendolyn Thomas.

#### READING #9

*"I had always been kind of a misfit in churches that insist I subscribe to dogma I didn't believe. Then I was working on fair housing and I found out that many of the people who were working with me were from the same church-the Unitarian church. I started asking questions about the church and I asked particularly what it had to offer my children. I wanted a church to give my children a sense of their own spirituality, so ...they could ask questions or find their own answers and not be criticized." (from Black Pioneers -UUA Religious Education video, 1989)*

Gwendolyn Thomas later became vice president of the black affairs council and served on the UUA Board.

In 1968, the Black Affairs Council demanded that the UUA take a stronger stand on the issues facing African Americans in the post-King era. Unitarian Universalists had always prided themselves on their Civil Rights actions and were insulted to hear that they were not doing enough. The conflict was named the Black Empowerment Controversy, and it was a fight over money and power. In the end, the UUA gave \$1 million to the Black Affairs Council who in turn gave money to other groups--groups that were not connected to any UU congregations.

A tremendous opportunity was lost.

In those years, in the 1970's & 80's, only 2 African American ministers were serving congregations. The few lay leadership positions felt like tokenism, the religious education curriculum did not include any contributions from African American UU's, and there was no expression of blackness in the Unitarian Universalist liturgy.

Gwen Thomas, speaking to the UUA said, "while you talk of diversity, you have here in this denomination, some of the most intelligent capable black people in the country and yet you have not given them any positions of leadership in the denomination." (Black Pioneers video)

One of those intelligent capable people was The Rev. Dr. Yvonne Chappelle. In 1981, after graduating from Howard University Divinity School, Rev. Chappelle was ordained by the All Souls congregation in DC.

She was the first African American woman to be ordained a Unitarian Universalist minister. (Yes--she is the mother of comedian, Dave Chappelle.)

She served as extension minister of a new start church--an intentionally diverse urban congregation. Sojourner Truth Congregation (STC) of Unitarian Universalists in Washington DC

Just like the Harlem congregation, this one did not continue after their minister left.

After reading Mark Morrison Reed's book, Rev. Chappelle said,

#### READING #10

*"The struggle has been real.*

*Reading Mark's book makes me realize that*

*I am not alone, and I was not the first,*

*but also that the struggle has not changed." (Black Pioneers video)*

The struggle has not changed. Even though there are more African American ministers in our movement than ever before, the number who actually lead congregations is still quite small. Many of them are associate, interim, or community ministers; professors or UUA staff.

When Mark Morrison Reed was a child, he and his siblings were dedicated by the Unitarian congregation in Chicago. Located in the diverse neighborhood of Hyde Park, this congregation voted to affirm a policy of integrating the church in 1948. Several prominent members left in protest. Within the next two decades, Black membership went from two individuals to 10 percent. Their minister wrote, "We now count among our membership "persons of Japanese, Hindu, and Islamic background as well as Blacks. It is our purpose to become a church of all races and religious backgrounds."

The is the task of the religious community--

to bring together people of all backgrounds and orientations and experiences,

"...for alone our vision is too narrow

to see that all must be seen,

and our strength too limited

to do all that must be done.

Together, our vision widens

and our strength is renewed." May it be so.