

**Wade in the Water:
Race and Class in the U.U.A.**

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THE READING:

From an essay by Rebecca Parker titled, "Not Somewhere Else, but Here: The Struggle for Racial Justice as a Struggle to Inhabit My Country."

In 1976 I began a cross-country road trip, on my way to seminary. I traveled with a friend. We had time, so we decided to take back roads. One afternoon, the road passed through rural western Pennsylvania. Late in the day, we came down through hill country into a valley. It had been raining hard, and as we neared a small town, we noticed blinking yellow lights, warning of danger. We saw fields covered in standing water and passed several side roads blocked off with signs saying "Road Closed."

"Looks like they've had a flood here," we said.

Coming into town, we crossed a bridge over a wide river. The water was high, muddy, flowing fast. Sandbags lined the roadway.

"Gosh," we said, "they must have had quite a bit of high water to contend with here. Looks like it was a major flood!"

We headed out of town, following a winding country road, captivated by the evidence all around us that there had been a dramatic flood. Then we rounded a bend, and there in front of us a sheet of water covered the roadway. The water was rising fast, like a huge silver balloon being inflated before our eyes.

We halted and started to turn the car around, but discovered that the water had been rising behind us as well. Suddenly we realized that the flood hadn't happened yesterday, or last week. It was happening here, and now.

Dry ground was disappearing fast. We hurriedly clambered out of the car and scrambled for higher ground. Soaked to the bone, we huddled under a fir tree. No longer were we protected by our familiar vehicle; the cold water of the storm poured down on us, baptizing us into the present—a present from which we had been insulated by both our car and our misjudgments about the country we were traveling through.

This is what it is like to be white in America. It is to travel ensconced in a secure vehicle; to see signs of what is happening in the world outside the compartment one is traveling in and not realize that these signs have any contemporary

meaning. It is to be dislocated—to misjudge your location, and to believe you are uninvolved and unaffected by what is happening in the world.

Born white in this country, I was gradually but decisively educated into an alienated state of mind. With this narrowing, my capacity for creative participation in my society was stunted, and I became compliant with social forms and patterns that failed to support the fullness of life for others or for myself.

To come of age in America as a white person is to be educated into ignorance. It is to be culturally shaped to not know, and to not want to know the actual context in which we live.

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Rebecca Parker gives us several rich images and phrases in her passage about being caught in a flood in western Pennsylvania.

One is the image of being *enclosed and protected* within a vehicle as she drives through a flood-ravaged area, looking out from the safety of the inside, not understanding the situation she is in, not realizing that she is indeed involved. I will embrace her metaphor to understand the *unawareness* of privilege. She describes this in another way by using the words “*not knowing, and not wanting to know.*”

Another image she gives us is the sudden alarming realization that she has been caught in rising waters, that the flood is swelling all around her. It’s “not elsewhere, not yesterday, but here and now.”

She describes being “baptized into the present.” That turning point when she must take a liberating plunge, when she must finally get out of the car and get wet, she must wade through the water in order to get to higher ground. This is a metaphor for entering into the bracing and turbulent waters of awareness and responsibility.

So, using these images, these metaphors, I want to share with you three phases of our collective journey as a religious movement.

1. First is the early days of Unitarianism, particularly the 19th and early 20th centuries, which can be likened to someone looking out the window at a flood disaster area and not realizing that one is involved or has a responsibility to help out. It must be noted that there were many passionate social activists during this early time, agitators who embraced Unitarianism as their religion. Theodore Parker was one of the finest expressions of this. Yet for the great majority of Unitarians, it was a time of deep unawareness regarding race and class oppression.
2. The second phase that I want to touch on is in the period of the late sixties and early seventies. The Unitarian Universalist Association, just barely forged from the

marriage of the Unitarian and the Universalist denominations, suddenly found itself swamped up to its armpits in the rising floodwaters of a black power movement within the denomination itself.

3. The third stage is the recent past and the present, a time of grappling with the fact that, if we want our liberal faith to truly, honestly be about liberation, well then, we're going to have to get out of the car and get wet. It's a time of reckoning with who we have been and who we are—for better or worse—and who we will become.

So let's take a look back. To do this I'm going to turn to a classic of our tradition, Mark Morrison Reed's book, *Black Pioneers in a White Denomination*, which was first published in 1980. Morrison-Reed, an African American, raised Unitarian, soon-to-become UU minister, needed to understand why he was an anomaly in this faith that he loved and believed in. Why, given the moral promise of Unitarian Universalism, had liberal religion remained segregated?

The stories he uncovered were often tragic. Black converts to Unitarianism who attempted to enter the fold of the denomination on the one hand, and to bring liberal religion to the black community on the other, were often met with indifference and resistance on both sides. Yet Morrison-Reed wrote his book as one who would stake his claim with this faith. It is both a serious critique and a gesture of hope, written at a time when renewed efforts toward awareness and reparation were taking hold in the UUA.

Unitarianism was, from the time it claimed its name in the early 1800's, a religion of white, educated, often affluent people who apparently thought quite highly of themselves. Historian Earl Morse Wilber writes that early Unitarians in New England "*were disposed to be complacent and self-confident.*" They showed no urgency about sharing their faith even with others like themselves, much less with the common masses. "*Early Unitarians felt liberal religion should be propagated slowly, cautiously and silently. ...They feared Unitarianism would become popular, and once it the majority it would become intolerant.*"

With regards to race, Samuel May, who was a leading Unitarian abolitionist, wrote in 1869:

The Unitarians as a body dealt with the question of slavery in any but an impartial, courageous, and Christian way. Continually in their public meetings the question was staved off and driven out, because of technical, formal, verbal difficulties. ...We had every right to expect from Unitarians a steadfast and unqualified protest against slavery...[and] they, of all other sects, ought to have spoken boldly. But they did not.

If they would barely take a stand to fight slavery, the notion of racial integration was unimaginable. Why were these Unitarians, who embraced a philosophy of freedom, so incapable of empathizing with those who had none, whose bondage was excruciatingly real? This was a particularly shameful example in our history of "not knowing and not wanting to know."

Morrison Reed describes a split in the development of American religion, what he calls “two American faiths”: the religion of the middle class and the religion of “the disinherited.” By “the disinherited” he is referring to black communities and to poor communities, and to those for whom racial and economic oppression intersect.

Here is what Morrison-Reed uncovers: As people achieve economic security, as they gain an expanded view of the world through education, their religion tends to gravitate toward philosophic, abstract, and individualistic concerns. Personal energy and initiative, skills, and knowledge have brought success—you worked hard and you got rewarded for it. This enhances the sense of self-worth, self-reliance, personal power.

Indeed, one of the central motifs of liberal religion is this individualism—we emphasize self-determination, the primacy of personal conscience, the individual spiritual journey, and the capacity for individuals to make a difference in the world. In line with this self-confidence, over time the Unitarian concept of salvation virtually abandoned any reliance on God’s grace and intervention. *We would be saved by our own striving.* The world would be saved through our own efforts.

By contrast, for the disinherited, life more often brings an experience of helplessness—at the hands of undeserved fate, and at the hands of a callous and prejudiced society. Working hard does not necessarily bring rewards or progress. The individual has limited capacity to shape his or her own destiny, much less change the world.

Therefore community is absolutely necessary simply to survive. What gains that can be made against oppression are achieved through unity and cooperation. And salvation is not earned, not a result of striving, but a gift, an act of God’s grace, God’s merciful intervention and justice.

And there are very different notions of freedom in these two religions: Central to black religion is the struggle for freedom—freedom from slavery, freedom from political and economic oppression, freedom to participate fully in society, freedom from the pain of this world.

How have Unitarian Universalists typically understood freedom? Freedom of thought and belief, freedom of conscience, the free search for truth. These are the prerogatives of the middle class, those who have already attained physical, economic and political freedom.

In 1976, a study was published called “The Religious Value System of Unitarian Universalists.” It confirmed these same patterns. The survey revealed that UU’s placed a greater emphasis on competence and self-actualization than on moral issues. It also revealed that, in the hierarchy of importance, UU’s ranked freedom as a high value and placed equality much lower on the list. Apparently Unitarian Universalists didn’t recognize that social equality is a necessary precondition for freedom! The values of Unitarian Universalists paralleled those held by the highest economic levels of other

religious groups, and were a virtual *reversal* of the values of those at the lowest income levels.

To return to Rebecca Parker's flood imagery, there is the sense that Unitarian Universalists have been like the travelers in the story. The disinherited are the ones whose homes and lands have been devastated by the floodwaters. Middle class UU's, able to afford the mobility of a car, drive through that landscape on their way to more important things—perhaps a conference where inspiring ideas such as *freedom* will be discussed with other liberal thinkers. Vaguely relieved that they themselves are safe and secure, they look dispassionately out the window at a spectacle that is someone else's problem.

This had been the unconscious undertow of our movement for over a century when the 1960's rolled around.

Although I have been painting an unflattering picture of our forebears, the good news is that there always was and still is a strong activist strain in Unitarian Universalism. There *were* many UU's who actively supported civil rights, many who drove south to join Martin Luther King, Jr. in the march from Selma to Montgomery. Two white UU's were murdered during that march for their solidarity with the black marchers. One of them was a Unitarian minister, James Reeb. He was eulogized by Dr. King. And by the late sixties, the number of African Americans who had embraced Unitarian Universalism was at an all-time high.

And yet, in spite of the brave few who were wading in the floodwaters, many white UU's were still happily ensconced in their cars. The late sixties and early seventies came as that moment when they were shocked to discover that the flood was "not somewhere else, but here and now" and the water was rising fast.

1967 saw a summer of racially-charged riots that were rending American society. The UUA's *Commission on Religion and Race* called an "Emergency Conference on Unitarian-Universalist Response to the Black Rebellion." It's interesting to note the title of this conference. It might have been called "Emergency Conference on Unitarian-Universalist Response to White Racism" or at least, "Unitarian-Universalist Response to a Crisis in Race Relations." But the fact that the problem was defined as "the Black Rebellion" is telling.

At that conference, UUA President Dana Greeley asked, "What will we do?" He could not have imagined what would occur in answer to that question, because if he had, he would not have asked it.

Out of that conference a Black Unitarian Universalist Caucus (BUUC) was formed. After a year of meetings behind closed doors, the BUUC presented a proposal to the 1968 General Assembly in Cleveland. The BUUC proposed the formation of a Black Affairs Council, which *alone* would speak for the black community of Unitarian Universalists.

They proposed—some would say demanded—that it be funded from the UUA budget at \$250,000 a year for four years.

Although many supported this proposal, some did not. Several black and white delegates rejected the BUUC's process as well as its proposed solution, calling it hostile, separatist and exclusionary. They formed a counter organization that they named Black and White Action (BAWA). BAWA insisted that complete racial integration was the solution.

Over the next year, these positions polarized and hardened. The tension was intensified by escalating financial crisis within the UUA that would make funding for either of these initiatives virtually impossible. All this led to an explosion of frustration and alienation on the floor of the 1969 General Assembly in Boston.

This rupture, what has come to be called "The Black Empowerment Controversy," split the UUA, driving many people of color from the denomination in bitter disappointment. Several promising inner-city congregations collapsed as a result of it. The Unitarian Universalist Association recoiled from the conflict and receded into a period of frightened denial.

The effects of these events still linger. They were recently revisited with great passion and seriousness when General Assembly returned to Cleveland for the first time since 1968. Memories and feelings were still strong. And yet the integrity of the dialogue indicated how far the denomination had come.

There is good news in all of this, and that's where I want to leave us in these last few minutes: It has been more than 30 years since that pivotal conflict. In that time a lot of very hard, genuine, and painful work has been done to help us see and dismantle the structures of privilege and power within our religious movement. The institutional leadership of the UUA has embraced an anti-racist, anti-oppression, multicultural standard, which is brought to bear in the governance process, in hiring policies, in program development, in evaluating priorities and assessing the achievements of the denomination.

But this commitment is not necessarily embraced or understood at the grassroots level in our congregations. We, the people, still often "do not know and do not want to know." We still have work to do when it comes to understanding the experience of being marginalized, whether because of skin color or culture, sexual orientation, economic conditions or disability. We are still learning to see and feel these realities.

Over the past three decades, Unitarian Universalists of color have returned and, though still a small minority, are a minority that is growing and vital, vocal, proud and rich with its own diversities. It should also be acknowledged that this minority does not speak with one voice. Controversies still simmer and occasionally erupt over how change is to be wrought. Some of the strongest voices that are addressing race and class in Unitarian Universalism right now are in fierce disagreement with one another.

But this is the nature of true democracy. Justice-making is messy, complicated, confusing, creative, painful, enlivening, humbling, life-giving. And we have to be willing to wade in the water. We have to be willing to get wet if we want to get to higher ground. As our community walks together into the days ahead, I pray that we will have the openness and courage to enter into the waters of discovery. May it never be said of us, “They did not know and they did not want to know.”

Amen.

CLOSING HYMN: “Wade in the Water”

BENEDICTION: drawn from the last two stanzas of African American poet Margaret Walker’s poem “For My People”

For my people standing staring
trying to fashion a better way from confusion,
from hypocrisy and misunderstanding,
trying to fashion a world that will hold all the people,
all the faces,
all the Adams and Eves and their countless generations;
Let a new earth rise.
Let another world be born.
Let a bloody peace be written in the sky.
Let a second generation full of courage issue forth;
let a people loving freedom come to growth.
Let a beauty full of healing
and a strength of final clenching
be the pulsing in our spirits and our blood.
Let the martial songs be written,
let the dirges disappear.

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