

## An invitation to the Promise and the Practice

Theodore Parker Unitarian Universalist Church

January 14, 2018

### Welcome

Our worship service this morning is by invitation of Black Lives of Unitarian Universalism. During this service, you will hear only the words of those who identify as black. It is uniquely prophetic: It calls to us who identify as white to listen, humbly and perhaps with some discomfort, to the lived reality of black Unitarian Universalists in our midst. This discomfort is both a gesture of hospitality to voices that have not been heard enough, and a sign that we're growing in the right direction."

*[Information about the voices in this service can be found at the end of this transcript.]*

If you're joining us today as a guest, know that you are witnessing this Unitarian Universalist congregation doing sacred work: Collectively, we will wrestle with what it means to be a majority-white faith whose anti-racist intentions have not always been borne out. We invite you to witness this moment of transparency and vision, to practice being curious, and to allow your discomfort to lead you to new learning.

### Opening Words      Call to worship by Viola Abbitt

We are Unitarian Universalists.

When we lift up our Seven Principles, some of us think of them as a form of theology — but they are more important to our collective than that:

they do not tell us what we should believe; they tell us how we should **be**.

They tell us how we should act in the larger world and with each other.

We are brought here today by the fact that Unitarian Universalism has fallen short of the image that was presented to the world, and to many of those who embraced this religion.

But we are also brought here today by the truth that Unitarian Universalism has shifted course to move toward a place of wholeness: a place that perhaps never existed for us as a denomination.

It has been a long and sometimes unforgiving road to today. But we are here today because we are mindful of that past, and because we have hope for the future. We want the practice of this faith to be a fulfilling manifestation of its promise.

Open your hearts. Seek new ways of understanding.  
Come, let us worship together.

**Opening Hymn**      There's a River Flowin' in My Soul

**Chalice Lighting**      by Rebekah Savage

We light our flaming chalice as a beloved people  
united in love  
and thirsting for restorative justice.

May it melt away the tethers that uphold whiteness in our midst.  
May it spark in us a spirit of humility.  
May it ignite in us radical love that transforms our energy into purposeful action.

*This a chalice of audacious hope.  
This chalice shines a light on our shared past,  
signaling our intention to listen deeply, reflect wisely,  
and move boldly toward our highest ideals.*

**Reading**      **Missing Voices**      Connie Simon

When I started attending a UU church, I was excited by the promise of worship that would draw from the arts, science, nature, literature, and a multitude of voices. Indeed, some of the voices that Unitarian Universalists hear in worship each week belong to Thoreau, Emerson, Ballou, and others. Their words are beautiful, but they come from a culture and experience that's foreign to me. When do I get to hear voices from my culture? I quickly learned that, other than the same few quotes from Martin Luther King, Jr., and Howard Thurman's "The Work of Christmas," it wasn't gonna happen. I sit attentively and listen with my head to "their" voices while my heart longs to hear more of "our" voices.

I am a Black Woman. When I look around on Sunday morning, I don't see many people who look like me. In most of the congregations I visit, I don't see anybody who looks like me. So I guess I shouldn't be surprised that I don't hear voices of people who share my experience. But it still hurts. I want to hear voices that tell the struggle of living under

the weight of oppression in this culture of White Supremacy. I want to hear stories of trying to stay afloat in the water we swim in. I want to hear voices of Living While Black in America.

I don't hear those voices in UU churches so I have to supplement my worship by reading black theologians like Anthony Pinn and Monica Coleman. I read Maya Angelou, James Baldwin, and my favorite poet, Paul Laurence Dunbar. Though not a Unitarian or a Universalist, Dunbar chronicled the African American experience in the years following the Civil War and the emancipation of enslaved Africans — a time of opportunities for blacks as we migrated north in droves seeking employment and education but also a time of continuing segregation, racism, and oppression.

Dunbar acknowledged this tension in his writing. We hear him long for joy and prosperity while at the same time knowing that the system would conspire to keep true happiness just beyond his grasp. "A pint of joy to a peck of trouble and never a laugh but the moans come double; and that is life!" Still, he was a champion of social justice, believing that God has sympathy for the plight of the oppressed and that his grace will be bestowed not on those "who soar, but they who plod their rugged way, unhelpt to God."

For Dunbar, the struggle was real. One hundred years later, hearing Dunbar express his frustration and give voice to the contradictions of our existence as African Americans encourages me and nourishes my soul. His voice speaks to my heart. He knows my pain and understands my sadness, my fear, and my rage. He understands the tears I cry as I pray for strength to get through another day in this world. He gives voice to my deep faith that real change is coming someday. He didn't see it in his lifetime and I might not see it in mine, but I have to keep believing it's possible.

That's the message many African Americans long to hear in church. I know that's what I need to hear every now and then. Will it ever happen? Or will we always have to go "outside" to hear our voices? If that's the case, maybe there's no place for us in Unitarian Universalism. The thought of leaving is painful — but so is being in a faith that ignores our voices.

**Reading**      Kimberly Quinn Johnson

Hush:  
Somebody's calling your name —  
Can you hear it?  
Calling you to a past not quite forgotten,

Calling us to a future not fully imagined?  
Hush, hush:  
Somebody's calling our name.  
What shall we do?

Middle Hymn Hush

Reading      **Squandered Divinity**      DeReau Farrar

"Oh God, was there something that I missed? Did I squander my divinity? Was happiness within me the whole time?"

—lyrics to "[Dust and Ashes](#)" by Dave Malloy, from "Natasha, Pierre & The Great Comet of 1812"

The song starts, "Is this how I die?" It's sung by Josh Groban in a Broadway musical I know absolutely nothing about. The combination of all these things was enough to make me immediately check out for the next 5 or so minutes when I heard it recently at a piano bar for show tunes. Oh, oops, I forgot to give you the nerd alert before saying that. Sorry. At any rate, the song started and I got up to go buy a ginger molasses cookie. When I got back to my seat, the song was still going, and the above quote hit me as soon as it was sung.

I believe that every person is created in the image of God, born a replica of divinity. Some people call it "the God within." Others refer to it as the "inherent worth and dignity of every person." Whatever words make sense to us, we all have it. We invoke the spirit of it for ourselves and for others when we see any number of injustices occurring. But, good Lord, when do we ever turn it back on ourselves and question our own habits of squandering our divinity and wasting our capacity to be holy? I'm not necessarily talking about the big-gesture stuff, like rallying against White Supremacy, or donating toward natural disaster relief, or tutoring underprivileged children of Color. I'm talking about how we behave in committee meetings, or how we respond to change we don't like, or how we think and talk about those with values different from our own.

Living up to my sacred identity is hard! It means confessing that I have prioritized my own happiness at the expense of others'. It means recognizing that my perspective is no more important than anyone else's. It means being good to those I don't think deserve it. It means remembering that every time I fail to choose grace, or goodness, or peace, I am thoughtlessly squandering my divinity.

**Prayer**

That which is in us and all around us and which constantly draws us to our holiest selves, please never stop. Even in those tiny moments when I feel emboldened by my own righteousness, bring me back to godliness and grace. Transform my way of being so that I will see the heart, humanity, and divinity in all and respond in kind. Amen.

## Meditation by Viola Abbitt

Let us open our hearts, still our minds and enter a time of prayer.

Let us call forth and hold in our hearts the stories of all who have come before us, the memories of those who are with us today, and the hope for tomorrow and for all of those who will come after us.

Let us be thankful for this opportunity for healing, forgiveness and reconciliation, while knowing that we can never, should never, forget what has brought us here today.

Let us be glad that voice has not only been given to those whose sorrow and pain were their companions in this faith, but that the stories told by those voices have been received with a goal of redemption and understanding.

Let us call upon that light which shines in each of us to give us the strength to walk together into the future and do the work that is necessary, and which does not end here today.

Let us have the wisdom to lovingly have the conversations we need to have with each other, that we must have with each other, in order to grow this faith in radical love and inclusion.

Amen.

## OFFERING

### **The Promise and the Practice: Invitation to the Offering**

By Susan Frederick-Gray, Lena K. Gardner

Every day in our world, people are feeling vulnerable, frightened, and heartbroken. For those [of us] who are Black, Indigenous, or people of color, the effects of racism and oppression are an everyday lived reality — and these feelings are not new.

For others, this can be a time of hard awakening to the realities that have existed for a long time, and to new and heightened racial violence and policies targeting the most

vulnerable. For all of us, the call of this moment is real. And as Unitarian Universalists we are invited and challenged everyday to live more deeply into our faith.

And every day, our people, our congregations — you — are responding to that invitation. We are learning to live with a vision of the Beloved Community in the face of white supremacy and fear. We are learning to confront these things in our own hearts, lives, and congregations.

If we as UUs are going to be ready to meet the challenge, and accept our invitation to build a new way, we must do it together. We know that, as June Jordan said, "we are the ones we've been waiting for."

Black Lives of Unitarian Universalism is one of the most exciting ways our faith is answering this call. As a national ministry for and by black-identified Unitarian Universalists, BLUU embodies a liberating community of all ages. A community that lifts up the lives and stories and the leadership of those who have been marginalized and silenced. A community that brings hope, when hope is hard to find. And a community that calls us to wrestle with the gap between our theology and our practice in the world.

Today, we are asking you to join us in fulfilling this promise. We need your help.

The Unitarian Universalist Association has set aside one million dollars from its endowment. Two very generous Unitarian Universalists, Julie and Brad Bradburd, have offered an additional one million dollars to match congregational giving. All of your gifts are needed and appreciated. And, if this congregations reaches the threshold of \$10 per member (or however we count the souls we serve), our gift will doubled!

If you believe that our faith must become radically inclusive, justice-centered, multiracial, and multigenerational, then there is no better way to advance that vision than through your support for BLUU.

The power and promise of Unitarian Universalism is waking up to meet fear and hate with radical imagination, transformative partnership, resilience, and joy.

We make it possible through our commitment and our generosity. Thank you for your support.

• • •

*[from Rev. Anne Bancroft]* We have already met that goal with a pledge of \$3,000 to this effort, but we would like to double that amount so that this congregation – committed to the growth of our spirits AND to justice and compassion for all people – can effectively give a much bigger amount than we thought possible! If you have a check

today and want to support the effort, write “TPC/BLUU” in the memo line. If you want to give cash, do that on your way to coffee hour – we’ll have a basket by the door. And if moved to do so, please add your name to those who have already pledged to participate. We will be collecting funds over the next two weeks.

Today’s offering for the work of our church will be most gratefully received.

Reading      **Are We Living in a Post-Racial World Yet?**    Xolani Kocela

We get good at what we practice. Research now tells us very clearly what distinguishes amateurs from experts – it’s the amount of time they spend practicing their craft.

To become exceptional, you must do two things. First, you must practice with intention – you have to aim to become very good. If you set out just to know how to do something or do it “good enough” then that is how good you will become. To become expert, you have to envision yourself as a master of your craft.

Second, you must practice a lot and consistently. Studies show that amateurs practice about three times a week for about an hour per sitting. Those who develop into experts put in three hours a day almost seven days a week. They become consumed with their craft.

In addition, there is a magic number. Becoming an expert demands about ten thousand hours of practice! That’s twenty hours a week every week for about ten years.

The notion of intentional practice also applies to how we become the beloved community. It’s not enough to just say that we are post-racial, we have to practice being post-racial.

It is said that if you’re not on the court, you’re not in the game. We have to put in the time on and off the court.

Reading      **Black Joy**      Kimberly Quinn Johnson

Joy Unspeakable  
is not silent,  
it moans, hums, and bends  
to the rhythm of a dancing universe....

For our free African ancestors,  
joy unspeakable is drum talk...

For enslaved Africans during the  
Middle Passage,  
joy unspeakable is the surprise  
of living one more day...

For Africans in bondage  
in the Americas,  
joy unspeakable is the moment of  
mystical encounter  
when God tiptoes into the hush arbor...

Joy unspeakable is humming  
“how I got over”  
After swimming safely  
to the other shore of a swollen Ohio river  
when you know that you can’t swim.

—[Barbara A. Holmes](#)

(used with the author’s permission)

When theologian Barbara A. Holmes talks about “joy unspeakable,” she’s talking specifically about how the contemplative practices of the Black church have sustained Black people in America through suffering and survival. More than referring to a particular church or denomination, this experience is collective and transhistorical. It’s also a different expression of Black religion than I’m expected to exhibit, as a Black woman.

On more than one occasion, I’ve had a particular mode of black worship projected onto me: the more charismatic modes of Black worship that we’re so familiar with — the shout, the stomp, the song. That particular style of Black worship sometimes strikes me as a caricature of joy — a shallow stereotype. I see this in the expectation that more “black” worship will bring more lively singing, more rhythmic clapping, more energetic worship. I see this in the anxiety that more “black” worship will bring more lively singing, more rhythmic clapping, more energetic worship. The shout. The stomp. The song.

But this caricature — this stereotype — is a narrow sliver of the complexity and the richness of black spirituality and black worship.

The modes of black spirituality that are most powerful, nourishing, and nurturing for me aren't the stomp, shout, or song. Instead, I think of the rock, the sway, the bend, the moan, the hum. And I think of these things done in community. I marvel that in the midst of sadness and sorrow, in the midst of feeling the effects of generations of trauma wrought by racism and white supremacy, we can still find joy with each other. We are finding joy in each other.

I call it Black Joy because I am Black and it is the joy that I have been familiar with my whole life. It is the joy that I have learned from Black people. It is the joy created through our collective healing — our laying down of burdens, to be picked up and shared by our people, our community. This is not joy in spite of suffering — a mask put on to hide pain, an armor put on to push through pain. This is an embrace, holding and soothing us in our suffering. This Black Joy is joy created through our being together. This Black Joy reminds me that I am not alone, that trouble don't last always, that I am held and carried forward by a power beyond what I can comprehend.

I call it Black Joy, but I want to offer it — to the extent that it is mine to offer — to this faith. One of my gifts to Unitarian Universalism is the suggestion that joy is ours. We are the people who commit to justice, equity, and compassion. We are the people who aspire to world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all. We are the people who affirm our interdependence with each other and the universe itself. I want to challenge Unitarian Universalism and Unitarian Universalists to claim Joy.

Unitarian Universalist Joy will require a different way of imagining ourselves and a different way of being with each other. Claiming the possibility of Unitarian Universalist Joy requires making space for the surprise that Holmes describes. Claiming the possibility of Unitarian Universalist Joy requires slowing down to hear the talk of the drum — pausing to move to the rhythms of the drum. Unitarian Universalist Joy requires opening to the possibility of the mystical encounter. Unitarian Universalist Joy requires embodying this faith differently than many of us are accustomed to.

#### Reflection on *There Is More Love*

Dr. Glen Thomas Rideout

Last summer at General Assembly, I walked out of the sanctuary we had made from the convention center space. As tired as I was, I returned more and more to my deeply introverted default of self, and I passed a woman who had to stop to talk with me.

Many religious professionals who have led a morning worship service know this is where the work begins.

She walked up to me and said, “Doctor Rideout!” Because she had enough grace to remind me of my title, she gave me the opportunity to resume my church face and posture. She held my hands as if we had known each other for the longest time. She looked into my eyes and she said, “You know what? I always sing that song: *There is more love right here.... There is more love right here.... I’m gonna keep on ‘cause I found it... There is more love right here....* I don’t understand why it is that we don’t sing that here at GA. We’ve already found a community of love.”

And because she had enough compassion and grace to call me Dr. Rideout, she had given me enough time and opportunity to summon up a bit of stillness from the weary remnants of my churchman’s posture.

She looked into my eyes and spoke and sang to me with her own truth. She asked with genuine curiosity why it is that we don’t all sing the words that she had come to know.

I was compelled to respond to the woman I had just met with, “Thank you for trusting me with that question.” And then I explained to her why I thought it was necessary — particularly with the music of people of color — that we enter and examine these songs with more curiosity than colonization.

I thanked her, and I explained that for those of us who live with the privilege of knowing love, it can be difficult to understand the perspective of one who lives without such a privilege.

I explained that it can be difficult to understand the lived experience of those who have trouble finding the evidence of love in their immediate vicinity; in their church; in their neighborhood; in their city; in their nation; even in their planet.

I thanked her, and I explained that for some who don’t share the privilege of perceiving love “right here,” moving toward that idea of privilege had become a vital practice of Black faith.

I offered that if we, as a spiritual community of Unitarian Universalists, populated by well-meaning people, are to mean anything to the lives and the deaths of people of color, we must begin by learning — not squelching — the forms of expression that arise from these living perspectives.

And she said, “Thank you. I’ve never heard it expressed that way. I’ve never understood it that way. And I will never sing it that same way again.”

When we inhabit the music, the forms of expression of people who lived their lives along the margins of notice, we must notice that we have entered holy ground, a sacred space of learning; a sacred space of relationship.

Closing Hymn #95    There Is More Love

Benediction    All We Are One – Yvonne Seon (Voices from the Margin)

Each of us comes from a different place, yet all we are one.

We carve for ourselves our own unique space, yet all we are one.

We learn how to speak, eat, dress, cook, and play in different ways.  
Of common homeland, we have not a trace, yet all we are one.

We kill, maim, and harm one another with no thought for God's will.  
We forget the One God and one grace, yet all we are one.

On a mountain in East Africa near Olduvai Gorge, our common mother, "Eve,"  
Says that we come from one human race, and all we are one.

May it be so.

**These are the voices shared with us today.**

**Viola Abbitt** is a candidate for the Unitarian Universalist ministry and a seminarian at Meadville Lombard Theological School.

**Rev. Rebekah Savage** (formerly Montgomery) is the full-time Associate Minister at the UU Congregation of Rockville, MD, serves in the US Army Reserve, and is completing a Doctorate in Ministry at Wesley Seminary in Washington, DC.

**Connie Simon** is Intern Minister at the Unitarian Society of Germantown and Contract Chaplain at Einstein Medical Center in Philadelphia.

**Rev. Kimberly Quinn Johnson** is minister of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of the South Fork. Among her specialties are anti-racism and youth ministry.

**DeReau K. Farrar** is director of music at First Unitarian Church of Portland, Oregon, and a

member of the board and conference planning committee of the Unitarian Universalist Musicians Network.

**Xolani Kocela** has been a fellowshipped minister in the Unitarian Universalist Association since 2008. H serves as a chaplain for the Texas Air National Guard and has deployed several times, including to Iraq.

**Dr. Glen Thomas Rideout** serves as Director of Worship and Music at First Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Ann Arbor, Michigan. He is the 2013 winner of the American Choral Directors Association National Conducting Competition.

**Yvonne Seon** became the Unitarian Universalist Association's first female African-American minister in 1981 when she was ordained at All Souls Church, Unitarian, in Washington, D.C. Now retired, she lives in Yellow Springs, Ohio.