

Sermon: Not Our Finest Hour; Delivered 16 February 2014 by Kathy Tew Rickey at UU Church of Cortland, NY

Not Our Finest Hour

Prologue – In my last sermon, I left off with Unitarian Universalism’s finest hour, in recent history at least – that is, the march from Selma to Montgomery in 1965. Scores of Unitarian Universalist ministers responded to Dr. Martin Luther King’s call to Selma, a much higher percentage than clergy representing other denominations and faiths. There were already a significant number of African-Americans among the Unitarians and Universalists, especially in urban areas. Following the UU presence in Selma, that number increased. But Dick Leonard whom I quoted to a great extent on his Selma experience, expressed a certain amount of foreboding at the end of his story. He worried that while he and his fellow ministers had just witnessed a life-changing experience, they would not effectively integrate this new experience into their daily living. He feared they would all go back to business as usual and not realize how much work was left to do with regard to UU identity and values in the face of this major shift in the American paradigm. Leonard predicted a failure by our newly-formed association to realize the need for the ongoing work of racial integration and the urgent need to dismantle institutional racism.

What transpired among UU’s over the next decade was partly due to UU’s limited worldview but also due partly to the UU witness of what was happening across the country – a perfect storm of a fading manufacturing-based economy, a dwindling demand for unskilled labor, white flight to the suburbs, all led to the creation of particularly depressed inner city neighborhoods where concentrations of unemployment and poverty were belying the American myth; the myth of equal access to the opportunities afforded by the Civil Rights Act and by our mighty land of plenty. Trapped by their lack of means and power to change their circumstances and depressed by chronic unemployment, oppressed peoples turned to a mighty inner-city drug culture to survive. At the same time, violence and unrest erupted across the country. From 1964 to 1970, there were 26 race riots reported by several urban areas including Los Angeles, Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland, New York City, and even nearby Rochester.

In light of epidemic unrest, the black intelligentsia grew impatient. Seeing the limitations of Civil Rights and blooming social problems, they demanded political and economic empowerment – they wanted the power to address the issues and conditions of the post-segregation African-American experience. Blacks knew how to address black social problems. The mostly privileged white-euro men running the country could not truly know the black

experience in America. The white stronghold over economics, politics, and American society needed to be loosened; white power needed to cede some of its influence to black power.

I think it would be fair to say that white society of the 1960's was taken aback. Fear and mistrust were widespread across white class strata. The upper classes had been out of touch and taken by surprise while the white middle and lower classes had for a while been facing increased job competition from black communities of similar stature and skills – and they were not feeling neighborly. The elite were not about to give over any of their power and privilege either, especially to the demographic they feared. Instead, efforts to maintain control began in 1969 with the Nixon Administration and the War on Drugs. Nixon's efforts to reduce street crime he associated with the drug culture instead led to the present mass incarceration of African-American men.

In the meanwhile, Angela Davis, Malcom X, and the Black Panthers arrived on the scene of widespread social unrest. Davis, Malcom X, and Stokely Carmichael were among the high profile black activists calling for black empowerment and black separatism.

I have a memory of Davis – in the 1970's I was coming into my teen years and remember being fascinated by the young woman with giant Afro and big hoop earrings who, in my white world, was an anarchist. In 2010, I attended a speech she gave in honor of Martin Luther King, Jr., at University of Chicago. I was sitting on a side bench of Rockefeller Chapel waiting for Davis to take the stage. I looked up as a striking black woman in sophisticated dress with braided hair and piercing gray eyes walked past me, looking directly at me. Impressed, my gaze followed after her as she passed – and only after she passed did I realize – that's Angela Davis! She gave an impassioned speech about the current state of racism and I realized she was no anarchist in the 1970's but an activist simply wanting the same human rights as everyone else in the country, for herself and for all African-Americans.

The Black Empowerment Controversy ran somewhat parallel to what was happening outside the sphere of the very newly formed Unitarian Universalist Association and its General Assembly. It was about a Black Caucus asking to be empowered to govern themselves within the UUA and at General Assembly.

The Black Empowerment Controversy started in October of 1967. A later Commission on Appraisal report describes the events:

The Dept. on Social Responsibility of the Unitarian Universalist Assn. with its Director, the Rev. Dr. Homer Jack, sponsors an Emergency Conference on Unitarian

Universalist Response to the Black Rebellion. This follows racial rioting in Newark, NJ and Detroit, MI. There were 135-140 participants, 37 of whom were African-American. Almost immediately, 30 of the 37 African-Americans withdrew upon suggestion from Black members of the Los Angeles church's organization called Black Unitarians for Radical Reform (BURR) including Louis Gothard, Jules Ramey and Althea Alexander to form a Black Unitarian Universalist Caucus (BUUC). They were joined by Hayward Henry..., board member of Boston Second Church...and former Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) organizer. Henry had attended the National Conference on Black Power in Newark, NJ, three months prior to the Emergency Conference and would become national chair of BUUC.

BUUC's list of "non-negotiable demands" was presented first to the Conference and then to the UUA Board of Trustees. The core demand was to establish a Black Affairs Council (BAC) to be elected by BUUC and to be funded for four years at \$250,000 per year (12% of UUA annual budget) with a program designed for Black self-determination. The Black Caucus recommendation of proposals carried a two-thirds majority at the Emergency Conference. "The people who led the Black UU Caucus were at the vanguard of the Black movement in America - bright, articulate, educated, passionate." -*Unitarian Universalism and the Quest for Racial Justice, Commission on Appraisal*

The proposal for a funded Black Affairs Council was reviewed at the UUA Board of Trustees at their November, 1967 meeting. The Board was divided about the proposal. The Black Caucus asked for a straight up or down vote on the proposal. Instead, the UUA Board passed a resolution stating that The Commission on Religion and Race will be reorganized to include more non-Whites, inviting Black Caucus participation. The Black Caucus was insulted by the UUA Board resolution and remained disgruntled. In February of 1968 the Black Affairs Council was established by a National Conference of Black Unitarian Universalists. The Council was comprised of six blacks and three whites. The Reverend George Johnson who had been hired by the UUA to develop congregational participation in civil rights activities attended the National Conference of Black UU's. In his report, he described "the Negro dilemma as a choice between integration and developing pride and power through Black unity."

At the March 1968 meeting of the UUA Board of Trustees it was apparent that the Board had become divided between pro-empowerment, pro-integration and those who saw valid positions on both sides. This played out in the wider association as well. The BAC was invited to have affiliate status with the UUA.

The May 1968 General Assembly in Cleveland was marked “extraordinary emotion and tension.” The BAC had come to stand for black empowerment and separatism. Another caucus arose called Black and White Action which had come to stand for black integration into the UUA and General Assembly. Both parties struggled for support and funds, and amidst a debate that included recommendations from the UUA Board, the Resolution was passed by a vote of 836 to 327 to commit one million dollars over four years to the Black Affairs Council.

The very next month, at the June 1968 meeting of the UUA Board it was declared that all of the UUA’s unrestricted endowment funds had been spent and there was not sufficient money to fund the Association’s current operations and programs. However, at the May 1969 UUA Board meeting the administration recommended that the funding promised to the BAC be honored. Then the Board, without the administration’s support, moved to fund the BAWA with \$50,000.

At the July, 1969 General Assembly in Boston, controversy over BAWA funding and agenda procedures leads to a microphone possession by members of various factions including the Black Caucus and the Black and White Action. Motions failed to alter the agenda despite close votes. An unceremonious walkout by delegates with the Black Caucus followed. This precipitated the infamous walkout of 400 empowerment-supporting delegates, threatening a split in the eight-year-old Association. The next day, outgoing UUA President, Dana Greeley talked the delegates into returning to the Assembly. By a narrow majority, the Black Affairs Council was funded while the Black and White Action contingent received no funding. A setback for the BAC was the election of Robert West for UUA President, who BAC did not endorse. At the January, 1970, UUA Board meeting, Robert West has to make the unpopular decision to cut funding to the BAC by \$50,000. In March of 1972, the Veatch Fund grants \$250,000 to benefit both the Black Affairs Council and Black and White Action. However, by the next year, the leadership of the Black Affairs Council began to implode. Allegations by the Black Caucus of mishandling funds by the Black Affairs Council exacerbated the tensions. Litigation ensued. Prominent leaders of the Black Affairs Council left their posts for interests outside of Unitarian Universalism. In a 1976 report, the Black Caucus wrote:

“As most of you know, we have been involved in the building of BAC from the inception. It was a difficult experiment which required much by way of personal sacrifice. We believed strongly in what we were doing. The litigation has proved to be personally devastating and frustrating - not only because we were no longer able to serve Black people as we had been before, but also because the litigational issues seemed so far removed from the problems we were supposed to be working on.”

Robert West, the UUA President who inherited the Black Empowerment Controversy, was at the epicenter of tensions. He had to make some very unpopular decisions during his tenure. When his term was complete, West left Unitarian Universalism and his ministry entirely. He went to law school and worked as an attorney for a large insurance company for the remainder of his career.

And a large number of African-Americans exited with West, not in sympathy but in disappointment so succinctly expressed by Henry Hampton, producer of "Eyes on the Prize," UUA Director of Information 1963-1968: "We were the first denomination to act on behalf of black empowerment; we were the first to turn our backs on black empowerment." Not the finest hours of our faith movement.

What does this story mean for us now? I think it presents an opportunity to learn from our mistakes; it offers an opportunity for making amends; and it offers us an opportunity to open our hearts and let ourselves be empathetic and a bit vulnerable in the face of difference and change. This story compels us to examine white privilege, which is difficult to notice if you have are immersed in it. It's like being the fish in the ocean who is asked "How's the water today?" The fish replies "What the heck is water?"

Most of all, this story shows us that we have to love each other. And I'm going to let Dr. Martin Luther Kings, Jr explain it. In his 1956 speech at the Cortland Hotel, King said the following:

"Agape means nothing sentimental or basically affectionate; it means understanding, redeeming goodwill for all men. . . It is the love of God working in the lives of men not because we like them, not because their attitudes and ways appeal to us, but because God loves them. Here we rise to the position of loving the person who does the evil deed, while hating the deed that the person does."

King was a man of deep faith and a genius on Agape Love. I think this is meant by "love your enemies." Or, love those who worry you, scare you, annoy you, hate you, intimidate you, make you uncomfortable, those who interest you and those who don't, all those you know and don't know yet – you gotta love them all as King encouraged us to do. Imagine if we could.