It isn't Black History, it is History

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Black History Month. I've been asking myself for a while now, what exactly it was, I a white person was going to say. In fact, I considered, "What can a white woman say about Black History Month?" as a sermon title. I'm a white person, in a faith tradition that is predominantly white. It would be easy for us, easy for me, to use this time to reflect how those of us who are white are enriched by the diversity, how our beloved community is expanded when African Canadians, and others without white skin, join us and when we learn their stories. But, that would be too easy, it would be too familiar, it would be centring white experience in Black History Month. Which is, I think the opposite of what this specific month of focus asks us to do. Black History Month is not a once and done – a tidy, 'we've told some stories about Black people and can now get back to our regularly scheduled program" month. Rather I hope we can use this month of focus to remind ourselves that Black History is not something other, but rather it is history. If we believe, in interdependence, the way we say we do, then Black History Month can serve as a reset time, so that we remember that our traditional ways of talking about history have centred and privileged white history – and in doing so, it has failed to teach us understand history.

My first post-secondary studies were of history. Mostly Victorian English, with a bit of Canadian History – particularly focused on religion – thrown in. Now it has been a while, but I do not remember being asked to study the history and stories of black people. This, despite the fact, that we were frequently reminded that history could, and should be studied from the lens of those not in power – we looked at the stories of women, economically disadvantaged, and those that were to a large degree, not paid a lot of attention. It is why, to this day when someone says, I'd like to have lived in Medieval times, my usual response is, "probably not, chances are you'd have been an indentured serf – not really a great life, in many ways!"

I've come to learn that I, with a history degree, have a LOT of catching up to do. It is probably safe to say that most of us have had, when it comes to history, inadequate educations. One of the things we can do, is educate ourselves; to mind the gaps so clearly left by the way we've been taught to see the world.

Last week, we handed out wallet cards, (and if you didn't get one, there are more on the welcome table) that highlight the 8 principles and 6 sources of Unitarian Universalism. The 8th principle, the most recently added, calls us to individual and communal action that accountably dismantles racism and systemic barriers – Black History month, not as a once and done exercise, but as a reminder, as a time to take

stock, is one of the ways we can engage the work. Like the work of reconciliation with indigenous people, a key element of the work of justice making is truth telling. Black History Month is a call to us to learn more about history and then use our expanded understandings to do the good, and challenging work of dismantling racism and systemic barriers.

I've got two stories to share. One is mine and the other is not. Some years ago now, I began digging around, in an attempt to learn more of my family history, to do some genealogical research. I learned some things, that surprised me. One of my father's great-great grandfathers was born in Keene New Hampshire, in 1795. His grandfather, born in 1735 was ordained as a congregational minister, and served in Keene. Another of dad's ancestors, Thomas Stanton, my 10th Great-Grandfather, came to this continent in 1637, and settled in Stonington, Connecticut. He was a translator and having learned some of the languages of the indigenous people was an interpreter. And, this was the part that gave me pause, there is strong evidence that he enslaved a black man. My walk through a long, detailed and well documented history was sobering.

Contrast this now, with this story by the black UU musician Glenn Thomas-Rideout. Rideout tells of a time in 7th grade when the class were doing an assignment on their family histories. He begins, sharing a story of a classmate:

> When it was his turn to present his history project to our 7th grade class, he began with delight, flashing a large posterboard and permanent-marker family tree. He'd been able to trace his ancestors back to the 1500s!
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> I wondered how he managed to discover so much and so many. I'd tried something like that a year before. I asked every adult in my family. Stayed in the local library for so long, they gave me a job at the desk! I combed the Internet looking for something of my deeper heritage, so that I could imagine myself.
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> He was talking about his German ancestors. I remember feeling confusion. I had no idea where he was getting this information about his great-great-great grandparents. I looked around me, and none of the other Black kids in the classroom seemed to have a clue either. We don't have those stories.
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> Ultimately, I realized that my white classmate had access to time that I didn't have: access to stories and connections that I could never have.

He continues,

> Like most Black people, I rise on the shoulders of ancestors whose names I cannot know. Our ability to move through our own past is encumbered, cut off at the point where we as human beings are sold like cargo: the point of erasure.

> In order to shackle people to ships, you have to untether them from their life stories and their heritage; their bloodlines and their land and their homes. You do all of this untethering, and for the rest of the generations of that person—for the rest of the time—there will be no knowing of their stories.
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> If, from the beginning of racism and this human trafficking, the point was to build a country with people imprisoned and kept in their economic states, then the only way for America—for all of her people—to get any sort of free together is to act as if these stolen stories truly exist; to replace habits that encumber the movement and liberation of our kindred; to remember even the lives for which we know no names.

He concludes:

> We show our children now the truths of yesterday and the possibility of tomorrow. It's this deeper connection with the greater living story that brings a chance of wellness and repair for all life.
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> We need Black History Month so we can learn the real truth of who we all are and where we come from. We need to remember stories, stolen stories, even if we know no names.

This contrast, between my story and that of Glenn Thomas-Rideout and so many others, is evidence of systemic erasure of lives lived, of accomplishments of oppression and represents a process of dehumanization. It is also a reminder that my story, my history, is not separate from the Black history.

So many family stories were disrupted by the slave trade, and traditional historical scholarship has for too long used a white lens, making the stories of those that don't fit the dominant narrative, invisible. This is why we have Black History Month, again, not as a one time a year, 'get it done' program, but as, I hope a reset. A reminder that the stories we tell are all linked to one another. It is time for us to challenge ourselves to look beyond the stories we know, the ones we tell, the ones we were taught, and to remember that religion and theology have justified this erasure. Our job, all of us, but maybe particularly those of us with white skin, is to educate ourselves and to undo some of the damage that has privileged us.

I spoke earlier of a bit of my family story, and how in learning about it I came to learn some things that might have been nice to not know. It might have been nice not to know about an ancestor who likely enslaved another, but it would not be honest. And if we are going to do this work, if Black History Month or Reconciliation are to be more than performative we need to have a good understanding of the truth, as much as we can know it. During Black History Month we can lift up stories of black people, and we typically do. you know the stories of Viola Desmond, Lincoln Alexander and Oscar Peterson. It is important that we know these and so many other stories, but is it

enough? If we only tell the stories of those 'who made it', or those who overcame, we are not truly honouring the lived experience of so many others, those who struggled in a system that saw them as less than, those who lived and died simple unknown and erased lives. We tend to tell the stories of people, regardless of the colour of their skin that accomplish something, that matter. Of course this is, in part because those are the stories that are better documented. But it is also because we like the success stories, the ones where people do good work or beat the odds or challenge the status quo. They are worthy stories, but they don't provide a understanding what was. I think this is important. As the Spanish-American philosopher George Santaya wrote, **"**Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." When Unitarian Universalists tell the stories of our involvement with the abolitionist movement of the 1800's or the civil rights movement of the last century, they tell the stories of Theodore Parker who it is said preached with a pistol in the pulpit, in case a vigilante group came looking for an escaped slave. We tell the story of James Reeb who answered the call to Selma and who died there. We tell the stories of UU ministers, serving in Canada who went to Selma – Bob Hemstreet of Hamilton, Arnold Thaw of Mississauga, and this congregation's minister, John Morgan, who travelled with 4 members of the congregation, including one young teen woman, who was recently enrolled at the University of Toronto. It might be easy to be self congratulatory. But… we can't tell the stories that put us in good light and omit others. In Chicago and Los Angeles, the decision to explicitly allow black people to become members was followed by Board member resignations. The first black Unitarian Ministers found, if they found any at all, marginal and temporary employment. In Detroit, Eugene Sparrow a Harvard Divinity School graduate who came with recommendations and funding from the American Unitarian Association was considered as minister at a congregational meeting in 1950. The meeting minutes are missing and the subsequent newsletter makes no mention of the discussion or vote. Sparrow was not called. In 2007, eight of the people who had been present were interviewed and the story they tell is not a pretty one, here is some of what they shared, 57 years later - "people were screaming at one another" and "I was shocked at the racism", "his qualifications were questioned" and "people threated to leave the church and withhold their pledges". Equity, it seems was an aspiration, but "not in my backyard" seems an apt description of the mood of the time. In my mind truth seeking and telling exercises such as this one are useful, as they help us, in the sometimes-uncomfortable work, of being honest with ourselves. One of this congregation's former ministers, Rev. Dr. Mark Morrison-Reed has since his service here, made it his focus to help us understand our history – researching, writing and teaching – so that we can better understand how our largely white perspective can be pushed, shifted so that the picture we have isn't narrowed by the dominant narrative.

I mentioned our principles earlier, and for us they provide us with values that we each, in our own way integrate into our personal theologies. And, as we consider them it

becomes quite clear that we are called to, each person, and each congregation, to do what they can to break down barriers, to build beloved communities. We affirm the inherent worth and dignity of each person, we name a commitment to justice and equity, creating accepting communities, a belief in interdependence and the 8th Principle I mentioned earlier, the one that explicitly names our commitment to dismantling racism. The call to justice making, the call to remove barriers is about more than an annual observance when we tell stories, it is for us about a theological imperative to live our values into being.

This isn't easy work. The work of Black History Month, is, if we are to take it seriously, the work of letting go of old ways of seeing, old ways of knowing, and allowing ourselves to live with other knowledge, other information and to see what our established ways of understanding history have obscured. Good and bad, we need to understand the stories of this congregation, our faith tradition, our society as a whole, if we are to undo the norm, usually implicit of whiteness.

James Baldwin wrote:

> History is not the past. It is the present. We carry our history with us. We are our history. If we pretend otherwise, we are literally criminals.
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> I attest to this: the world is not white; it never was white, cannot be white. White is a metaphor for power, and that is simply a way of describing Chase Manhattan Bank.

History is not the past. It is the present. We are our history. White is a metaphor for power. I understand this, in my heart, my head and my bones. And, I confess I managed to be a liberal minded, well-educated adult before I really understood it. I'm not just my personal history; I am our history. I can't understand you, or me, or us, unless I understand that our present circumstances are a result of what has happened, in the distant, middle, and recent past – the past is shaping our present. If we fail to understand too, that the histories that have been left out of the story telling have made it possible to misinterpret our current realities. I come back to the Santayana quote, **"**Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

And here we are, a community of good people who share values who have common aspirations and who have a stated commitment to help bring more justice into the world, who have committed to dismantling racism and oppressive systems. We are part of an imperfect tradition of justice and equity. What is our work now? May we use this time as a reminder to look more deeply at the tidy and incomplete stories we are told. Let us commit to learning more about the black leaders who have, often without notice, been part of our stories, because if we don't, we will fail to have the knowledge we need to do the work that the world needs. Black History Month – there is so much we don't know. Sadly, some stories are lost, obscured so completely by those who found them

unimportant, or inconvenient, that we may never know them. But not all the stories are lost to us. Let us learn the stories. Let us begin to tell a more complete history, so that we will better understand ourselves and the world, so that our hearts and minds are open, so that we can with integrity, and intention, begin to offer, each in our own way, with our own gifts – the love the world needs from us.

May we be a people who do not merely remember history, but who allow it to transform us.