

A Promissory Note, a Bad Check

**A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Lee Bluemel
At The North Parish of North Andover, MA, Unitarian Universalist
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*“You are not obligated to complete the work; neither are you free to desist from it.”
– Jewish saying*

As I begin this morning, I'd like to ask a few questions...

but I assure you, I ask them out of genuine curiosity-- this is not a test!

How many of you are familiar with the story of the Rev. James Reeb, the Unitarian Universalist minister who was attacked and killed by white racist thugs in Selma, Alabama, in 1965?

How many of you know that the Rev. Reeb preached right here, in this pulpit, just a few weeks before he made that fateful trip?

How many of you know about Viola Liuzzo, a UU from Detroit who was also killed in Selma that same week?

How many know that many other UUs had showed up there?

Now, how many of you are familiar with the story of the UUA's controversy over black empowerment, which started just two years later, in 1967?

How many of you know about the walk out at 1969 General Assembly, the national meeting of UU congregational representatives?

How many know that many black delegates and their white supporters walked out to protest what they considered a racist vote, that many left the denomination, and that the reverberations of that time still affect many to this day?

How many of you know that a promise was made 50 years ago to dedicate one million dollars for the support of black UUs and leadership, but that after about half of that was paid,

that promissory note was returned marked “insufficient funds”?

How many of you knew that the controversy nearly split the denomination, and that the Unitarian Universalist Association- which joined the two groups in 1961- barely survived its first decade?

It is interesting, isn't it, how easily certain stories become the dominant narrative of our faith, our identity, our self-understanding. More of us know about James Reeb than the Parable of the Blank Check. Reeb fits nicely into the story we want to tell ourselves; the other not so much.

Or perhaps, more accurately, I should say that Reeb fits nicely into the story *I* have wanted to tell you- and *have* told you from this pulpit. After all, I want y'all to be proud of our faith and inspired by it! I'd honestly rather not air our dirty laundry, especially with new folks in the pews!

But to tell the whole story about UUs and racial justice, to understand how we got here and how far we have to go, one must include the conflict and controversy, the hurt feelings and broken relationships, the broken promises and alienation, and the devastating loss... no matter how much we might want to skip over those chapters in our story.

The creation and re-creation of narratives- of stories- is a constant process in life.

We do this on the personal level, the communal level, the theological level. Think about the narrative you have about your own life- the story you tell yourself about yourself or your family.

Has it changed over time? Did you ever feel like it was stuck? Did you ever get some new information about your family or have a new experience that significantly shifted your self-understanding? If so, was it easy to believe the new story about who you are?

Such internal stories can keep us steady,
but they can also hold us back, keeps us stuck, get in the way of maturation.
For example, we might have created a story about ourselves
when we were a child, or a young adult—
one that says we are not truly lovable,
or that we must always keep our guard up,
or that we are in need of rescuing,
or that we must compete to survive,
or that we are a follower, not a leader—
or a leader and not a follower,
or that we do not deserve of all that is good in life-
or that, indeed, we do.

Those well-worn stories may not be helping us get by or thrive any more,
but letting go of them often takes real intention.
Yet we have to let go of that old narrative in order to re-invent ourselves,
to purposefully transform our perceptions and our reality.

Similarly, we can get stuck in the groove of a familiar theological narrative-
perhaps one that says suffering is redemptive,
or that the divine is male gendered,
or that certain people are not worthy or are locked out of salvation,
or that ill fortune or punishment is somehow deserved.
It can be hard to shake ideas like this when they get locked in young minds.
And as we know, such theological narratives can have dramatic consequences.
We need to let go of those old narratives to re-invent ourselves.

There are consequences, too, when our communal narratives get stuck.
We might have a story about what kind of town or city we live in,
or what kind of congregation we are,
or who belongs in the United States,
or the place of women,

or manifest destiny,
or the unlimited resources of the earth...
or any number of silly frameworks that benefit some at the expense of others.

Boy, those stories can be hard to change!

And when someone tries to change them, we often resist!

We saw this play out these past weeks in the abuse scandal in U.S. gymnastics. The dominant narrative said that those in power wouldn't abuse it—so when a counter-narrative emerged—when the girls began to offer their truth—the first impulse of the adults around them was to reject that new story, to deny it, push it away. They didn't want to *hear* that new truth; they didn't want to *believe* it, and they didn't want to *act* on it.

For a long time those adults *chose not to listen*,
to sit with the discomfort of what others knew and told them.
Only intense pain and truth-telling—shared and named *by many*—
was enough to change the narrative, and bring about justice.
Only *now* begins the long process of re-invention for that community.

So what about our story-- our UU story about racial justice?
For those of you who don't know what happened 50 years ago,
let me give a rough thumb nail sketch of the story,
thanks to an article by Warren Ross--*The UUA Meets Black Power*—
as well as writing by the Rev. Mark Morrison-Reed
and a UUA video of those involved.

The story begins with a predominantly white denomination,
a denomination that whose black membership was at about 1% in the early 60's.
Now, Black Unitarian and Universalist congregations and ministers
had emerged throughout the 1700's, 1800's and early 1900's.

But, as Morrison-Reed detailed in an article last fall in UU World magazine called *The Black Hole in the White UU Psyche*, the white and racist denomination did not support them, and these upwellings of black Unitarians and Universalists faded away without UUA support.

As a result, our denomination didn't develop forms of worship, liturgy, music or theology reflective of African-American experience, nor was there a single African-American UU minister in a major pulpit.

Over the first half of 20th century, UU attitudes shifted with the nation's. As Ross says, we "*were engaged in- but not at the forefront of- a movement calling for racial justice.*"

Then, came 1963: 1,000 UUs joined UUA president the Rev. Dana McLean Greely at the March on Washington.

1965, Selma happened: Alabama UUs marched on their own Selma courthouse, then ministers and laypeople responding to Rev. King's call, then more arrived after the murder of James Reeb- until in the end, there were 500 UU witnesses in Selma, including 140 clergy. It was an "all-in" kind of moment.

Fast forward a few years to 1967, when riots were spreading through U.S. cities.

In February of '67, the First National Conference of Black Unitarian Universalists took place.

Then in October of '67, the UUA called together a conference in New York City.

They didn't call it the Conference for Civil Rights, or Justice, or Equal Rights.

They called it the *Emergency Conference on the UU Response to the Black Rebellion*.

The "Black Rebellion"—it's an interesting choice of words.

37 of the 100 attendees at this conference were African-American UU's, over 25% of gathering.

Soon after it began, a black caucus withdrew
to hold their own meeting in a separate room.

As one participant said, they needed to get together and decide on their own destiny.

They also wanted a new, more powerful intervention of our movement
in their expanding racial justice concerns.

They couldn't continue to walk by and ignore what was happening
to blacks out there in the street-

they felt they *had* to do something about it...

and persuade their white brothers and sisters to help.

Influenced by a training with veteran community organizer Saul Alinsky
who advocated "all or nothing" negotiating tactics to get things done –
the Black UU Caucus and their white allies asked for \$1 million
to fund various activities in the black community over the next 4 years...
and refused to compromise.

At the time, it was 12% of the UUA budget.

What happened next is too complicated to tell in a sermon,
although you can read about it if you're interested, in Warren Doss's article.
It included various votes by the UUA Board of Trustees and General Assembly delegates-
the majority of whom, of course, were white;
arguments about what should take precedence—
redressing grievances or the democratic process;
appeals to procedure that slowed everything down;
the decision to spread payments out over 5 years instead of 4;
requirements to return to the General Assembly to reaffirm the commitment;
escalating conflict between two opposing groups contending for funds—
the Black Affairs Council and Black and White Action;
accusations that some groups were too separatist;
a walk out at a General Assembly by the Black UU Caucus;
the possibility of the denominational schism...

and in the midst of it all, the murder of Martin Luther King Jr.

It included a deep financial crisis in the UUA,
the discovery that all of the UUA's discretionary reserves had been depleted
by the ambitious President Greeley,
a Board focused more on survival than justice,
the election of a new UUA President who discovered the magnitude
of the UUA's deficit and had to cut 40% of the budget- 1 million dollars-
and close down all the regional offices.

In other words, it was what some might call a big, hot mess.
Or in still other words, it was a tragedy- that caused irreparable damage.

In the end, \$450,000 of the promised million was paid by the UUA,
and another \$180,000 come from a UU grantor called Veatch.
In the end, the Black Affairs Council disaffiliated itself from the UUA
and many African- American UUs left the denomination.
Congregations and friendships and marriages broke up over this.
It was traumatic.

As Mark Morrison-Reed has noted, it wasn't the money alone that caused the rift.
Following King's assassination in April of 1968
there was a tremendous amount of rage and grief in the black community,
a renewed sense of urgency and impatience with white foot-dragging.
Some left the denomination broken-hearted, some left in anger,
some left to focus their energies on black institutions
and the black community—
because at the time, affirming black identity became more important
than nurturing liberal religious identity.

People left for as many reasons as there were individuals.
But they left... and when they left, we lost so many voices, so many leaders.
We lost the energy, the leadership, the perspective, the influence,

the friends and acquaintances, the children and grandchildren of those Unitarian Universalists. We lost future UU ministers.

Black UUs lost mentors, elders, friends in faith.

White UUs lost some of those who could teach us how to be better allies.

We lost some who could lead us in centering black voices and experience in worship, in calling out white supremacy in our culture and ourselves and sitting with it in discomfort.

And without those voices, those leaders, those ministers, white Unitarian Universalists continued to act in ways that centered whiteness and ignored the experiences, the pain and the truth-telling of people of color.

Here's just one example that I remember myself, and was reminded of by the Rev. Rebekah Savage. Savage is Associate Minister at the UU Congregation of Rockville, MD, a doctoral student and a black UU, who wrote a reflection called "*The Healing is Not Done*".

In 1993, when I was in divinity school, there was a General Assembly in what was then called the Thomas Jefferson District, and at that GA the organizers had planned a Thomas Jefferson Ball to honor Jefferson who was a Unitarian- and what else? A slave holder. And for that ball, all guests were invited to come in "period costumes".

...That's right—period costumes. As Rebekah said, "Ouch."

She writes, "*...those who conceived of this social gathering did not take into account the centering of whiteness by asking people to attend in period dress.*

The organizers forgot or ignored the fact that in Jefferson's time, we black and brown UUs would have been slaves: property to traded and sold, brutalized and subjected.

The matter was taken up at General Assembly

when delegates challenged the appropriateness of holding this event.

During a plenary session, delegates voiced their concerns

by reading a statement of protest.

In response, the organizers and other leaders gathered

to consider how to proceed and came to a decision:

the Thomas Jefferson Ball would proceed ahead as planned.”

Needless to say, that story- and others like it- had legs.

When Rebekah first heard it, she writes,

“As a person of color, raised in a UU congregation,

I felt a shiver down my spine as I learned something new and unsettling

about the faith that I call home.”

In his book *Black Pioneers in a White Denomination*,

the Rev. Mark Morrison-Reed speaks of Unitarian Universalists when he notes,

“We do not stand above the social attitudes of our times,

as we are prone to believe,

but instead flounder about in their midst, with everyone else.”

What he is talking about here is a shift of a beloved narrative about our engagement with racial justice:

a shift from the painful but clear and inspiring sacrifice of a James Reeb

to the prolonged, painful and confused floundering of an institution,

its governing processes, its members and congregations,

who continued to center whiteness

and ignore the truth-telling by people of color,

and in doing so, lost so many, so much.

It’s not a pretty story. It’s a painful story.

It’s a story we might resist, or deny, or dislike.

But sitting with our discomfort with this story

is the first step towards the re-invention of our faith.

It's a first step towards the intentional, purposeful transformation of our perceptions about ourselves and the world- and our future.

In summing up our UU history during the civil rights movement, Warren Ross wrote,

"Two shocks jolted the Unitarian Universalist Association soon after its formation. Both were related to the struggle for racial justice, but while one unified the denomination, sustaining its self-image of being on the right side of the struggle, the other shattered this easy assumption and inflicted wounds that still have not healed.

...What had seemed so obvious after Selma— that in the fight for racial justice it was "us" (the good guys) vs. "them" (the racists)— suddenly wasn't so obvious after all. The line between "us" and "them" no longer seemed so clear."

The line was no longer clear.

After all the pain and loss, the whole denomination went completely silent on race for a long, long time, as our member Gail Forsyth-Vail has pointed out to me. There was a report in 1983, an antiracist resolution at General Assembly in 1997 which was followed by a lot of work over the next three years, but then again, there was quiet. Perhaps the election of the Rev. Bill Sinkford as the first black UUA president led people to relax.

Our denomination was not alone in this. Jennifer Harvey of Duke Divinity School wrote a book called *Dear White Christians* in which she shows a similar pattern in dominantly white denominations in the late 1960's and beyond.

It turns out that many white folks wanted reconciliation without the truth telling, or deep self-examination, or repentance for damage done by whiteness, white people and institutions of faith. But as we know-- watching all the demands for truth-telling that are swirling around us today-- unless there is truth-telling our communities cannot move forward and justice is not found.

All over the country, UU congregations are challenging each other this year to engage in self-reflection, to center the voices and experiences of people of color, to make a long-term commitment to dismantling white supremacy, racism and oppression within our denomination and beyond, and to participate in funding this commitment to each other.

Last year, the Board of our denomination made a pledge of 5 million dollars to BLUU, Blacks Lives of Unitarian Universalists. BLUU is committed to expanding the power and capacity of Black UUs, providing support, information and resources for Black Unitarian Universalists, and justice-making and liberation through our faith.

The intention is to make good on that promissory note, that blank check from 50 years ago that was returned "insufficient funds". The intention is to help re-shape, re-create our future as a denomination.

There is so much to gain. All you have to do is read the reflections by youth who have attended a leadership conference for UU youth of color called *Thrive*, and you'll be convicted and converted! This is an exciting moment. In a denomination that is still 87% white and aging- most over 60 nationwide- *we have so much to gain*.

Today, the UUA has a budget of \$25.7 million,

and an Endowment of 25 million more.

Believe it or not, that is tiny for a nationwide denomination- and money is often tight- but we can't deny we *do* have resources.

1 million has been pledged from the UUA Endowment,

1 million from a single, generous couple,

and we are also asked to contribute as individuals and a UUA congregation.

If our pledge is at least \$10 per member, it will be matched.

That means our North Parish \$3,300 contribution would equal \$6,600.

I bet we can do that, can't we? \$10 per member?

Some might not have an extra \$10 but I bet others have more.

And if you want to pledge to bring something next week

there's a rip-off reminder in the Order of service.

We already have one pledge of \$500 towards this offering.

The rest is up to us.

Our offering will now be gratefully received.

Amen.

Reading: from the 1963 "*I Have a Dream*" speech by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

This part of the speech might be called "*The Parable of the Bad Check*".

"Five score years ago, a great American, in whose shadow we stand today, signed the Emancipation Proclamation. This momentous decree came as a great beacon light of hope to millions of Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice. It came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of their captivity.

But one hundred years later, the Negro still is not free. One hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination. One hundred years later, the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the

midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity. One hundred years later, the Negro is still languishing in the corners of American society and finds himself an exile in his own land. And so we've come here today to dramatize a shameful condition. In a sense, we've come to our nation's capital to cash a check.

When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, *they were signing a promissory note* to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the 'unalienable Rights' of 'Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.'

It is obvious today that *America has defaulted on this promissory note, insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked 'insufficient funds'.*

But we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation. And so, we've come to cash this check, a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice."

Opening words by Viola Abbitt, UU seminarian

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.

PRAYER, 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.

Benediction by the Rev. Kimberly Quinn Johnson, minister of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of the South Fork.

We are the ones we have been waiting for.

We are not perfect, but we are perfectly fitted for this day.

We are not without fault,

but we can be honest to face our past as we chart a new future.

We are the ones we have been waiting for.

May we be bold and courageous to chart that new future

May we have faith in a future that is not known.

We are the ones we have been waiting for.