

Rev. Linda Simmons
Abraham Lincoln and Memorial Day
May 28, 2017

Abraham Lincoln is a figure larger than life and also one so burdened by life that his photos and sculptures show him weighed down by it. Lincoln wrote the Gettysburg Address on November 19, 1863, that foundational document that still serves as a text upon which our democracy rests. I will read it here:

Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battle-field of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

But, in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate -- we cannot consecrate -- we cannot hallow -- this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here.

It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us -- that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion -- that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain -- that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom -- and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

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This call, that those who littered the battlefields of this nation in the fight to rid us all of the sin of slavery, might not have died in vain because we as a nation were too great yet, our dreams still so unfulfilled, our capacity so tender and alive to build institutions that protect and honor the rights of others so that all might thrive under this great flag, so that all might know the promise of this nation as their own.

Barack Obama used Lincoln's bible for both his inaugurations. I think this represents not only a reminder of who we are but of who we are meant to be, of who we can become when we find the courage to live into our stories and not turn away from them, to see the cost

and the gifts of history and to never, never, give them away again to be trod on with casual disregard.

When a life is given, when a war is fought, when people lay down their lives, we have an obligation to live in recognition of the dream they died for, to live to fulfill in full the vision they saw as they charged into battle. In the case of the Civil War, that debt is a world free from slavery, from one person being considered less worthy based on skin color than another.

And Lincoln felt that debt keenly.

Bill Clinton's suggested Lincoln lived a life of wounded humanity when he said, "It's really interesting. Lincoln had, you know, serious depression problems. And when he lost a son in Illinois; then he lost a son in the White House; then his wife lost three of her half brothers fighting for the Confederacy. Then, she suffered all of her trauma. And then he had all the blood of the Union streaming from his decisions."¹

All the blood of the union streaming from his decisions. I cannot imagine that kind of responsibility and yet do we not all carry it, the consequence of the decisions our elected leaders make on the lives of others and the burden of their dreams too?

I have a minister friend who is from the Philippines and she said to me the other day, "You Americans, you give all your power away to your leaders and when they do not fulfill your dreams, you are so angry but you do not see that it is up to you to fulfill those dreams and that you too carry the price of those dreams being fulfilled and unfulfilled at home and around the world.

It is not only your leaders who are responsible. It is you too who bear that responsibility in a democracy."

The dream we are still tasked with fulfilling from the civil war, that still lingers, that still bends Lincoln's shoulders in the statue at the Lincoln Memorial in DC, the voices still calling to us from the fields of our own lands whisper: Are you keeping the bargain, are you doing the world of anti-racism we died to ensure in this land?

Rev James Ford, who gave me the inspiration for this part of sermon with his own, "Abraham Lincoln Points the Way" writes:

"Lincoln was a moderate, not a radical. Early on he believed the Constitution would not allow the abolition of slavery where it already existed, and his first election platform only called for slavery to be blocked in new territories."²

¹Rev. James Ford, "Abraham Lincoln Points the Way" sermon, May 25, 2014:

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/monkeymind/2014/05/abraham-lincoln-points-the-way-a-memorial-day-sermon.html>

² Ibid.

Ford goes on to write that Lincoln changed as he saw what the country needed, and as he grew, as he traveled, as he experienced slavery and its ills more deeply, he became deeply committed to its eradication. He was nimble,³ he was flexible, he had the courage to modify his views as the world around him demanded more of him as a leader until he could utter: Those who deny freedom to others deserve it not for themselves; and under the rule of a just God, cannot long retain it.

Do I have that nimbleness, I ask myself? Do you? When I know I need to change my views, when I know I need to allow another way of seeing into my mind but am so attached to my own way of making rightness, do I have the courage to shift because I know justice and mercy and love require it of me, because I know that our very principles of democracy and Unitarianism demand it of me? Sometimes!!

UU minister Rev. Tom Schade, writes that he had “come to be drawn by the picture of Lincoln as someone whose positions kept evolving as time and the river flowed toward him. Adherence to principles matters a lot,” Tom acknowledges.

But he writes, “I think it more important to be able to see what is the right thing for this moment in time.” Tom sums his point up by quoting one of his mentors. “Sometimes, you have to put aside your principles and just do the right thing.”⁴

This is a provocative statement and a difficult one for me. What does it mean to put aside principles to do the right thing? Perhaps it means that sometimes we change even when we think we know the way, and we’ve taken out the tried and true and we polish and shine it until it reflects us back to ourselves and we brandish it like a sword of justice and it still only brings only more pain and no more justice.

I think we are in some of these times again as we respond to racism in our country together. On this, we must find a way to be unified as a faith tradition, and yet, as I speak, the ground beneath us is quaking.

As a Unitarian Universalist Association, we have a long history as white and black people doing and undoing faith together. During the time of the race riots, just before the murder of Martin Luther King, and after Selma where many were beaten and some murdered, an emergency conference on as it was called “the Unitarian Universalist Response to the Black Rebellion” was held in October 1967 in New York.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

This led to the creation of the Black Affairs Council (BAC). The General Assembly GA held in Cleveland—two months after the assassination of Martin Luther King—in 1968 voted to fund BAC with \$1 million over four years.

When Robert West took over the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) presidency in 1969, he discovered that the UUA's financial condition was worse than anyone had expected. The promised money was then offered in a divided way over several years which led to more acrimony, walk outs, arguments, and broken relationships until the money and BAC dissolved.⁵

The wounds for our UU Association never healed. The work between us as black and white UUs was never done. The UU Association, largely white, turned away, went on, did not have the skills, capacity or depth to do the reconciliation and healing called for.⁶

Our UU black brothers and sisters who are here with us now are saying to us again there is deep work to be done and now is the time and that we must have the skills, capacity and depth to do what is needed to be done this time.

What precipitated this conversation this time is that among the eleven people on the Unitarian Universalist Leadership Council, there are only 2 non-whites. Of fifty-six people with supervisory responsibilities at the UUA, eight are people of color, or just over 14 percent.⁷

A recent new hire of another white male that over looked qualified people of color brought this to a head. People resigned, the UUA president resigned, interim Presidents were assigned. Another discussion is happening, another upheaval, another time when we look again and ask ourselves who we are in the face of race and commitment and humanity.

The term that people of color are using at the Unitarian Universalist Association this time is white supremacy. That's a tough one for some folk who feel that this term will keep good people from our doors because they will feel insulted or that this is a misuse of terms for our organization or they are just plain turned off. Arguments against the term have been heard and the answer is still: Yes, it has to be this term, not because we are white supremacists, but because the world we live is one in which racism is systematic and benefits white people, who are dominant. It is a simple equation.

It is how it has to be this time, because this time, we can't look away, we can't pretend we are not here; we are needed to stand side by side and look in each other eyes and see the pain and know the suffering of our brothers and sisters, as fellow UUs, as people who are needed in love.

⁵ Rev. Mark Morrison Reed, "It Happened the Way it had to Happen," General Assembly, 2009: <http://www.uua.org/economic/ga/144305.shtml>

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ <http://www.uuworld.org/articles/critics-challenge-uua-hiring-practices>

Part of loving is always to be willing to look at the world and name the same evil with the same words. Part of loving is always to be willing to look at the world and name the same evil with the same words.

When we are with our friends and someone hurts them, we comfort them, we say: You are right, you deserve better. Come over and let me feed you and hold you and remind you that the world is better than that.

And part of seeing our brothers and sisters of color right now is a willingness to say, when the state of North Carolina is gerrymandered to create apartheid type redistricting, that is about white people being supreme, when black children playing with toy guns are shot, that is about white people being supreme, and as black people are 5 times more likely to be incarcerated than whites, this is about white people being supreme and I am here as your ally and friend and I see you and I am not going anywhere this time.

And so, when you hear the words *white supremacy* please, before you react, take pause. Consider that it might be time to readjust our worthy principles and just do the right thing by hearing this plea and its desperation and responding with love rather than anger and judgment no matter our fears or judgments. What is being asked of us? If we can listen and hear this time, maybe we can move forward together and build the world we dream about.

We will be holding a book group with St. Paul's to read together the novel by Jodi Picoult, Small Great Things. It will be held on Mondays from 5:30-7pm beginning June 12th at the UU Meeting House. Announcements are in the OOS and will be in the Weathervane.

In Small Great Things, Ruth Jefferson, a black woman with a teenage son, has been a labor and delivery nurse for more than 20 years when Turk and Brittany Bauer come to her maternity ward for the delivery of Brittany's first child, a boy named Davis.

Turk demands that Ruth have no interaction with the baby — but when the ward is short-handed, Ruth finds herself alone with Davis just as he stops breathing. In that moment, Ruth has to decide whether she should heed her humanity and her oath as a nurse or follow the orders she has received to stay away from the Bauer baby. A court case ensues that unravels racism in this small town.

I thought this might give us a chance to review some of our inherent assumptions and talk freely with each other about how they show up in our lives. Please join us!

President Lincoln's last inaugural address, on March 4, 1865, months before he was shot, closes with these words, "With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to

bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan – to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.”

May be so. Amen.