

Keepers of the Flame

Who do we think we are? Who are we really? And who, exactly, do we want to be?

When I was in college, I had a close friend named Willow who was a few years ahead of me. After she graduated, we traded letters regularly, and I was always thrilled to catch sight of her handwriting among my mail. In fact, I loved the shape of her lower case *f* so much that it still shows up in my own handwriting. We'd keep in touch about her research, my classes, people we knew, music, philosophy, and everything in between.

In one letter, she did me the kind of service that only a true friend can—she told me an uncomfortable truth about myself. “May I offer you a topic for reflection?” she began. She went on to observe that I'd often express my opinion of people in harsh or dismissive terms. I was shocked—and chastened—because I immediately knew she was right. In my impatience with a grocery store clerk or frustration with a coworker, some occasional venting about life's inconveniences had become a pattern of hubris. My friend's invaluable feedback became a spur to do better.

Fast forward to a several years ago. Now, I know I'm not alone in occasionally checking in about the big picture of my life. This particular time, it took the form of asking, “If I died today, how would I want my friends to remember me?” As I ran through the possibilities, I realized that the adjective I wanted at the top of the list was “kind”...and I wasn't sure it would be.

It's not that I thought people would lead by saying I was unkind, but I saw that I wasn't living in a way that made kindness *central* to who I was. So once again, I set out to do better. I began moving through the world differently, with no expectation of getting anything in return—except becoming the person I wanted to be. And it worked. I mean, I have moments of impatience and brusqueness like any fallible human (which is to say, all of us), but I really do see kindness as integral to who I am now, in a way I wasn't able to put into practice before I made that intentional change.

Who do we think we are? Who are we? And who do we want to be?

In *The Selma Awakening*, which traces the effects of the civil rights movement on Unitarian Universalism, Mark Morrison-Reed talks about the difference between *espoused values* and *values in practice*. Individual UUs had been part of racial justice movements for ages, but he looked institutionally as well.

In the decades leading up to the Selma march in 1965, the Unitarians, the Universalists, and then the Unitarian Universalists all made public statements calling for an end to racial discrimination. They passed resolutions at General Assembly, they voted to support the 1963 March on Washington, they wrote articles for denominational journals, they even signed a petition to members of Congress urging them to pass the Civil Rights Act.

However, Morrison-Reed's analysis of their principles in action—"principles [that are] revealed, not in aspirational statements, but in the everyday business-as-usual decisions made by individuals, congregations, and denominational departments"ⁱ—well, that paints a less flattering picture.

Broadly speaking, almost every aspect of Unitarian Universalism "[held] African Americans at arm's length"ⁱⁱ: from the style of worship, to the hymnals and religious education materials, to increasing numbers of congregations in the suburbs, to ministers of color not finding settled pulpits, to the nearly uniform whiteness of national bodies like the UUA's board, committees, and commissions.

But in 1965, the *espoused values* of UUs and their *values in practice* came into alignment. The shocking violence against peaceful protesters in Selma on Bloody Sunday, and the telegram from Martin Luther King, Jr. asking clergy of all faiths to come for another march on that following Tuesday, sent out a call to which UUs responded: about 60 ministers and 15 laypeople. By the way, that 60 represented nearly 10 percent of our active parish ministers at the time.

After the murder of James Reeb—who was one of those 60 ministers and who, along with Jimmie Lee Jackson and Viola Liuzzo, was one of the martyrs connected with Selma—thousands of people came to march from Selma to the state capital in Montgomery, including many additional UUs. I heard one estimate that of the 600 or so clergy present, 200 of them were UU ministers.

This was a moment when our faith took a big step closer to becoming who we said we wanted to be.

Of course, we also know that the work is far from over. Just last month, Kenny Wiley wrote a poignant piece entitled "Who Are My People?"ⁱⁱⁱ about his dual, sometimes competing, loyalties as a Black Unitarian Universalist. At one point in the article, he describes a road trip through the South and his experience stopping at a site honoring James Reeb.

Kneeling in front of Rev. Reeb's marker drove me—to tears, and to an understanding of history's importance. Finally, after ignoring the race problem for years, we showed up in Selma. But fifty years later, if we UUs show up in Selma in 2015 [for the anniversary] but not in Ferguson right now, and not for all those black and brown victims of police violence in the sadly inevitable future, we will not have learned from our past.

He continues:

When the next Ferguson happens—and sadly, it will—we can and must do more. We have to show up, be willing to follow others, and be willing to change ourselves. [...]

The next call to action for racial justice has arrived. My people: Will we answer?

My people want to know.

In countless ways, we live in a much different time than 1965. Yet according to The Guardian, the rate at which African Americans are killed by white police officers is

approximately the same as the number of lynchings during Jim Crow—about twice a week.^{iv} If you add together the extrajudicial killings committed by police, security guards, and vigilantes, then we're talking about a Black person being killed every 28 hours.^v And those are just the ones found through publicly available information.

Here's a truth that is immensely self-evident: in 2014, huge numbers of people in the United States still cannot exercise their supposedly unalienable right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, even while just walking down a stairwell or walking home with a bag of Skittles.

For all the ways we've failed each other as a nation, I still believe in the radically empowering potential of the promises we've made as a nation. They're promises worth keeping, which is part of why it's so painful when we don't.

Promises like everyone being created equal. Government deriving its power from the consent of the governed. Promoting the general welfare and securing the blessings of liberty for ourselves and those who'll come after. Ensuring freedom of religion, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and freedom to assemble peaceably. Requiring that the state follow due process. And remembering that these ideals emanate from We the People, not just I the Person. I want to keep these flames alive and burning brightly because I believe they **can** illuminate a way forward.

But when fire engulfs the church of Michael Brown's family, when large swaths of Americans can't understand the rage of their Black neighbors, when James Baldwin's searing indictment of his fellow citizens "that they have destroyed and are destroying hundreds of thousands of lives and do not know it and do not want to know it" still rings true 52 years later, then those promises...become ashes in my mouth. The distance between espoused values and values in practice becomes the length of a funeral procession four centuries long.

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People keep asking the question, "But what can I do? What can we do?" It's important to start by reminding ourselves that there's no simple formula. If there were, we would have used it by now to solve the problem.

It's also important to point out that the question of what you can do is largely defined by your social location.

I step into this pulpit with olive-toned skin that has never caused shopkeepers to follow me around. I've never been pulled over by a cop while driving through a ritzy neighborhood. And except during a high butch phase in my 20s when I wore a leather motorcycle jacket, I don't remember anyone ever clutching a bag more tightly when I came near. I've had grey-haired grandmothers in San Francisco's predominantly Latino Mission District come up and start speaking Spanish to me, but that's about the extent of the racial profiling I've experienced. I've got options about how to act that would put someone with darker skin at much greater risk.

Now, I can offer suggestions about practical things to do. Donate to the grassroots organizers in Ferguson, and to the town's small but fierce public library. Support independent journalists who are putting their bodies on the line to film what's happening. Volunteer with groups addressing poverty. Speak out at protests and at holiday dinner tables. Attend meetings for the police oversight commission, or get appointed yourself. Get involved in environmental justice, for that matter, which

disproportionally affects communities of color. Seriously, there's no lack of entry points into what we can **do** to address racism.

But I think it's more powerful to start by asking those questions about who we **are**, and who we want to become. Because once we figure that out, the promises required of us will make themselves known. Social action becomes not a duty borne out of guilt, but an expression of our values, our commitments, and our sacred longing.

I'm not saying it's easy. Take my example from earlier: making kindness central to who I am isn't just about thanking the waitress every time she refills my water glass or taking the time to help a tourist who's lost. It's also taking responsibility for those times when I **am** brusque and humbly asking for forgiveness. It's about confronting someone who has done me serious harm while still holding genuine compassion for the person. It means not losing sight of every police officer's humanity even as I call for accountability.

Things can become tricky when we're pulled by competing promises, like Viola Liuzzo was. Her decision to answer the call to go to Selma had devastating consequences for her children. Kenny Wiley also talks about the tensions he lives with. I think of another friend, too, who is deeply dedicated to racial and economic justice and whose organizing work keeps him away from his beloved family for long stretches. His spouse and child are making major sacrifices along with him to bring about a more equitable world.

No matter what we choose to do—or not do, for that matter—others will bear some of the costs. That interconnectedness just comes with the territory of inhabiting a shared reality. We can't help but affect each other. The best we can do is to make our decisions consciously, intentionally, and with integrity, rather than with fear or selfishness or impulsivity.

Under it all, we need to answer an even more fundamental question: Are we willing to be transformed? Posting a link on Facebook is great for sharing information, but it isn't enough to...y'know...dismantle centuries of institutionalized racism. Something more—something life-changing, soul-changing—is being asked of us.

As Rev. Gordon McKeeman noted, “Hell...is the issue of separation, whether we can, with safety and impunity, set up little islands in the human experience and therefore protect ourselves against any relationship with the mainland. And Universalism says unequivocally, it cannot be done.” In other words, there is no “them,” only “us.”

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Today's closing hymn, which we'll sing in a few minutes, is *America the Beautiful*. Now, it has lyrics that aren't as inclusive as I'd want, but across the four verses, it does include a combination of aspiration and nuance that I appreciate. For example, the second time through the chorus asks for God to mend all the country's flaws, which of course requires an acknowledgment that we've fallen short. And the third verse could be a tribute to the protesters who throughout this country's history have stood up and sat down and inched their way forward for justice:

O beautiful for heroes proved
In liberating strife
Who more than self their country loved

And mercy more than life

At the same time, I want us to find new stories about reaching liberation and extending mercy, stories where the heroes aren't expendable. Because just to be clear, nothing about ending racism in this country **requires** a body count.

The people saying, "Enough!" to the violence inflicted on people of color are offering the rest of the country invaluable feedback, raising their voices about the need to reflect and then to do better.

The stories we tell about who we are as a society are inextricably entwined with the promises we make, and the promises we keep, and the promises we break, and the promises we choose to renew. And how we decide which is which will determine who we become.

We are, as the poet David Roderick writes,

... *homo fabula*: we're part story,
part human, but only if our names are known,
and only if our names, when spoken aloud,
are pronounced correctly, with proper inflection,
as when a mother addresses her son.

Names like Michael Brown, Jordan Davis, Eric Garner.
Names like Eugene Ellison, Tamir Rice, Dante Parker.
Names like Trayvon Martin, Emmett Till, Medgar Evers, Oscar Grant,
Amadou Diallo, Henry Glover, Alan Bluford, Omar Abrego, Ezell Ford,
Mario Romero, Ronald Madison, Kendrec McDade, Sean Bell,
and the horrifyingly long litany of others senselessly killed every day,
and the countless black and brown bodies whose names we don't even know
but who deserved so much better.

*Until the killing of black men, black mothers' sons
Is as important as the killing of white men, white mothers' sons*

*We who believe in freedom cannot rest
We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes*

Who do we think we are? Who are we really? And who, exactly, do we want to be?

Let us stay awake to the ways we fall short of the promises made in our name.
Let us keep open the doors to our hearts and allow a mighty love to sweep through.
And let us renew our commitment to transform the shattered promises of the past,
with no expectation of reward—other than becoming the people, and the nation,
that the coming generations need us to be.

Ashé! ¡Presente! And blessed be.

- ⁱ Mark D. Morrison-Reed, *The Selma Awakening* (Boston: Skinner House, 2014), 23.
- ⁱⁱ Morrison-Reed, 67.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Kenny Wiley, “Who Are My People? A Black Unitarian Universalist on Selma and Ferguson,” October 15, 2014, accessed November 26, 2014, <http://kennywiley.com/2014/10/15/who-are-my-people-a-black-unitarian-universalist-on-selma-and-ferguson/>.
- ^{iv} Isabel Wilkerson, “Mike Brown’s shooting and Jim Crow lynchings have too much in common. It’s time for America to own up,” August 25, 2014, access November 28, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/aug/25/mike-brown-shooting-jim-crow-lynchings-in-common>.
- ^v Malcolm X Grassroots Movement, *Operation Ghetto Storm: 2012 Annual Report on the Extrajudicial Killings of 313 Black People by Police Officers, Security Guards and Vigilantes*, April 2013, accessed November 28, 2014, <https://mxgm.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/Operation-Ghetto-Storm.pdf>.