

Across the Atlantic

UU Church of Vancouver

June 18, 2023

Reflection on the Theme by Ronnie Mars

Sitting down with Dr. Henry Louis Gates for an episode of *Finding Your Roots* on the Public Broadcasting System would be an honor. Prominent individuals are taken on a deep dive into their ancestry, discovering stories about family members - some unknown to them.

My story is abridged; not by omitted facts but disrupted by the enslavement of my ancestors. These broken chains symbolizing our freedom also signifies the broken link to our past.

My great-grandfather was born into slavery because South Carolina, like Texas and a couple of other states did not grant slaves their freedom immediately following the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863. We should not forget our history, but some choose not to even reflect on its past; as if it never happened. In freedom, my great-grandfather's descendants found solace in the belief of an everlasting afterlife from their faith after the struggles they experienced in this life.

Tomorrow is Juneteenth! Another federal holiday. Pardon me if I don't celebrate. If I was acknowledging a day of my ancestors' freedom, it would be the date Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation. But thank you for my freedom. No, thank you!

Forty acres and a mule? You reneged on that deal. How about the back wages for the years my family worked the fields on your plantation! Pay us what you would have paid yourself! Above all, allow us to live in peace. Deal with us as you would your sons or brothers. We don't expect you to have our backs, but don't paint a target on it. Until you can do that, we have a different concept of what freedom is.

Racism in this country is like a malignant tumor. Its hatred flares and spreads like a wildfire. It reared its ugly head during Barack Obama's first presidential run, with his successor's birtherism claims elevating bigotry on a larger scale.

During a 1960 "Meet the Press" interview, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. declared, "I think it is one of the tragedies of our nation, one of the shameful tragedies, that 11 o'clock on Sunday morning is one of the most segregated hours, if not the most segregated hours in Christian America."

The Pew Research Center found a majority of Americans say race relations in the United States are bad, and of those, about seven-in-ten say things are getting even worse. Roughly two-thirds say it has become more common for people to express racist or racially insensitive views since Donald Trump was elected, even if not necessarily more acceptable.

When it comes to justice, the Ethics in Government Act requires justices, judges, members of Congress and federal officials to annually disclose gifts they receive. But the United States Supreme Court justices are not subject to the gift bans applied to lower court judges, so that justices are "accepting gifts based on whether they choose to accept them or not".

Clarence Thomas, failed to disclose many large financial gifts. After these revelations, the rule of law has no meaning, and in the words of comedian Richard Pryor, "You go down to the courthouse looking for justice, and that's what you find, just us." The foundation of our common ground slowly crumbles away, but clearly we all have never been on solid ground.

Across the Atlantic by Jennifer Springsteen

You might be thinking, wait a minute, why are we talking about Christianity again? So first of all, you might not be Christian, and neither am I, but our ancestors were. The roots of Unitarian Universalism go deep into the soil of the Christian faith even as many of our people were scorned and punished for the interpretations they offered.

Second, we work towards being a welcoming community which means creating connection to people who might not pray the same as us. We tend to be very welcoming to Buddhism or Paganism, ignoring any harm those faith traditions have caused, and we scoff at Christianity, the religion often embraced by Black and Brown folks here in the U.S.

Tomorrow, when people are celebrating the legal end to slavery in the country, they will be doing so with songs and prayers in the Christian tradition. Let's take a look at the how and why and who of this religious balm on our kin. I want this to sound less like a history lesson and more of a discovery of how we feel restriction, release, and spiritual awakening in our bodies. Not what we *think*, what we *feel*.

What I noticed as I read through these materials is the corporeal nature of worship brought across the ocean from Africa and what emerged in this country through the Great Awakening. Our Unitarian ancestors remained stoic—worshiping the Anglican way through the head, while the Baptist's peeled off into another direction. In fact, one of the greatest critics of the Awakening and its itinerant revival preachers was the New England Unitarian, Charles Chauncy. He complained that the Baptists were emotional, and their claims to feeling the spirit within

their bodies was simply their own egotistical imagination. The Unitarians, he claimed settled into a more “Christian temper,” (Robinson) code for somber and heady. UUs are critiqued even still for our eschewing of more embodied ways of worship.

Scholars have claimed: “The single most important outgrowth of the Great Awakening was that blacks who had been converted [to Christianity] at the revivals formed their own independent congregations, thereby beginning the political, social, and economic autonomy of the Afro-Baptist church.” (W. F. Pitts) Many of us—those of us worshipping today and our ancestors in the early days of this country—missed the importance of what was happening religiously for Black people, even as they stood up against slavery.

I believe we need to rewind a little and see what was happening spiritually during the socially traumatic turmoil of our country’s beginnings for Black Americans, and how it has affected worship styles today in our desire to be a diverse and welcoming congregation.

By the 1700’s in this country, rather than West and Central African indentured servitude, lifelong slavery had become law in the Southern States. The African diaspora brought their religious cultures and customs with them, and those cultures were many and varied. And yet in order to hold themselves in their own sacred humanness against the insanity of their enslavement, Black folks on plantations created secret meetings where they practiced their disparate religious customs in rituals, rites of passages like weddings and funerals, as well as to pass along the sacred wisdom that crossed the Atlantic with them to younger generations born into slavery. Song, ritual, belief. (W. F. Pitts)

These meetings were secret not because the plantation owners worried about slaves religiosity (not yet, that would come later), they were outlawed because of the worry that those people would be too tired in the morning to work. So began the secret codes in songs to spread the word of the when and where of the evening gathering. A thread of hope to cling to, a desire for spiritual belonging. (W. F. Pitts)

The slave spirituals gathered stories from the Bible that slaves connected with: those from the Old Testament like the exodus from Egypt and God’s punishment for those whose cruelty angered him. The Bible is filled with stories of God meting out justice and these stories became the strength of the spiritual verse. (Kirk-Duggan)

*Oh, Mary, doncher you weep, doncher moan. Oh, Mary, doncher you weep, doncher moan.
Pharaoh's army get drownded? Oh, Mary, doncher you weep.*

The Mary’s in this song are conflated from Old and New Testament, but the irony is clear in this song as in so many—justice will come, and once in the glory of heaven, the slave could finally

rest. Scholar Kirk-Duggan claims, “The words of the song affirm without equivocation that African American Christians will walk, fly, shine, and play all over God’s heaven.” (Kirk-Duggan)

While many slave spirituals embraced the ideas of heaven, the religion of West Africans is a cosmology of God interested in the common lives of people and a divine morality that spoke to cosmic justice. This wasn’t a God off in the clouds, but very present with people. And if lucky, embodied with the people. Perhaps the idea of embodied spirituality is why slaves’ readily adopted Christianity as their own.

In those secret slave meetings I spoke about earlier, people experienced ecstatic possessions—the supernatural was called in through the ritual of dance and song and completely enveloped the person or group. Some scholars say that having been together in this way, possessed by the spirit of the divine, allowed slaves to stay connected even when torn apart. Their spirits were forever bound with one another through those holy experiences. (Lippy)

White folks, planters in the South most especially, as well as clerics and theologians, quote: “found Christianity incompatible with slavery and slave trading. Moreover, enslaved peoples themselves, forcibly transported from Africa to Caribbean and American settlements, often found support in the beliefs and institutions of Christianity, helping them to ameliorate and sometimes openly defy their enslavement”. (Schmidt-Nowara)

Planters were compared to the Egyptians of the Old Testament and some (including slaves—*Pharaoh’s army was drowned, O Mary don’t you weep*) thought the planters would get their just deserts in time. We know that the Bible was written by many hands, which is what accounts for multiple interpretations of its stories. For example, in Exodus, the Israelites are emancipated, but in other places in scripture, we don’t read the abolition of slavery, but laws regulating it. In the 1700 and 1800’s White Christians struggled with the cruel treatment of enslaved Africans as being un-Christian. And yet calls for conversion were met with resistance because Christians should not enslave other Christians. (Schmidt-Nowara) And yet by the 19th Century, converting slaves was touted as a way to control and pacify. (Boles) The just rewards for a life well lived (interpreted as “good behavior” for the planters) was the glory of heaven.

And yet white planters were continually called on to defend slavery to abolitionists and humanists. Colonization and plantations were highly lucrative. Planters justified themselves with Biblical verse and claimed that they were teaching their slaves the Bible, making them Christians, and wasn’t that a good thing? (Boles) Even a righteous thing? All that conversion?

If that didn’t work, they used the curse of Ham Bible verses which to me doesn’t make any sense. I’ll leave that for you to read and interpret but suffice to say this misinterpretation was the beginning of the focus on skin color as justification for slavery.

Again, the question of converting slaves—one cannot enslave and treat another Christian with such cruelty—so by converting people, white planters were contradicting the tenets of their faith. They worried baptizing would bring about the immediate emancipation of an enslaved person. To quote, “It was easier for many Euro-Americans simply to regard African American slaves as hopeless heathens, perhaps even without souls, than to wrestle with their own internal demons about holding humans as property.” (Lippy) The planters of the South were not keen on the notion that Christian conversion would lead to emancipation. When slaves realized emancipation would not follow conversion, they resisted. (W. F. Pitts)

Thus began a push and pull. Slaves holding their own secret meetings and when they had converted, they interpreted the Old Testament and the word of Jesus through the embodied God of their African cultural roots. They had already awakened (or sure, I’ll make the comparison, they were *woke*) to the true understanding of Jesus’ lessons here on earth.

So came Great Awakening of the early 18th and 19th centuries and Christian revivals and preachers shouting into the crowds to literally wake people up to word of God and to stop their sinful ways. Preachers in Virginia made it their mission to bring Christianity to slaves. Rather than infant baptism, they converted Black folks by immersion and were glad by their animated reaction. Like African possession, baptism was a physical fusion with God.

Slaves attended church and revivals alongside white Baptists. The evangelical Awakening was more well suited to the spiritual embodiment of the African heritage than other types of Christianity. A new Christianity awoke. (Lippy)

Now one group of Christians, the “New Lighters” preached that salvation was available to all humankind—no matter the color of one’s skin. (W. F. Pitts) That sounds pretty Universalist to me. Even the poor whites in the South welcomed Blacks in worship and conversion came in the form of visions and emotional encounters with the spirit of God. (This is what, many years later my mother would witness in the revival tent as “feeling the spirit.”) Both white and Black people joined in ecstatic physical movements and vocalizations.

Since New Lighters condemned the elitest class of the planters, one didn’t need a seminary education to become a preacher, one only need heed the call. And since the Baptist churches were not governed by a formal hierarchy (Bishops and such), Black folks—even slaves—were able to preach and form their own church communities. God was already moving through the rafters. The Afro-Baptist Christians held onto their faith, body and soul.

Kate Hanch, author and Methodist preacher wrote a book on Black 19th century itinerate women preachers. Sojourner Truth was one such preacher. So were Zilpha Elaw and Julia Foote. Hanch calls what moved these people was *witness* of the Holy Spirit. They understood the Holy

Spirit to be something physically present in their own bodies and moving through the crowds of those they preached to. It could touch any and every person and change the way they read biblical text, how they lived their lives, and how they worshipped. (Hanch, *Three Black Women Who Preached With the Power of the Holy Spirit: What Zilpha Elaw, Julia Foote, and Sojourner Truth taught me about God's "witness."*)

Not one of these women (nor a fourth whose autobiographical testimonial I read, Jarena Lee) minced words about how slavery affected their lives and their spirits. In spite of slavery, they even roamed the country speaking their truths, even when their truths cut hard into the white way of rationalizing slavery.

Shew. That was a lot of history. What I want to recognize with you this morning is that Black people came to embrace Christianity regardless—even in spite of—the Biblical interpretations white people used to continue to oppress them. That the teachings in the Bible allowed *all* to find a connection to the holy is a beautiful thing. A beautiful thing.

In the Reyes poem we read earlier, the Brown body is compared to a fallen tree, one damaged by fire—like slavery has done—but it isn't just fallen and dead, it becomes a nurse log, creating new life in the forest. That physical embodiment of hope is what is passed through the generations as each new Christian experiences the *witness* of the Holy Spirit.

"When broken open, see what of her mother she has kept, what of her father, what of the stars."

Resmaa Menakem, author of *My Grandmother's Hands*, writes, "The body is where we live. It's where we fear, hope, and react. It's where we constrict and relax. And what the body cares most about are safety and survival." He goes on, "Trauma is not primarily an emotional response. Trauma always happens *in the body*." (Menakem)

The body is where we live.

Think back to Ronnie's reflection. To when he said: *We don't expect you to have our backs, but don't paint a target on it. Until you can do that, we have a different concept of what freedom is.*

How did that make you feel in your body when you heard those words? Feel into it. (Here? Here?) How does it make you feel now? All these hundreds of years later, and the truth of slavery's trauma lives in our bodies, white and Black bodies alike— it makes us uncomfortable with its frank truths of pain, anguish and yes, even anger. This discomfort we feel? Here in our bodies (heart, stomach, head)? Recognizing that discomfort brings us to the threshold of opportunity: the opportunity to learn and grow and release the constriction we feel.

Juneteenth is an embodied celebration, the hope of the body returning to itself. For us UU's freeing our bodies from slavery's impact might mean letting some of what has come through slave bodies from Africa into our own religious understanding, because the good news is the physical place where trauma lives is the same one where the spirit of life resides. We can awake and celebrate the Divine Light shining inside all of us!

Blessed Be and Amen.