

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York

“The Minority Opinion”

Rev. Samuel A Trumbore November 14, 2021

Call to Celebration

My call to celebration this morning is a reinterpretation,
a “queering” if you will, of the song “Let It Be.”

We live in troubled times
Every time systemic racism is exposed,
the system fights back and tries to cover its tracks.
Again and again, broken hearted people of color
and their allies who seek to dismantle white supremacy culture
Raise their voices in protest.
And, there is still a chance that the defenders of the status quo
will see and wake up.

Wake up and see
There will be an answer. There will be an answer.
Words of wisdom will guide us. There will be an answer.

The night of racism appears in the forms of clouds
That hide the truth from our sight.
Yet there is still a light that shines on me, on us
to show us the way to liberation.

So this morning I ask you to hear this phrase
“let it be” differently.

Rather than resignation,
Let us hear the words as a call to action,
A call to bring peace, equity and justice to life.

Let it be, let it become,
let peace, justice and liberation become real.

(Prelude was a “Let It Be” duet by Randy Rosette and Chris Bystroff)

Reading

From the [Sunday article in the Times Union](#) reported by Rachel Silberstein on the Critical Race Theory controversy in New York State.

Across the state, the talking points are similar. At a recent local [school] board meeting, a parent compared the allegedly oppressive public-school climate to Mao's China. In a neighboring district, a mom claimed it was like North Korea.

"I will fight until my dying breath for the freedoms of my children," she said.

The culture wars around masks, vaccine mandates, and now critical race theory continue to dominate public comment periods at school board meetings in the Capital Region and beyond.

Parents, particularly in predominantly white suburban and rural districts, are blasting the state Education Department's new educational equity framework, which they see as a ploy to implement critical race theory in K-12 schools. ...

Opponents claim schools have become excessively focused on race and that the discourse around educational equity is divisive and harmful to children's self-worth....

Excerpts from [Texas law H.B. No. 3979](#)

No teacher, administrator, or other employee in any state agency, school district, campus, open-enrollment charter school, or school administration shall require, or make part of a course the following concepts:

- 1) one race or sex is inherently superior to another race or sex;
- 2) an individual, by virtue of his or her race or sex, is inherently racist, sexist, or oppressive, whether consciously or unconsciously;
- 3) an individual should be discriminated against or receive adverse treatment solely or partly because of his or her race or sex;
- 4) members of one race or sex cannot and should not attempt to treat others without respect to race or sex;
- 5) an individual's moral character is necessarily determined by his or her race or sex
- 6) an individual, by virtue of his or her race or sex, bears responsibility for actions committed in the past by other members of the same race or sex;
- 7) any individual should feel discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress on account of his or her race or sex;
- 8) meritocracy or traits such as a hard work ethic are racist or sexist, or were created by a members of a particular race to oppress members of another race.

Spoken Meditation

Riffing on the words of Lao-Tse (#602 in Singing the Living Tradition)

If there is to be peace in the world

 There must be peace in the nations.

If there is to be peace in the nations

 There must be peace between the religions.

If there is to be peace between the religions

 There must be peace between cultures.

If there is to be peace between cultures

 There must be peace between the races.

If there is to be peace between the races

 There must be peace in the cities and rural areas.

If there is to be peace in the cities and rural areas

 There must be peace in the school board meetings.

if there is to be peace in the school board meetings

 There must be peace between neighbors.

If there is to be peace between neighbors

 There must be peace in the home.

If there is to be peace in the home

 There must be justice, equity and compassion for all.

If there is justice, equity and compassion for all

 The conditions will exist for there will be peace in the heart.

Until then

let us work for peace in the home, between neighbors,

in school board meetings, in cities and rural areas,

between races and cultures and religions and in the nations

through advocating for justice, equity and compassion in human relations

so we may have both peace in the world and peace in our hearts.

Sermon

Our public schools have become centers of political strife. School board meetings have become conflict zones. Parents are showing up to fight mask mandates. Some will be fighting vaccine requirements for elementary children as they have been for those 12 and up. Some are fighting COVID restrictions for sports teams.

And now agitated parents are showing up fearful of their children being exposed to the 1619 Project or learning about Critical Race Theory. They've been whipped up into a frenzy fearing their children are being indoctrinated with a racial ideology they don't believe or accept.

Our former President put it in [this inflammatory language](#): "Critical race theory, the 1619 Project and the crusade against American history is toxic propaganda, ideological poison, that, if not removed, will dissolve the civic bonds that tie us together, will destroy our country"

I've been curious what those specific concerns might be. I've read: opponents fear that CRT admonishes all white people for being oppressors while classifying all Black people as hopelessly oppressed victims. This just isn't true.

"CRT does not attribute racism to white people as individuals or even to entire groups of people. Scholars and activists who discuss CRT are not arguing that white people living now are to blame for what people did in the past. They are saying that white people living now have a moral responsibility to do something about how racism still impacts all our lives today." ([source](#))

The concern I'm interested today is the fear of the effect of learning about the history of racism in this nation as is taught by the 1619 project, could cause harm to white children. After all, they didn't cause that harm, ancestors in the distant past did.

I suspect the concern they are feeling is their child may feel, what the Texas law wants to prevent: feelings of "discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress on account of his or her race or sex." If they don't want that kind of feeling about our American history, then I suspect they are already fighting off those feelings in themselves or resisting having them in the first place. They don't want their children perhaps questioning the white supremacy they learn at home that history may undermine as morally bankrupt.

Editing and sanitizing history is a requirement of looking backward and seeing better days. The touchstone of conservatism is thinking the past was better than the present that is suffering from moral decline and corruption. Yet through the perception of African Americans, that glorious history was first a land of chattel slavery then terrorism of Jim Crow. People of African descent in this nation can only look back a little over fifty years for an end to that reign of terror. And that terror isn't completely over either – as Brionna Taylor, George Floyd and Ahmaud Arbery's deaths attest. An authentic engagement with our history will undermine this foundation of conservatism. White supremacy was the cornerstone of the South leaving the Union of States. The Texas Law rejects that cornerstone in the words: No one shall require or make part of a course one race or sex is inherently superior to another race or sex. Glad they've learned at least that lesson and I hope it is featured prominently in however they teach their history.

I sense in the Texas Law and the parent's fury at school boards an approach to history that is dualistic. Either we're the good guys and have a glorious history or some false corrupted version is being taught to make white people feel bad about themselves. We need our founding fathers and mothers to be great heroes our children can look up to.

I appreciate the problem being aware of children's developmental stages. In Piaget's concrete operational stage there isn't much nuance to their thought. Either George Washington was a hero

of the people or he was a fraud and we should reject him. Build a monument to him or if he prove mean, tear it down.

Sadly, real people aren't so easy to categorize. Look at Ralph Waldo Emerson. We wrote and said some beautiful things. He did a great deal to assist Transcendentalist thought to blossom in Concord and spread through Unitarianism. Generations have been inspired by his essays, *Nature* and *Self-Reliance*. Yet he also said some terrible things about Black people. He held sexist views just like many of his contemporaries. He wasn't a saint or a sinner, just a man of his times ***who didn't rise above them.***

So many New England Unitarian and Universalist ministers were either supportive of slavery or looked the other way. Most felt the protection of the institution of slavery was a necessary evil written into the constitution to bind the union of states together into one cohesive whole and preserve it. I'm afraid almost all our heroes have clay feet.

As I've worked to dismantle White Supremacy in myself, our congregation and now in our Association of Congregations, sometimes it is more than a little discouraging to encounter those clay feet. There is a childlike quality in me and maybe in you too, that wants purity in our heroes. I want to be able to idolize them. I don't want to know they cheated on their wives or had illegitimate children. I don't want to know they betrayed their values in search for making money. I don't want to know they betrayed a trust or told lies. I especially don't want to know they were racist or sexist or ableist.

So, for this sermon today, I went searching for some admirable folks you might not have heard about. Let me say immediately they are not without fault. But I will say they are admirable, inspirational nineteenth century Unitarian ministers. I dare to say they would be inspirational models of ministers leading good and honorable lives. Their names are Samuel Joseph May and James Freeman Clarke.

I'd like to do biographies for both of them for you in the future because I do not have the time to give them their due this morning. What I would offer you, though, is a chance to look through their eyes at the antebellum period both lived through in their young and middle aged years. Both wrote personal histories of the anti-slavery work to which they both dedicated themselves.

First, I'd like to bring you Clarke's description of Kentucky when he served a church there on the Western Frontier. He writes:

I, myself, was a citizen of the State of Kentucky from 1833 to 1840. Slavery existed there, it is true, in a comparatively mild form. But its evils were such that I learned to look on it with unmixed aversion. I learned my anti-slavery lessons from slavery itself and from the slaveholders around me... the sentiment of Kentucky, in those days, among all the better class of people, was that slavery was a wrong and an evil, and that it ought to be abolished. It was also believed that Kentucky would, when the time came for altering its Constitution, insert a clause in the new Constitution that would allow slavery to be abolished.

Clarke tells an interesting anecdote about attitudes of the Kentucky farmers he knew:

A young man from Boston called upon me one day in Louisville. He was a member of one of the very conservative families of New England, who believed that abolition was a fanatical movement, and that abolitionists were endangering the safety of the Union. He had been brought up with these sentiments.

I took him with me to drive into the country to visit some of the plantations. The first place that we came to was the residence of Judge John J. Marshall, who belonged to one of the old families of Virginia and Kentucky. ... The Marshalls owned slaves, and there were a great many ... about the house. My Boston friend, seeing he was among slaveholders, thought it was a fitting opportunity for him to say something in favor of the institution. "Mrs. Marshall," said he, "I think our people at the North are very much mistaken in attacking slavery as they do. It seems to me there is nothing so very bad about it." Mrs. Marshall replied, "It will not do, sir, to defend slavery in this family. The Marshalls ... have always been abolitionists." He was a little surprised at that very decided statement, coming from slaveholders.

We next drove to the house of my dear old friend, Judge John Speed, who had a large plantation and fifty or sixty slaves.... When we reached his house, he took us about the plantation and showed us the negro cabins, having in them various little comforts, such as muslin curtains in the windows, pictures on the walls, or here and there a piece of mahogany furniture. My friend from Boston, thinking, no doubt, that Mrs. Marshall was an exceptional person, and that he should be safe this time in speaking in behalf of slavery, said, "Judge, I do not see but the slaves are as happy as our laboring classes at the North."

"Well," answered the Judge "I do the best I can to make my slaves comfortable; but I tell you what it is, you cannot make a slave happy, do what you will. God Almighty never meant a man to be a slave, and he cannot be made happy while he is a slave."

Samuel May, in his 1869 book, *Some Recollections of Our Antislavery Conflict*, reflects on the people who were crucial to the abolitionist cause. He singles out William Lloyd Garrison for high praise. But he also praises a man who inspired Garrison to deepen and energize his commitment to the cause. His name was Benjamin Lundy.

Born in 1789, Lundy was raised as a Quaker and saw slaveholding as a great iniquity. At the age of nineteen he moved to Wheeling, West Virginia to learn the saddle making trade. He plied that trade in Clairville, Ohio with great success for ten years. What he couldn't get out of his mind was the sights he had seen in Wheeling, a center for the slave trade. He felt he had to "do something for the relief of that most injured portion of the human race."

May writes:

As early as 1815, when twenty-six years of age, he formed an antislavery society, which at first consisted of only six members, but in a few months increased to nearly five hundred, among whom were many of the influential ministers, lawyers, and other prominent citizens of several of the counties in that part of Ohio. Although unused to composition, he wrote an appeal to the philanthropists of the United States, which was published and extensively circulated, and led to the formation, in different parts of the State, of societies similar in spirit and purpose to the one he had instituted. He then engaged in the publication of an antislavery paper; and to promote its circulation, and to gather materials for its columns, he commenced his travels in the slave States. These were performed for the most part on foot. Thus, he journeyed thousands of miles, through Virginia, Missouri, Kentucky, Tennessee, and North Carolina. In most places where he lectured publicly, or privately, he obtained subscribers to his paper. In some places he succeeded in forming associations like his own. Frequently he met with angry rebuffs and violent threats of personal injury. But he was a man of the most quiet courage, as well as indomitable perseverance. He disconcerted his assailants by letting them see that they could not frighten him; that the threat of assassination would not deter him from prosecuting his object. Several slaveholders were so much affected by his exposition of their iniquity that they manumitted their bondmen, on condition that he would take them to a place where they would be free. ... He was frequently threatened, repeatedly assaulted, and once brutally beaten. But he could not be deterred from prosecuting the work to which he was called. He was a rare specimen of perfect fidelity to duty, a conscientious, meek, but fearless, determined man ... a moral hero.

I bring you these stories because for all the cruelty, betrayal, ignominy, and horror that fill our history books, there are also inspirational human beings doing truly heroic work. And let us also be realistic about the limitations to our humanity, that we'll never be perfect. Let us celebrate the heroic spirit whenever we find it.

I'd like to end with historian Woody Holton's reflections on the October 19 Ezra Klein Podcast:

We've got to let go of the heroes and replace them with heroics. That is, to see that the same person can do something heroic on Monday and be an enslaver or a town destroyer. That was Washington's nickname among the Indians — call me town destroyer. It's the same guy that we admire ... for leading his army across the Delaware on Christmas night, 1776.

And is that so hard? Does anybody have any perfect friends? Most of us are some of this and some of that. And I think we are more likely to unify around the founding fathers if we admit their feet of clay, as well as the virtuous aspects. And I think one way to do that is to focus on people's heroics rather than insisting on heroes.