

Our 2nd principle, Justice, equity and compassion in human relations how can it inform us for being out in the world what does it call us to do or to be.

We as a denomination have a strong history of social justice work. We are very proud of it. We should be; we have many things to be proud of. But we have not always been on the side of the good guys, or at least there have been moments in our history when our response to an issue was muddled, at least at first. One could call them mistakes, and just as easily and truthfully call them growing edges. It is this edge where we as an Association learn, grow find that new life that Howard Thurman wrote about.

Take the issue of Slavery - especially here in upstate NY, once a hotbed of abolitionist work, we UUs tend to pride ourselves on our ancestor's work to end slavery. I found an interesting paper entitled "Unitarian and Universalist Denominational and Individual Involvement in the Anti-Slavery Movement Prior to the U.S. Civil War."

<http://www.sksm.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/antislavery.pdf>

The author Paul McLaine lines out some of the history of our movement in relation to slavery. As early as 1790 Universalist leaning churches declared that there should not be a slave trade in this country or slavery. But in 1820

Hosea Ballou one of our more famous Universalist forbears refused to sign the roll at a national convention of Universalists “ because he believed a discussion of slavery was not a proper denominational question.”

The American Unitarian Association did not do so much better. Samuel J. May, who was minister at our sibling congregation here in Syracuse, and a well known abolitionist said, "The Unitarians as a body dealt with the question of slavery in any **but** an impartial, courageous...way. Continually in their public meetings the question was staved off and driven out, because of technical, formal and verbal difficulties which were of no real importance... We had the right to expect from Unitarians a steadfast and unqualified protest against... American slavery. And considering their position as a body not entangled with any proslavery alliances, not hampered by any ecclesiastical organization, it does seem to me that they were pre-eminently guilty in reference to the enslavement of the millions in our land with its attendant wrongs, cruelties, horrors. They, of all other sects, ought to have spoken boldly. But they did not. [3] “ Strong words for sure.

The work of individual Unitarians was in sharp contrast with the institutional response. McLaine gives an annotated list of famous UUs who fought slavery

William Ellery Channing

Maria Weston Chapman

Lydia Maria Child she was also famous for writing a poem - "A Boy's Thanksgiving," which begins "Over the river and through the woods..."

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Octavius Brooks Frothingham

Thomas Wentworth Higginson

Harriet Martineau

Samuel Joseph May

Theodore Parker - who was known to write his sermons at his desk with a gun in the drawer because he had been threatened so many times

Henry David Thoreau

These are some big names in the history of our country. We had very vocal individuals but our denomination was fairly silent.

We have been at the forefront of women's rights and we historically have lived that out. We were the first denomination to ordain a woman, Olympia Brown. In June of 1863 she was ordained in the Universalist denomination. She went on to actually pastor congregations. Many ministers who break cultural barriers for the

first time do not.

And she was both an abolitionist and a suffragist. She was one of the few first generation suffragists to actually be able to cast a vote in 1920 at 85 years of age.

Clara Barton I mentioned in the children's story,

Lucy Stone was also a woman of firsts. She is listed as the first female college graduate in Massachusetts's history and the first woman to keep her own name after marriage. She was married to Henry Blackwell who happened to be the brother of Elizabeth Blackwell, also Unitarian, the first female physician in the United States. Lucy had been raised a Congregationalist but was too radical in her abolitionist views and they kicked her out and she found the Unitarians.

Susan B. Anthony is counted among our Unitarian ancestors as is Julia Ward Howe Suffragist, abolitionist and author of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic".

These women were powerhouses of their time, powerhouses. And they were nurtured by their Unitarian and Universalist faith. Which affirmed their intelligence and their courage. A common theme in the stories of these women's lives was the importance of education. At a time when most

women were not educated they were. They had fathers and mothers who had the means and the will to see to it that their daughters were educated to their capabilities. And a church that believed that all people, including women deserved an education.

But even though we can claim ourselves to be the first denomination to ordain a woman. Ordination did not come easily for women and the process was not always respectful of their inherent worth and dignity. A minister who sat on the Ministerial Fellowship Committee, that body that authorizes individuals as fit for ministry, recounted that years ago it was difficult for women - back in the 1970s when he first served on the Ministerial Fellowship Committee. Questions were asked related to their high voices (a preacher?) and whether with children they were able to attend evening meetings or how would they respond to men who were attracted to them. These types of questions were not asked to the men. As a committee during the seventies and early eighties our denomination had to deal with our sexism, racism, and homophobia.

During the civil rights movement we had some amazing individuals who marched on Selma and who marched on Washington. Two of our UU folk, James Reeb and Viola Luzzi lost their lives fighting for racial equality in the march on Selma. But as an institution the UUA has made some major missteps in working toward racial equality and justice. One only needs to look to our recent history

and to the “White Controversy over Black empowerment” that took place in the late 60s.

Promises by the General Assembly our national annual meeting that included funding were made to the Black Affairs Council and the UUA Board of Trustees reneged on the promises made by GA.

It is a controversy that is still unresolved and haunts the progress of racial equality in the UUA still. And yet, and maybe because of this unresolved conflict in our past, we have developed some really good trainings and resources for cross-cultural work. There is at our very core a deep understanding that as an Association we are primarily white privileged folk and if we want to reach out to others and we do in order to become more inclusive more diverse we need to be mindful of that. There is a deep and growing realization in our movement that if we are to become more diverse it means that we will change and that we need to respect and celebrate the differences. We need to not simply assume that ours is the right way and that folks who join our ranks will become like us. I know that the Unitarian Universalist Service committee service trips I have been involved in have been deeply and well informed by a cross cultural sensitivity that respects the differences among us and builds upon them.

Perhaps all of this speaks to how slowly institutions do change. How much

easier it is for an individual to come to an opinion and to take a stand and work for justice.

Paul McLaine makes the following point "

One of the benefits of the congregational individuality is the potential for members to create within the congregation the particular type of organization that best fits their needs rather than trying to accommodate to an existing structure in the denomination/association. Although the task is made more difficult at the higher levels it can be done with good ideas, good communications, and ingenuity.

Which leaves one with a question of these "UUs" of the 19th century – would they have shone as brightly in any other denomination? Many of them were only part-time members of one or the other denomination. They were powerhouses, both in energy and independence and they were highly literate individuals. Perhaps, rather than lament our poor showing as denominations, we should be lauding the denominational structures and processes that attract independent thinkers and such outstanding social activists.

I think it also speaks to how difficult it is to understand all of the issues that are involved in something and to figure out what is the problem and what is a just solution. Inevitably it is an individual who leads the way but eventually it is

groups of people or an institution that follows along. Clara Barton and the Red Cross is one example of that.

Where are the big names now? We have historically been a denomination that attracts people who think outside of the box, I've named many in this sermon. But UU culture has changed. The box we live in is not so boxy anymore. The world we UUs live is more diverse, less rigid than the culture that spawned the abolitionists, the suffragettes, the pioneers in the gay rights movement. Our American culture is by and large now a culture of rugged individualists no matter ones beliefs

Perhaps where we are going as an Association is not a redo of our history - loud voices that led us toward justice. Those loud voices of the free thinkers were important and still are important But nowadays there are a lot of loud voices. . Look at public discourse - it would seem that people are way more interested in yelling their own point of view than in taking the time to enter into a dialogue. We as a culture seem to be an aggregate of individuals.

Maybe where we are going is in finding different ways to be the church. Perhaps we will move to being less an aggregate of individuals and to be on the forefront of networking for justice. We are a covenantal people - perhaps this practice of covenant and mutual accountability will inform justice work as we go



forward. What would it look like if global negotiations around climate issues were based in covenant and accountability?

I don't know what the issues will be I cannot predict the future that way. I suspect that we are pretty committed to environmental justice issues and climate change, to standing on the side of love - it's LGBTQ focus and its focus on labor rights, and immigrations rights. There may be other issues but I wonder if we may have some of the biggest impact in changing the tenor and tone of the engagement. Can we help to move our political, cultural, theological, economic discourse to a place where we are in dialogue respectfully with folks. Can we lead this world in understanding how to live justice, equity and compassion in human relations.

Perhaps what we can learn from our history as we go forward is that we will make mistakes. And they are just that mistakes. They are not moral judgments and our universalist theology assures us that they will not damn us. But our history tells us that our mistakes will teach us, in fact this is the only way to learn. And we learn to be better, to do better. We are learning, from experiences that are sometimes painfully embarrassing, that we can create and affirm justice, equity and compassion in human relations even if it is one mistake at a time.