

I grew up in the 1960's. There are memories of that time indelibly etched in my memory. But it wasn't until I attended seminary that I critically examined some of those memories and what they meant about the time I grew up in and about my own privilege.

An early memory. My family attended All Saints Episcopal Church, the only Episcopal Church for miles around in my Cleveland, Ohio suburb. I remember being hauled off in the evenings while my parents rehearsed for the annual fundraiser. It was a minstrel show! Many of you have perhaps never seen a minstrel show. This is good! Others of you are old enough to remember these affronts to the dignity of black Americans. In a minstrel show, whites portray themselves as blacks, in blackface. Meant to be comedy, the performers would play off all the stereotypes of blacks--happy slaves, ignorant, simple, lazy, superstitious. I have a memory of my mother, in blackface, onstage, in a skit. At some point in the early to mid-60's, as the civil rights movement gathered force, these shows disappeared from the repertoire of fund-raising events at our church.

I grew up in a second ring suburb, Parma. We were separated from the city by only one other suburb. During the 50's and 60's, after the Supreme Court outlawed segregation in schools in their Brown vs. Board of Education ruling of 1954, my suburb experienced exponential growth. My classmates were mostly Catholic, with a sizeable minority from the various Eastern Orthodox religions. Their parents were often immigrants from Poland, Italy, Yugoslavia, the Ukraine. They had moved to Parma from Cleveland or mixed-race first ring suburbs to avoid having their children bussed. Parma and the neighboring second ring suburbs were lily white. Blacks were not welcome. Real-estate practices and police diligence only mirrored the general feeling of the populace. There may, may, have been two black families in my town of 100,000. There were none in any school I ever attended. This, of course, led to fear out of ignorance. It was assumed among my friends, that if we traveled cross-town to a football game at a "black" high school, that we would probably get mugged or our cars broken into.

I've asked my parents how we ended up in Parma. My parents, despite their ignorance around race, which mirrored the prevailing ignorance of the time, were not racists, were not bigots. As best I can tell, it was one of those chance things. Our family relocated to Cleveland for my father's employment when he left the

Navy around 1959. They asked at the office of his new employer where to look and Parma was suggested.

But back to my story of a lily white suburb and fear. This, then, was the Jim Crow of a northern industrial city and "white-flight" suburb. I knew nothing of what was going on in the South, in Montgomery, in Birmingham, in Selma, in Memphis. My parents shielded us from the news, which, as the 60's and the Viet Nam war progressed, was increasingly gruesome. We did not have the TV news on during dinner. They watched the 11 o'clock news. How they were able to sleep after watching that is beyond me. Dad took the paper with him when he left for work as I was getting up.

My first education about what happened during the civil rights movement occurred in seminary. My first real conversations with African Americans did not happen until I was in seminary. Both occurred in a class taught by Rev. Dr. Dorsey Blake. Some of you met him during my ordination. He gave the "charge to the minister", to me. His class was titled Non-violent Social Transformation. We read extensively from Ghandi, Doris Day, Caesar Chavez and, of course, Dr. King. I was astonished at what I didn't know about any of these movements, but especially about the Civil Rights Movement. I had been educated in one of America's elite universities. I had continued to read widely after graduation. I had even had a black roommate my freshman year of college. Yet I knew almost nothing. And, despite my black roommate and a close friend during college who was black, I had never had real conversations about race. How many of us can say that we've had those conversations? They're uncomfortable. They make us squirm. I was astonished when African American classmates described being routinely stopped by police when driving in "white" neighborhoods; was astonished when they described being profiled in stores, tailed by security police, because they were a "shoplifting threat." I was astonished when a longtime member of my Davis UU church defended this practice, saying that she used to practice it when she was in retail. In the same breath, she stated how the Civil Rights Movement of the 60's had accomplished what it needed to and that there was no further work to be done.//

What was accomplished in the 1950's and 60's by the Civil Rights Movement? Quite a lot, but not enough. The movement sought to restore 14th and 15th Amendment rights that had been eroded by the Jim Crow laws passed after the Civil War.<sup>1</sup> It sought to achieve civil rights equal to those of whites, "

including," according to Encyclopedia.com, "equal opportunity in employment, housing, and education, as well as the right to vote, the right of equal access to public facilities, and the right to be free of racial discrimination."<sup>ii</sup> The Civil Rights Movement had spillover effects, still reverberating today, in gains for women, persons with disabilities and other historically oppressed groups.<sup>iii</sup>

And where are we today, 50 years later? Blacks today are no longer shunted off to black only restrooms, hotels, restaurants and swimming pools. With the signing of the Voting Rights Act by President Johnson in August, 1965, there was a great step forward in access to voting for blacks. Those rights are now being eroded, for blacks and other people of color, as was reported in the run-up to our most recent election. Is there equal opportunity in employment? It's much more equal than it was, certainly, although I would not call it equal. Are blacks free from racial discrimination? One has only to pay attention to the ongoing reports of excessive use of force by police departments throughout our nation to know the answer to this question. Remember, the police are not an isolated entity. Their actions do not happen in a vacuum. Their actions mirror the feelings of the culture in which they operate.

Is there equal access to housing and education? While red-lining in housing has been made illegal, there are less obvious ways in which it is still practiced. The Christian Science Monitor reported several months ago about resegregation in America.<sup>iv</sup> It was a follow up story to the shooting of Philando Castile by the police. The Monitor found that Minneapolis and many other cities are much more segregated than they were only a couple decades ago due to defacto red-lining. Public policy changes are responsible. There are many ways to skin a cat. In his feature article on President Obama in the January issue of *The Atlantic*, Ta Nehisi Coates cites Patrick Sharkey, a sociologist at New York University on housing inequality. Sharkey has found that "black families making \$100,000 a year or more live in more-disadvantaged neighborhoods than white families making less than \$30,000." Let me say that differently; if you are white, making less than \$30,000, you are likely to live in a better neighborhood than most blacks making more than \$100,000. Continues Coates, "This gap didn't just appear by magic; it's the result of the government's effort over many decades to create a pigmentocracy—one that will continue without explicit intervention."<sup>v</sup>

What, then, is our role as Unitarian Universalists? Some of us are joining the celebration of Dr. King here in Chico this afternoon, beginning with the rally and march at 2:30. Let our Fellowship be well represented.

This is a start. A start. The Rev. Dr. Bill Sinkford is a former president of our denomination. He is currently the senior minister of First Unitarian Church in Portland, Oregon. Dr. Sinkford gave the sermon at the Service of the Living Tradition at General Assembly last June. His feature article "The Myth of White Innocence" in the winter edition of "UUWorld," is adopted from that sermon.

Dr. Sinkford was one of a relatively large number of African Americans actively involved in UU during the 60's. UU's were showing up in the Civil Rights Movement. One of our white ministers, Bill Reeb, died in the Selma march. Our own Rev. Art Wilmot went to Selma. We were considered friends of the movement, of Blacks. Dr. Sinkford was also one of a large number of Blacks who left our denomination after we reneged on financial promises to the movement made at General Assembly in 1968, an event that has come to be known as "The Black Empowerment Controversy." Dr. Sinkford knows it by another name: "The White Entitlement Fit." Dr. Sinkford was one of only a small number of Blacks to return to UU.

Dr. King spoke at the 1966 GA, at which a youthful Bill Sinkford was present. Dr. King concluded with his vision of Beloved Community, in words that you have heard before. "We will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of [unity] and speed up that day when all of God's children... will be able to walk the earth as [siblings], and then we can sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual--'Free at last, free at last, thank God almighty we are free at last.'"<sup>vi</sup>

Dr. Sinkford has this to say to the question I asked earlier; what is our role now as Unitarian Universalists? He asks that we give up the notion that we are innocent and that we are fully awake. He asks that we understand ourselves, "not as the already conscious leaders waiting for the deluded dreamers to awaken, but as one community of resistance, struggling to stay awake and aware ourselves, one community of resistance to the hate and the violence, ready to partner with other communities of resistance--climate activists showing up at Black Lives Matter

demonstrations, and Black Lives Matter banners marching in pride parades-- communities of resistance willing to build a more embracing dream together.

He continues: "Resistance is what love looks like in the face of hate. Resistance is what love looks like in the face of violence." He concludes by saying "It is only together that we can find the will not to look away this time." To stay awake.

May it be so.

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<sup>i</sup> 14th-equal protection under the law; 15th-right to vote

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.encyclopedia.com/social-sciences-and-law/political-science-and-government/political-parties-and-movements/civil> Accessed 1/13/2017

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iv</sup> Nissa Rhee, The Resegregation of America. The Christian Science Monitor, September 10, 2017

<sup>v</sup> <http://www.encyclopedia.com/social-sciences-and-law/political-science-and-government/political-parties-and-movements/civil> Accessed 1/13/2017

<sup>vi</sup> William G. Sinkford. "The Dream of White Innocence." UU World, Winter, 2017. 25.