

## **“And Still I Rise: An Ode to Black History Month”**

**By Reverend Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, Ellicott City, MD, Feb. 16, 2020**

“You may write me down in history

With your bitter, twisted lies,

You may trod me in the very dirt

But still, like dust, I'll rise.”

The writings of Maya Angelou; iconic African American author and poet, winner of esteemed literary awards. Maya Angelou, who wrote several autobiographies detailing her lived experience, famous for her prose and vulnerability, detailing with the written word the racism faced as a child, sexual abuse and horrific violence, and the woman she became in response to this prejudice; a woman who used her art – her writings – to share her story with the world. To use her own story as healing; as awareness; as activism.

Last week we spoke about resilience in relation to sharing our own experiences and healing stemming from pain. As a white woman who has benefited from white privilege my entire life, I do not have the experience to speak authentically of the lives, struggles, and successes of African Americans or any people of color. Today as we lift up Black History Month I honor those stories shared by those with lived experiences. Today we lift up the strength and resiliency of a whole race of people in this country. The voices of poets, of ministers, of activists, of politicians.

And our narrative today begins here, on the land we occupy, in Columbia, MD, where we have our own history of slavery and abuse and racism. Columbia hosted numerous plantations.

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Slaves worked in tobacco fields and iron quarries under horrific conditions. Here, where we live, this history we would rather ignore. The historic buildings in our midst; built by slaves. Our economy, just as it is in this country of ours, established by slaves. This may seem a far off narrative but it is here on the land where we worship.

And right here – right in Howard County – one person – one iconic person – escaped, and brought others with her. A person with unmeasurable resilience – Harriet Tubman – a remarkable figure in this tragic piece of American history. Harriet Tubman was born into slavery and later escaped. And yet – she returned. She returned again and again, liberating and waves of slaves. Could you imagine the strength to do that?

Harriet Tubman, later known as “Moses,” named after this Biblical hero who saved the Israelites, made her own escape from slavery in Maryland to freedom in Philadelphia, where she became an abolitionist leader. Once finding this freedom she returned to rescue her family, and returned, again and again, to guide other slaves to freedom. She utilized the Underground Railroad, a network of safe house and secret routes. She made this trip repeatedly, traveling by night to remain hidden in the shadows. Traveling by night, guided by the stars

Resiliency. Escaping from slavery and returning. Saving the lives of enslaved humans one trip at a time. Let us lift up this true story of a savior, of a hero. As Angelou writes,

Just like moons and like suns,

With the certainty of tides,

Just like hopes springing high,

Still I'll rise.

We heard earlier from Black Lives Matter co-founder Patrisse Cullors. “Our imagination has only allowed for us to understand black people as a dying people. We have to change that. That’s our collective imagination. Someone imagined handcuffs; someone imagined guns; someone imagined a jail cell. Well, how do we imagine something different that actually centers black people, that sees them in the future? Let’s imagine different.”<sup>1</sup>

Let’s imagine something different.

Our culture largely imagines African Americans as a suffering people, focusing on the injustices done to them, what they’ve endured, portrayed as a dying people. Let’s highlight success. Let’s illuminate the strength, resilience, perseverance pervasive in the black community.

Through all of this adversity, this prejudice, this hate, have arisen folks whose impact will forever change history.

Booker T. Washington, born into slavery and after emancipation became a voice for African Americans and the severe prejudice they were facing. Thurgood Marshall, the first African American justice on the Supreme Court. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. who we spoke about several weeks ago, famous for his foundational role in the Civil Rights Movement, calling for love and non-violence. Jackie Robinson, breaking the color barrier in baseball and inducted

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<sup>1</sup> <https://onbeing.org/programs/patrisse-cullors-and-robert-ross-the-spiritual-work-of-black-lives-matter-may2017/>

into the National Baseball Hall of Fame. Barrack Obama, first African American president of the United States; innumerable names.

You may shoot me with your words,

You may cut me with your eyes,

You may kill me with your hatefulness,

But still, like air, I'll rise.

When I think of resilience I can't help but bring to mind author Audre Lorde. Audre Lorde was at the intersection of so many marginalized identities: black, female, gay. She described herself as "black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet." Throughout these layers of adversity she survived, thrived, and gave back to the world around her. Lorde wrote, "I write for those women who do not speak, for those who do not have a voice because they were so terrified because we are taught to respect fear more than ourselves. We've been taught that silence would save us, but it won't."<sup>2</sup>

The daughter of West Indian immigrants Lorde repeatedly lifted up the intersection of race, class and gender. "I have a duty," Lorde once stated, "to speak the truth as I see it and to share not just my triumphs, not just the things that felt good, but the pain, the intense, often unmitigated pain."

I have selections from Lorde's poem entitled "For Each of You." Lorde writes,

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/audre-lorde>

“Be who you are and will be  
learn to cherish  
that boisterous Black Angel that drives you  
up one day and down another  
protecting the place where your power rises  
running like hot blood  
from the same source  
as you pain...  
Speak proudly to your children  
where ever you may find them  
tell them  
you are offspring of slaves  
and your mother was  
a princess  
in darkness.”

Audre Lorde, speaking directly to an African American audience, telling folks to cherish who they are, to be proud of who they are and pass this pride to one’s children. Again,

Out of the huts of history’s shame  
I rise  
Up from a past that’s rooted in pain  
I rise

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I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,  
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.

I want to take a moment to lift up the life and legacy of the late Elijah Cummings, our congressman and civil rights activist who recently passed away. Cummings came from a modest background, born to sharecroppers in Baltimore, MD. As a child he experienced a violent, life changing event. Cummings and his friends were trying to integrate a swimming pool when an angry white mob attacked the children, held back from police they held signs proclaiming, “white people have rights too,” and pelted rocks. This forever changed him and mentally and also through the physical scars he received. As an adult he completed law school and was later sworn into Congress. Cummings later spoke of his repressed, underrepresented background as a strength, because he could use his unique experiences to craft legislation. He was later called a “justice angel” for the work he did. <sup>3</sup>

One highlight of his career is the work he did after the death of Freddie Gray, who died while in police custody. At Grey’s funeral Cummings promised, “we will not rest until we address this and see that justice is done.” He worked tirelessly to make sure Grey’s life was celebrated; that his life was seen, not just his death. “Let’s imagine something different.” He was a presence at riots advocating for non-violence. Cummings served his country, using his experience with hate and his resiliency to pave the way for future people of color. <sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> (<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/12/23/magazine/elijah-cummings-death.html>)

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/10/17/elijah-cummings-death-key-moments-from-his-career.html>

Through this work of Elijah Cummings and Audre Lorde I am reminded of the words of Patrisse Cullors, “How do we imagine something different that actually centers black people, that sees them in the future? Let’s imagine different.” The work of Lorde and Cummings is crucial in allowing folks to “imagine different,” to center black people and see their future; to celebrate life and not death; to be proud of and cherish black life.

I am reminded here of the Black National Anthem, written in 1900. “Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us; sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us, facing the rising sun of our new day begun, let us march on till victory is won.” Words of resilience, words of liberation and words of affirmation.

You may write me down in history

With your bitter, twisted lies,

You may trod me in the very dirt

But still, like dust, I'll rise.

What does this mean to Unitarian Universalism?

Can we as a denomination love, act, and serve to bring about racial justice?

Unitarian Universalism is a largely white denomination. We have work to do as a denomination to decenter whiteness. And the UUA is working to dismantle this system. Black Lives of Unitarian Universalism – BLUU – a group formed to provide support and resources to black Unitarian Universalists, have proposed an 8<sup>th</sup> Principle to follow the current 7. The proposed 8<sup>th</sup> Principle states:

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“We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote: journeying toward spiritual wholeness by working to build a diverse multicultural Beloved Community by our actions that accountably dismantle racism and other oppressions in ourselves and our institutions.”<sup>5</sup>

Beloved Community. This happens “when people of diverse racial, ethnic, educational, class, gender, sexual orientation backgrounds/identities come together in an interdependent relationship of love, mutual respect, and care that seeks to realize justice within the community and in the broader world.” Why single out race? This work is crucial especially in this country where racism is prevalent and stems from chattel slavery, where we have a history of people being treated as property, this injustice is what we as Unitarian Universalists need to do deep, intentional, internal work on. <sup>6</sup>

Rev. Connie Simon lifted this up in her paper we read earlier:

“we gather in awareness of the opportunity before us as Unitarian Universalists.

We have been given many chances before today to heal the wounds of the racism and oppression that have beset our denomination for many years, and held us back from realizing the inherent worth and dignity of all Unitarian Universalists.”

Realize the inherent worth and dignity of all Unitarian Universalists. We as Unitarian Universalists, and members of this nation, need not defer from this crucial work to decenter whiteness; to give voice to all people; to lift up the life and stories of people of color.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.8thprincipleuu.org/>

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.



I want to take a moment to lift up a current activity that many people in this room are participating in, or have participated in in the past. Courageous Conversations. These are a series of conversations had over the period of a month to discuss race and religious bias. This is a tangible thing we can all do. I encourage those who have not been able to attend to look into participating next year. It's important work.

Someone imagined handcuffs; someone imagined guns; someone imagined a jail cell. Well, how do we imagine something different that actually centers black people, that sees them in the future? Let's imagine different." As we imagine something different, let's lift up those lives celebrated today.

Harriet Tubman, escaping slavery and returning of her own free will; returning to save countless others, risking her own life and welfare, over and over again. Audre Lorde, using her experiences as a gay, African American woman to lift up voices of those who cannot speak. Elijah Cummings, using his turbulent past to fight for legislature to help all. Maya Angelou, telling her story through prose. So many named and unnamed African Americans throughout our history, across the nation with many intersecting identities, resilient. Surviving, thriving, and doing that hard work of justice.

Leaving behind nights of terror and fear

I rise

Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear

I rise

Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,

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I am the dream and the hope of the slave.

I rise

I rise

I rise.

May it be so, and Amen