

Was anyone surprised when Henry Louis Gates, Jr. was arrested in his home for what some call the ‘crime of being black?’ Was anyone surprised that the media outlets were crammed with layer after layer of misinformation about what happened, who said what to who, and how the arrest was issued? Was anyone surprised that issues of race, guilt, fear, shame, and privilege were all jumbled up in those news reports?

Of course, you weren’t surprised. You live in America. You know the wound that sinks deep into the American experience. You know your own confusion about race, and you know how guilt, shame, and privilege operate in your own life. You may not always have the words or the right concepts to express what you experience, but you know it when you feel it. You don’t have to be Euro-American, you don’t have to be African-American, to have experienced the same confusion and roiling emotions.

Is anyone surprised that over the last few weeks three African American men have taken center stage in the public media? A black professor, arrested. A black President, struggling to make health care reform a reality. A black entertainer, reviled by many while he was alive, now revered by some as the ‘best entertainer who ever lived.’

Three black men, all extremely successful in their chosen fields. Three human beings, trying to make a successful passage through this world, all three scarred by the American experience of race. Three children who grew to adulthood with divergent family experiences. Michael Jackson growing up in front of adoring audiences, and only much later revealing the physical violence his father used to extract acceptable performances from his sons. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. raised in a small paper mill town in West Virginia, learning resistance to segregation, and graduating from Yale in 1973. Barack Obama, growing up in Indonesia and in Hawaii, where Hawaiian, Asian and Euro cultures meet and sometimes clash, matriculating at Occidental and Columbia for his undergraduate degree. What a world of difference is captured under the phrase ‘three black men.’

Yet, Henry Louis Gate’s recent experience underlines the prejudice that follows ‘black men’ like a riptide ready to pull their sure accomplishments out from under their feet to drown them under a sea of troubles.

This sermon was supposed to be about two black ministers, but, the story of three other black men folds into it, and lies in the background of every word.

The first of the two is Egbert Ethelred Brown, a Unitarian minister who founded and served the same congregation for thirty-six years. The church, gathered in Harlem in 1920, in the midst of the Harlem Renaissance, became a focal point for thinkers, doers and dreamers who were making waves of change in the African American experience. You would think that such a man would be more often spoken of among us. You would think his name, ever memorable, would take it’s place with the likes of John Haynes Holmes or anyone of our ministers who made a lasting contribution to our movement.

But, such is not the case. Egbert Ethelred Brown remains a lesser light, a problem really – not a problem for what he did – but a problem because of the way the American Unitarian Association treated him.

Egbert Brown felt a call to ministry early in life while living in Jamaica. Yet, he could never find himself fully comfortable in the churches he attended. He held different jobs to support his family, sometimes an organist, sometimes this or that. He knew he was a Unitarian without a church to attend. Finally, from the distant shores of Jamaica, Brown issued a letter “To Any Unitarian Minister in New York City.” The reply he received eventually came from the President of Meadville (a Unitarian theological school). The President rejected the prospect of a mail order course, told Brown he would have to come to Chicago to study, and informed him that white Unitarians required a white minister to serve them and there was little prospect for Brown’s placement after graduation, if he did come.

Despite that less than gracious welcome, Brown made it to Meadville and graduated in 1912, the first black man to be ordained a Unitarian minister. He hurried back to Jamaica to rejoin his family and to start a congregation there. The American Unitarian Association leaders gave Brown grudging support. They saw their mission reaching out to well-educated, well-to-do white Americans, and held little fondness for Brown’s efforts. A congregation at Montego Bay failed. A second start up in Kingston had some small successes, but, Brown was a man caught in the middle of race confusion. He was too dark-skinned even for Jamaican blacks, who (consciously and unconsciously) reserved their full respect for leaders with lighter complexions. The AUA wanted more success than Brown could produce, and they withdrew funding for the Kingston congregation. Brown fought to have the monies re-instated, and in the process seems to have earned the animosity of AUA leaders. When the funding was withdrawn a second time, Brown took another leap of faith, packed up his family, and headed for Harlem.

The AUA gave minimal support to the new congregation. Brown, who had worked as an accountant in Jamaica in addition to serving the church, could only find a job as an elevator operator in the United States. Less than a decade after arriving in Harlem, his wife had a nervous breakdown, one son was committed as an alcoholic, his eldest son committed suicide. Brown persevered as minister to an always struggling congregation. In 1937, Frederick May Eliot became head of the American Unitarian Association, and he was predisposed to assist Brown and the Harlem church. After years of hard work, by 1940, Brown was a respected minister. The church presented forums and services, and brought Unitarian reason and freedom to those who cared to listen.

The years of Egbert Ethelred Brown’s ministry in Jamaica and Harlem are some of the most embarrassing years Unitarian Universalists have to look back upon. We like to think of ourselves and our early leaders as paragons of virtue and intrepid agents of change. Well, Egbert Ethelred Brown was both, but, he was hemmed in by powerful leaders who were caught in the racism of their time. Leaders who couldn’t imagine Unitarianism stepping out of the cage of privilege it enjoyed. In an attempt to preserve the reputations of AUA leaders, we’ve overlooked the real agent for change.

And, yet, I have to ask myself how much has changed, even after a more enlightened leadership took the helm; even after decades when the converged Unitarian Universalist Association proclaimed its availability to all; even after numerous attempts to start African American congregations; even after the placement of a few dozen African American ministers in predominantly white congregations. How much has changed?

Here's some of the answer Mark Morrison Reed shared with us at a General Assembly workshop:

In 1967, a survey of Unitarian Universalists showed that 67% thought that race (that is, being an African American) would hamper the effectiveness of a minister. In that same year 47% of Unitarian Universalists figured that gender (that is, being a woman) would hamper the effectiveness of a minister. Today there are well over 1,000 Unitarian Universalist ministers, and more than half of them are women. There are currently 31 ministers of color serving congregations, and about 18 more in fellowship as ministers. The difference between those figures is staggering. There has been, as you all know, a sea change in the attitudes toward women in ministry. It appears there has not been the same change in attitudes toward African American ministers wishing to serve our congregations.

Keeping in mind that there are currently 31 ministers of color serving congregations, we can note that in 1987, 66% of respondents thought that sexual orientation (that is, being gay or lesbian) would hamper a minister's effectiveness. Today, more than 70 gay and lesbian Unitarian Universalist ministers are serving our congregations. This is interesting to note because the prejudice against each group might well be imagined to be equally strong. One can cite as further proof of this surmise that when surveyed about the same percentage of Unitarian Universalists believed that people of color (67%) and people who were gay or lesbian (66%) would not be able to serve them through ministry. A note of personal experience emphasizes the fear was real. When I arrived at Milford in 1994, a congregation with only 22 members on the books, lost 3 members, all because I was a lesbian. I know for sure, because one had the courage to write and share her thoughts. Today, gay and lesbian ministers serve twice as many churches as ministers of color, and that number is rapidly approaching the 10% of gay and lesbian persons reflected in the total population.

What can we do about that? Should we sink into a miasma of believing that we have advanced little beyond the AUA leaders who effectively undermined Egbert Ethelred Brown? Hear this additional bit of information. In 1987, the Commission on Appraisal learned that 'embracing diversity' in race ranked third highest in the aspirations that Unitarian Universalists congregants espoused. They also discovered that embracing diversity ranked third lowest in accomplishments reported by Unitarian Universalist congregations. Clearly, as Morrison Reed pointed out, we feel like we've failed at this effort which is an integral part of our self understanding as caring, inclusive people, who want everyone to find a welcoming home with us.

Mark Morrison Reed's experience in ministry was strikingly different from Egbert Ethelred Brown's experience. "I was born," he writes, "into an upwardly mobile, middle-class Afro-American family, raised in an interracial milieu, and fated to come of age in the either-or era of Black Power." The Unitarian Church near the campus of the University of Chicago became their family church. After spending a year in Switzerland as a family, Mark Reed decided he would return and finish his education at a small private school there. College brought him to Beloit, studies he interrupted with work in Vista and a return to Switzerland. Mark Reed allowed a friend who was a preacher's kid to convince him that he was cut out to be a minister. When Mark Reed entered Meadville-Lombard, he was fully welcome. There he met Donna Morrison. Though Mark was not a stranger to the confusing issues of race that helped shape his destiny, it seems that neither he nor Donna Morrison were fully prepared for the resistance both their parents mounted when they announced an intention to marry; a black man and a white woman. Yet they prevailed, and Donna and Mark served congregations as co-ministers for twenty-five years. Of ministry he writes: "Being black meant everything and nothing, and more in other's eyes than in my own. It meant everything because I brought my black experience and perspective to every encounter. It meant nothing in moments of human intimacy. Therefore it meant more in my community work than it did in the routine of everyday church life." Morrison Reed didn't slide through ministry like a knife through butter. (No one does.) Morrison Reed found it difficult to take a leading role in the gatherings of black clergy. After all, he served a predominately white Unitarian Universalist church. And, even in his own congregations, there were moments of sad realization that personal racism was still alive, and Mark Morrison Reed didn't always experience every parishioner as fully comfortable with him.

Things have changed. Our institutions have changed, and the people in those institutions are changing still. There are 42 seminarians of color preparing for ministry in Unitarian Universalist congregations; and a program is in place to support their successful transition in the congregations they will serve. The Beyond Categorical Thinking program invites congregations to consider their prejudices and fears, even as they prepare the search for a new minister. As an institution and people serving that institution we recognize that we need to continue to work to overcome the racisms we are taught.

Mark Morrison Reed suggested a few other things we might remember when that feeling of having failed to embrace racial diversity overwhelms us.

First, he suggests we observe with him that one of the constants of our Unitarian Universalist congregations is the level of educational attainment – 17.2 years. And, further that the rise in the percentage of black ministers exactly parallels the rise in the number of black Americans receiving bachelors degrees. I took from his remarks the concept that our education, our progressive values and our socio-economic status create a 'pseudo-ethnic' group that will change in complexion as more African Americans gain the same education, status and progressive values that white Unitarian Universalists enjoy.

Mark Morrison Reed left his hearers with the thought that our congregations will change whether we ‘work for it, wait for it or resist it.’ Even as he spoke, it occurred to me that Unitarian Universalists are by nature the kind of people who will want to work for change, and these are a few suggestions for the work we can undertake even as we wait for change to overcome us:

Rather than waiting for black people to get more education, we can continue to be, and even redouble our creative efforts at, insuring that every child has access to a liberating education and higher degrees.

We can continue, and even redouble our efforts at, creating a society where the wild American dream of being a country of the middle class more nearly reflects the reality people of color experience.

We can encourage in one another an understanding of the freedoms Euro-Americans cherish, and an understanding of the freedoms African Americans cherish. For it seems to me that Ellen Rowse Spero has found something we should remember in Egbert Ethelred Brown – and understanding of those two concepts of freedom: “In Unitarianism, growing out as it did from the social and intellectual circles of Boston, intellectual freedom of the individual was the most important... In the black religious tradition, growing out of the experiences of slavery and racial oppression, freedom is both an individual and a communal concept. It is not just the mind, but, the body, the soul. It is also freedom of community, for a whole people to be a people...”

In the end, I hope you won’t just remember two ministers, or five men, or the Unitarian Universalist history of guilt. I ask you to consider the fuller freedom we all might seek, the wholeness of person we can come to know, and the paths we can walk as change comes to meet us decade upon decade.

Sources: *In Between* by Mark Morrison Reed
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