

# A Full Day



## A Unitarian Universalist ‘Black Lives Matter’ Theology

MARCH 26, 2015 | KENNY WILEY | 46 COMMENTS

“If, while I hear the wild shriek of the slave mother robbed of her little ones, I do not open my mouth, am I not guilty?”

–Lucy Stone

In the Denver community I strive to be a racial justice activist. Whenever I introduce myself in justice circles, I say that my Unitarian Universalist faith informs my work. “My faith,” I have said, “calls me to proclaim that black lives matter—that *my* life matters.”

Deep down I’ve been asking myself: *Is that true?* I knew that *I* felt called; was it *Unitarian Universalism* calling me here? The questions lingered even as dozens of UUs joined me at Denver’s ‘Selma Sunday’ gathering of 275, and as hundreds descended upon Alabama to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the deaths of Jimmie Lee Jackson, Viola Liuzzo, and James Reeb.

The doubts remained because of the hateful and/or ignorant comments some Unitarian Universalists have sent my way since I joined the racial justice movement. The doubts remained because of the silence and seeming indifference I've felt from some of my fellow UUs, even as others have gotten quite involved.

I needed a *Unitarian Universalist Black Lives Matter* theology. I needed more than the First Principle—I needed to dive into our history and our theology and find the deeds, words, and voices that could help me feel *theologically* grounded in racial justice work. In *The Larger Hope*, Russell Miller writes, “When Universalists opposed to slavery first undertook to launch a campaign to [stop] it, one of their first steps was to cast back over their own history to find support.”

The first of the Seven Principles of Unitarian Universalism reads: **Unitarian Universalist congregations affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person.**

Some UU religious educators refer to the first principle as “the principle we remember.” Indeed, it’s the one we so often invoke as we tell confused friends about our faith. We believe every person is important! It’s beautiful, and simple, and too often not quite true. The story we tell about ourselves, the story we have told about ourselves, and the story we tell ourselves, all have a deeper, more somber truth.

They are stories we have been telling for centuries. In 1846, the periodical *Universalist Miscellany* said that belief in the brotherhood of all humanity was “one of the distinguishing excellencies of Universalism.”

“However remote we may live from each other, however different our complexions, we are family,” the *Miscellany* contended. Despite such rosy proclamations, nineteenth-century Universalists and Unitarians were largely reticent about involvement in abolitionist work.

When confronted with white, privileged Unitarian Universalists derailing the ‘Black Lives Matter’ message with statements like “all lives matter!” or “I don’t get why black people are so angry all the time,” the first principle starts to feel like a lie. A deep dive into the archives of our Universalist and Unitarian ancestors—and of our nation’s history—unearths a more profound explanation.

Like the Declaration of Independence and the preamble of the Constitution, the first principle of Unitarian Universalism stands as an unrealized promise. It is a map of the work done centuries and decades ago, and a map of the work yet to do. The first principle operates as what UU and Harvard Divinity professor Dan McKanan calls “radical hope.” “Radical hope,” McKanan writes in his book *Prophetic Encounters*, “transcends the institutions of present-day society, but it does not transcend the laws of physical or human nature. It looks to the future, not to heaven.”

In America there have always been those willing to follow the roadmap, to look, as McKanan says, to the future—beyond immediate comforts—and insist that the statements held in our founding documents meant more work needed to be done. In the nineteenth century Frederick Douglass asked, “What, to the American slave, is the Fourth of July?” Sojourner Truth, who fought for rights for black men and all women—and encountered exclusion from both—insisted: “Ain’t I a woman?”

Decades later, as Jim Crow coalesced in the South and the privileged entrenched economic inequality in the North, W.E.B. Du Bois wondered aloud, “How does it feel to be a problem?” In the wake of the civil rights movement, Dr. Vincent Harding said he was “a resident of a country that did not yet

exist.”

It is on the shoulders of those willing to strive for what the Constitution’s preamble calls “a more perfect Union,” and those Universalists and Unitarians who strived for a *more perfect* faith, that I find a ‘Black Lives Matter’ theological framework.

In 1812, the *Universalist Magazine* wrote vehemently that it was “utterly impossible to reconcile slavery with the pure doctrines of Christianity.”

In October 1845, 170 Unitarian ministers signed the “Protest Against American Slavery,” published in the abolitionist newspaper “The Liberator.” In it the ministers condemned their own reticence to engage, referring to harm done “by the long silence of northern Christians and churches. We must speak against [slavery] in order not to speak in its support.”

Lydia Maria Child said of systemic racism, slavery, and segregation, “The removal of this prejudice is not a matter of opinion—it is a matter of duty.”

The nineteenth-century Universalists and Unitarians who worked to denounce slavery fought three battles: the battle to end slavery, the battle against silence from within the congregations, and the battle against their own prejudices. We fight the similar struggles today.

In the early and mid-nineteenth century, the majority of Unitarians and Universalists were not actively engaged in the abolitionist movement. Those willing to *attempt* fully living out their espoused values pushed their colleagues and religious siblings to eventual understanding and greater action.

Taquiena Boston and others call this “leading from the margins.”

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries brought Jim Crow segregation and, again, silence from too many churches. Neither stopped black woman and Unitarian Fannie B. Williams from saying, in 1893, “It should be the province of religion to unite, and not to separate, men and women according to the superficial differences of race lines.”

Denominational fear and ambivalence in 1953 did not stop the white minister A. Powell Davies from proclaiming, “I shall myself...not eat a meal in any restaurant in [Washington D.C.] that will not serve meals to Negroes. I invite all who truly believe in human brotherhood to do the same.”

Tragic indifference from fellow clergy about Jimmie Lee Jackson’s February 1965 murder did not stop James Reeb from traveling to Selma. Finding some of her religious siblings unaware of the horrors facing blacks in America did not stop Viola Liuzzo from making the same journey.

In 2014, that many Unitarian Universalists had (and have) yet to dive into the ‘Black Lives Matter’ movement did not stop Elizabeth Nguyen from joining a Christmas Eve vigil against police brutality across from the Beavercreek, Ohio Walmart in which unarmed black male John Crawford was murdered. It did not stop UU teenagers in Denver from marching down Colfax Avenue and demanding justice.

It has not stopped Leslie Butler MacFadyen from organizing nationally to assist protestors from Oakland to Ferguson to Philadelphia. It did not stop the UU Congregation of Columbia, Maryland from calling the nearby, historically black St. John Baptist Church about co-planning a vigil against police violence. It has not stopped Raziq Brown from challenging a racially biased police system in Fort Worth.

To fight for black lives now is to participate in radical hope. It is to battle for salvation on this Earth. It is to fight for life, for love, for justice. It is to demand *more* out of the first principle. It is to demand a *more perfect* faith.

Most of us in the faith are here because we felt welcome—at last—here. Some of us were too agnostic somewhere else. Some of us weren't vindictive enough somewhere else. We were too working-class somewhere else. We were too lesbian somewhere else. We were too nerdy somewhere else, too introverted somewhere else, too gay-married somewhere else.

Many of us are here because this faith and the people in it affirmed: you may not be perfect, but your life matters just the same.

That's what's on the line now. Through racism and posthumous victim-blaming, through silence and bullets and indifference and vilification, black people are being told that our lives do not matter—or that they matter only conditionally. Black lives matter *if*. *If* we are educated. *If* we are respectful. *If*. And sometimes, not even then do our lives matter.

Right now we as Unitarian Universalists are being called to act. We are being called by our ancestors—those who insisted, who *demand*ed that we help end slavery, that we fight for suffrage, that we join the struggle to end Jim Crow, that we listen to and honor Black Power. Lydia Maria Child and William Lloyd Garrison are calling us. Lucy Stone is calling us. Fannie B. Williams and Frances Ellen Harper are calling us. James Reeb is calling us. Viola Liuzzo is calling us.

Guided by that principle—that enduring, unfulfilled promise of the belief in the inherent worth and dignity of every person—ours is a faith that has said, or worked to say to those who have been marginalized:

You are a woman, and your life matters just the same.

You are gay or lesbian, and your life matters just the same.

You are transgender, and your life matters just the same.

You are bisexual, and your life matters just the same.

You have a disability, and your life matters just the same.

You were not loved as a child, and your life matters just the same.

You struggle with depression, and your life matters just the same.

Right now we are being called—by our ancestors, by our principles, by young black activists across the country—to promote and affirm:

You are young and black, and your life matters just the same.

You stole something, and your life matters just the same.

I have been taught to fear you, and your life matters just the same.

The police are releasing your criminal record, and your life matters just the same.

They are calling you a thug, and your life matters just the same.

Wayne Arnason said, "The way is often hard; the path is never clear, and the stakes are high. Take courage. For deep down, there is another truth. You are not alone."

Our ancestors, principles, and fellow humans are calling on us to promote affirm, with deeds and words: Black lives matter just the same.



## 46 thoughts on “A Unitarian Universalist ‘Black Lives Matter’ Theology”

1. **Kerridwen** says:

[MARCH 26, 2015 AT 9:26 PM](#)

Kenny, I am so moved by your words and your actions. I am more grateful than I can say for the strong connection you are creating between the Black Lives Matter movement and our shared faith as Unitarian Universalists. I believe that I will be better able to be part of the movement with that strong connection. Thank you so much!

2. **paulawatson2013** says:

[MARCH 26, 2015 AT 9:28 PM](#)

Reblogged this on Musings.