

History in the Bones

A sermon offered at Countryside Church Unitarian Universalist

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Readings

From Freedom's Plow by Langston Hughes

When a man starts out with nothing,
 When a man starts out with his hands
 Empty, but clean,
 When a man starts to build a world,
 He starts first with himself
 And the faith that is in his heart-
 The strength there,
 The will there to build.

First in the heart is the dream-
 Then the mind starts seeking a way.
 His eyes look out on the world,
 ...

America is a dream.
 The poet says it was promises.
 The people say it is promises-that will come true.
 The people do not always say things out loud,
 Nor write them down on paper.
 The people often hold
 Great thoughts in their deepest hearts
 And sometimes only blunderingly express them,
 Haltingly and stumblingly say them,
 And faultily put them into practice.
 The people do not always understand each other.
 But there is, somewhere there,
 Always the trying to understand,
 And the trying to say,
 "You are a man. Together we are building our land."

Land created in common,
 Dream nourished in common,
 Keep your hand on the plow! Hold on!
 If the house is not yet finished,
 Don't be discouraged, builder!
 If the fight is not yet won,
 Don't be weary, soldier!
 The plan and the pattern is here,
 Woven from the beginning

Into the warp and woof of America:
 ALL MEN ARE CREATED EQUAL.
 NO MAN IS GOOD ENOUGH
 TO GOVERN ANOTHER MAN
 WITHOUT HIS CONSENT.
 BETTER DIE FREE,
 THAN TO LIVE SLAVES.
 Who said those things? Americans!
 Who owns those words? America!
 Who is America? You, me!
 We are America!
 To the enemy who would conquer us from without,
 We say, NO!
 To the enemy who would divide
 And conquer us from within,
 We say, NO!

A long time ago,
 An enslaved people heading toward freedom
 Made up a song:
 Keep Your Hand On The Plow! Hold On!
 The plow plowed a new furrow
 Across the field of history

Into that furrow the freedom seed was dropped.
 From that seed a tree grew, is growing, will ever grow.
 That tree is for everybody,
 For all America, for all the world.
 May its branches spread and shelter grow
 Until all races and all peoples know its shade.
KEEP YOUR HAND ON THE PLOW! HOLD ON!

from The Manumission Requiem by Marilyn Nelson
 We are brief incarnations,
 We are clouds in clothes.
 We are water respirators,
 We are how earth knows.
 I bore light passed on from an original flame:
 While it was in my hands it was called by my name.
 But I am not my body.
 I am not my body.

You can own a man's body,
 But you can't own his mind.
 That's like making a bridle

To ride on the wind.
 I will tell you one thing, and I'll tell you true:
 Life's the best thing that can happen to you..

You can own someone's body,
 But the soul runs free.
 It roams the night sky's
 mute geometry.
 You can murder hope, you can pound faith flat,
 But like weeds and wildflowers, they grow right back.

You are not your body,
 You are not your bones.
 What's essential about you
 Is what can't be owned.
 What's essential about you is your longing to raise
 Your itty-bitty voice in the cosmic praise.

Sermon

It's Black History Month. You know, we have Black History month because somehow sometime someone recognized that the history of Black people, particularly in the United States had been submerged, perhaps even hidden -- that, in our classrooms, our public holidays, and our self-understanding as a nation we had left African Americans out of the equation -- except for the few exceptions -- Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, and, maybe, but not often, Rosa Parks. Slavery was an aberrant period in an otherwise proud history and was a matter of a few stubborn Southerners. We needed Black History Month -- in fact we still do because the situation hasn't changed nearly enough. American History is still, largely, taught White. We aren't really taught that America would not be the great and wealthy nation that it has been because of the free labor of African American slaves that invested their sweat equity in a nation that has never given a return on that investment. And we still aren't really taught that Black History is our History.

And we are very much in need of our history. Back when I lived in Pittsburgh, one of the things I loved the most was the annual Folk Festival. It lasted for quite a few days, took up a major arena in town and included many nationalities -- from all across Eastern Europe to Asia to Africa -- any nationality that had a community in Pittsburgh. Each would offer performances of dance from their culture of origin as well as booths of history, and, best of all, food booths. It allowed us, Pittsburghers to be proud of our individual heritages, revel in the richness of our diversity, and to move out of our ethnic enclaves. It reflected back to us in a truly affirmative way that we were a mosaic of cultures and identities. I much prefer the Canadian term mosaic to the American idea of melting pot -- I like the idea that we don't just become one great mush -- but instead a composite with complexity, texture, and beauty. But we are not simply people of British or Russian or Polish or Japanese or Chinese or South African or Kenyan or.... What have

you descent... we are also American – with the history and inheritance of this nation in our bones.

Two weeks ago the Reverend Elizabeth Harding came to Countryside and shared a film with us called *Traces of the Trade* – it was a story of the DeWolf Family, of Bristol Rhode Island, who were once one of the wealthiest families in America. The DeWolfs money came, in large part, from the role they played in running the largest slave-trading business in our North or our South. They had been celebrated for generations in Bristol for the wealth they bestowed upon the town. But no one had addressed the sources of this wealth – they knew it – but it was both excused and often minimized. Katrina DeWolf Brown decided to own this part of her history. She sent out invitations to two hundred of her kin inviting them to join her in delving into their past – and retracing the steps of the slave trade all the way to the Slave Forts on the Coast of Ghana across the Middle Passage to a family plantation and station on the slave trade route in Cuba, and back to Bristol. Of the two hundred, ten took part in the pilgrimage – which was—really -- a pilgrimage into a violent and criminal past. The ten struggled together to accept this critical aspect of their history. And, for all they felt sadness, and sometimes even guilt for the actions and impact of their ancestors, it seemed to me that they all were more alive, more engaged in the world, and richer people – in a spiritual sense – than they were before following the traces of the trade. In part, Reverend Harding’s hope was that by showing this film and preaching her sermon Unitarian Universalists would be encouraged to share and to hear stories about the legacy of slavery and of issues of race.

One of the stories that I’ve wanted to share with you, though it’s not my own story, is one I learned at our General Assembly, last year in Salt Lake City. I heard it from Ysaye Barnwell – one of the members of *Sweet Honey In The Rock* – the women’s ensemble that has sung much social conscience into being and brought the sounds of justice to a growing community. She is also an amazing song leader and someone who believes that our stories are reflected in our music and that by sharing our music we begin to share our stories – if we share with respect. So she shared this story from the old deep North again -- and it struck me to the bone.

There was once a man whose name was Fortune, but his great misfortune was that he was owned and bound into slavery by a man in Waterbury Connecticut – a physician named Preserved Porter. Fortune was listed with his family as a group of slaves in the Porter household in the 18th century. Fortune’s wife was named Dinah and they had three children: Jacob, Mira, and Roxa – whose births were recorded since Connecticut was working toward gradual emancipation and needed the census of slaves to be accurate. Fortune also had a much older son, named Africa – who because of his age was not eligible for gradual emancipation – which only applied to slaves born after a certain date. Fortune and his entire family worked for the Porters. Dinah outlived Fortune, who died in 1798, and she was bequeathed to Fortune’s wife upon the Doctor’s own death in 1804. No record has been found of where the children ended up.

We know something about Fortune’s life through the study of his bones. And we know his bones because the doctor did not bury Fortune when he died – but, instead, decided to use the skeleton for educational purposes. He took the body of his dead slave and boiled it and separated the flesh from the bones and assembled Fortune’s skeleton for use in instructing other doctors. The bones tell us that Fortune was a powerful man, used to hard labor. His back was broken at one time and his feet and hands had all been broken

as well. The exact manner of his death is not known, though he was in good health at the time of his death, his neck broken in a clean snap like a whiplash.

Medical skeletons were very rare and with Fortune's bones, Dr. Porter opened a school for anatomy in Waterbury. Fortune's Bones were used, as bodies and cadavers of many slaves were used, to help a very primitive medical science advance. After the Doctor's death his son inherited Fortune's bones and they passed down through the generations until Dr. Sally Porter Law McGlannan a descendant and one of the first women to graduate from John's Hopkins Medical School, gave Fortune's Bones to the Mattatuck Museum in 1933. She herself had learned skeletal anatomy from her father who used the bones to teach her. The skeleton was exhibited as a medical relic beginning in the 1940's. By the 1960's the skeleton was used as a reminder of slavery as well. But then, in 1970, despite the great popularity of the bones – which had been renamed Larry – the skeleton was removed from public display in recognition that this was a too painful and perhaps a too disrespectful reminder of slavery.

It's hard for me to imagine Dinah's experience in 1798 as her husband's body was rendered into a teaching instrument. That image seared my mind when I heard the story. It's become complicated to figure out what to do with these bones. Scientists hope to find out more about his life through his bones. Anthropologists hope to learn more about his times. Others hunt for his descendants so that they may decide what to do with his bones. Yet others believe that the bones should be given an honorable burial so that, finally, Fortune's body can belong to himself.

Hearing this story is important – even if it's jarring and, perhaps, painful. In the film, *Traces of the Trade*, there's a moment – coming through a tiny room with a small door – one so short you have to crouch to pass through it, and once through that door, the slaves were bound for the Middle passage. It was called the door of no return. As the DeWolf descendants each passed through that door of no return they felt a chill – as though they caught the fear and anguish of each person who'd been forced through by their own ancestor. By honoring this past we give honor to those who suffered. By honoring the past we are freer to live more honestly in the present. And by honoring the past we are better equipped to understand, with compassion the different burdens that we all carry – DeWolfs in the present and slaves and their descendants. And somewhere there are, likely, the great, great, great grandchildren of Dinah and Fortune. They carry within them the suffering they have inherited. Just as we all carry the traces and the scars of the past – remembered and unremembered – so do they. Somehow, in hearing and honoring that story we may salve some of the scars. Just as countless people do as they pass through Holocaust museums or concentration camps, or walk along the Freedom Trail in Boston or the underground railroad or the Vietnam memorial in Washington or make a paper crane on Hiroshima Day. Our memories give us cultural rootedness – whether in celebration or compassion or suffering or a combination.

Fortune's Bones spoke to me because it's not only a story of the past but of the present – his bones continue to ask hard questions of us that make us wonder about how to honor the past – through burying it or researching it? Through ritual or exhibition? Simplistic answers to the challenges of history don't work and don't feed our souls -- any more than religious formulas really deepen our spiritual lives. Is there a right or wrong answer – or merely an imperative to try to answer the question? The quandry of his bones is our quandry. The bones challenge us in the present. Hearing stories is not

enough – genuine acts of reconciliation are needed to build a bridge toward the future. Feeling bad about this story or other stories is natural but it can also result in the habit of wallowing in the past and failing to move into the present. Getting mired in guilt never liberated anyone. Out of this story and many others there are steps that can be taken toward the future. The state of Connecticut in April of 2009 voted to formally apologize for its role in the slave trade. The DeWolfs have been working on similar efforts in Rhode Island. That is a form of reparation – making amends on behalf of ancestors.

In *Traces of the Trade* a man named Harold Fields, an interracial dialogue facilitator, says “perhaps reparations is a process, not necessarily an event.”

Fortune’s Bones are our bones – the way that we finally choose to honor and treat them will reflect as much on the ways that we honor our family stories. Fortune’s Bones are the skeleton beneath our skin – the framework around which our nation has grown. They tell us who we are – and have been – in part – if only in part. How we hear these Bones and share their story – how we look toward the past and how we build toward the future – that is how we define who we are and shall be. That is how we live reparations – not only for African Americans but for us all.... Langston Hughes wrote:

Down into the earth went the plow
 In the free hands and the slave hands,
 In indentured hands and adventurous hands,
 Turning the rich soil went the plow in many hands
 That planted and harvested the food that fed
 And the cotton that clothed America.
 Clang against the trees went the ax into many hands
 That hewed and shaped the rooftops of America.
 Thus together through labor,
 All these hands made America.

Labor! Out of labor came villages
 And the towns that grew cities.

...

Out of labor-white hands and black hands-
 Came the dream, the strength, the will,
 And the way to build America.
 Now it is Me here, and You there.
 Now it’s Manhattan, [Chicago](#),
 Seattle, New Orleans,
 Boston and El Paso-
 Now it’s the U.S.A.

America!
 Land created in common,
 Dream nourished in common....
 The plan and the pattern is here,
 Woven from the beginning
 Into the warp and woof of America:
 ALL MEN ARE CREATED EQUAL.

NO MAN IS GOOD ENOUGH
TO GOVERN ANOTHER MAN
WITHOUT HIS CONSENT.

Fortune's Bones are our bones because, as I said a few weeks ago – the idea that you and I are entirely separate – the idea that the world is made of isolated creatures is, at best, an illusion and, at worst, is insane. Your stories are my stories, my stories are yours – initially told from a different viewpoint – but shared none the less. How we come to embrace that is our burden, blessing, our greatest challenge, our greatest gift.

How we do this will determine whether we can have great hope as we move toward the future – the sort of hope that we experienced – not because we may, in a moment of pie eyed optimism, have thought that the election of Barack Obama meant the return of a rapid and sweeping liberalism – but the sort of hope that arose from wishing – deep in our bones – for a healing between races, for a reconciliation across differences for a future that chose to lift up the pattern of freedom and mutuality rather than the pattern of license and exploitation. But, as I said in that same sermon a few weeks ago – one election does not turn history – we do.

This task comes to us as a faith – as Unitarian Universalists and it comes to us as a nation.

We have been a largely white faith movement – not entirely – and not intentionally. We have a history of activism in the civil rights movement, of building bridges through coalitions and of longing to be inclusive and welcoming to all people. To a large extent our make up is due to our default outreach system – we haven't tried to let anyone know we're here – we don't want to discourage anyone – but, we didn't want to evangelize or proselytize so we were just lucky to find each other at all. But lately, we have awakened and recognized that we have some good news of our own and we have a responsibility to let people know that there is this other – amazing faith option – one that embraces many paths and diverse persons at the same time that it stands for something deeply life affirming and shared. Now, through the internet and our actions of public witness and social justice new people are finding us all the time. And to be truly welcoming we need to learn what an intentional welcome looks like. And yet this is a slow – I think, often, too slow process.

I was reminded of this at the same General Assembly when my colleague, the Reverend Rosemary Bray McNatt shared that her teenaged son, raised all his life in Unitarian Universalist settings, son of a minister was considering exploring other faiths because he felt too isolated from other African Americans in our congregations. Since then I've had a thirst to explore and address this issue – how can we become a faith community that more truly reflects our national picture and, more importantly, our deepest values. Sometimes its simply our failure to see the promise and richness of multiculturalism as something to pursue. By going to the bones – learning our own history and learning to understand ourselves through it we become fuller people – more alive! By sharing the stories in worship and in longer deeper dialogue we make clear that we recognise that the past is still present and it is important to us. So when new people enter they can hear in our talk and see in our walk that the journeys of every people are the journeys of all people. That the ache that each person feels is an ache that all persons feel. That, as Reverend King said – A threat to justice anywhere is a threat to justice

everywhere. We sometimes use music to convey our message -- we have a rich music program – that ranges from the Baroque to the Blues from the Beatles to the Black Eyed Peas. But we have to use every wall and every word and every action to say that we are not a “we” apart from the whole – but inextricably connected – to one another – and to the larger history of this land in which we find ourselves. As a movement we have been too often slow to change.

Real hope begins as we turn toward one another’s stories and toward the past for answers –as we look into the richness of culture we are healed, and blessed, and made one. We are given into the present and dedicated toward the future.

As I was ruminating on this sermon I was reminded of the Old Spiritual – Dem Bones – Strange, I know – but it sings about one bone being connected to another and I found myself wondering if it had anything to do with Fortune. So I looked it up on line and was reminded of the source of that spiritual – it refers to Ezekial 37 in which the Lord takes Ezekial to the valley of bones – and tells Ezekiel to prophesy over the bones and the bones become whole persons again. He takes two sticks and marks one of them for the kingdom of Judah and one of them for the Kingdom of Israel and he joins the two kingdoms together and the people are then joined as one nation – as one body would be joined – no longer lifeless –no longer north and south. Two peoples who were dying without one another were made alive and even more alive with one another.

I believe that by bringing our stories to light, by seeing the skeleton beneath the skin, the framework of history, we will make whole – for the first time – the body of this nation – by honoring the once hidden bones of our nation we will be more whole as a people of faith. By pursuing this as a people of faith we will more deeply than ever live our finest values, our deepest hopes and our strongest principles. I believe, in a healthy balance of story telling, reparation, and new creation, we turn the point of history – become the turning point of history. We will be liberated by honest memory. And if we do this long enough, it’s just possible – it’s likely – I believe that if we honor our history in all its convolutions – all its depth –some time in the long distant future people might look back and wonder how black history, or women’s history or asian american history, or latino history could be different from what we know as our history... we will become one people – indivisible –bound together in love and justice. I don’t know if it’s probably but I truly I believe it is possible – I believe it and I feel it – in my bones.