

## Why History Matters

February is Black History month and Women's History month. A couple weeks ago we were remembering the work of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. This past week we were also remembering the liberation of Auschwitz. All this had me reflecting on why history matters. I mean Unity teaches us we are not limited by our past. We shouldn't get stuck in our past. So what is the importance of our history, or our past?

Let me explore something that unfolded on social media. There was a post about the number of Jews who died at Auschwitz. As the horror of that recedes further into the past, we are losing people with direct knowledge. Current generations only know what we talk about in history books so what is included in the history shapes our perceptions of the event. Fewer and fewer survivors remain to tell personal stories. Dale posted a different aspect of Auschwitz: the number of homo-sexual individuals, predominately men, who were in the camps, many of whom died and survivors were then put in prison after liberation. How many of you identified gays as a target of the Nazis? Or that liberation for the LGBT individuals didn't really mean liberation in Germany at that time, only moving from a concentration camp to prison? Then I posted another aspect of Auschwitz: a family of seven dwarfs and their average height family members who survived at the camp by undergoing experimentation by Dr. Mengele. People with disabilities, physical or mental, were usually the first to die in the camps. It didn't matter what your religion was. The extermination of people with disabilities was part of a larger program of genetic purification begun by Hitler in 1940. It is estimated that over a quarter of a million people with disabilities were killed before the war ended.

Do we hear about this in the history books? Nothing in my post and I am guessing in Dale's post minimizes the horrendous genocide of Jewish people. We don't want to make it seem less hideous. We just want to shed some light on a broader picture of the hatred. We want to expand the story to include those aspects often left out.

And what is the significance of leaving stuff out? Maybe you thought today would really be about why it's taken the Kansas City Chiefs 50 years to make it back to the Super Bowl. Or how Andy Reid has been unable, in his fairly successful coaching career, to coach a team to a Super Bowl victory. Those are interesting historical topics. 50 years ago, there were no starting black quarterbacks in the NFL. Black players were banned in the NFL until 1946.

The first starting black quarterback was born in Philadelphia and became a Canadian citizen after playing for Syracuse because blacks were still banned in the NFL. Bernie Custis played in Canada. Why were there no starting black quarterbacks 50 years ago? They weren't quarterbacks because black players weren't considered leaders or smart enough to play the position. Patrick Mahomes exemplifies both qualities. So why would people think what they thought?

Does it seem odd people believe your intelligence is linked to the color of your skin? How does that fit with Unity's teachings that there is the Divine, the exact same Spirit, in all of us? If we look at history, we know that when dark skinned people were brought to this country, primarily from Africa, they were brought as property. They were traded as livestock and not given rights given the white skinned human beings. They couldn't own land or businesses in most areas of the country. They certainly couldn't vote. Now if your history book says that the Civil War was about state's rights and the sovereignty of state's autonomy and not at all about the institution of slavery and how other human beings were treated, you might not understand why a part of our human consciousness still regarded darker skinned people as less than others. For years, many states in the south prohibited text books that did not portray the Civil War as a state's rights event. In the absence of a fuller picture, you might not understand why dark skinned people might be angry about the treatment that marked decades of living in this country.

The Peace and Justice Memorial in Montgomery Alabama is a reminder of another piece of history we often omit. There are inscribed there the names of 4,075 people recorded as lynched in 12 states between 1877 and 1950. Now, if you don't understand that up til 1950, lynching or the hanging of primarily dark skinned people in public by private citizens was tolerated, you might not understand why dark skinned people are so upset by the disproportionate number of dark skinned people shot by the police. There is no trial, no exploration of facts, until after the death sentence.

In 1890, around the time Unity was formed and Silent Unity began operating, a group of United States cavalry surrounded a group of Lakota men, women and children engaging in a sacred Ghost Dance. It was a ceremony arising from a belief that the indigenous people were suffering because Great Spirit was angry they were abandoning their native ways. The cavalry was nervous about the activity at the ridge at Wounded Knee. Exact numbers are difficult but estimates of 150 to 300 men, women and children were killed.

Do you remember this from your history books? I dug into this story because this winter a friend of mine who is Lakota participated in a Ghost Dance Ride at Wounded Knee. December 29<sup>th</sup>. In South Dakota. With horses and tents. Without understanding the nature of the event and the devastation of the killing, we might not understand why indigenous people try so hard to protect their traditions and resent the actions of the U.S. government.

I talked about the Hitler program to kill people with disabilities. Would it surprise you that his program actually grew out of the Eugenics Movement, which began around 1880 and was active in the US. In 1906 the Race Betterment Foundation was formed in Battle Creek Michigan with money from Kellogg and Carnegie and others.

The primary idea was that we could improve the human race through “selective breeding”. The challenge was who got to decide what qualities were promoted? It might surprise you to know that even people like W.E. B. DeBois and women’s rights leaders supported Eugenics. The deselection in reproduction was accomplished primarily through forced sterilization although there were those who favored euthanasia as an alternative. Would it surprise you to know that North Carolina maintained a eugenics sterilization program through 1977? Did you know 61% of those sterilized were women and primarily people in hospitals and institutions were sterilized without consent. And the Supreme Court allowed it. And that there are still laws on the books? So without this history and understanding, it is harder to grasp how truly vulnerable people with disabilities feel. Without knowing the history established through our humanity, it is hard to comprehend how far from our spiritual teachings we have strayed.

Take a breath. It is a lot to take in, all the history that gets suppressed. How do we learn to do better, to make better choices, if we don’t have an accurate picture of what our past choices have been? How can we connect with empathy with others if we have no clue the history passed down, maybe in oral traditions, that shapes their view of the world? In our SQ21 class we’ve been talking about what our world view is and how to be aware of the world view of others. We have to respect the world view of others and acknowledge that it may have been shaped by an awareness of history we don’t know about. Increasingly, with technology, we have the ability and perhaps responsibility, to learn our history. To dig for more information than fed to us in textbooks and via mainstream media. Seems like work but are we here to grow or just exist?

The other way suppressing history works is to not only hide the ugly things that happen to oppressed people, but to hide positive things oppressed people have contributed to our society and community. Not only does it hide their contribution, it denies role models for the next generations of marginalized people. Reading history books as a kid, I had to assume that the only important people were all white, able-bodied, heterosexual MEN. Madame Curie—I clung to a woman in science. George Washington Carver, maybe he didn't look like me but at least he was different, and he was born near me. Kids look for someone to identify with. They want to see possibilities for their future. Illuminating positive contributions is the focus of most of our current history months. One of the aspects of oppression is the portrayal of the oppressed population as worthless, not contributing and a burden on all the hard working, tax paying dominant people. Perpetuating that portrayal is part of the continued oppression. So we are engaging in corrective action. Slowly but surely. People of color, women, LGBTQ people, immigrants, people of different religions and different abilities all are **people** and make positive contributions to our society!

And you might say, "Well, Reverend Joy, interesting history lesson but really does this make a difference in my personal life? I am kind of out of school."

I get it. Who needs more lessons? We all make choices about how actively we'll participate in the world around us. How much information do we want? Who we will engage with and what is our goal in interacting with others?

So let me take the history down to a really personal level. How honest are you about **your** history? Are there parts of your past that you have suppressed? Are there events you don't want to examine because they are painful or because you don't really want to see your role in how things turned out? History is self-awareness. Without self-awareness, we operate out of old wounds and fail to heal. Hurt people hurt people. Could having a better understanding of our past, benefit us in living a better present? It might be worth considering. If you are feeling stuck about something, explore something in the past you haven't fully examined.

One of the challenges in Unity's program to help churches, in my opinion, is that Healing the Past often fails to identify our role in the history and how we could do things differently. Yes, we need to forgive ourselves and forgive others, let go of our stories of pain, AND we need to figure out the lesson! We need to make whatever changes are needed so that we don't repeat the past.

Also, on a personal level, are there accomplishments you suppress? I don't mean you need to be arrogant or prideful but maybe a false humility isn't that helpful either. Sometimes we downplay our skills, so others don't expect so much of us. Sometimes we fear success because success challenges us to keep improving and our fear of failure kicks in. Just because we did it once doesn't mean we could do it again. Why do we sometimes fear success? It is an interesting question to ask ourselves as we examine our own history.

Nothing we have done in the past, aware or unaware, limits the possibilities in this now moment. If we are afraid of the past, that fear might limit us. If we are ashamed of the past, that shame might limit us. But nothing in an honest, non-judging awareness of what has come before prevents us from living into our fullest potential right now. Becoming aware of the history that shapes the world view of others increases our ability to be empathetic and compassionate in our connection with others. Jesus said, "Love one another." Different world views don't diminish the unity of Spirit that underlies all things. Awareness of those glimpses of potential we see in our success might actually give us some insight into just how big our potential is. Perhaps we **really** are here to not only live our best life but also be a part of creating an awakened world of peace, harmony and abundance!

Engage in some history this week and see what you learn, about the world and about yourself! Next week we'll talk about Change and have our Annual Meeting!