

“The Jefferson Window”

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Ever since I announced that I was going to do a sermon series on the windows here in our physical sanctuary, there has been one question that has been raised to me more than any other:

“So, what are you going to do about the Jefferson window?”

This one, right here. Closest to the pulpit, in fact. And it’s not just a window in our sanctuary that bears his name – we also have Jefferson Hall, and Jefferson Courtyard, right on the other side of this wall. The window was dedicated in 1930, but Jefferson Hall came many decades later, and it attests to the fact that Thomas Jefferson has been associated with Unitarians for a long time and his name is found all over our Unitarian landscape, although he himself never officially joined a Unitarian congregation. Theologically, he aligned himself with the Unitarians, and his writings about the separation of church and state, and the necessity of freedom of religion, have endeared him to Unitarians for many generations. But unlike every other name on these windows, he never quite claimed the mantle of Unitarianism for himself.

But that has not kept us from naming UU congregations after him in Colorado and Kentucky and Texas and Virginia, several of whom have recently renamed themselves. There used to be a District of the UUA named the Thomas Jefferson District, until it was renamed the Southeast District in 2011, after a long process that included two failed votes in 1997 and 2010. In the congregation in which I grew up I think there was a Jefferson room, and as a kid I had a t-shirt titled “Famous UUs” on it that I loved that listed him among them.

There is an important story from our recent UU history that perhaps was the turning point in how we perceived the role of Jefferson in our movement.ⁱ In 1993, our annual General Assembly was held in Charlottesville, Virginia, which is near Jefferson’s Monticello plantation. And so, in honor of his 250th birthday, and the fact that General Assembly was held in the District named after him and so close to his home, the

planners decided that the Saturday night dance would be a Jefferson Ball, and encouraged attendees to dress in period costume.

I'm sure you can see the problems with this plan.

Thursday morning, at the first open plenary session, Hope Johnson, a Black woman who was a lay leader from Community Church in New York City and would later go on to become an ordained minister, stepped up to the microphone and read a statement on behalf of the African-American Unitarian Universalist Ministers group, asking, "If UUs were to wear period costume for the ball, must African Americans attend such events in rags and chains?"

Johnson said you could have heard a pin drop in that enormous conference hall.

It had not occurred to the white conference organizers that their event celebrating Jefferson, a man they saw as a champion of liberty and religious freedom, would not be seen by everyone as worthy of such celebration.

The Moderator of the General Assembly immediately assembled a small group of people, including Hope Johnson, to discuss a plan of action. In the short turnaround time they had, they decided to allow the dance to proceed, but that people were also invited to protest the event if they wished. Rev. Johnson, in a discussion years later, reflected that this was a turning point in our movement not just because of what happened, but because unlike previous instances in our history when conversations about racism had resulted in breakdowns within our movement, in this instance, the people who were in conflict were able to stay in relationship and learn and grow together. At a discussion 25 years after the event, the white minister who had come up with the idea the Ball in the first place said that this was the beginning of his own eyes being opened to the internal work of anti-racism that is necessary within our movement.

So Jefferson's name has been both embraced by us and rejected by us for a while.

He is a complicated ancestor.

A complicated father figure, if we want to acknowledge the intersection of Father's Day with this question about how we relate to one of the Founding Fathers of our nation, a

man who lent his political and intellectual skills to the birth of a new democracy, but whose personal life included the fathering of two families, one free and the other enslaved. I find it interesting to use the word “fathered” here – because the children Sally Hemmings bore him were also his property. We are still healing from the damage that slavery did to the idea and institution of fatherhood in our nation.

So Jefferson is undeniably one of the more complicated figures in American history.

Many of you can probably quote his famous words from the Declaration of Independence by heart: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” These words not only set the course for the United States, but have been a bell sounded around the world in movements for democracy and liberty.

And yet his lived history tells a different story, one far from the equality that he espoused. His whole life was built upon the enslavement of over 600 people on the plantations he inherited and managed; he dismissed any claim that women were due equal rights to men; and he was clear in his intent to assimilate and subsume all indigenous nations and peoples.

There is a lot of great scholarship out there about Jefferson and his legacy, more than I could possibly summarize here, but I want to share two particular points that stood out for me as I was reading about his life.ⁱⁱ

The first is that although he publicly advocated for abolition and called slavery a “cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life & liberties.” he also was very aware of how slavery benefited him financially. In 1792, in a letter he was writing to then-President George Washington, Jefferson calculated the profit and loss of the plantation, and concluded that he received a 4 percent return on every Black child that was born to his possession. In other letters, he urged a friend that purchasing more enslaved people was a good investment. To quote one scholar, “He quite bluntly advances the notion that slavery presented an investment strategy for the future.” It is clear that in the end, Jefferson’s economic self-interest overcame his moral sentiment.

The second anecdote that illustrated something of the tension within Jefferson's own engagement with the institution of slavery is a description I read of his dining room. Like many plantation homes, at Monticello there was a network of tunnels and back hallways that kept enslaved servants from being visible to guests. Jefferson invented a system of dumbwaiters and revolving trays that would allow food and wine to magically appear, and empty dishes to disappear, without having to see the people waiting on the other side of the wall, or down the stairs. In his day-to-day life, Jefferson found many ways to distance himself from the violence and subjugation his system required in order to function.

And yet this was the same man who wrote, "Indeed I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just, that His justice cannot sleep forever. Commerce between master and slave is despotism. Nothing is more certainly written in the book of fate than that these people are to be free."

But he could not find it in himself to take the actions that one would assume would follow from these words. He could see the horizon, but he could not bring himself to walk toward it. It would be 75 years, and a Civil War, before that prediction of Jefferson's would come true.

It seems fitting that we examine this history today, on Juneteenth, Liberty Day, a day of joyful celebration of the end of slavery.

Today, 157 years after that first Juneteenth - with still a long way to go before the promise of equality becomes a reality for all - how do we navigate our relationship with this complicated ancestor, and what do we do about his name on our window?

So I ask the same question I have asked of all our Unitarian ancestors on these windows – what is the wisdom from your story that speaks to us today? What can we learn from your lives about how to live in this moment in which we find ourselves?

Jefferson reminds me that the seduction of comfort and stability, and the pull of self-interest, is powerful. We can have the most noble thoughts, and aspire to the highest moral and ethical practices, and we can even see the self-evident and inalienable truths in front of us, but when it comes down to changing our behavior to embody that truth,

that moral vision, that is where systems of supremacy assert their power, and snap the trap closed around our ankles.

It is hard to pry open the jaws of self-interest. I'm sure Jefferson had a thousand well-rehearsed excuses as to why he could not free the people he enslaved.

But in the end, the profitability of the arrangement for him won out. For all his intelligence, for all his ability to imagine a new form of government, or new interpretations of religious scripture, he could not imagine a life for himself outside of the system of slavery.

Or maybe that's not quite right. Maybe he could imagine it all too well, and was unwilling to make the sacrifices that it would inevitably require. He would not give up the comforts, emotional and physical, of the only life he had ever known, the life of a white male on a plantation.

As we consider our own relationship to systems of supremacy, whether they are based on race or gender or sexual orientation or country of origin or wherever our privilege lies – as we consider the places our lives intersect with these systems of power - where are we building tunnels and false walls to keep hidden that which we would rather not see? Where are we unwilling to give up our financial gain, our return on investment, our secure future, even though we know the profit comes at the expense of other people's lives?

I do not ask these questions lightly. I know that my own life has been cushioned by privilege, and I can so very often feel the trap of supremacy around my ankles. Sometimes I manage to wiggle free, but sometimes the pull of safety and security is too strong to overcome, at least on the first try.

But isn't this why we come together in communities like this one? Isn't this one of the main functions of religious community – to help us identify what sacrifices we need to make for the greater good? Jefferson, while he admired Unitarian theology, never committed to actually living in religious community. He never allowed the accountability inherent in community to influence his actions.

We are not here because we are perfect, or because we assume that we will live up to our ideals each and every day of our lives, but rather to keep one another accountable to our ideals and ethics, to encourage one another to be better, to try again, to keep imagining new ways out of the trap. To keep creating, day by day, a better world for our children, so that even if we don't manage to escape, they will.

In 1857, Fredrick Douglass, an abolitionist and statesman who had escaped from enslavement himself and understood all too well what waiting for the benevolence of the powerful meant – who understood that even men like Jefferson who talked such a good game were unwilling in the end to make the sacrifices necessary for the liberation of others, said the following:

“Those who profess to favor freedom and yet deprecate agitation are men who want crops without plowing up the ground; they want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters. This struggle may be a moral one, or it may be a physical one, and it may be both moral and physical, but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Jefferson was unwilling to endure the personal struggle that would have followed the emancipation of the enslaved people on his plantations. He wanted the ocean without the waves, he espoused the moral struggle but would not embody it. He wanted his wine to appear, as if by magic, whenever his bottle was empty. He wanted the four percent profit that he gained off of each child that was born on his plantation. He wanted not just liberty, but also security and peace. He was afraid. He was human.

These are human desires: security and peace.

I can have sympathy for Jefferson as a fellow human being, wrestling with these dilemmas. But it is hard to see his name up there on the window, to read the address of Jefferson Hall on our website, and not remember Rev. Hope Johnson, and the way she felt at that General Assembly, asked to celebrate a man who would have kept her in chains, and sold her children away from her.

When someone is involved in the direct and brutal abuse of other human beings, no matter how brilliant their mind or influential their philosophy, then I think it is good to re-evaluate our willingness to hold them up as a moral exemplar of our tradition.

So I ask us to reflect seriously on the question of how the Jefferson name lines up with our ideals of integrity and action. How does having the Jefferson name on a building reflect on the values of this congregation, and who will feel welcome and at home in this space? And perhaps most importantly, it raises the question, what example will we set for those who come after us, and what space will we clear for them and the people who do not yet appear on any window?

The question is not so much what am I going to do about the Jefferson window, but what are you, the congregation, going to do about it? These windows have seen more than a dozen ministers take this pulpit before me, and with care and luck they will see a more than a dozen come after me. Ministers come and go, but the conscience of the congregation remains, informed by our history, reflected through these panes of glass, but embodied in the people here today, in this moment now, the only moment where action is possible. We can't change the past, but we can learn from it, and chart a course towards a better future. This is what the eighth principle is all about, in case you are wondering about that announcement earlier. How to accountably dismantle systems of oppression and make space for Beloved Community to grow – this is the work in front of you.

I will leave you with some of Jefferson's own words. They are inscribed on the Southeast Portico of the Jefferson memorial in Washington, DC, and he wrote them in a letter to a friend in 1816:

"... laws and institutions must go hand in hand with the progress of the human mind. As that becomes more developed, more enlightened, as new discoveries are made, new truths discovered and manners and opinions change, with the change of circumstances, institutions must advance also to keep pace with the times. We might as well require a man to wear still the coat which fitted him when a boy as a civilized society to remain ever under the regimen of their barbarous ancestors."

Whether their names are on a window or not, our ancestors, barbarous and otherwise, are always with us - but they do not own us. Not anymore.

May it be so, blessed be, and amen.

Note: There is a lot of great information at www.monticello.org

ⁱ <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/ball-didnt-break-us>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/the-dark-side-of-thomas-jefferson-35976004/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/1857-frederick-douglass-if-there-no-struggle-there-no-progress/>