



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

Rise and SHINE

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This week, America received a confusing lesson about black history. President Trump, speaking to the beginning of Black History month, said, "Frederick Douglass is an example of somebody who's done an amazing job, that is being recognized more and more, I notice." The President appeared to talk about Frederick Douglass as if he were not the historical giant abolitionist, but perhaps someone working alongside Trump in his worlds of reality tv, corporate business, or conservative politics.

The internet soon ballooned with responses inquiring about the meaning of Trump's odd shout out to Douglass including a now removed twitter account @realFrederickDouglass. One of the best tweets from this account read: "My autobiography, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, is #1 best-seller on Amazon. 4x better sales than *the Art of the Deal*. P.S. I am dead!!"

A reporter, Douglass Clarence Page, a writer for the Chicago Tribune, tried to make sense of the statement in this way:

Just about everyone watching him on TV could hear Trump's use of the present tense. Did Trump think that Douglass, who died in 1895, is still alive? In fairness, Paris Dennard, a black Republican CNN commentator who attended the meeting, defended Trump, saying his remark was actually referring to a Douglass exhibit in the new National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington. But even if that was his intent, Trump's odd sentence structure leaves me asking, as Dorothy Parker is said to have responded to news of President Calvin Coolidge's death, how can they tell?

Trump's speech certainly kicked off Black History Month in an unforgettable way, calling attention to the president's profound lack of knowledge of the namesake of the month.

It was a moment of shame for many of us who for the last 8 years have seen Black History become more about daily visibility and recognition than a month in the calendar year. Every day black history was being made simply by the fact that our nation had elected a black man with both Kenyan and Kansan ancestry to the presidency twice, accompanied by his black wife and family who were living in the white house, a mansion built by slaves. Many progressives began to wonder if "Black History Month" was unnecessary and out of touch with an America which was increasingly reflecting black life. The movement for Black Lives called for an end to the traditional black history month, explaining that it condensed black histories benignly and superficially into the shortest month of the year while ignoring the painful realities of slavery, systemic racism and the modern day violence of police brutality and the crisis of mass incarceration. In its place the group called for "Black Futures Month," a creative way to imagine a sustainable future for blackness.

As it turns out, acknowledging Black History month in these times is more critical than ever. Rereading one of my favorite of Octavia Butler's essays entitled "A Few Rules for Predicting the Future," she points to this fact.

The past is filled with repeating cycles of strength and weakness, wisdom and stupidity, empire and ashes. To study history is to study humanity. And to try to foretell the future without studying history is like trying to learn to read without bothering to learn the alphabet.

To remind us of the history of Black History month itself, February 1st marks the day that President Abraham Lincoln signed the joint House and Senate resolution that banned slavery, which would formally become the 13th amendment, stating that "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction."

February 1 was unrecognized on a national level until the advocacy of Major Richard Robert Wright, Sr., an accomplished intellectual and community leader who founded black-owned institutions of higher education and finance. Wright was born into slavery in 1855 in Georgia and, after the 13th amendment's passing, Wright excelled in school, developing a life-long passion for advancing educational and economic opportunities for African Americans in post-civil war America. One story of 13 year old Wright illustrates this well:

When retired Union General Oliver Otis Howard visited his school in 1868 and asked the students what message he should take to the North, Wright replied with these words, "Sir, tell them we are rising."

And rise, he did, going on to found what is now Savannah State University and the Philadelphia's Citizens and Southern Bank and Trust Company, the only black-owned bank at the time. As more black owned banks were founded he organized their efforts into the first banking association of its kind.

In his 80s, as his final life project, Wright organized and led a national movement organized to advocate for the passing of Feb. 1 as "National Freedom Day." Wright was inspired by President Roosevelt's "4 Freedoms" speech, the 1941 wartime state of the Union speech. You may remember Roosevelt's powerful claim:

In the future days, which we seek to make secure, we look forward to a world founded upon four essential human freedoms.

The first is freedom of speech and expression—everywhere in the world.

The second is freedom of every person to worship God in his own way—everywhere in the world.

The third is freedom from want—which, translated into world terms, means economic understandings which will secure to every nation a healthy peacetime life for its inhabitants—everywhere in the world.

The fourth is freedom from fear—which, translated into world terms, means a world-wide reduction of armaments to such a point and in such a thorough fashion that no nation will be in a position to commit an act of physical aggression against any neighbor—anywhere in the world.

Inspired by the understanding of human freedom set forth in Roosevelt's speech in light of the 13th amendment barring slavery, Wright convened a gathering in Philadelphia to call for a "national freedom day" to be celebrated on February 1. The call was heard by Congress, and one year after Wright's death, in 1947, a law was passed proclaiming February 1 "National Freedom Day," signed by President Truman in 1948.

Black History month began with National Freedom Day, but the month itself was not formally recognized until 1976. Upon the occasion of the first Black History Month, President Gerald Ford declared:

In celebrating Black History Month, we can take satisfaction from this recent progress in the realization of the ideals envisioned by our Founding Fathers. But, even more than this, we can seize the opportunity to honor the too-often neglected accomplishments of black Americans in every area of endeavor throughout our history.

This year in particular, the sting of the president's brief speech brought into clear view that in order to honor the accomplishments of black Americans, we must know who they are and take care to be careful stewards of a past which is wrought with great suffering and even greater resilience. If the president had bothered to investigate Frederick Douglass, he would, perhaps have learned that Douglass, too was a Republican. But a deeper look could have drawn forth a history of a brilliantly subversive and tireless leader whose words inspire us to the kind of resistance against the fundamental violations of freedoms and human rights to which we aspire today.

Douglass had these words to say in his 1857 speech "If There is No Struggle, There is No Progress," an abolitionist speech delivered in New York years before the civil war. He was speaking on the lessons learned from West Indian emancipation struggles, to an audience in upstate New York. Douglass' words:

The whole history of the progress of human liberty shows that all concessions yet made to her august claims have been born of earnest struggle. The conflict has been exciting, agitating, all-absorbing, and for the time being, putting all other tumults to silence. It must do this or it does nothing.

If there is no struggle there is no progress. 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. Find out just what any people will quietly submit to and you have found out the exact measure of injustice and wrong which will be imposed upon them, and these will continue till they are resisted with either words or blows, or with both. The limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress.

Now we see why these words were not fit to be read this week, parsed into the short and meaningless phrase “amazing job.” To read these words would have spoken directly to tactics being employed around the nation to resist the erosion of freedom protected by our constitution.

It would have sent a signal to people of conscience that leaders like Douglass were needed in our time. It would have been a clarion call to religious people and institutions of moral courage to carry on the legacy of freedom fighting. In Douglass’ time, the moral institutions which could be counted on to support the freedom struggle to end slavery were few. The white Christian church had largely remained indifferent on the views of slavery, at best, and at its worst called for the biblical defense of slavery. Our own Unitarian churches were slow to speak out, carefully crafting sermons steeped in cautious biblical interpretation so as not to upset their congregations. Channing once said that many of his colleagues and congregations:

dread all discussion of the subject, and, if not reconciled to the continuance of slavery, at least believe that they have no duty to perform, no testimony to bear, no influence to exert, no sentiments to cherish and spread, in relation to this evil. A community can suffer no greater calamity than the loss of its principles.

At this, the beginning of Black History month, let us count ourselves as a principled community who stands firm in the legacy of our forbearers and strive for a more just future with each day’s labor. Let us dedicate ourselves as an institution that can be called upon to defend human rights and say, unequivocally, that all Black Lives still matter. And let us join the real struggle where we are informed by the histories of resistance to create a sustainable and vibrant future of a restored and whole human family, the beloved community we dream of. As we pass through these brief 28 days of black history, let’s continue to educate, agitate, and collaborate. And let’s never forget what 13 year old Major Richard Robert Wright said, when that retired Union General Oliver Otis Howard asked what message he should take to the North:

“Sir, tell them we are rising.”