

Remaking Our Stories/Remaking Ourselves
Sunday, June 11, 2023
Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Lake County
Eustis, FL
Tri-County Unitarian Universalists
Summerfield, FL
Rev. Cynthia A. Snavely

I have complained more than once about how little history I was taught from first through twelfth grade. First, we didn't have history every year. We had social studies. Some years it was geography where we drew maps of other countries lining out their rivers and marking their states and territories and learning their exports but learning little to nothing of their history. The years that we did have history it was always American history and all about wars, although usually we didn't get past the Civil War even though the textbooks went further. It was June by the time we were finishing with the Civil War and school was over for the year. Until college, history for me was America was discovered by the Europeans, there was a Revolutionary War, there was a Civil War. The end.

The people in my history books were almost all men. I remember two women being included and one wasn't even given her proper name. In one of the battles of the Revolutionary War Molly Pitcher, who carried water to the troops, took over her husband's role of swabbing and loading a cannon when he was killed. Woman Number 1. Woman Number 2 was Harriet Tubman who led slaves to freedom and served as a spy for the Union during the Civil War. Even those two women might not have been included if what they did hadn't been connected to a war.

Apparently, I am not the first to make a similar complaint. The sixteenth century Venetian writer and poet Modesta di Pozzo di Forzi, who wrote under the name Moderata Fonte, wrote, "Do you really believe ... that everything historians tell us about men – or about women – is actually true? You ought to consider the fact that these histories have been written by men, who never tell the truth except by accident." I wouldn't put men down so completely, but I do not believe that women did nothing in our history.

And women are not the only ones to complain about how history is written. In the 1800s the American Mark Twain wrote, "The very ink with which history is written is merely fluid prejudice," and the English writer Samuel Butler said, "God cannot alter the past, though historians can."

Sometimes even children can spot the prejudice in our telling of "history". Twentieth century comedian and civil rights activist Dick Gregory said of going to the movies, "We used to root for the Indians against the cavalry, because we didn't think it was fair in the history books that when the cavalry won it was a great victory, and when the Indians won it was a massacre."

I am currently in a group with some of you reading "The 1619 Project," which places slavery and its continuing legacy at the center of American history. In the Preface to the book the editor, Nikole Hannah-Jones writes, "My favorite subjects in school were English and social studies, and I peppered my teachers with questions. History revealed the building blocks of the world I now inhabited, explaining how communities, institutions, relationships came to be. Learning history made the world make sense. It provided the key to decode all that I saw around me.

“Black people, however, were largely absent from the histories I read. The vision of the past I absorbed from school textbooks, television, and the local history museum depicted a world, perhaps a wishful one, where Black people did not really exist. This history rendered Black Americans, Black people on all the earth, inconsequential at best, invisible at worst. We appeared only where unavoidable: slavery was mentioned briefly in the chapter on this nation’s most deadly war, and then Black people disappeared again for a full century, until magically reappearing as Martin Luther King, Jr. gave a speech about a dream. This quantum leap served to wrap the Black experience up in a few paragraphs and a tidy bow, never really explaining *why*, one hundred years after the abolition of slavery, King had to lead a march in the first place.

“We were not actors but acted upon. We were not contributors, just recipients. White people enslaved us, and white people freed us.”

In another congregation one of the members, a black mother, was homeschooling her son. Part of her reason was that when he learned about slavery, she did not want him to learn that black people passively accepted it. She wanted him to learn about the many black people who resisted and about those who acted to free themselves and their loved ones and others.

Nikole Hannah-Jones writes of the response to “The 1619 Project,” “Black students, especially, told me that for the first time in their lives, they experienced a feeling usually reserved for white Americans: a sense of ownership of, belonging in, and influence over the American story.”

The cast of the musical “Hamilton” sings, “Who lives, who dies, who tells your story?” For centuries the American story has been told by white men. Black and brown people and women lived and died without being part of the story. Nikole Hannah-Jones is not the only person who feels that it is time to change that.

Twentieth century English author and journalist George Orwell wrote that, “The most effective way to destroy people is to deny and obliterate their own understanding of their history.” I am proud to say that Unitarian Universalists are taking an active role in helping people whose history has too often been obliterated to reclaim their history and tell it in their own voice. If you go to the website of our UU Bookstore, InSpirit, you will find these books published by Beacon Press, a department of the Unitarian Universalist Association, [A Black Women’s History of the United States](#), [A Queer History of the United States](#), [An African American and Latinx History of the United States](#), [An Indigenous People’s History of the United States](#), and [A Disability History of the United States](#).

You will also find books, particularly those written by UU minister Mark Morrison-Reed such as [Darkening the Doorways](#), [Black Pioneers in a White Denomination](#), [Revisiting the Empowerment Controversy](#) and [The Selma Awakening](#), that help us take off the rose-colored glasses as we look at our own Unitarian Universalist history.

Winston Churchill, who served as Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, said, “History will be kind to me for I intend to write it.” He did indeed write his own history, and people still read it. But sometimes it is beneficial to listen to someone else’s version of our history. And other people besides Churchill have written about him giving us a variety of understandings of the man and his actions. Those of us who are white, straight, cisgender will learn from reading others’ versions of our history.

I grew up in a family with three children. My sister, brother, and I experienced the same events, but there has been many a time when one or the other of us starts to tell about that time that...and one or sometimes the other two of us will look askance. That's not the way we remembered that. The one of us telling the story is not lying. All three of us were there, but we each experienced the event differently. We may benefit from seeing events in our own lives differently by hearing how others experienced them.

And sometimes it is good as we look at how we move through the world to consider and examine the stories we grew up with and have incorporated into our lives. For years I struggled when interviewed by groups of older white men wearing suits or when supervised by one such man. Now one might think that that is because those are people with traditional power in our society. But that was not my story.

The only older white man in my childhood who wore a suit other than on Sunday to church was my grandfather. When I was young, we were taught we had to be especially good around my grandfather and do absolutely nothing to upset him. He had had a nervous breakdown we were told, so we were to treat him gently. Consequently, when I would want to disagree or challenge some other older white man in a suit, I was wary. These were fragile human beings whom I had the power to harm. It wasn't until I figured out my back story that I was able to change my reactions. I wish someone in my family would have challenged the story while my grandfather was still alive. I don't think our tiptoeing around him was helpful to him anymore than it was to us. When he was dying of lung cancer, we were told never to say the word cancer in front of him. Until his dying day he was treated as delicate and fragile, and I don't think he actually was.

In our personal lives as well as in society sometimes it is good to examine our stories, question their accuracy, and tell them over in new ways born of new insights and newly discovered facts.

We will be different both as individuals and as a society because of the stories we begin to allow to be told and heard. We can thank Betty Ford for making it acceptable to tell our breast cancer stories. We can thank Patty Duke for beginning the task of making it acceptable to speak about mental health issues and Tina Turner for opening up the subject of domestic abuse. When a celebrity speaks out it opens the way for others, but just because we aren't celebrities doesn't mean we can't also pave the way for the telling of stories that have previously been silenced.

Jennifer Lynn Barnes writes in her young adult novel, [The Inheritance Games](#),

"Why do I have to tell a story?" I asked.

"Because if you don't tell the story, someone else will tell it for you."

Jabari Saeed Jones (they/them) is a Black, queer, forty-something, non-binary person residing on unceded Abenaki land in Vermont. They are a student of Radical Dharma, a professional baker, and a novice gardener. This is one of their stories.

"On a spring day in Farmington, Maine, as I was walking downtown, I made my way through a line of cars that were waiting for the light. In front of me was a large Confederate flag flying from the back of a white pick-up. I crossed the street, not looking at who was driving the truck, and went into the store. As I went about my business, I felt stunned; my mind stirred with thoughts and feelings, memories and speculations. I felt fear, and anger, and curiosity; worry, and defiance, and humiliation.

"As I stood at the register, I chatted with the older white woman behind the counter. "Hi, how are you today?"

"'I'm good, how are you?,' she replied. I paused, and then I told her about the truck with the flag.

"She said something like, 'Oh, yes, we have some of that around here, but don't let it upset you. Don't let it get to you.'

"I appreciated her gesture, her attempt to comfort me. At the same time, her gesture made me more uncomfortable. She was asking me to respect that person's right to fly that flag and shrug it off like everybody else. What she failed to see, or perhaps ignore in a gesture of 'colorblindness' wrapped in the First Amendment, is that I am not like everybody else who walks in the shadow of that flag. I am from "away;" my hair is coarse; my skin is dark brown. I am a black man in Maine. In so many ways, I am not like everybody else around here. But I want to belong here. In so many ways, that flag represents the denial of my rights, my belonging.

"It is impossible for me to blend in, to hide my black body, to "not let it get to me." I don't have the privilege of hiding from history. Because I am conscious, I know what it is; I know its name. It rides in the back of a pick-up truck, it proudly stalks around town like an alpha predator. It clings to me like a nightmare, while it seems like everyone else is walking through a dream. I point at the thing and say 'Look!,' and the crowd replies, 'Yes, but...'

"When I hear 'Yes,' I feel heard. When I hear 'but,' I become invisible; my life doesn't matter. It's this 'but—,' this disbelief in the truth of black bodies, this tolerance for something that is ugly and intolerant, that is the terror that 'everybody else' allows to walk in their midst: a casual terror that I cannot escape any more than I can escape my own body, my own consciousness. A terror that makes all lives matter less. I struggle to wake up from the nightmare, and the dream that is its mirror image. I struggle to make my life matter, for black lives to matter, so that all lives will matter."

Tell your story, tell this country's story, tell the world's story, and, if some of those stories, don't seem exactly right, then question them, examine them, reshape them, and then retell them incorporating the new truths you have discovered and leaving out the falsehoods that have been brought to light. It is a never-ending task but one that is worth the effort.

Terry Pratchett, English humorist, satirist, and author of fantasy novels said, "There's always a story. It's all stories, really. The sun coming up every day is a story. Everything's got a story in it. Change the story, change the world."

Please join me in a time of meditation using words from Nathan Walker.

"breathing in
i am aware of my pain.
breathing out
i am aware that i am not my pain.

"breathing in
i am aware of my past.
breathing out
i am aware that i am not my past.

"breathing in
i am aware of my anger.

breathing out
i am aware that i am not my anger.

“breathing in
i am aware of my despair.
breathing out
i am aware that i am not my despair.

“breathing in
i am aware of peace.
breathing out
i am aware that i am worthy of peace.

“breathing in
i am aware of love.
breathing out
i am aware that i am worthy of love.

“breathing in
i am aware of joy.
breathing out
i am aware that i am an agent of joy.

“breathing in
i am aware of hope.
breathing out
i am aware that i am an agent of hope.

“breathing in
i am aware.”