

# TESTIFYING: INVOKING THE LIVES AND VOICES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN UNIVERSALISTS, UNITARIANS AND UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST WOMEN<sup>1</sup>

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Paper in Progress

**Every cultural group needs to be free to speak its own word in its own way, and to develop its own religious expressions, using whatever approaches it chooses; it should not be expected to interpret its heritage in the light of the western Christian tradition or through the use of the kinds of academic tools we tend to impose on it with virtually no reflection.<sup>2</sup>**

## Introduction

The African American Unitarian Universalists, Unitarians and Universalists women featured in this essay are characterized not only by their affiliation with Unitarian Universalism<sup>3</sup> but by their quests for individuality and selfhood, and their willingness to step into and claim the fullness of their lives, and to seek truth and justice for their people.<sup>4 5</sup> Another common passion shared by these women is their social justice orientation. To gain a more thorough understanding of African American women's lives and to glimpse their celebrations and what they have confronted in their lives, it is necessary that we consider their individual lives. But we would be remiss to stop there. Without a larger context to embrace these women they are merely

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<sup>1</sup> I will be using the terms African American and black interchangeably to mean women of African descent.

<sup>2</sup> Ivone Gebara. *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation* (Minneapolis: Fortress press, 1999), 9.

<sup>3</sup> Unitarians and Universalists consolidated in 1961. Prior to 1961 individuals identified as either Unitarians or Universalists and it was not until after the consolidation that Unitarian Universalism existed. Hence, in an effort to show these distinctions and to be inclusive I am using the historically correct terms. Thus, when I speak of periods before and after 1961, pre-consolidation and post-consolidation, I am attempting to be historically accurate. For instance, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (1825-1911) was a Unitarian. Annie Bissell Jordan Willis (1893-1977) was a Universalist.

<sup>4</sup> It was in 325 CE that Trinitarian conceptualizing the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost were pronounced as the only acceptable Christian doctrine. Unitarians' rejection of the trinity ensured their continued persecution. In 381 A.D., a General Council was called in Constantinople where assembled bishops added an article to the Nicene Creed that affirmed the Godhead of the Holy Spirit. A religious movement of Unitarians emerged from the liberal thoughts of Faustus Socinus (1539-1604).

<sup>5</sup> Universalism was primarily introduced in America through the efforts of John Murray, a former Methodist who preached the first Universalist sermon in America in 1770. Murray's message was one of hope. His message differed significantly from the prevailing theology of Calvinism that promoted the belief that God saved a chosen few and thus, the fate of all others was helplessly doomed. Consequently, Murray's message appealed to those excluded by Calvinism. The new doctrine of universal salvation began to spread in the late eighteenth century. The gospel of a saving salvation particularly appealed to rural and small-town folks. Thus began Universalism in America.

individuals subject to individual analysis. I want to offer multiple approaches and levels of interpretation to interrogate and understand their lives. Thus I would understand their contributions and their connections to contemporary issues. I identify with those that believe Unitarian Universalists generally would benefit from exposure to stories depicting African American Unitarian Universalist women. They are not currently reflected in our main stream Unitarian Universalist literature. Thus, I invite readers to think about these women in a historical context offering a more comprehensive analysis. When we place African American women at the center of a discourse about Unitarian Universalism we are intersecting not only race, class, gender and culture, but also religion and spirituality. This research explores the rich contributions of female African American, Unitarian Universalists, Unitarians and Universalists. The research will enhance readers' understanding of them and perhaps encourage appreciation of the challenges they faced both as women and African Americans embracing Unitarian Universalism, Unitarianism and Universalism. I join the ranks of generations of African American women that have attempted to construct a liberating testimony.

Blessed Be! Rev. Dr. Qiyamah A. Rahman

### **Race, Class and Gender in the Lives of African American Women**

African American women's oppression has yielded a distinct perspective providing survival skills which utilize adaptive behaviors and resistance. Black women's survival has often depended on their ability to use all of the larger communities' economic, social and cultural resources,<sup>6</sup> However the construction of negative stereotypes from the popular culture has impacted the characterization and perception of black women.<sup>7</sup> Black women's resistance and survival have pushed against the negative stereotypes and the resulting perceptions that have

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<sup>6</sup> Gloria I. Joseph and Jill Lewis, *Common Differences: Conflicts in Black and White Feminist Perspectives*, 2.

<sup>7</sup> Marsha J. Tyson Darling, *The State, Friend or Foe? Distributive Justice Issues and African American Women*. <http://www.giga./conference.as?action=item&sourcedocuments&id=71>. December 28,2007.

haunted them. bell hooks reminds us that the systematic devaluation of Black womanhood was not simply a direct consequence of racial hatred. Hooks contends that it was a calculated method of social control.<sup>8</sup> At first glance, with little or no knowledge of the historical nature of African American women's experiences, one might consider hooks' statement extreme, an exaggeration or possibly erroneous. In the opinion of Marsha J. Tyson Darling, black women have been the victims of centuries of systematic biases designed to dehumanize them:

As the only population of women in **American** ever defined by law as chattel property, African American women are indeed very vulnerable to enduring beliefs, attitudes and actions that attitudinally undermine, and structurally expropriate self-determination from black females.<sup>9</sup>

The absence of any human rights for enslaved women and their off springs disadvantaged them. While enslaved males and females did the same work, enslaved females provided additional sources of sexual pleasure and profit for their slave masters. The children they bore enriched the coffers of the slave master and were children that did not have to be purchased. Thus it was in the interest of plantation owners and the existing economy based on the free labor system of slaves to appropriate and institutionalize black female production, reproduction and sexual atrocities. (interject stories) White society's need to demonize black women as lascivious and promiscuous grew out of the need to protect the economic usefulness of black women. As the property of their white slave masters, any offspring, regardless of their paternity became the property of their white slave owners. Except for abolitionists who denounced the rape and defilement of black women, many white men and women denied the humanity of enslaved women and often dismissed them as "incapable of decent womanhood." Legal statutes precluded any right of ownership of enslaved women's bodies to anyone except their owners. However,

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<sup>8</sup> bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*

<sup>9</sup> Marsha J. Tyson Darling, *The State, Friend or Foe? Distributive Justice Issues and African American Women*. <http://www.giga.conference.as?action=item&sourcedocuments&id=71>. December 28,2007.

history is replete with accounts of women that challenged the dehumanization of slavery and fought to claim agency of their bodies and lives despite their legal status as objects of labor. The efforts of two slave mothers, Harriet Jacobs AKA, Linda Brent, author of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Eliza and Linda, the principal antagonists in both historic accounts, challenged the established legal order that treated them and their children as property. They fought to assert their human rights over slavery as virtuous women and good mothers. On the other hand, the cult of womanhood was in full bloom for white women by the middle 1800s. Generally, white women were viewed as the chief transmitters of religious and moral values. However, this privileged status was denied slave women.<sup>10</sup> The four cardinal virtues of "true womanhood, piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity" applied only to white women.<sup>11</sup>

Male medical and scientific professionals in this country sealed the fate of slave women by denouncing their humanity as sub-human. These racist beliefs found their way into politics, social policy and popular culture through specialized medical and scholarly journals, cinema, radio, and television. According to Darling:

Many of the nation's health care practitioners and providers and scientific researchers were trained or influenced by the racist and misogynist beliefs about Black female sexuality even as they set about to further disparate treatment for Black females, particularly in the area of reproductive rights. So widespread and pervasive was the vilification of Black females that many professionals in the public health movement, the birth control movement, and still later, the social welfare movement internalized many of the pejorative racist and sexist beliefs constructed into humanities, science and social science scholarship and popular culture in earlier decades.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Marisa Anne Pagnattaro, *In Defiance of the Law: From Anne Hutchinson to Toni Morrison* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), 83-85).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>12</sup> Marsha J. Tyson Darling, *The State, Friend or Foe? Distributive Justice Issues and African American Women*. <http://www.giga./conference.as?action=item&sourcedocuments&id=71>. December 28, 2007.

Many feminist/womanist scholars contend that black women, as well as women of color, face systematic cultural assaults, described by Darling and hooks, that are perpetrated not only by individuals but institutions and social organizations. The maintenance and flourishing of certain groups' cultures depends on the systematic cultural assault of others. Thus, black women have been defined and categorized in dehumanizing ways with terms designed to attack the essence of their personal integrity and self worth. Historically, black women have been stereotyped as sex objects and breeders. As a result, black women's personal growth and self image have been negatively impacted by these continuing myths and stereotypes which are still so pervasive in society. The 2007 Don Imus debacle is an example of the continued attack on black women's integrity. His depiction of black women as "nappy headed ho's" was only one of the most blatant high profile examples of the continuing devastating affect of myths and stereotypes that exists in the collective consciousness of white society (and internalized in some blacks). Adult black women are not the only victims of this systematic oppression as indicated by six year old Desre Watson. Watson was arrested in Avon Park, Florida in April, 2007 by three adult officers as a result of a tantrum that consisted of flailing her arms and pulling a teacher's hair in kindergarten. She was subsequently brought before a judge on "unruly conduct." The convergence of race, class and gender placed this child at risk in this egregious situation. Unconscious stereotypes impact social relations on every imaginable level and places black females in harm's way. Similarly, stereotypes like the emasculating black matriarch popularized by then Assistant Secretary of Labor, Patrick Moynihan's Report titled, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, also known as the *Moynihan Report* in 1965 also propagated such injurious myths. Such stereotypes are intended to inhibit black women and create a sense of shame about their strength and ability to survive, thus libeling black women's character,

discrediting their existence and invalidating their personal strengths. Some of the continued polarization and fractured relations between black men and women can be attributed to these damaging stereotypes of black women that are sometimes internalized, to the detriment of black men and women's relations.

### **Women's Movement**

Hooks' contends that the contemporary women's movement during the second wave marginalized, slighted and even ignored women of color's concerns and struggles. Furthermore, hooks perceived white women's actions to appropriate black women's presence and to assert their credibility. This resulted in white women minimizing race and racial oppression. Instead they pushed the issue of class. By failing to recognize the interlocking oppressions of race, class and gender, they minimized important social relations that acted oppressively against African American women and other women of color. Furthermore, white women isolated economics, politics, culture and gender, while dismissing racial politics as equally valid.

Thus, white women retreated away from any possible alliance with African American women, while claiming leadership of the women's movement. Ultimately, black women activists were forced to conclude that most activist white women in leadership were not ready or willing to relinquish power or even to consider sharing power. As a result, womanism evolved and black women created a black women feminism/womanism based on their lived experiences. Thus, black women came together to form their own organizations. Black feminisms commitment to the liberation of black women and its recognition of black men as valuable and complex human beings undergirded the organizational efforts and analyses of progressive black women. Holding the dialectical relationship of race, class and gender as interlocking oppressions was central to formulating an analysis to guide black feminists/womanists, while distinguishing themselves

from white feminists. Black women created and continue to create feminisms out of militant national liberation and /or anti-racist movements which fundamentally distinguish their struggles from white women's. Included among the black women's feminist organizations that evolved during the second wave of feminism were: 1) Combahee River Collective; 2) National Black Feminist Organization; and 3) Black Women Organizing for Action. Their presence, along with other organizations challenged the notion that feminism was a white middle-class movement.

### Patriarchal Biases

Oppression of women is one of the oldest forms of oppression known to humankind.<sup>13</sup> Male misogyny is acted out on a daily basis, not just in this country, but around the world. Feminist theologians' readily biblically based accounts substantiate claims that women have historically been victims of patriarchal oppression. Many noted scholars have investigated the relationship between patriarchy and religion and have confirmed that many of the major world religions have in fact been deeply influenced by the patriarchal views that developed.<sup>14</sup> As a result, women's contributions and lives have not been fully acknowledged in the Bible and other historical sources. Thus, much of the focus of feminist theologians' investigations and discourse have centered on the past and present contributions of women as well as resistance to injustices such as clergy sexual misconduct.

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<sup>13</sup> Ann-Cathrin Jarl, *In Justice: Women and Global Economics* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 12.

<sup>14</sup> Russell and Clarkson, *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, 205.

## Gender Relations

Social relations between men and women are fundamentally about power. Gender is a primary way of signifying and negotiating power relations between males and females in society. Consequently, gender is significant to how power is constructed. Power, its construction and legitimacy, is crucial to understanding women's oppression and ultimately the particular oppression that is the focus of this research—clergy sexual misconduct. How do the attitudes and beliefs that women are inferior to men contribute to women's marginalized status? Women's marginalized status subjects them to male power and privilege. Women's marginalized status disadvantages them and positions them to have less access to resources. Women's marginalized status is a reflection of their limited access to resources and privilege. Their diminished status renders them vulnerable to male violence. Violence against women helps sustain male social control of women and thus helps maintain a patriarchal social order according to West.<sup>15</sup> The hegemony of men's power and its ties to global capitalism is dramatically depicted in societal laws that often fail to protect women, rendering them even more vulnerable to male violence.<sup>16</sup>

Women's marginalized status in many societies around the world is a result of gender biases. These gender biases are evidenced in the following ways: in general, women tend to hold positions making less money than men while working longer hours, they have less access to political decisions, decision makers and social institutions, and women often stand to inherit less. Thus, while women are granted fewer rights, they are also, in most societies, responsible for the care and nurture of family, including the elderly and infants. One cannot overlook the critical

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<sup>15</sup> West, *Wounds of the Spirit*, 107.

<sup>16</sup> Phyllis Noerager Stern, "World Developments in Nursing Practice and Violence against Women," *RESPONSE* 13, no. 2 (1990): 20.

role that many women assume in reproducing the future labor force. In addition to all the aforementioned factors, many women can expect to work either part-time or full-time outside of the home in order to either support her children as a single parent or to help support the two income household to make ends meet.

### **Patriarchy, Sexualized Violence and Bodily Integrity**

Patriarchy is enforced through a combination of forces including economic exploitation, violence, and the sexualization of women. Sexual exploitation must not be viewed as an aberration of an unfair system, but an integral part of a patriarchal, capitalistic system that is based on the subordination and exploitation of women and children. While all women are oppressed, not all women are oppressed in the same way. The interlocking nature of oppressions subjects individuals to various -isms because they are stigmatized and perceived as different. Thus their status and access to resources and privileges reflect their socially constructed identities. Such is the case with people of color, the poor, gays and lesbians, elderly, and other marginalized groups. Like the example of women, this does not presume that all oppressed people experience oppression identically. Likewise, women experience patriarchy vastly differently depending on their race, class and other social markers of identity that interact with their gender identity. For instance, a white heterosexual female domestic and a Black female lesbian bank executive may suffer similar incidents of workplace sexual harassment, but race, class, gender and sexual orientation intersect to produce vastly different outcomes and access to resources and redress.

Another aspect of women's oppression that is usually linked to capitalism is the commodification of women's bodies. As such, their labor is sexualized, thus eroticizing their

subordination.<sup>17</sup> A casual examination of any of the industrialized nation's urban cities quickly establishes the validity of this statement. The proliferation of adult entertainment such as strip clubs and prostitution raises grave concerns, as does the increase of sex trafficking around the world. To the chagrin of the "civilized world," sex trafficking of women and children continues to plague both developing and developed nations. Unscrupulous males from developing nations pimp women and children to developed nations. Angela Gilliam maintains that the rapid growth of the international sex trade market is linked to the ideological notion of women as property whose bodies are fair game to be consumed.<sup>18</sup> High rates of rape and other forms of gender violence abound in so-called developed nations around the world. Traci West believes in some instances that males are actually unable to distinguish between (healthy) sexual intercourse with women and violent assault because of the impersonal marketing of women's bodies and the messages that conflate sex and violence.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, Karen Lebacqz contends that violence and sexuality have too often been linked in the experiences of women. When sex and sexuality become fraught with violence and power struggles then women's bodies become battlefields. Witness Bosnia and Rwanda where systematic rapes were used as tools of war to ensure ethnic genocide. Sadly, such acts of gender violence have become routine and perceived as a normal part of war and conflicts. Angela Gilliam connects global capitalism to the sexual commodification of women. She contends that capitalism has carried out its expansion on the backs and bodies of women. Irene Diamond and Gloria Feman Orenstein articulate similar findings. They contend that while "gender subordination and patriarchy are the oldest of

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<sup>17</sup> Fortune and Poling, *Sexual Abuse by Clergy*, 54-55

<sup>18</sup> Angela Gilliam, "The Sexual Commodification of Women in the New Global Culture: A Black Feminist Perspective" (paper presented at the conference of African Diaspora and the World, Atlanta, Georgia, 1999).

<sup>19</sup> West, *Wounds of the Spirit*, 117.

oppressions, through development they have taken on new and more violent forms” of gender-based oppression.”<sup>20</sup> Eco-feminists, Diamond and Orenstein link the “mal-development” of so called third world countries with the simultaneous subjugation of women and nature.

Mal-development is rooted in identifying a narrow Western patriarchal bourgeois interest as universal, a partial as the whole. Violence arises from imposing this part on a diverse and integrated world. It arises by destroying wholeness in the mind, seeing separation where it should see unity. Woman is alienated from and dominated by man, nature is separated from and exploited by man, and society is torn apart by fragmented thought and action, by projecting duality, divisions, and dichotomies where they do not exist...The violence to nature, as symptomized by the ecological crisis, and the violence to women, as symptomized by women’s subjugation and exploitation, arise from this subjugation of the feminine principle...In mal-development, nature and women are viewed as the “other,” as the passive non-self.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Irene Diamond and Gloria Feman Orenstein, *Reweaving the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1990), 191.

<sup>21</sup> Diamond and Orenstein, *Reweaving the World*, 193, 194.

## **Universalist, Unitarian, and Universalist African American Women**

Recognizing women in Unitarian Universalist scholarship has not always yielded fruitful results for Unitarian Universalists African American women and women of color. Too often most Unitarian Universalist scholars have completely ignored the roles of African American female Unitarians, Universalists and Unitarian Universalists. In other instances the same historic personalities are recycled and thus become burdened with the dubious and thankless task of maintaining the tired I-am-Black-woman-hear-me-roar motif. When non-Unitarian Universalist feminist/womanist scholars have researched Universalist, Unitarian, and Universalist African American women they tend to focus solely on their historic contributions and sever their connections to Unitarian Universalism. This renders them spiritually invisible.<sup>22</sup> It is time to interrupt this travesty that marginalizes Unitarian Universalist African American women. This short research paper seeks to build on a small but growing body of scholarship on African American female Universalists, Unitarians, and Unitarian Universalists. Readers are invited to seek out additional resources and to learn more about these and other African American Unitarian Universalists, Unitarians and Universalists women.

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<sup>22</sup> A classic example is Frances Ellen Watkins Harper. She is a well known icon in Women's Studies and particularly Black Women's Studies. However, her affiliation as a Unitarian and member at First Unitarian in Philadelphia is seldom mentioned. I had been exposed to her life story before I discovered she was Unitarian. One of the few non Unitarian Universalist scholars that in fact mentions Harper's affiliation as a Unitarian is Melba Joyce Boyd in her book, *Discarded Legacy: Politics and Poetics in the Life of Frances E. W. Harper 1825-1911*. I acknowledge her careful scholarship and the recognition that one's religious affiliation is a critical part of ones identity. A Unitarian Universalist scholar, Jane E. Rosecrans, and member of Collegium, has written an essay on Harper titled, *Between Black and White: Frances Ellen Watkins Harper*.

## **THE ELDERS THAT HAVE COME BEFORE US**

The phrase, “we stand on the shoulders of those that have come before us,” while overused, rings true nevertheless when talking about African American women whose journeys have included Unitarianism and Universalism. While a few might have been born Unitarian or Universalists or Unitarian Universalists, most have stepped out of the safety and familiarity of black culture into the culture of Unitarian Universalism, a predominantly European American culture, in order to respond to a compelling call to a new form of spirituality, religion and ideology. What common denominators, if any, exist between these women? Clearly they are risk takers, willing to claim their identities and voices even when it meant pushing the boundaries. Frances Ellen Watkins Harper and Charlotte Forten Grimke were two such pioneers as seen below:

## **Frances Ellen Watkins Harper: I Hold a Place In My Heart for My People**

### **Introduction**

Frances Ellen Watkins Harper was an anomaly in her lifetime. She achieved financial independence and nationwide acclaim as a lecturer, writer, and social activist in the nineteenth century, an era when such opportunities were not usually available to American women of any race.

Born in 1825 to free African American parents Baltimore, Maryland, Frances Watkins suffered the loss of her mother at age three. An enlightened uncle took charge of her formal education and strongly influenced her early intellectual development. At a time when it was considered a crime to teach a slave to read and write, her free status allowed her to pursue her education. Around age fourteen, she secured employment with a white family. In their home, she was given access to their library and read widely.

Frances Watkins formed a lifelong friendship with William Still, an ex-slave who taught himself to read and write. In 1847, he became secretary of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, one of many antislavery societies formed by black people. In 1859, after John Brown's failed raid on Harper's Ferry, Watkins spent two weeks with Brown's wife while he was on trial.

Other details about Watkins' life during this period are scant. She continued to lecture and teach during and after the war, becoming one of the first female lecturers, black or white, hired by abolitionist associations to speak to and represent antislavery organizations around the country. In addition to donating generous portions of her income other abolitionist, she never charged black people for her lectures. Watkins married Fenton Harper in 1860 and lived with him

until his death in 1864. They had one daughter, and during her marriage, she limited her activism to her immediate locale of Virginia.

The emancipation of slaves kindled the possibility of voting rights for blacks and women. Frances Watkins Harper and her contemporaries campaigned tirelessly for women's right to vote. She also worked with the Women's Christian Temperance Union for almost a decade and served as its national superintendent of the black division for ten years (1878-1888). An excerpt from her temperance speech to the Women's Congress was reprinted in the January 1878 issue of the *English Woman's Review*.

Harper's literary works were prolific and very popular. She supported herself through the sale of her books, selling over fifty thousand copies, which was remarkable for that era. One of the most widely read American poets of the nineteenth century, she published over 120 poems in eleven volumes between 1854 and 1901. Her essays, speeches, and poems appeared regularly in all the prominent African American periodicals. Harper's passionate energy was directed toward several movements: abolitionism, race advancement and equality, women's and children's rights, Christian morality, and temperance.

While Harper's education and breeding helped develop middleclass white audiences for her literary talents, she was also able to write significant protest literature in the black liberation tradition. She argued for self-help and self-advancement of the race, and much of her poetry addressed subjects of oppression, religion, and the social and moral reform of black people. She used her influence and position to argue in support of civil rights for black people, women, and children.

Harper was one of the first black women known to publish a short story, *The Two Offers*, in 1859, and to publish a novel, *Iola Leroy*, in 1892. Though she was a political writer, her

decision to use the romance novel to communicate messages of racial pride and service to the race reflected the limited options available to women, despite their talents. *Iola Leroy* portrays “race” issues, and the chief character boldly embraces her black roots despite having white features that could help her pass into the more privileged world of white society. Iola’s sense of “race loyalty” causes her to reject the trappings of the white world and struggle for her race.

Harper’s life represented some of the earliest stains of black women’s womanism and feminism. As part of the womanist tradition, she broke many social norms that restricted women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. For instance, she often traveled by herself during her continuous lectures for the Anti-Slavery Society of Maine and others. She also spoke to audiences that were mixed both in terms of race and gender, something quite unusual at that time. As a married woman, she campaigned for women’s financial independence and marriage equity issues.

Harper never appeared intimidated by her male peers and colleagues. Her female characters Iola and Janette depicted in *Iola Leroy* and *The Two Offers* are liberated women. Janette gains personal as well as economic independence as a successful though unmarried career woman. Her female characters are centrally placed in each novel and short story, and the plots depict the lives of women and their realities as prominent, with males playing secondary roles.

Frances Harper’s deep concern for the plight of black people, witnessed during her travels throughout the United States, provided continued impetus for her work. She worked at the Bethel African Methodist Association, although she was a member of the First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia. Her strong Christian beliefs were consistently projected in all her work. In *Iola Leroy*, the main character, Iola, states her most admired Old Testament characters are Moses and

Nehemiah because they are willing to put aside their own advantages in order to benefit their race and country.

In her later years, Harper was an activist for a renewed morality within her race. He organized Sunday schools lectured on temperance issues, and helped found the National Association of Colored Women.

## **Charlotte Forten Grimke: The Fruit Does Not Fall Far from Its Source**

**She stretches her hand to the poor. (Proverbs 31:20) She extends her arms to the needy (Proverbs 31:26) and She open her mouth in wisdom, and kindly counsel is on her tongue.**

### **Introduction**

Charlotte Forten, born August 17, 1837 was an extraordinary individual whose life as a free born black reflects the life of middle class blacks and her family's ability to pursue a full and richly stimulating life despite the social restrictions of gender and race during the Civil War era. Growing up female Charlotte was expected to learn all the domestic etiquette of sewing, cooking, visiting and caring for the sick. She was also exposed to a liberal education that included the American and European classics and piano as well as language skills including French, German, and Latin. Charlotte began chronicling her life on Wednesday, May 24, 1854. Her five volumes of journals spanned 1854 to 1892. These journals are significant because of the rich insights gleaned through her sensitive and articulate observations and comments. These observations provided insights into a social and intellectual lifestyle of middle class blacks as well as their interactions with white abolitionists and intellectuals. Furthermore, her journals provided insights into the class dynamics of free middle class blacks lifestyles, attitudes and activities that were in many ways very similar to middle class whites, while at the same time drastically different because of the institution of slavery and racism. However, the few incidents that Charlotte detailed about the racial discrimination she encountered, were a clear reminder that economic status did not insulate middle class blacks entirely from the ugly tentacles of racism.

In my examination of Charlotte's observations of the interactions between mostly white and black abolitionists and intellectuals, I believe several factors account for this given the times. Most of these interactions were between middle class and upper middle class blacks and whites,

thus their status formed a strong bond between this specific population of blacks and whites. In addition, one must also acknowledge their liberal politics that supported their mutual desire to abolish slavery. This, I believe was at the heart of the interaction, that is, the recognition of blacks humanity. Charlotte's journals provided glimpses into the social and intellectual circles frequented by Charlotte, her family and friends, many of whom are first and foremost, liberals, secondly, abolitionists and oftentimes Unitarians, Quakers and other liberalist individuals and communities of individuals. Charlotte's journal is steeped in the politics of the abolitionist movement as is noted by a friend's observations:

Saturday, June 17, 1864 - a bad headache has prevented my enjoying the fine weather today, or taking as much exercise as I generally do. Did me sewing on my return from school. - Read the "Liberator," then practiced a music lesson. Late in the afternoon I went to Mrs. Putnam's, and listened to an account of her journey, and her visit to my home-home I must still call, though I may never live there again; yet while those I love are there it shall be "home, sweet home." Mrs. P.[utnam] left my letters with her baggage in New York. But of le, which cannot be left behind, I received as much as the most exacting affection could desire. In the evening Miss Sarah Redmond read aloud Mr. Frothingham's sermon, whose stern truths shocked so many of his congregation. We of course, were deeply interested in it, and felt grateful to this truly Christian minister for his eloquent defense of oppressed humanity. While Miss R.[emond] was reading, Miss Osborne came in, and said she believed that we never talked or read anything but Anti-Slavery; she was quite tired of it. We assured her that she could never hear anything better; and said it was natural that we should speak and read much, on a subject so interesting to us. . .<sup>23</sup>

### **Charlotte's Unitarian Exposure**

Charlotte's access to education was the vehicle that facilitated her enlightened views on human rights and women's rights. While there is no documented evidence that Charlotte was in fact a Unitarian in practice, the fact that her opinions and ideas, as well as her social and intellectual circle consisted of so many close friends and interactions with Unitarians suggests a strong possibility that she might have been a closet Unitarian. We know she interacted with a

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<sup>23</sup> Ray Allen Billington, ed., *The Journal of Charlotte L. Forten* (New York: Collier Books, 1953), 48-9.

number of Unitarians. This paper will examine that history in greater detail at a later point.

Besides her interactions, another notable behavior that Charlotte shared with Unitarians of the day and other abolitionists, included the fact that most radical abolitionists, including Garrison, were professed spiritualists and Unitarians were Transcendentalists.”<sup>24</sup> Charlotte’s journal entry indicates both her skepticism and a willingness to trust the process:

Friday, Feb. 13. 1857 . . . This evening went to a spiritual meeting. A rapping mediums present. Many very satisfactory answers were given – satisfactory because they showed almost conclusively that there was no imposture. But I cannot think there is a spiritual agency. Still I am open to conviction. . . <sup>25</sup>

Some of the many Unitarians mentioned in Charlotte’s journal entries that she interacted with include the following: Rev. Theodore Parker, Rev. William Furness, Rev. Samuel May, Laura Matilda Towns, Colonel Robert Gould Shaw, Frances Kemble, Louisa May Alcott, Maria Weston Chapman, Lydia Maria Child, Margaret Fuller, Charles Sumner, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Rev. Octavious Brooks Frothingham, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Lucretia (Coffin) Mott.

Rev. William Furness, a prominent Unitarian clergyman and abolitionist was minister at First Unitarian. For this reason he is of particular interest because of his connection to two Unitarian females, Laura Matilda Towns, a teacher and physician that preceded Charlotte and who like Charlotte, traveled south and taught on St. Helena Island for approximately thirty years. Towns was a member of First Unitarian in Philadelphia where Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, an Africa American female abolitionist, writer, and Unitarian was also a member. In addition, Harper was a dedicated temperance advocate, women’s rights activist and gifted writer.

This is what Charlotte wrote after hearing Furness speak:

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<sup>24</sup> Ray Allen Billington, ed., *The Journal of Charlotte L. Forten* (New York: Collier Books, 1953), 252.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

Sunday, October 18, 1857 - . . . To-night heard one of the most beautiful and excellent Anti-Slavery lectures, by Rev. Mr. [William] F. [urness]. It did my very soul good. Most earnestly and truly did he speak of the terrible prejudice against color. He particularly dwelt on the dreadful effects produced by slavery on the morals of the people; how some of the greatest minds had utterly debased themselves at the bidding of the Slave Power. I have rarely heard anything more eloquent than were man passages of his lecture. My heart was so full of gratitude, of deep and earnest appreciation, I cold not help writing a few lines to express to him something of what I felt. Thank God for such brave earnest hearts as these!<sup>26</sup>

Rev. Samuel J. May, a Unitarian minister, disciple and fellow laborer of William Lloyd Garrison was from a Boston merchant family and a Harvard graduate that Charlotte met and briefly described as follows:<sup>27</sup>

Tuesday, December 18, 1856 - A dear, good man has spent the day at our school – Mr. May of Syracuse - one of the most delightful persons I have ever met.<sup>28</sup>

Wednesday, December 19, 1856 – This afternoon Mr. May gave us an interesting lecture on the Idiot Schools.<sup>29</sup>

Sunday, December 23, 1856 – This evening had the very great pleasure of hearing dear Mr. May speak on anti-slavery. It was one of the best lectures I have ever heard. And I thanked him with my whole heart for the beautiful and well deserved tribute which he paid Mr. Garrison, who is so very greatly unappreciated and misrepresented.<sup>30</sup>

Rev. Theodore Parker was an abolitionist and supporter of women’s rights. While he was a little late coming to the abolishment of slavery, he embraced the cause, even putting his life on the line when he learned that slave-catchers were searching for two members of his congregation – William and Ellen Craft. He hid them in his house and wrote the following: “For the first time I armed myself, and put my house in a state of defense. For two weeks I wrote my

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<sup>26</sup> Brenda Stevenson, ed. *The Journals of Charlotte Forten Grimke* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 262-3.

<sup>27</sup> It is not clear to this author why she refers to the Rev. as Mr.

<sup>28</sup> Ray Allen Billington, *The Journal of Charlotte L. Forten*, 77.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

sermons with a sword in the open drawer under my inkstand, and a pistol in the flap of the desk, loaded, ready. . . “<sup>31</sup>

was a member of the 1850 Vigilance Committee that had close ties to the Underground Rail Road network. Black residents of Beacon Hill formed one of the most cohesive and effective networks in the nation with almost everyone providing shelter, clothing and food to self emancipated people.

Daniel Webster Christmas Day, 1855 - . . . Went to hear Ralph Waldo Emerson lecture on beauty. .

According to Marisa Anne Pagnattaro, Massachusetts Senator Daniel Webster was publicly rebuked by Ralph Waldo Emerson for his support of slavery during the final debates when Senator James Mason of Virginia “introduced a bill to reassert the constitutional right of slave holders to apprehend fugitive slaves.”<sup>32</sup> In addition, Emerson was noted for his

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### **Charlotte’s Ancestral Ties**

Charlotte Forten like most individuals did not emerge as an anomaly in her family of origin. Instead, she reflected the seeds planted and nurtured through her ancestral ties. Her grandfather, father and mother all modeled for Charlotte the importance of education, economic sufficiency and a strong work ethic, loving supportive family and friends, intellectual and cultural pursuits, spiritual fulfillment and a life guided by values such as a sense of freedom, justice and equality. Charlotte’s lineage taught her the primacy of ethics over material possessions.

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<sup>31</sup> Joan Gelbein, *Two Lives, One Dream: Theodore Parker and Martin Luther King, Jr.* Arlington, VA: sermon January 14, 2001. <http://www.uucava.org/sermons/ParkerMLK011401.htm> January 9, 2007.

<sup>32</sup> Marisa Anne Pagnattaro, *In Defiance of the Law: From Anne Hutchinson to Toni Morrison* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), 89.

Charlotte's grandfather, James Forten was described as a man of "wealth, idealism and determination."<sup>33</sup> James Forten was born in 1766 to free parents and was considered by some to be one of the first true abolitionists in the United States. He first voiced his opposition to the American Colonization Society in 1817. They proposed to win blacks' freedom and then ship them to Africa. They proposed to endorse Forten as the ruler of Liberia if he secured the support of Blacks. Forten declined and set out to publicize their plan. He accomplished this with a national convention of Blacks in Philadelphia on September 15, 1830 to oppose colonization. James Forten, Charlotte's grandfather volunteered as a powder boy aboard a Philadelphia privateer during the Revolutionary War. He set out for England and was exposed to abolitionist thinking during the year he spent in England. He decided to return home to fight against slavery. With his newfound awareness and knowledge he soon established his leadership in the black community in Philadelphia. As a result of an apprenticeship to a sail maker he became a foreman at 20. His astute business savvy combined with his sailing knowledge allowed him to become the proprietor at age 32. Additionally, his invention of a device to handle sails earned him a fortune of \$100,000. By the 1830's the antislavery movement was fully activated. With his sail making shop that consisted of forty workers, black and white. In addition, he supported his wife, eight children and other relatives in a spacious house on Lombard Street. He never drank and was a supporter of temperance societies and advocated for universal peace and women's rights. Forten was a great supporter of William Lloyd Garrison and provided financial and moral support. He oftentimes solicited subscriptions and sent them directly to Garrison along with words of encouragement.

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<sup>33</sup> Ray Allen Billington, *The Journal of Charlotte L. Forten* (New York: Collier Books, 1953), 12.

The other major influence on Charlotte Forten was her father, Robert Forten. Robert Forten was raised in an environment of abolitionist protest influenced by his father. As a young man he followed in his father's footsteps and became a popular abolitionist speaker. The amazing parallels between father and son are striking. Like his father, Robert Forten fled to England and Canada to escape racism. However, once the Civil War began he returned home, believing that educated "colored men" should join Lincoln's holy crusade.<sup>34</sup> He enlisted as a private in the Forty-Third United States Colored Regiment on March 14, 1864 and was assigned to recruiting service in Maryland. He died a month later in April, 1864. His body was shipped to Philadelphia. This man who had resisted the oppression of slavery throughout his entire life was buried with full military honors and was the first Black to ever receive such an honor.

Charlotte appeared to be surrounded by a large extended family that greatly influenced her identity formation. Perhaps the early death of her mother, Mary, at age three galvanized the family to compensate for her beloved mother. Another of Charlotte's relatives was her uncle Purvis, Robert Forten's brother. Purvis Forten was also a renowned abolitionist. At twenty-three he was one of the sixty selected in 1833 to sign the original declaration of the American Anti-Slavery Society. He was one of William Lloyd Garrison's staunchest supporters, serving on the executive committee as vice president and as president. He founded the Vigilance Committee of Philadelphia which over an eight year period assisted hundreds of fugitive slaves. He was called the "Father of the Underground Railroad."

### **The World of Charlotte as Glimpsed Through her Eyes**

A "typical day" in Charlotte's teen years is reflected in her journal entry that depicts the abolitionist leanings of her entire family that characterized her life and profoundly shaped her values and practice:

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 20.

Tuesday, May 30 1854 – Rose very early and was busy until nine o’clock; then, to Mrs. Putnam’s urgent request, went to keep store for her while she went to Boston to attend the Anti-Slavery Convention. I was very anxious to go, and will certainly do so tomorrow; the arrest of the alleged fugitive will give additional interest to the meetings, I should think. His trial is still going on and I can scarcely think of anything else; read again to-day as most suitable to my feelings and to the times, “The Run-away Slave at Pilgrim’s Point,” by Elizabeth B. Browning; how powerfully it is written! How earnestly and touchingly does the writer portray the bitter anguish of the poor fugitive as she thinks over all the wrongs and sufferings that she has endured, and of the sin to which tyrants have driven her but which they alone must answer for! It seems as if no one could read this poem without having his sympathies roused to the utmost in behalf of the oppressed. – After a long conversation with my friends on their return, on this all-absorbing subject, we separated for the night, and I went to bed, weary and sad.<sup>35</sup>

In many ways Charlotte was living the “American Dream.” She had access to education and was born into an enlightened family that exposed her to an array of experiences that included domestic travel and constant intellectual stimulation grounded in a strong social justice identification forged through exposure with some of the greatest abolitionists and leading intellectuals of her times as noted in the following journal entries:

Sunday July 9, 1854 – Attended the meetings during the day and evening. I felt sorry and disappointed to see such a small number of persons present. The intense heat of the weather perhaps accounted for this. Though for such a cause I thought much more than that might have been endured. Very eloquent and interesting speeches were made by Mr. Garrison and Mr. Foss in the afternoon and evening. After tea I went to Miss Sarah Redmond’s where Mr. Garrison had taken tea, and felt happier and better after listening to the conversation of that truly good and great man.<sup>36</sup>

Despite her youth (nineteen at the time) Charlotte was not above critiquing even the most celebrated intellectuals including Reverend Theodore Parker, noted Unitarian minister, abolitionist, philosopher, and writer:

Thursday, May 31, 1856 Attended the meetings all day. Several very interesting speeches were made; in the afternoon an animated discussion on the Constitution was carried on between Mr. Garrison, Mr. Pierpont, Mr. Burleigh and others. In the evening Mr. Phillips made one of the most eloquent speeches I have ever heard even from his eloquent lips. Theodore Parker spoke; I was somewhat disappointed in him. The Hall was crowded; and

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<sup>35</sup> Ray Allen Billington, ed., *The Journal of Charlotte L. Forten* (New York: Collier Books, 1953), 44-45.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

while Wendell Phillips was speaking, I gazed on the hundreds of earnest faces, and thought that those loving words so full of eloquence and truth could not be lost upon all of those to whom they were addressed.<sup>37</sup>

However, Parker managed to redeem himself just a year later in a presentation on Benjamin Franklin's anti-slavery views. Charlotte's journal entry dated, May 26, 1857 praises both "great liberal men":

Monday, May 26, Attended school.-This evening heard Rev. T. Parker's lecture on Franklin (Benjamin). It was admirable. He spoke beautifully of Franklin's anti-slavery views. "He the most famous man of America, almost of the age, was not shamed to be known as the President of an Abolition Society." – Noticed in Mr. P[arker] as do in all our great liberal men, how much more eloquent they become in speaking of slavery. This ever exciting subject kindles in them a noble enthusiasm, which always finds expression in the most beautiful and elevated language. . .<sup>38</sup>

One of the "liberal men" that Charlotte spoke most frequently about besides her own family and friends was William Lloyd Garrison. Garrison was one of the foremost European American male abolitionists of his times. Perhaps it was his passion that attracted Charlotte to him displayed in his fiery oratory in the excerpted statement from the first edition of his famous newspaper, *The Liberator* in 1831. This speech, though short, gives a sense of Garrison's passion and eloquence, "I will be as harsh as truth, and uncompromising as justice. . . I am in earnest, I will not equivocate, I will not excuse, I will not retreat a single inch, and I will be heard." As of August 4, 1837, Antislavery societies were growing across the country according to the *Liberator*. The *Liberator* listed "1006 antislavery societies in the USA with 100,000 members."<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 72-73.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>39</sup> A recent exhibit at The Museum of Afro-American History in Boston, MA on William Lloyd Garrison included a section titled, "Ambassadors of Abolition" and featured the following names in its extensive exhibit : Harriet Beecher Stowe, Charlotte Forten, John Greenleaf Whittier, William Cooper Nell (1<sup>st</sup> African American published historian), and Wendell Phillips. Wendell Phillips was so popular that the April 3, 1857 edition of the *Liberator* noted that the Rev. Theodore Parke's church was crowded with three thousand listeners even though the topic of Phillips address had not been announced in advance). Additional noted abolitionists named in the exhibit included the Rev. Thomas Paul, Rev. Samuel Snowden and Maria Stewart (1803-1879).

Charlotte diligently read the *Liberator* and made every effort to be fully apprised of the plight of enslaved blacks as indicated by the observation of Miss Osborne:

Wednesday, May 31, 1854 . . . Dined at Mr. Garrison's; his wife is one of the loveliest persons I have ever seen, worthy of such a husband. At the table, I watched earnestly the expression of that noble face, as he spoke beautifully in support of the non-resistant principles to which he has kept firm; he is indeed the very highest Christian spirit, to which I cannot hope to reach, however, for I believe in "resistance to tyrants," and would fight for liberty until death. . .<sup>40</sup>

Friday, June 1, 1854 – The trial is over at last; the commissioner's decision will be given to-morrow. We are all in the greatest suspense; what will that decision be? Alas! That any one should have the power to decide the right of a fellow being to himself! It is thought by many that he will be acquitted of the great crime of leaving a life of bondage, as the legal evidence is not thought sufficient to convict him. But it is only too probable that they will sacrifice him to propitiate the South, since so many at the North dared oppose the passage of the infamous Nebraska Bill.<sup>41</sup>

Charlotte lived during the same era as Amelia Jenks Bloomer, a women's rights activist and owner, operator and publisher of *The Lily*, a newspaper devoted to women's rights. In reaction to the uncomfortable floor-length and heavy dresses worn over many overskirts and with tight fitting corsets that made breathing and movements difficult, Bloomer invented an article of clothing that was controversial at the time.<sup>42</sup> The loose fitting garment that looked like a pair of big baggy pants was worn under a knee length dress. As a result, women took to bicycling, climbing trees and all sorts of activities that their former wearing apparel did not permit. Charlotte's journal entry recounts her first time climbing a tree in her bloomers:

Saturday, July 15, 1854 – Have been very busy today. On my return from school did some sewing, and made some gingerbread.- Afterwards adopted "Bloomer" costume and ascended the highest cherry tree, which being the first feat of the kind ever performed by

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<sup>40</sup> .Ray Allen Billington, ed., *The Journal of Charlotte L. Forten* (New York: Collier Books, 1961), 45.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 45-46.

<sup>42</sup> Christy Steele and Kerry Graves, ed., *A Free Black girl before the Civil War: The Diary of Charlotte Forten, 1854* (Mankato, MN: Blue Earth Books, 2000), 21.

me, I deem worthy of note. – Obtained some fine fruit, and felt for the time “monarch of all I surveyed.” And then descended from my elevated position. . . <sup>43</sup>

## Encountering Racial Discrimination

Despite her education and family status, Charlotte was not exempt from racial prejudice nor was her family able to shield her from the ugly realities of slavery. In one particular incident Charlotte and some friends had been visiting Byberry, her Uncle’s house, and was discussing the book, *Autobiography of a Female Slave* when they headed back to Philadelphia and had the following encounter:

Wednesday, June 17, 1857 – On reaching the city, Mrs. Putnam and I were refused at two ice cream saloons, successively. Oh, how terribly I felt! Could say but few words. Ms. Putnam told one of the people some wholesome truths, which cannot be soon forgotten. It is dreadful! Dreadful! I cannot stay in such a place. I long for New England. <sup>44</sup>

Less than a week later she encountered another incident of racial discrimination:

Tuesday, June 23 - Came to town this morning. Refused again in a saloon. This place is thoroughly hateful to me. Spent most of the day lying down, reading . . . <sup>45</sup>  
Charlotte

Charlotte writes a detailed account of the mob attack on her friend, William Lloyd

Garrison:

“Sunday, October 21, 1856 the twentieth anniversary of the day on which beloved Garrison was mobbed and insulted in the streets of Boston. Today on the very spot where that little band of noble-hearted women so heroically maintained the right, the dauntless Pioneer of our glorious cause stands with many true hearted co-workers, surrounded by hundreds of eager, sympathizing listeners. The men who dragged him with a rope around his neck through the streets of Boston, - and their own shame – not his would blush to confess it to-day. And even his bitter enemies are forced, despite themselves, to respect his self sacrificing unfaltering devotion to Liberty and Truth. . . <sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>46</sup>

Charlotte was incredibly gifted. She was studying German, Latin, and French. She was in the midst of the abolitionist circles in Boston, one of the strong holds of activists and the home of William Lloyd Garrison, and the Liberator. Boston was both a hotbed of abolitionists and the seat of intellectuals. The intersection of these two promoted an environment that was typically filled with meetings and discussions, fairs and debates. And Charlotte had the enviable privilege to be in the midst of this rich center of activities.

In 1854 Charlotte left her home town of Philadelphia to live in Salem, Massachusetts where unlike the schools in Philadelphia, Salem schools were not segregated. Charlotte's father was so opposed to segregated schools that Charlotte had been home schooled rather than subject her to segregation. Charlotte loved school and learning. She was an apt student and later would become a passionate and competent teacher.

### **The South**

Charlotte's desire to lend her skills to the education of former slaves and their children led her south. Her lifestyle, though privileged, never permitted Charlotte or her family to dismiss the larger reality that they and other African Americans did not enjoy the privilege of citizenship, nor the rights accrued to citizens. Thus, when she heard about the Port Royal Experiment, an area that had recently been occupied by the Union soldiers where they had freed several thousand slaves, she was eager to serve. These former slaves were in the care and protection of the United States government and The Boston Port Royal Educational Commission had been organized on February 7, 1862 to undertake their care and education. Charlotte arrived first at Hilton Head and then went on to St. Helena Island where she began her life in the south.

Charlotte made a number of friendships that consisted of at least two known Unitarians while in the South. One included Laura Matilda Towne, teacher and physician among the

freedmen on St. Helena Island. Charlotte also became friends with Colonel Robert Gould Shaw, commander of the U.S. army 54<sup>th</sup> Regiment of Massachusetts. The sad day would arrive when Shaw and many of the 54<sup>th</sup> Regiment would be killed in a battle with the confederate soldiers. She writes about receiving word of his death after holding out hope that he had survived the attack:

Friday, July 24 1864 - . . . There can no longer be any doubt. It makes me sad, sad at heart. They say he sprang from the parapet of the fort and cried "Onward, my brave boys, onward"; then fell, pierced with wounds. I know it was a glorious death. But oh, it is hard, very hard for the young wife, so late a bride, for the invalid mother, whose only and most dearly loved son he was, -that heroic mother who rejoiced in the position which he occupied as colonel of a colored regiment. My heart bleeds for her.<sup>47</sup>

Another individual that Charlotte was fortunate to meet was Harriet Tubman, otherwise know as "Moses." Her first hand account of Moses follows:

In B[eaufort] we spent nearly all our time at Harriet Tubman's – otherwise "Moses." She is a wonderful woman – real heroine. Has helped off a large number of slaves, after taking her own freedom. She told us that she used to hide them in the woods during the day and go around to get provisions for them. Once she had with her a man named Joe, for whom a reward of \$1500 was offered. Frequently, in different places she found handbills exactly describing him, but at last they reached in safety the Suspension Bridge over the Falls and found themselves in Canada . . . My own eyes were full as I listened to her – the heroic woman! A reward of \$10,000 was offered for her by the Southerners, and her friends deemed it best that she sh'd, for a short time find refuge in Can[ada]. And she did so, but only for a short time.<sup>48</sup>

## Returning North

Charlotte suffered from poor health her entire life. However, she never appears to indulge her illness, nor complain. Sometimes only a brief explanation about her health was included in her journal, but most often a very short comment. Yet, there were times in her life when she was in such distress that she had to leave teaching positions, limit her activities and succumb to

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<sup>47</sup> Brenda Stevenson, ed., *The Journals of Charlotte Forté Grimke* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 497.

<sup>48</sup> Ray Allen Billington, ed., *The Journal of Charlotte L. Forten* (New York: Collier Books, 1953), 180.

complete bed rest. Sometimes her diagnosis was referred to as “lung fever.” Charlotte had to cut short her teaching tenure in the south because her health was failing.

There appear to be some lapses in Charlotte’s journal entries. Thus, with very little transition or indication important events might appear with no entries leading up to them. Such is the case with her marriage. Charlotte first penned words of her marriage to the Reverend Francis J. Grimke on December 19, 1878. Grimke, a famous pastor was a “never-tiring champion of Negro rights and an unswerving foe of prejudice.”<sup>49</sup> He and his twin brother, Archibald were the offspring, along with a third brother, John, of a Charleston, SC plantation owner, Henry Grimke and a slave mother, Nancy Weston, owned by Grimke. Henry Grimke was the brother of two prominent abolitionists, Angelina and Sarah Grimke. Upon his death in 1852, Henry Grimke willed his other slaves to his eldest son, E. Montague Grimke, requesting that his three slave children be freed. These instructions were initially followed, until at ten years of age, Francis was threatened with the possibility of being sold. Francis retaliated by running away. After a two year absence Francis returned and was thrown into prison by his brother/owner and then sold. Eventually agents from the United State Sanitary Commission sent Francis and his brother Archibald to Massachusetts where they enrolled at Lincoln University, in Oxford, Pennsylvania. While at Lincoln University Francis and Archibald came to the attention of their famous aunt, Angelina Grimke Weld. Weld, married to abolitionist Theodore Dwight Weld read about an upcoming lecture given by Francis Grimke. Assuming it was a former slave of her brothers that had taken the family name she made inquiries and discovered that he was in fact her nephew. She believed the family honor could only be reclaimed by making things right, which meant claiming him as rightful family. This is the letter she wrote to Francis and Archibald:

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<sup>49</sup> Ray Allen Billington, ed., *The Journal of Charlotte L. Forten* (New York: Collier Books, 1953), 39.

I am glad you have taken the name of Grimke. It was once one of the noblest names of Carolina. You, my young friends, now bear this once honored name. I charge you most solemnly by your upright conduct and your lie-long devotion to the eternal principles of justice and humanity and religion, to lift this name out of the dust where it lies, and set it once more among the princes of our land.<sup>50</sup>

In June Angelina Grimke Weld attended Francis' and Archibald's commencement at Lincoln University in Oxford, Pennsylvania. At that time she publicly announced her relationship to the brothers. From that time on she acknowledged them as family and assisted them financially. Later, Archibald graduated from Harvard Law School with honors, maintained a thriving law practice, edited a Boston newspaper between 1883 and 1895, served as US consul to the Republic of Santo Domingo between 1894 and 1898, served as president of the American Negro Academy in Washington, organized one of Boston's leading Negro literary societies, and wrote a dozen books and pamphlets.<sup>51</sup> Francis studied law at Lincoln and Howard universities and entered Princeton Theological Seminary in 1875 a few months after his marriage to Charlotte L. Forten. Grimke served as pastor at the Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church in Washington. He and Charlotte relocated to Florida because of his failing health. Where he pastored a short while and returned to Washington. He resumed his pastorate at Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church until his death in October, 1937. His stirring prophetic sermons captured attention from Blacks and Whites around the country. He preached against slavery and prejudice.

Charlotte L. Forten and Rev. Francis Grimke shared social views and literary interests that sustained their marriage. The one child they conceived died in 1880 and Charlotte died on July 23, 1914.

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<sup>50</sup> Ray Allen Billington, ed., *The Journal of Charlotte L. Forten* (New York: Collier Books, 1953), 38.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

## **Polly McCoo: Recalling My Life at First Unitarian Church of Chicago**

Mrs. McCoo sits reciting readings from the Unitarian Universalist Hymnal while she waits for the technicians to complete their sound check. In her clear eloquent voice she reads, “Out of the stars we come. . . in the the vastness of space. . . earth warmed. . . by . . . the stars have we come. Ponder this thing in your heart.”

Pauline Daly McCoo came to First Unitarian Church on October 19, 1947. She was eighteen years old, turning nineteen that November. She announces this information with a preciseness that underlies a propensity toward detail and organizing things just so. “. . . And I loved every minute of it,” she said with passion and a warm friendly smile. When she initially church of Chicago she only related to the Sunday School. She had just started Teachers College. “We started the Sunday School before church and it ran long after church at that time,” she said.

The only time she was in church was to bring a child out or to get something.

“I was totally into the Sunday School”

The minister at the time was Reverend Pennington who she referred to as a “scholarly gentleman and very quiet.” “He sent you home with references, she recalled his active involvement in the community and civil rights. Reverend Pennington set into motion an ecumenical conference that would build a community of spirituality that infused the community with a spirit of “let’s learn,” she contends.

Mrs. McCoo recounted the time that Reverend Pennington went to the board and remarked that the church was totally white and “we want to show the community that we are welcoming and inviting,” she recalled. They were successful. The next Spring, 1948, some Blacks joined the church. She also eventually joined. She also recalled with surprising clarity a number of families active at the time, reciting their names that spanned so many years ago – the Wagners, Godbeys, Hayes, and Haywards. These were all “learned people who took notes on the sermon. You could

imagine doing a soul searching sermon knowing that people were taking notes. I admired him (Reverend Penington),” she stated. Recalling her family upbringing she said, “I came from a very protective Black family. I could say it now (Black) but I couldn’t say it then. It meant something negative then,” she remarked. While growing up her family went to church on Sunday and during the week.

“Every Saturday night we printed the church program”

She brought that church-through-the-week to Unitarian Universalism.

“I also brought the feeling of its ok to ask questions.”

Mrs. McCoo started a Y camp in 1947. She remembers that there was a distinguished and outspoken woman that was bombarded with questions from a fundamentalist man from Wheaton College.

“I heard the word Unitarian for the first time,” she recalled.

“Are you really a church?” he would query Mary.

“I began to sit closer. Mary would talk about her interest in all religions . . . I would stay back and ask questions. As soon as the camp was over I got a call from the Westons and what they did to this eighteen year old,” She mused.

“The Weston’s were a family at Meadville Lombard Theological School. The magic was they served wine. My family didn’t serve wine. So I was being a real adult,” she said thinking back on her visits with the Weston’s.

“I joined the church that spring. I was asked to do the music for the annual Midwest Conference at Lake Geneva. Here was this eighteen, nineteen year old and she was standing before 500 adults and leading music. “Now you can’t imagine how tall I felt,” she exclaimed. “I

went home and my mother listened to me, hhhhhhhhhhhhh- now unpack and wash your socks,” she stated matter-of-factly to me.

Polly talked about how “wonder it was to build a new person.” She compared the structure at the Teachers College that she attended and which she knew exactly what courses she would take until she graduated. In contrast, this was unlike the church where there was a growing sense of community, independence and autonomy.

“In 1967 I experienced the death of my husband. It was devastating because he was the glue that held us together. The church held me together from then on. It was a place to be a person of value and get strength and be assured that things were going to be alright,” she said.

Ten years after she joined the church, one of the behind-the-scenes-actions was a statement that the church be opened to all people. “Leslie and his group insisted that we must say it. The day I joined I invited my folks. The chairman of the board shook father’s hand and said,” “We don’t mind if members are people like your daughter.” “This was a very interesting statement,” she said. “He didn’t mind as long as they were like your daughter?” Shortly after that the chairman of the board and several others left. She didn’t know whether they left because she came or not.

Coffee hour was very stylized and literally closed off according to Mrs. McCoo. Professors would stand on one side of the room and professors wives on another. Mrs. McCoo related the fact that women’s fellowship consisted of tea on Monday.

“Tell me, who can have a job and be off on Monday. But that was the only kind of woman’s organization that we had. Back there was a lot of “we” and “they” and “those people,” she regretfully recalled.

“Leslie tried to take us into the community and Jack Mendelsohn brought us into the world. . . not just wringing our hands but doing something about it. We became known as rabble rousers. As for the police and FBI, we were listed. Jack Mendelsohn and groups in the church were spied on. We had a black member that was an FBI spy. They were red listed and finally she petitioned and confronted the red squad. If you addressed civil rights then you must be community,” she satated. In the 70s they became involved in the Black Caucus. Poinsett and Jenifer were two of the people involved. Ken Gibson was the first Black Chairman of the Board.

“I’m not sure that we had had a woman,” she said. The Black Caucus at church had to search its own feelings,” she said. “Had we come searching for enrichment or were we elitist? We are richer for the input. Some of the heads of BUB/BAC made decisions not helpful. Her at this church we made decisions not helpful. We rose above all that,” she proclaimed.

Looking around at the room she is seated in she remarks, “I was married right here in this room. . . This is a favorite room of mine because this is where I was married. We wrote our own vows. We had a gorgeously designed goblet. We didn’t smash the goblet’s the way they do in Jewish weddings. The wine was god awful. I drank a little and Arthur decided he didn’t want to finish the wine although the ceremony called for us to empty the goblet. The ceremony was gorgeous. The reception was upstairs and we had nuts, h’orderves, printed napkins – all for \$150.”

I have met so many innovative and creative individuals that it is hard to name just a few,” she conceded. According to Mrs. McCoo, some of the proudest times she has experienced have included individuals like Lee Reed, Aki Yasutake, Karen Day Jonas, Betty Sikes, Jack Mendelsohn and Tom Chulak and his wife. Recalling Lee Reed she grinned and said, “There wasn’t a person that could get away from her. She would introduce people with like interests.

She as trained as a social worker and developed a suicide prevention program in Fenn House and provided outreach in the neighborhood,” she reminisced. And then another of her favorite people was Aki Yasutake, or Mamasan who was noted for her candor. She would walk up to an individual that wasn’t carrying their weight and say, “You’re slacking off.”

“Aki saw me when I was just becoming a mother. Came back to Sunday School with my young son. They asked me to start a youth choir,” she said.

“Mack Evans helped me to know what a Gregorian chant was,” she said. “This building (the church ) is magical and he helped me understand how and where to place people for just the right effect. It was ethereal almost. We wrote a song, our own Gregorian chants. Chris Moore started the youth choir. He brought in other children and then they had the children’s choir,” she remarked. Her own son and daughter started in the choir. “My daughter started at nine and went on into college. She launched her own career in music. Chris made you think, “Hey, I can do that.” Betty Sikes was another person that inspired Mrs. McCoo.

### Sunday School

The Sunday School evolved from a very small group. The whole Sunday School could fit on the floor in the altar area. The Kindergarten was the biggest. During the Mendelson time it grew. Nan was part of the Religious Education at that time. It grew to 150 children. Sometimes we wrote our own curriculum,” she stated. She talked about one curriculum that included taking the children into various rooms and relating the history behind its name and the related events and its importance. Here niece came to be a part of the Sunday School. This meant it was instantly integrated,” she recalled with a smile.

Technical difficulties create long intervals in the interview. Mrs. McCoo picks up the Unitarian Universalist Hymnal and begins to recite once against from one of the readings, “If I

... and if I have prophetic power but do not have love I am nothing. Love is patient. Love is kind. Love is not envious. Love is not boastful or arrogant. It bares all things. . . . When I was a child I spoke as a child.” Corinthians. The words flowed almost effortlessly from her mouth with such conviction and dignity.

There have been wondrous and proud moments and stressful moments recalls. One of those was when we invited in a minister and he tried to mold us in his vision. “The minister is a stimulus, a presence, a vision that is not the strength of the church. It is the people that have been here and struggled daily with the challenge and produce daily the glory’s,” she believes. She recalls the many times some of them spent in the office ministering to Aki about distressing events related to the then minister. She recalled how the minister would go to one group and then another and say they were being divisive. The groups fortunately stated talking to another and realized what the troubled minister was doing. “We were very strong and not helpless. That was when we asked him to leave,” she recalled. “We have had many interesting experiences. I think of Tom Chulak. He used to be on the outside of church standing on the steps to greet individuals. We got many people in off the street to worship after seeing this tall handsome man welcoming people so warmly. And they all wanted to be welcome,” she remarked with a grin.

We had had female ministers in our midst. For example, Dorothy Schaad. Her job was to connect us to the district. AT that time the Mid West District started from Canada and went straight through to the Gulf. The Director asked me to come to Starr Island to do the same kind of singing and crafts she had witnessed earlier. Three of us got on the plane headed to New England. Mrs. McCoo recalled that she had never been on a plane. “I had never been down town by myself until I was twenty years old,” she exclaimed with wonder.

What they hadn't told her is New England is New England. The ladies knew the history of every rock on the Island. If you didn't know these things then they were not very tolerant of you. "Anyone not from New England was thought to be barbaric," she said. She reminisced how she spent the whole week sitting on the rocks and listening to the gulls because she was told they had their own musician.

"I had a great time. . . I met people from All Souls and Louisville. All Souls was going through a lot of changes," She said. The musician brought out her guitar and played songs like, "Old Black Joe" and then "Masta's in the Cold Black Ground." Here I was eighteen years old and I became absolutely frozen," she recalled. IT was folk music and it was racist music that she knew was inappropriate and yet the musician and others did not appear to understand that. The group from All Souls got her out of there and put her to bed before she exploded. Mrs. McCoo was the only Black in the group. When confronted, the group told the All Souls attendees that they didn't know before hand what the program was going to include. Mrs. McCoo recalled another racial incident, this time at he church involving the Chairman of the Board.

"He hadn't accepted me," she recalled. But we have learned to say, "This doesn't feel comfortable . . . We have gotten much stronger because of some of the challenges we have had to meet."

Mrs. McCoo recalled being a part of the Mid West Conference and later she was nominated "Unsung Hero." "Betty Sikes was pushing for this. I was a volunteer of course. That is what you do to help," she said matter-of-factly. That is how she was raised and was just part of her family values.

"They announced that I had been chosen for the 1998 Unsung Hero. It meant I had to go to General Assembly June 27, 1998. That is my twin grand son's birthday and I had never

missed a birthday.” They all insisted she go. She was honored by Bill Sinkford, now the President of the Unitarian Universalist Association. “I was told I couldn’t say a word. He said I had been a volunteer for fifty years. I whispered fifty one. He turned around and looked at me and corrected his remarks. And I had the last word,” she stated with a satisfied look on her face. “I am very proud of the plaque that is now on the wall at First Church Unitarian.”

My father was a United States meat inspector. You had Pullman porters, many of the porters were people with law degrees but were unable to find employment. Either they couldn’t find a company to join or they couldn’t get employment,” she recalled.

Her thoughts then carried her back to her grandson’s wedding in Colorado where Rev. Nan Hobart officiated. “We are an extended family here and have participated in naming ceremonies and times of sorrow,” she stated.

### Challenges Ahead

We have a building that was built at a time that stone immortalized people. We have moved to a time when programs are the priority. So much is needed to keep it all running. Some have suggested we move. However, it is a part of our history and to deny our struggle, I am not quite sure how to do it. Early on we didn’t have fundraisers because members were adequately endowed to write checks. They are no longer around she recalled.

Polly McCoo died October 10, 2007, a few short months after I finished transcribing this interview. She called me at home a few weeks before her death to talk about my assistance in gathering the information for oral histories at the church. She was lucid and amazingly focused on this task. At her memorial service she was honored at the church for her many years of service. She is sorely missed and I am grateful that I was able to hear her story and know her through this research project. The one picture I had taken of her was without benefit of makeup and lipstick. Her vanity got the best of her and she asked me to take another with makeup. To avoid the temptation of using the picture which I thought looked fine, I deleted it. Polly died before we were able to take another picture.

## **Rev. Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley: May the Works That I Do Speak For Me**

Like so many others that had been protected from news of Marjorie's illness, I did not realize how sick she really was. In hindsight, I now know what a gift she gave me. It was not until after I recovered from the shock of her death did I realize that she had to have edited a chapter in my dissertation research while she was apparently in the final stages of her battle with cancer. Was she motivated because the subject matter was so close to her heart? Was it the potential that she saw in me? Was it simply because that was who she was? Thank you Marjorie for this gift.

Reverend Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley and I met shortly after I became a Unitarian Universalist and a member at Thurma Hamer Ellington Unitarian Universalist (T.H.E.) in Atlanta, Georgia in 1992.<sup>52</sup> Thanks to Anne Olsen, another member heavily involved at Thurman Hamer Ellington Unitarian Universalist, I was properly exposed to all things womanist and activist such as the Unitarian Universalist Women's Federation (UUWF). Marjorie was actually going off the board and she was recruiting women of color. Someone gave her my name, we spoke briefly and I was invited to serve on the board of UUWF. I spent two of the most informative years of my Unitarian Universalist formation on that Board. However, I did not really get to know Marjorie until a few years later when she came to Atlanta in her capacity as a consultant with the Unitarian Universalist Association. She was surveying the intentionally diverse congregations in our movement and denomination. We were all eager to share our perceptions of what was working and not working. I remember really enjoying the interview that she conducted with me. She interviewed us one on and also in the large group. While Marjorie was in town, the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Atlanta, one of our larger sister congregations, invited her to speak

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<sup>52</sup> As a tribute to you Marjorie I have stopped abbreviating Unitarian Universalist to UU as you suggested.

at the Wednesday night vesper service. That night I witnessed a style of preaching I had only seen in the Baptist Church. She preached some of her sermon and she sang parts of it. And she did something else that I rarely witnessed from the chancel. She came from behind the podium. I had one of those moments of transcendence that might be playfully captured here as, “God is in her heaven and all is right in the world.” Marjorie powerfully impacted my understanding of worship and ministry that night and how to step into the worship experience by claiming one’s standpoint as a woman of color from a Christian background using liturgy and diverse genre. I saw her do this again at a minister’s conference in Birmingham, AL in 2003 when she and Rev. Anastasia blended his bluesy piano playing and her mastery of homiletics that produced a powerful worship experience. For the first time in 2006 and again in 2007 I finally risked including my voice in song as part of my sermon. Thank you Marjorie.

Whenever I was in Boston I usually stopped in to see Marjorie. Whether I had an appointment or not she usually tried to accommodate me for a few minutes. Thank you, Marjorie, for showing me your warm hospitality. When Marjorie sent me an invitation to her wedding I put the date on my calendar and put the invitation away. One of our churches was in crisis and needed my presence on the day of the wedding. I have always regretted missing her wedding. As we say in the vernacular, “Everybody and their mamma was there.” So when I received an invitation to her installation I promised myself come hell or high water that I would not miss it. I did not. It was grand and I witnessed the most amazing assembling of women of color ministers, seminarians and laity at her Installation. I knew we existed but outside of a few instances like General Assembly it was rare to see so many of us assembled in one place. Now as more and more women of color are fellowshipped, ordained and installed it is not so unusual to see almost all of the women of color gathered at these historic events. But we are still too few in

number.<sup>53</sup> Little did I know that the next gathering I would be invited to in celebration of Marjorie was her Memorial Service on December 30, 2007. What I had suspected for a long time, I am told was evident at her Memorial Service and that is, Marjorie was one of those rare individuals that was loved by everyone. Someone recently confessed that a year later she still picks up the telephone to dial Marjorie before she forgets that she is no longer here. Yet, she like so many others believe she is close by.

I planned to say good bye to my friend and sister. Bad weather cancelled the flight and I was not able to get another plane in to say goodbye to Marjorie for the last time among family and friends. I was still in the terminal when I picked up my cellphone and called my daughter who was leaving for Geneva, Switzerland that afternoon. She was not totally surprised to hear from me since I had told her about the initial delay. What we were surprised about was we were both in the terminal together although my plane had been originally scheduled to depart at 8:30 AM. It was almost 3PM. If I had not bothered to call my daughter I would not have been able to say good bye to her as she began a new phase in her life for the next five months. Thank you Marjorie.

Marjorie, I hope you know how much I appreciate your modeling sisterhood. While you were the younger by one year, because of your wisdom and willingness to share you were a big older sister and colleague. You have influenced me as a minister in so many ways including some of the following:

- Be bold and visionary in your thinking and ministry. And also know when to scale it down
- Be kind and generous regardless to how busy and important you think you are
- Keep a smile on your face. It takes less wrinkles to smile and it potentially can change your disposition and be a blessing to others

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<sup>53</sup> UUA President Bill Sinkford recently cited 41 ministers of color currently in fellowship with UUA.

- Love yourself and bring your full self to your ministry and love yourself and others will love you
- Practice good self care by having strong networks of friendships to support you so that you don't have to use your members to get your social needs met inappropriately
- Take time to play and balance your life with intimate long term relationships
- Don't be afraid to raise your prophetic voice and speak truth to power.

A final message that Marjorie reminded me of in her death, and that is, our works that we do speak for us and reflect the legacy we leave. Thank you for your gifts Marjorie.

Amen and Blessed Be!

## **Living Legends**

### **The Story of Norma Poinsett as Told to Qiyamah A. Rahman**

#### **Introduction**

I want to record for posterity some snippets about my life but as I think about my life, but as I think about the past, sayings keep dancing in my memory bank. “It’s not what you do ut the way that do it.” “It’s not where you have been, but where you are going.” For many decades, work has been a metaphor for my lie and both present and past families have been my guide. The family reunions I have attended with the eldest in their 30s down to babies in the womb; the many professionals represented; the enthusiasm of those who are in college; the interaction of the children; and everyone enjoying conversation, dancing, eating, playing games and recalling the past. Suddenly the elders realize the difficulty of trying to remember important instances of past events of their elders. We have said, “We must begin writing things down.”

My religious life has been varied. At age nine I joined the Baptist Church. At Southern Christian Institute I attended the Disciples of Christ (Christian Church), during high school and junior college; Congregational the last two years of college; and after a nine year hiatus I have been a Unitarian Universalist or the last 49 years. My many involvements d positions with the Unitarian Universlaist (UU) – appointed, elected and volunteered will be discussed lat. The years have been interesting or me and important for the UU’s to have a black woman’s perspective on the many areas of the Association’s deliberations and decisions that affect so many lives. My involvements began appearing on the UU scene during the Civil Rights Movement. This was a time that many people wrote, marched sang and prayed. This was a time for me to put pen to pear and fingers to keyboard.

#### **Early Years**

I was born near Learned, Mississippi, the central part of the state on a rented farm. I was the fourth child in a family of eleven – four boys and seven girls, a football team. Mother and father were proud people who were independent and industrious. We lived in a large two story house, which was rather unique for that rural area. I liked our house. Under the stairway in the hall was the girls play house. Aside from farming my daddy was a carpenter. He built our doll furniture. My dolls dresser had a real mirror and drawers that opened and closed thanks to daddy. He also made and remodeled furniture for neighbors. Daddy had a blacksmith shop in our back yard, and many mornings I was awakened by the ringing of the hammer against the anvil. The farmers, both black and white, bought their plow shares to be fired and sharpened. In addition, daddy repaired hoes and rakes. If that was not enough, sometimes Daddy shod horses.

Mama was usually taking care of a new baby, with our help. She was busy canning fruit, mending, and making clothes, sometimes from new cloth, hand-me-downs, and flour sacks in her talented hands became new creations. Mama taught us early to help with jobs and she was a patient teacher. Although she later regained her health, I remember she was often sick or ailing much of the time while she worked. Later she would take to her bed and then soon she had a new baby – a brother or sister for us. We worked on our farm. I remember begging my parents to let me go with my older sister and brothers to hoe cotton, corn and work in the vegetable garden. It was fun for me to watch plants grow up tall and produce fruits and vegetables of different shapes, colors and uses. Mama told us to watch for the guinea fowls, find their nests and collect the eggs. The guinea fowl had a featherless head, a rounded body and dark feathers spotted with white. We would stop working when we heard the guineas squawking, drop our hoe and rush to the wooded area. Often we stopped and ate wild plums, black berries and dew berries. We filled a bucket to take later to mama to make a berry or plum dumpling pie. Tiptoeing noiselessly we

looked for the nest as we neared the area of the guineas. One of us would spy the guinea hen. When the guinea hen left its nest we came back with a long handled spoon and basket to get the eggs. If human hands touched the nest the guinea would find another spot to build its nest. Sometimes we found twenty or thirty eggs in one nest. The eggs were smaller and stronger than hen eggs but we used them for the same purpose. There was a pond in the barnyard. My brothers made a boat from a sheet of tin, and used bucket tops for oars. One day when I was out in the middle of the pond the boat sank. Luckily, the pond was only shoulder deep. I walked out of the water and left the boat behind. We white washed the buildings, including the smoke house that was used for smoking meat at hog killing time. Sometimes rows and rows of dried fruits and vegetable lined the rafters. In the fall, during hog killing time the neighbors – men and women came to our house to help slaughter cows and pigs. Daddy grew and raised all of our food needed to sustain our large family. Hog season was a big production that required the entire family as well as the neighbors. A big fire was started under the big black pot, along with an oil drum of water which we later used to scrape the hair from the hogs. Meanwhile, the children ran errands getting spoons, a fork, and salt needed for salting the hogs. After the hogs were slaughtered and the hair was removed, we hung them by their hind legs on tee-pee built poles. The men would cut up the hogs into hams, middlings (known as bacon today), pig feet and pork chops. The women would clean the chittlins and take the scrap fat and cut it up and cook it in the big pot into cracklings and lard. They would make home made sausage which was hung in the smoke house to dry. The pigs melt, a long strip of liver like meat was cooked on sticks over the fire that we ate it, almost as if it were holy communion. Our parents would give us a small package of meat, some vegetables or a jar of fruit to take to older persons or sick neighbors that had missed the festivities of hog killing.

## **School Memories**

When I was five years old my sheltered world changed as I began to become aware of the racial realities of blacks and whites in the south. My sisters and brothers went to school a mile and a half away, via our short cut, and two miles as-the-crow-flies along the main road. We passed the white school, Lebanon Elementary School every day to get to our black school, Burleigh Hamilton Elementary School. The white children would taunt us and yell, “hey nigger” when they passed us on the bus. They threw rocks or paper wads at us. Sometimes they spat at us. We often retorted. At times, the bus driver intentionally veered the bus near the edge of the gravel road and forced us to hop into the ditch.

Another incident concerned Alice Brock. We had a beautiful flower garden with rows and rows of annuals. People would come and ask for a bouquet of flowers. One day, Alice Brock, a young white girl about nine skipped about admiring the flowers and letting me know which ones she wanted cut. She said, “Norma, my birthday’s coming and you gonna have to call me Miss Alice.” I retorted without a second thought, “The day I call you Miss Alice, you will have to call me Miss Norma.” I don’t recall her response. I think she was shocked. She simply took her flowers and went home. Fortunately, I had a strong sense of self and knew I was somebody.

Initially, I went to a three room school with three teachers. For many years we boarded teachers who came from Jackson and Clinton, Mississippi who were loaded with books for school. They would bring armloads of books from their homes to share with us. We were also the recipients of their teaching skills while they boarded with us. I read as fast as possible to make sure no book disappeared before I was able to gobble up each loving line. The teachers never sent notes to our house. The school was good for us. We enjoyed school programs

including outdoor basketball which finally came to Burleigh. We sang the “Negro National Anthem” every morning, recited Paul Lawrence Dunbar’s poetry and met Frederick Douglas through his books. Of course we had the three R’s – reading, writing and arithmetic. All student’s – the slow, average and bright, could benefit from having other grade levels in the same class room. I always felt good to be called on to answer a question asked of a student two grades ahead of me.

When I finished the eight grade I wanted to go to high school. There was no public high school where we lived in Learned, Mississippi. Having all four of the children in boarding school was not a financial possibility for our parents. My older brothers had already gone away to Southern Christian Institute (SCI), a Disciples of Christ Church school for Blacks. Students worked a year and began school the following year. Each summer school they worked in the dorms, dining hall, school buildings or farm work, as well as after school during the year. My parent’s had completed the eighth grade and they wanted us to go further in school than they had. My parents moved seventeen miles to Edwards Mississippi so that all of us could attend school. The campus included an elementary school, a high school and a junior college. We left the house where I was born and my parents had lived for fifteen years. I was glad to leave so that I could attend school. Through my oldest brother’s contact we were able to move to the home of the mother of the former President of SCI.

We were very happy even though Edwards and SCI were very different than what we were used to. For example, SCI was very old fashioned and didn’t allow social dancing. Instead, we students became some of the best folk dancers, as in square dancing. On the subject of religion, the white president preached about the wrongs of the south. No hell fire and damnation

in his sermons. I remember writing the Easter play for the school assembly based on the crucifixion of Christ in the movie, “The Robe.”

### **Extended Family**

Our larger family was my mother’s sisters and brothers and their families. Typically, we would meet up at one of their houses after church for Sunday dinner or at Grandma’s and Grandpa’s house. Dinner might consist of juicy tender greens, macaroni pie, fried chicken, ham, biscuits and cornbread. Each child had a turn at the ice cream freezer. When the handle would no longer turn, an aunt would wipe the top of the can and take out the ice cream dasher. Everybody wanted to lick the dasher. By then everybody would be so full that we would just want to “laze” around. The old folks would talk about being born and dying. The men would talk about their farm crops and dream of next years fruitful crops. The women talked about children, weddings, sewing, sickness, white folks kitchens, and making ends meet. The little girls played dolls, little boys played roll-the-spoke, the big girls washed the dishes, and then they went for a walk with the big boys down the road to meet their friends.

Life was very different when we moved to Edwards, Mississippi. We missed the “Sunday-get-togethers.” In Edwards we raised a larger vegetable farm at SCI. After school activities we had work, while the boarding students played tennis and basketball. Most of the teachers were white missionary’s who had come South to “save our souls, teach us proper English, prissy manners and give banquets instead of proms.” They came to erase our scars of ignorance and to wash us white as snow. They purified us with proper church services and helped us to look with scorn at the country church, the preacher’s emotions, spirited singing and amen’s to the minister.

Time passed and I had graduated and applied to Tougaloo College, near Jackson Mississippi where I attended my last two years of college. Tougaloo was 38 miles from my home. My older sister and I passed four white segregated colleges to get to Tougaloo, a historically Black College, started in the 1870s to educate slaves after slavery was abolished. I had many jobs, many subjects to study, and activities. I took a sewing machine to college and soon found that teachers and students hardly knew which end of the needle to thread. I made draperies for the gym and recovered couches in lounges, worked in the lunch room, in the library, baby sat and cleaned teacher's apartments. Yet, I was able to make the Dean's list each semester. Social dancing was permitted, in contrast to SCI. Weekly chapel was mandatory, as was church. I did not mind church because I was singing in the college choir. My major was history and I had a class in Negro History. Yet, when I graduated there was no teaching job for me in history. I ended up teaching second graders in Hollandale, Mississippi, in the delta of Mississippi where students were most deprived. Two brothers in my class, ages 12 and 13 years old were talented artists, yet they could not read or write. Most weekends I visited my sister who was teaching in a neighboring town.

Church was important for worship and a social outlet for almost the entire community. Many people walked miles to church, stopped near a bush, dusted their legs and feet, changed into Sunday shoes and left the old ones and rags in a bag under the bush. Our church was not only for adults but for children as well. The minister's sermons were punctuated with a babies crying. A small child occasionally was seen toddling down the aisle, its curiosity drawn to a bespectacled individual, or looking at a flower garden atop a woman's elaborate hat. Church and children went together.

We were among the three black families to own a radio in Learned, MS. People of all ages came to our house to listen to the radio. The bedrooms, stairway, dining room and porch would be filled with people that had come to listen to the radio. Daddy would put the radio on the washstand in the hall and turn up the volume so that everybody could hear. Joe Louis' fights in Mississippi were special times. The Black Bombshell, as he was called was cheered on by Black's around the country including, Chicago's South Side, Harlem and New York. It was almost like a church service. Men and women would yell "fight Joe. You could hear "Amen," "Hit him where it hurts Joe." A classmate of mine came one time and slept through most of the fight. At each shout, he jerked his head and finally the rhythm of the boy's head jerking and the yells synchronized perfectly, as I watched him and giggled. I nudged one of my sisters and she giggled too. Later my mother dressed us down, that is, verbally reprimanded us for laughing at company. When the fight was over you could see the happiness on people's faces. They talked about how strong Joe Lewis was. They felt that each time Joe punched the other man he hit a lick for them. They knew of many unjust deeds in the South like the killing Daddy told us about, twin brothers, both married, with children. Their landowner, complained to them that they did not finish plowing a section of land. One brother spoke up to tell him why they didn't finish and Mr. Stubbs shot him down. The other brother said, "Oh! You shot my brother, and the white man turned and shot him too. There was never an arrest or trial. So when Joe Louis landed those blows, our men folks felt that even if they could not defend themselves, Joe Louis could punch a white man for them.

Respect for their husbands and black men was of great importance to Southern women. The white man in the south never addressed my father and other black men as Mr. The women in my life must have decided that their men were to be respected. So my mother addressed my

father as “Mr. Miller.” My grandmother addressed grandfather as Brother Hicks. The only time they did not say, “Mr.” or “Brother” was when they talked to their children and then it was “Daddy” or “Papa.”

## **Graduate School**

I found Unitarian Universalism when I was in graduate school at the University of Illinois at Champaign. I met my husband the first day I was there. He was in the cafeteria line coming out. There was this sea of white folks and these two black guys. I asked if I could sit at their table. They were very engrossed in their own conversation. They were talking about writing. The one guy had written and sold two radio shows. The other, wrote for the Green Hornet, the University magazine for gifted first year student writers. So they both were published writers. Eventually we talked and they found out I was from Lumberton, Mississippi. I had taught second grade in Hollandale, MS. I assisted setting up the first library. I worked through college. The Principle at the high school had me help his wife who had had one summer school class in library science. She didn't know beans about it .I didn't want to teach second graders with a history degree. I had an epiphany. That's what I wanted to do, that is, be a librarian. I started that summer. I realized I wanted to stay on. Meanwhile, the Green Hornet guy walked me to the dorm. It was the first semester that Black women were able to stay in the dorms. Black males were still not allowed. By the end of summer school this Green Hornet guy, Alex Poinsette had won me over. He was taking a photography class in journalism. He claimed he needed pictures of me in my swimming suit and shorts. This was before we got engaged.

All along he was trying to get me to agree to marriage. I set the date for a year away. That was too far away for him. So the next time I said six months. But that was still too far away for him. So I said, “When do you want to get married,” and he said, “Now.” So on August 24, 1951 we

came to Chicago and got married. He was a veteran. His veteran's check hadn't started. I had \$60 on me. We stayed on for two years in Army salvaged t- Buildings near campus. T buildings were not sound proof. You could hear everything, especially if you got up on the chair and listened at the transom. For \$3 a month we lived in a furnished zero efficiency apartment in one room that was the size of a closet and held all our clothes, complete with a pantry sized toilet and shower and kitchen sink that was our face bowl. The kitchen was our two burner hot plate with a dutch oven on top and an ice box. We slept on our hide-a-way-sofa. We were the only Black couple in the building. It housed about 12 couples. I was one of the few women in school. Most of the other wives were putting their husbands through school. One day I was out hanging up clothes and was mistaken for the cleaning lady. I said, "I am a graduate student and everybody here does their own cleaning." We worked part time jobs and went to school full time. Everybody was struggling to make it. We had a bicycle that we would ride to school together. The University administration finally passed a ruling that prohibited double bicycle riding.

## WWII

During the war we would come to Chicago and work in factories. I worked in a candy factory and when I would come home I would have to take my shoes off at the door because of the sticky residue on my shoes. I also worked at a toy factory and I declared, "I know I will not do this for the rest of my life." I was putting dots on little toy dressers that just had imprints of drawers.

I named my daughter after a friend, Pierrette. We would eat together. She could really cook French food. One time I came home after an interview in Chicago and they were fixing dinner for us. It was one of the greatest experiences I had living interracially. That was the last time we would experience such true sharing and respect among individuals. If someone had a car

they would offer you a ride. We did things together. In February 1952 Alex finished his journalism degree and stayed on for a masters in Philosophy. We both marched together in 1953. That was the first time a Black couple received a masters degree together at University of Illinois. We made the newspaper with an article and a picture of the two of us.

### **Library Days**

Gertrude Geschiedle was the head of the Chicago Public Library. Two months after I was there I was sent to Ogden Park Library. We serviced parents and children. I worked two nights a week and on those nights I was in Chicago. I had a story hour and high school programs. We had all the elementary schools in a twenty block radius. I visited the schools, public and catholic in the Englewood District. I had a class for parents and teens. At that time most of the parents were working during the day and therefore, the class was all white although it was a mixed neighborhood. I took the school examination and passed and was assigned to DuSable High School. It was named after the person that founded Chicago. I realized this schedule was not conducive for having a family.

Once I went into a library while the staff person was on leave and found all these books in the library waiting to be catalogued. I was very upset about that. Everything is on computers now, but back then we used to catalogue everything by hand. When the librarian came back, “she had a fit..” They didn’t ever love me because I was too smart. Years late when I went back a former student who had become the Principal asked me to set up an African American library. That was in 1986/87 when I came back to DuSable in 1986/7. I retired in 1993. I had a lot of interesting experiences with DuSable and came back over the years. On April Fools Day in 1957 I was made super numerary to Ingle Wood High School. What that means is there are too many librarians in the system and so I was reassigned to Inglewood HS where I taught ninth grade

English. I had to check on maternity leave about six weeks after I was there. At that time the policy required that maternity leave automatically begin at five months pregnancy. So I was out for a year's maternity leave since women were required to take a full year's maternity leave.

### **Unitarian Universalism**

While at the University of Illinois we had attended the Unitarian Universalist (UU) church a few times. We graduated in 1953 and moved to Chicago after graduation where we went to several different churches looking for a church home. After we met a couple, Dr. Charles and June Davis, that we played bridge with during the summer. They said, "Our church opens again tomorrow. So we will not play bridge late tonight." We didn't know what they meant. They explained that their church, First Unitarian, did not meet during the summer. When we heard it was a UU church we exclaimed that we had been to a UU church in Champaign. The first time we attended, Reverend Leslie Pennington quoted Alfred North Whitehead several times and I knew that we were going to join that church because several times I had previously told Alex that he was married first to Alfred North Whitehead and then to me. Alex was a great fan of Whitehead, which is why I knew that we were going to join. Whitehead wrote one book that laypeople could easily read and I was working my way through it. We eventually joined in March, 1958. The only thing I knew about UUism was what I learned when I took a class in religion at the Southern Christian Institute in 1947.

A few months after we joined both of our children were in naming services in the church. Both attended church school every Sunday through grade school. They were also in the Chicago Children's choir. Neither of them attended the young people's evening activities. My son found a tennis ministry on Sunday mornings early in high school and is no longer associated with any church. My daughter, attempted to be active the first year of high school. She shared her gifts

with the church, a batik hanging, after high school and later when she was in college, a dance recital. She is now a practicing Buddhist and it meets her spiritual needs. I have gone through most of the leadership positions at the church including teaching, librarian, consultant to religious education, Vice Chair of the Board of Trustees, various discussion groups and ad hoc committees.

Who would know that our joining the church would be the start of fifty years of service to UUism. My public speaking debut began May 4, 1971 when Lonny Myers and I were asked to speak about, "Growing Up a Woman." The service was designed to refocus the traditional "Mother's Day" observance to stress the concrete conditions of women's lives. I began my presentation with the following:

When Jack called me and asked if I would appear in church and speak for about ten minutes on "what it means to grow up as a Black woman," I was hesitant. I didn't know whether I wanted to stand before a predominantly white audience and bare my soul. We as Black people have bared our souls often for many years and yet, few people have really listened or heard what we said. If they had listened, my standing here, today, with this assignment would not be necessary. I told a friend I had to speak in church for ten minutes on "What it means to grow up a black woman, and she said in a very loud voice, "ten minutes on that subject? Hell, that would take weeks and weeks and weeks."

Many years have passed and I do not recall how that presentation went. But in looking at the glowing thank you card that the then minister, Reverend Jack Mendelsohn sent me, I am pretty certain that it went over well. Besides, people like to hear stories of adversity and overcoming misfortune:

Dear Norma: I told you face to face after Sunday's service how moved and lifted I was by what you shared with us. I speak with confidence for everyone who was there when I tell you that what you laid out for us from the pulpit struck very deep, which is precisely what a church service is supposed to do. So, thanks again for taking the time in your very busy life to do something that was most important to your fellow and sister parishioners. Incidentally, Joan and I got a great kick out of the way the members of your family were sitting on the edges of their chairs exuding the "right on" spirit in your direction. Affectionately, Jack Mendelsohn.

This was the beginning of a long and illustrious relationship between me and UUs around the country. I often received written thank you's after presentations. The following words were written by Sue Bateman on October 27, 1969:

Dear Norma: At least 50 people join me in thanking you for coming to Rochester as a workshop leader for our Prairie Star District Annual Meeting. The 50 who were in your two sessions. We have heard only the highest praise for you. Knowing how pressed you are for time, I especially appreciate your sharing some with us. Wish there had been more time for getting acquainted personally, but you somehow made me feel that we do know each other! Thank you, to for talking with Ben. He's a real charmer – wish we should help him feel more at home. We are looking forward eagerly to the unit you are helping create. Meanwhile we shall make do with our own ideas. I guess. Cordially, Sue Bateman.

Since the late 1960s I have served on various national committees with the UUA that include the following:

Original Black Caucus Curriculum Committee, 1968-1971;  
Commission on Appraisal, 1972-1981  
Racial Justice Curriculum Team, 1985-1990  
Black Concerns Working Group, 1986-

### **Religious Reflections**

I feel strongly that if I am to be a good Unitarian Universalist, I should try to help make the Association more responsive to people like me. So far I find it difficult to think of being a member of any other church. The parts I miss most of all from the other churches are the music, singing and lots of Black people, in the congregation. Our church has a large black membership but presently few are in the choir.

In retrospect, thinking about ideas of faith, I realize that my mother's faith didn't allow us to hate out loud. Another incident that captures my mother's devoutness involved an afternoon when we had finished planting, hoeing, pruning and picking. My siblings elected me to ask Mama if we could go fishing. As a rule my mother always found something for us to do like sewing, canning, cleaning the smoke house or hen house and washing and ironing. I feared she

would suggest some of the latter, but she surprised me with, “You thinking about fishing, when revival meeting is going on. You should think about your soul.” She didn’t let us go, but began humming, “Jesus Keep Me Near the Cross,” while she rocked a baby sister and churned without missing a beat. That night I sat on the mourner’s bench trying to make some sense of the preachers hell fire and damnation tirade. I couldn’t wait for him to open the doors of the church. I was anxious to join church so my mother could never, ever use the revival meeting as an excuse to say no when I wanted to go fishing. All the children’s confessions about how they found Jesus meant little to me. Long ago I had serious doubts about a religion that seemed to ignore my personhood. I could see the white school every day and I couldn’t attend! I knew there was no God or Jesus, because if there were he would have to love me as much as he did the white folks. A good god/Jesus wouldn’t let the white kids play and sit on their porches while the Black children worked every day.

### **Social Justice Ruminations**

One of the many ways that I expressed my passion for a just world was through my involvement in anti UUA racism initiatives

Occasionally I have been known to put pen to paper to voice some of the things I have seen and experienced over my long lifetime. One of the poems I wrote titled, Po Folks was published in the 1974 UUA Meditation Manual.

We are roughing it.  
No baths for a week  
Think on that, all these middle  
    Class children without baths.  
    We are back to nature,  
    Removed from space age to  
    Bowl and pitcher.

“Po’ folks” rough it too,  
    One day, one week, one month, one year.

And maybe that's why they feel,  
And love, and hate, and get renewed,  
And have hope.

Their retreat is an eternity

Look at the rooms,  
One uncovered light bulb,  
Rusty spots showing through  
    Old and worn and rough linoleum  
    On the floor.  
    The dank, damp musty smell of poverty,  
    That's "Po' folks."

And a community toilet.  
    Listen for the und  
    Of rolling  
    Toilet paper, a flush  
    And footsteps,  
And run like Wilma Rudolph to be next in line.  
Clothes hang limp  
O hooks along one wall.  
That's "Po' folks" closet,  
    Showing their wardrobe  
    Of torn clothes, outgrown clothes,  
    And plain worn out clothes.  
    That's instant inventory.

Why do we travel so far,  
    To be renewed  
    With inconveniences?  
    Maybe we should spend  
    Our next retreat with reality –  
With "Po' folks."<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Norma R. Poinsett, "Po' Folks" in 1974 UA Meditation Manual (Boston: UUA Department of Publications, 1974), 28-29.

