

*“Forgotten Voices”*  
*Black History Month at UUCP*  
*Rev. Maj-Britt Johnson*  
*Feb. 6, 2005*

It’s amazing how differently any two or three people will see or hear, the same story. I find that sometimes with sermons. Two or three of you might approach me after this one, and tell me your impressions and I might think: Do I live in the midst of three different but simultaneous realities? (I might in fact, according to the new physics but that’s a subject for another day).

And that’s okay. It makes life very rich, very complex, and sometimes a little difficult. We look through different lenses and we measure what we hear against our own experience.

I get it that the human race will necessarily splinter any story, like those in the Bible, into many fractiles of light and color. A Black theology for instance, looks at the story of the Jews, led by Moses out of slavery in Egypt and, quite obviously sees a story of liberation from oppression.

The white church in the past also heard that message loud and clear. Or why else would they have banned, during slavery times, the singing of the spiritual: Go Down Moses.

*“Thus spoke the Lord, bold Moses said, Let my people go. If not I’ll smite your first born dead. Let my people go”*

The story of Exodus, was not one in which most white people in a slave state wished to see themselves as characters.

In the Black church there was, of course, more than one way of interpreting the story of liberation. Nat Turner, for example, found in the Bible a message for revolt. He searched the scripture and he heard a mandate. And it’s there to be found. He looked at the way his people were being tortured, killed, maimed, enslaved and said: we need to fight back. This is a war.

Others found stories which gave them the strength to endure the oppression, and a perspective from which to understand their own lives and their own humanity. And they too are there.

But my guess is the vast majority of Americans of African origins were pretty much in agreement about just who was heading south after death and who was going north. If the Promised Land didn’t arrive in this lifetime, then milk and honey was at least waiting on the Other Side... for the oppressed.

I sometimes think about those times and wonder which theological camp I would have been in had I been a slave? What about you? What choices might you have made?

My guess is that in my **twenties** I might have at least been in sympathy with Nat Turner, though I suspect that when it actually came to the moment of wielding a weapon to kill another human being, especially a child, I would have faltered. If I'd survived his insurrection, I might have eventually, not so much mellowed, as accepted reality. I'd probably have looked around me and said: this institution has been here hundreds of years, I suppose I have to find some way of living at peace inside of myself, and in my world.

For many in the Black church, historically, there was hope in a vision of Heaven, and probably more than a bit of quiet satisfaction in a vision of Hell.

A famous writer, I don't remember who, once wrote: "*All misery is bearable if it is seen as part of a story*".

Stories, give us perspective. If I can see myself as a character in a drama I get some distance from the feelings. Stories help us to make sense of all the strangeness and complexity of life.

This morning I'm trying to understand the story of a Universalist minister, named Joseph Jordan. Rev. Joseph Jordan, our first ordained black Universalist minister.

I was curious how a black man born in the south in 1842 goes for a Universalist theology. Our Universalist ancestors were known as the "no-hellites". They believed, as I think most of us do today, that there is no hell except that which we make on earth.

Universalism is a theology which teaches that God is "love itself". It is a belief system which has at its core the doctrine that all people are saved, are redeemable. Therefore, even the slave owner. How did Jordan deal with that, psychologically, in a world where clearly the bad buys were not getting their comeuppance?

Let me tell you just a little about him. Like I said, Jordan was born in 1842, in Norfolk County Virginia, more than 20 years before the end of slavery. But, like Moses, in the story I told you this morning, he was free. He was never a slave.

Jordan was a part time Baptist minister, oysterman, grocer and successful carpenter. He was literate, and well read. One day, in 1886 he was asked by a Methodist colleague, his opinion on a book called "The Plain Guide to Universalism" by Thomas Whittemore. In it Jordan read that God

had made of one blood all the nations of the earth, and that all humanity is one family. A pretty radical message back then. Still is. That *“rich men are not always the best members of a religious society, but rather those who are the best are most earnestly and zealously engaged in the cause of **truth**, whether they be rich or poor.”*

Whittemore explains why there is widespread opposition to these ideas in America: *“They are full of prejudice against this doctrine...they are not disposed to receive it. They have not an untrammelled spirit, free from bigotry; they are not in a proper frame of mind. If they were free from bigotry and prejudice, they would believe; because the truth is plain and rests on abundant evidence.”*

Rev. Jordan had something like an instant conversion experience apparently. He ran to his bookshelves, pulled down his copy of “Pilgrims Progress”, an allegory about the Christian journey and returning to his Methodist colleague offered to trade it for the *Plain Guide to Universalism*.

A really good choice on Jordan’s part I would say. My parents read “Pilgrim’s Progress” to me as a bedtime story at the tender age of only seven. I too was eventually overjoyed to trade the “slough of despond” for the more hopeful story of Universalism.

Jordan then went on to find a Universalist mentor to study with, up in Philadelphia. After seven months he returned to Norfolk and preached to anyone who would listen. Soon he had a large enough group to hold regular services, a room to hold them in and a pulpit he built himself. This group of Black Universalists formally organized themselves on June 29<sup>th</sup>, 1887, Norfolk Virginia.

Jordan was given an armload of books to read by the denomination (I remember those days) and then examined by a panel of Universalists (I remember that too). It was reported that Jordan

*“Is worthy as all who have met and conversed with him will concede. He is free alike from pretension and abjectness. He recognizes his manhood, and his examiners recognize it. Though not learned in the schools, he has a clear and bright mind and has solid foundation in the faith. He believes with us, and knows why; and I have great hopes of his usefulness.”*

On March 31, 1889 Joseph Jordan became our first ordained Universalist minister of African descent.

I need to take a minute to paint a picture of Jordan’s surroundings in 1889 in Norfolk Virginia. In Norfolk then, as now, the Black population stood at about 40-45%. During Reconstruction, which covered the first ten years after the end of the Civil War, black people had turned out to vote at

rates equal to those of whites in Norfolk. They were represented on City Councils, and they increasingly owned more and more property. That equality didn't come about easily, there was sporadic violence, and intimidation and sometimes the federal troops did nothing to help protect Black voters. I imagine it was a time of great hope and great fear.

So here were a people who had been "liberated" by an outside army, that couldn't or at times wouldn't protect them, were part of the democratic process for the first time, but never knew when any move would be met with violence. Sounds kind of like some news we're hearing today doesn't it?

And then Reconstruction ended in 1876. Slowly, or quickly depending on your perspective, here and there, by fits and starts the next several decades saw the erosion of most all of the rights gained in reconstruction. First by violence, and then by Jim Crow laws. I can't imagine the despair of seeing that brief taste of freedom, however uneasily attained, taken away.

To have had the hope, the possibility of thinking that long journey out of Egypt was over, only to find it was not. That in fact the Red Sea seems to be closing in, not on Pharaoh's Army but on those who had made the great Exodus...

During Jim Crow, in the 1890's and on into the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Norfolk, the number of Black voters was reduced by poll tax and

intimidation to only 44. This in a total population, of more than 34,000. 16,000 of whom were Black. The demographics for housing shifted from class to race. Where Black homes had been liberally dispersed around the city after the Civil War, by the 1880's there were Black sections.

The 1902 Virginia Constitution (I've read conflicting accounts as the actual date, this date comes from Dr. Will Frank's unpublished writings on Joseph Jordan), put the final nail in the coffin depriving Black children of schooling, while of course still collecting property taxes from their parents. Only a fourth of the black children in Norfolk were able to go to public school, that being the number of publically, if poorly, supported desks.

Black people were officially disenfranchised but they still had power in their own neighborhoods. They owned the shops, funeral homes, and most of all they had the church. The one place where white folks had no power and no visibility at all. And where once again, and always and forever there was the message of hope, solace, and justice for the sins of oppression.

And in this world, the world of the Black church, Jordan, as you can imagine, with his message of Universalism, was not widely welcomed. In fact he was considered an infidel, by his own accounts. The story he was now embracing just didn't appeal to many other Black people. His following was small.

Rev. Jordan wrote: “I almost get lonesome.” But he kept on. Not only did he start a church but he started a school for those children left out of the school lottery. Each child was given a big dose, he said of Universalism along with their letters. And I might add, his school continued until the 1980’s led by several other Black Universalist ministers whose story I won’t have time to tell today.

Joseph Jordan was a free man. I can’t help but wonder if this had an affect on the choices he made. God chose Moses because he was free, according to the story. Why did that make a difference? He knew what it felt like to be free. Who else would have the vision and the endurance to lead people for so long through desert, and keep the vision?

Rev. Joseph Jordan, speaking to a Universalist convention in 1893 said: he believed in hell as the Presbyterians do only he explains it differently. *“They say the sinner goes in to hell I say hell goes in to the sinner. There on the street is an intoxicated man. Do we say he is in liquor? No, we say ‘the liquor is in him’.”* The audience broke into applause.

Jordan set about trying to influence the freest people he could find: young children. In talking about his mission school he said: *“The object is not so much to make converts from other beliefs, those who come to us from*

*other creeds come 'stained' instead let us build up young minds; such make the best believers, the best churches."*

This is something for us to keep in mind.

Think about what he was teaching the kids, along with their letters:

*That we are all one blood, one family, there is only one human race.*

*All people are redeemable, even my enemies.*

*God is a loving God, and God is love itself in action.*

Joseph Jordan knew he had an inherent worth and dignity, and not because he found a predominantly white religion that told him so. I've tried to imagine how he stuck it out so long with Universalism, the rest of his life. How he stayed on that cusp of loneliness. And this is what I conjecture: It was the only idea he had found that was big enough for his particular spirit. I wonder if, by linking himself up with a message that affirmed the widest possible view of humanity he became bigger than the story that was being lived out around him.

But this is only conjecture.

Imagine being big enough inside, a free enough soul to *truly* practice Universalism under those circumstance? Hell, and I do use that word

advisedly, it's hard enough to practice the principles of Universalism in the best of circumstances, and most of us live in pretty good circumstances. It's an every day struggle for me to work toward internal freedom. To love mine "enemy".

So today we honor and remember a man who was responsible for reminding generations of Black girls and boys, thousands, in one corner of the south, that they too had an inherent worth and dignity.

And for building inside of them a vision that offers the ultimate spiritual freedom: a completely inclusive world. One in which they are not victimized. One in which they transcend the nightmare of their times, and ours.

I can't help but wonder if it wasn't in schools like Jordan's that some of the souls were being prepared which would one day step into the ranks of freedom marchers in the 1960's. Maybe some of them joined their brothers and sisters from the other black churches who also lifted up, out of Christian theology, its message to love thine enemy\*. Who had the soul force to be able to face down hate with love, and in so doing, changed the world.

-End-

(\*It should also be noted that both Gandhi, Martin Luther King credit Universalist theory, via the Universalist writer/theologian Adin Ballou as formative in the development of their theories on on non-violent resistance.)