

SKELETONS IN THE AMERICAN CLOSET
Scott W. Alexander, Preaching
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Vero Beach
Martin Luther King Jr. Sunday
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My Mother, Marcia Ewing Alexander, (here she is in Tulsa, Oklahoma right after World War II)



was a civil rights activist – a woman deeply concerned about and committed to racial equality and justice in the United States. During her entire adult life – I am proud to tell you – she diligently worked, right where she lived, for greater racial understanding and equality...which is something of a surprise, I think, because she grew up in virtually all-White Northern Wisconsin, where her exposure to people of different races and cultures was incredibly limited. In the isolated, little town she grew up in, the only diversity worth mentioning was between the Missouri Synod German Lutherans and the Wisconsin Synod German Lutherans! But somehow by the time she reached adulthood, Mother had a passionate commitment to work with and in the African American community, for greater educational, economic, and social equality of all.

Upon graduating from Northwestern University with a degree in Social Work in the early days of World War II, my Mother – who had plenty of opportunities to choose a comfortable, conventional life – went to work instead at a struggling neighborhood house in the slums of Syracuse, New York, where she worked with the children of the poor...mostly African American. She lived in the rough-and-tumble neighborhood where she worked with two roommates – an African American social worker colleague (a wonderful woman with whom she remained friends for her entire life) and – and this is a story unto itself – a Japanese American woman who also worked at the neighborhood house, whom my mother had managed to liberate from an internment

camp in California by promising the military authorities she would take responsibility for both her activities and welfare. My Mother remembered these years working in the slums of Syracuse as some of the most purposeful and rewarding of her life.

After the war, she married my Father, and moved to Racine, Wisconsin, to raise us four boys. But my Mother's commitment to racial equality and justice continued. In the early 60's, she pretty much singlehandedly created a thriving community center in the one black neighborhood in Racine – a predominately poor community that lay, predictably, at the bottom of a deep and depressing industrial valley right in the middle of town. After pulling both Black and White civic leaders together to launch the project, my social worker Mother not only provided the professional leadership and encouragement to get the educational program off its feet, she personally provided the funds to buy a house, which was bright pink...which explains why the new community center was for years known as "The Pink House," but was later named (at my Mother's urging) "The Bray Center" after George Bray, an African American (and Unitarian Universalist!) leader in the community.

On a whim, I googled "The Bray Center" this week and was stunned to see that, in its 50th anniversary year, it has become a thriving social service institution in Racine, providing a wealth of programming and support services for primarily African American youth and adults. Anyway...what I want to share is that all throughout my formative years, I watched as my Mother worked in Racine and beyond for the betterment of the African American community, and instilled in me and my three brothers an understanding of the importance of racial equality, dignity and justice in America.

Perhaps this is why, following her death, my brothers and I were shocked, genuinely shocked, as we went through a bunch of dusty, old family photo albums my Mother had in her possession – to find a photo almost identical to this one:



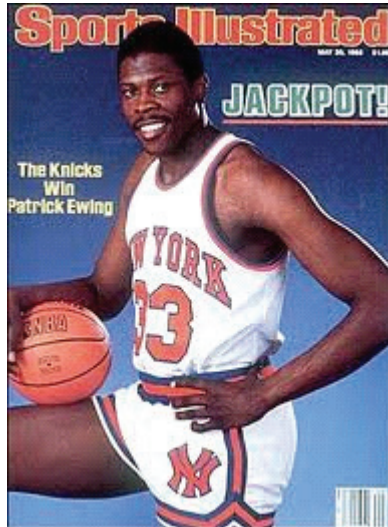
Photo, page 467
America: A Concise History, Third Edition
© 2006 Bedford/St. Martin's

in one of the family albums. Although we were able to trace this photo back to the Illinois side of our Ewing/Scharrs family, we have been unable to determine precisely who these two sinister men were, or why their picture was included our family album. But I can only assume – family albums being just that! – the scary looking KKK goons in the album with their sinister hoods and shotgun at the ready both were relatives of mine from the last half of the 19th Century. Could these two evil characters be great, great uncles or cousins perhaps, or – heaven forbid – someone even closer to me on the family tree? We just don't know precisely who they were, beyond the fact that they are almost certainly a part of my extended family...an embarrassing part of my ancestry as an Midwestern American of European descent. Though it pains me to acknowledge it, these folks are – simply put – “My People” a few generations back.

Some of you may not know the full and rather ugly and complicated history of the Ku Klux Klan. The KKK is the name given to a number of past and present fraternal organizations in the United States that have variously advocated white supremacy and power, anti-Semitism, racism, anti-Catholicism, homophobia, and nativism. The first Klan was founded in 1866 in the Deep South by veterans of the Confederate Army, with the sole purpose of resisting Reconstruction and keeping the freed slaves “in their place” at the bottom of the social, educational and economic order. This first Klan was destroyed in the early 1870s by President Ulysses S. Grant's vigorous enforcement of the Civil Rights Act of 1871, also known as “The KKK Act”. The second incarnation of the KKK was a massive whites-only membership organization which sprang up in the 1920s, with many local chapters and millions of members, representing – believe it or not...and this is a shameful American statistic – about 15% of the nation's eligible white male population. This organization – which in many parts of the country including Midwestern states like Ohio, Indiana and Illinois where it again had hundreds of thousands of members – was responsible for many lynchings, fire-bombings and other violent activities directed against African Americans and their supporters. Like its predecessor, this 20th Century KKK was committed to maintaining the economic privilege and political power long afforded to White Americans...while denying advancement and equality – by force, intimidation, and murder if necessary – to African Americans. Mercifully, this organization (just as its predecessor) also collapsed after a couple of decades of sinister activities...and was virtually non-existent as an organized movement by the time of the Second World War. But today there are, as you all sadly know, still a few pathetic pockets of modern KKK activity and thinking, known as the loosely organized White Supremacist Movement, on the margins of our society, all of which are roundly repudiated by mainstream American culture. But both the 19th Century Klan and the 20th Century Klan – and their decades of violence and terrorism – remain a terrible stain on American history and race relations which we must never, ever minimize or forget.

That is why I took the risk this morning of sharing this little bit of my own family's “dirty laundry” with you on this Martin Luther King Jr. Sunday. I share this shocking and shameful photograph from my own family's past not because I particularly feel any personal guilt over it a hundred and fifty years later, I honestly do not feel any personal responsibility for, or emotional connection to, the terrible choices some of my ancestors may or may not have made in the middle of the 19th century in the contexts of their own fearful, ignorant, prejudiced lives – any more than I would take any credit today for all of my Mother's noble work a century later on behalf of racial equality and justice. I share this undeniable part of my family story – here it is, for all time, in photographic black and white – because it serves me and all white Americans of European descent, who are facing the tragic facts of America's violent and oppressive racial history, as a stark reminder of the power, privilege, and prejudice that has over the history of this nation given me and all White Americans such incredible advantages over those Americans who were enslaved and then otherwise held down and oppressed, for generation after American generation.

Just one more painful example from my own family history of this legacy of racial power, prerogative and privilege. During the many years of his successful NBA basketball Career, every time I hear the name of Patrick Ewing –



who was during the 1980's and 1990's the stand-out African American star-center of the New York Knicks, and is always counted among the finest players ever to grace the courts of the NBA – every time I hear the name of Patrick Ewing, I am reminded of my family's slave holding past. For the undeniable historical truth is that Patrick Ewing and I through my Mother share the Ewing name simply because his great-great-grandparents were enslaved and owned by one of **my** Ewing forbears. That's precisely how (of course) a majority of African Americans today came by their surnames...they were forced to adopt the last name of those who (quote, unquote) "owned" them. While I profoundly wish it were otherwise, as a privileged American white male living in these supposedly enlightened early years of the 21st Century ...I have some ugly skeletons in my closet...both slaveholding and the KKK are directly in my family past...and I am sure that the same is probably true for many (but not all) of you sitting here in this room this morning.

Now...let me be very clear about something right here and now. I bring all this up this morning not (believe me!) because I want to lay some sort of big white liberal guilt trip on every light-skinned person in the room, myself included. I bring this all up on this Martin Luther King Sunday to remind us all of the truth that as a nation, America – now just a handful of generations after this photograph was taken – is not even close (not even close!) to being finished with the pressing moral and societal work of correcting the damage done to Black and White Americans alike by many generations (first) of slavery, and (following that) many generations of economic, educational, and social discrimination and oppression. In the year 2012, all Americans – as citizens of our flawed and unfinished nation – have a pressing duty to face our shameful racial past, and – and this is the hard part – promise to commit the resources (economic, governmental and personal) that will continue to be required to truly heal the nation and finally make things right.

Let me take a moment right here remind you of a bit more of American history – this somewhat more recent and immediately relevant – and then suggest to you where I think we must move as

a nation in regards to our ongoing national struggle with the issues of race, discrimination, equality, and privilege. Following the watershed 1954 Supreme Court decision *Brown VS the Board of Education*, which began the painful and slow process of desegregating America's racially divided schools with the goal of providing equal and quality education for all Americans. Following *Brown VS the Board of Education* for several decades federal, state and local governments began to implement a wide range of remedial social programs designed to correct the accumulated economic, educational, and social harm done to African Americans and other discriminated-against racial minorities. The most systematic and noteworthy of these remedial programs were on the federal level, beginning the President Kennedy's New Frontier proposals which were expanded and extended after President Kennedy's death by the progressive administration of Lyndon Baines Johnson who:

1. *Persuaded a reluctant congress to pass The Civil Rights act of 1964;*
2. *Announced a wide ranging, remedial "War on Poverty" program, and*
3. *Pushed through congress a wide range of other programs which he said would lead to "A Great Society."*

In the year 1965 alone – and I was amazed to be reminded of this when I did my research for this sermon – in the year 1965 alone, there were 115 presidential legislative recommendations – 90 of which were quickly enacted by a supportive Congress – launching wide-ranging programs designed to help the poor and racial minorities, most especially poor African Americans who disproportionately – and again, for obvious historical and racial reasons – suffered economic hardship.

And indulge me a quick (but I think telling) aside here about one of these remedial programs. In the last congregation I served in the suburbs just outside Washington, DC. One of the distinguished older members was a gentleman named Bradley Patterson, who happened to be a staunch Republican, who was a member of the White House staff through several administrations in the 60s and 70s...and who, among many other accomplishments, worked on developing anti-poverty programs during the Johnson Administration. One day – when we were discussing the persistent issue of race in American society – he told me the story of a White House meeting in the mid-sixties with his boss, Sargent Shriver, who was in charge of Johnson's anti-poverty effort. In looking over a proposal to spend millions in poor, predominantly African-American inner-city schools, Shriver noticed a budget line item for hundreds of thousands of dollars of mirrors, and skeptically asked the project manager what possible use the schools could have for so many mirrors. The project manager matter-of-factly replied, "The mirrors are for the classrooms, because so many of these impoverished children have never seen themselves in a mirror, and have not had the opportunity to develop appropriate self-esteem or self-awareness." Brad told me that this answer silenced the room. Let that shocking fact about the face of American poverty in the 1960s sink into your psyche for a moment.

But...back to my broader history. In the 1960s and 70s, President Johnson's Great Society initiatives – and other remedial social programs designed to lift discriminated-against minority populations out of poverty – enjoyed the widespread support of the American people, including (I remember) my parents and their friends who were totally committed to America achieving real racial and economic equality. But as the nation moved into the last two decades of the 20th Century – and African American and other minority group poverty proved difficult to eradicate, or even substantially reduce in many cities and rural communities – many in America became impatient, even hostile, to both the cost and the possible ineffectiveness of such programs.

Economic and social conservatives in particular began to raise their voices and political clout against these tax-supported remedial programs, and suggested that the great economic, educational and social gaps between various racial and ethnic groups in America could best be closed not by “throwing federal tax dollars at the problem” but rather by insisting that those who find themselves poor take more “individual responsibility,” for their own educational and economic advancement, and “pull themselves up” – as the saying goes – “by their own boot straps.” Under the weight of this conservative argument and a growing resentment in many American quarters against paying taxes for any purpose, over recent decades – most especially over recent years as American conservatism has found a larger voice on talk radio and other venues – we have seen a steady and intentional decline of federally mandated and financed “remedial programs” designed to compensate and correct for past racial discrimination and oppression. And there has also recently been a similar widespread roll back – in part due to several recent decisions of an increasingly conservative Supreme Court – of what are known as affirmative action programs, both in educational and business spheres. It is clear – in the year 2012 – that for some time now America has been moving away from concerted governmental investment aimed at correcting long-standing poverty and racial discrimination, a trend which I and many others regard as a grave societal and moral mistake. As I have said, I personally believe we are nowhere close as a nation to have sufficiently addressed the collective damage done by our shamefully racist past.

But of course, as is so often the case when we look at vexing and persistent social problems, I suspect that this national situation of ours, concerning race and remediation for historical discrimination, may be more complex than any of us as progressives want, at first, to admit. As I thought, in preparing for this sermon, about the dualism between: 1) the liberal/progressive commitment to programs of social remediation (on the one hand)...and 2) the conservative insistence on encouraging more individual responsibility (on the other), it occurs to me that when it comes to the dream of America achieving greater racial justice and social equality in America in the 21st Century, indeed these two, at first seemingly incompatible, things may be simultaneously true.

First, as I have already said, because African Americans in particular historically suffered generations of spirit-crushing slavery, and the subsequent economic, educational and social subjugation they suffered in American culture, additional and substantial governmental remediation and investment will be required to bring about true racial and social equality in these United States. At the same time, and please hear me here...the same is true whether we are talking about white poverty in the hollows rural Appalachia...or latino poverty in the barrios of South Los Angeles...or black poverty on the southside of Chicago...at the same time no amount of governmental remediation and investment will work unless those individuals (of any racial, ethnic or cultural background) now trapped in the cycle of poverty, joblessness, illiteracy and deprivation are able to step up and take increased individual responsibility for the future of their own lives and the lives of their children.

Although it is not without controversy, this is precisely the largely-conservative message that African American entertainer Bill Cosby...and African American economist Thomas Sowell... and Charles Ramsey (the no-nonsense Police Chief of Philadelphia), and even Oprah Winfrey and other outspoken leaders in the Black community...are all currently preaching to Black audiences across the nation. Although as a progressive I always am inclined to unflinchingly support governmental anti-poverty programs, it also make some sense to me that that no amount of governmental remediation and investment – again, in any impoverished community – will work unless those families suffering from generations of poverty and discrimination are willing and able to play an active role with governments committed to remediation and justice in

working to improve their own situations. Indeed one of the greatest and sometimes overlooked success stories of American society over the last century is the inspiring – and in some ways spectacular – fact that millions upon millions of African Americans whose ancestors were enslaved in chains as recently as just 150 years ago, with the help, don't forget, of tax-supported governmental remediation and support programs and affirmative action have diligently applied themselves – in situations where they were obliged to repeatedly surmount prejudice, racism, and discrimination – and by working harder, longer, and smarter than other Americans had to, to achieve success as middle- and upper-class Americans.

The bottom line here is that I believe that both liberals and conservatives have something to contribute here as America struggles in the 21st Century to move the whole nation toward greater racial equality and justice. Liberals and progressives, both Black and White, are morally and politically right to call for more and better designed social remediation programs, that invest significant governmental resources in correcting past discrimination and oppression of all minorities and impoverished populations, ...and conservatives both black and white are also morally and politically right to encourage “the impoverished” to invest something of themselves if their personal situations and those of their children are ever to improve. It seems to me that when seeking to correct its racial and social inequalities, America should not be asked to choose between the progressive commitment to governmental remediation and the conservative insistence on individual responsibility. It seems to me both perspectives are required to get the whole job done.

Let me just give one example of this “merger of liberal and conservative perspectives” that I am talking about. A few years back when I lived in Washington DC, the then young, African American mayor Adrian Fenty (who, incidentally, like Patrick Ewing, bears the name of the Scotsman who enslaved his ancestors) announced – and this is pure, progressive remediation, folks – a comprehensive, citywide Adult Illiteracy Elimination Program which was a partnership between government (which provided the centers and the teachers) and the residents of DC (who will need to get themselves to where the help is being offered). As a taxpayer – sadly aware that fully 1/3rd of the population of our nation's capital is functionally illiterate – I was thrilled with this multi-million dollar use of my tax dollars...for I believe all Americans have a role to play in this important work of social justice, equality and opportunity...and must not begrudge the cost of such work.

And thus in closing:



I return on this Martin Luther King Sunday to affirm what I believe is our primary responsibility – those of us who are sitting here this morning, most of us in a comfortable place of great social privilege and prerogative – what is our primary responsibility in this great struggle to help

America move toward racial equality and social justice. Our responsibility – as citizens, voters and tax payers – is to do everything we can to ensure that our government on the federal, state and local level wisely and responsibly invests in affirmative action and remedial programs designed to end racially-based poverty, while never failing to insist that those to whom the funds are directed step up to their part as well. It frankly saddens me that at this particular juncture in American history many comfortable and successful Americans, including many here in Vero Beach, want to forget and deny this truth about the necessity of the racial and economic justice work that remains for us as a nation to accomplish. But perhaps – if we constantly remind ourselves about the persistent skeletons – the obvious and unjust skeletons – that remain in the American closet...skeletons of our violent and oppressive racist past which we have not yet succeeded in burying – perhaps we will find the national will to once and for all make this right.

I pray that as committed and compassionate Unitarian Universalists we will be steady and reliable voices -- in our families...in our workplaces...in our social and friendship circles...in our neighborhoods and communities – advocating for America to do the hard – and, yes, still expensive and halting – work of undoing the damage and injustice of our racist past and present. It is clear to me in the year 2012 the dream of genuine racial equality and social justice that Martin Luther King had for America will take more time and effort than any of us would have hoped...and certainly more time and effort than many Americans today have patience for. But this is the dream we must never forsake...this is the dream we must never abandon...this is the dream we must keep at the forefront of the American agenda...an America with opportunity and equality for all. We're not there yet...we're still on the long road...let's stay the course.

Amen.