

WHAT'S IN A NAME? – PART II

Minister's Reflections by Rev. Dr. Ed Piper
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Waynesboro (VA)
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Last Sunday Rev. Barbro Hansson offered a first-hand account of her experience during the 1993 General Assembly of our denomination in Charlotte, North Carolina. The focal point of that meeting was the controversy surrounding a seemingly innocent decision to sponsor a costume ball in honor of the 250th birthday of Thomas Jefferson. A group of African-American ministers issued a protest statement read by Hope Johnson, which asked pointedly whether, in honor of Jefferson, they should come to the ball dressed as slaves. The resulting controversy polarized the Assembly delegates. More importantly, it called attention to our largely **unsuccessful** efforts to become the racially diverse denomination we aspire to be. In spite of numerous loftily-worded resolutions and underfunded programs since then, it is as true today as it was in 1993. Only a tiny fraction of our members and ministers come from minority backgrounds.

The uproar during the 1993 GA also called attention to Thomas Jefferson himself as a source of ongoing controversy for some current and potential UUs. As president of the Thomas Jefferson District Board of Directors, Barbro Hansson initiated a process to consider changing the name of our district. At the annual meeting of the TJ District in 1997, a motion to change the name from “Thomas Jefferson” to “Southeastern” fell just nine votes short of the necessary two-thirds needed for approval. “At issue was the concern of many in the District that calling it by the name of a slave owner is offensive to African-American members. Some delegates, however, were offended by the implication that their championing of the name of Jefferson, whose doctrine of the separation of church and state and freedom of religious belief is central to Unitarian Universalist belief, implied that they were racist.” [Leslie Takahashi Morris, Chip Roush, and Leon Spencer, *The Arc of the Universe Is Long*, p. 163] Following this vote, a District Anti-Racism Transformation Team was formed to promote interracial understanding within our congregations, and each year a District Anti-Racism conference is organized. This year it will be held in Richmond on February 5th and 6th. At the annual meeting of the TJ District the first weekend of May, delegates will consider another proposal to change the name of

our district. Our Fellowship will send delegates to this meeting, including me. This morning I will offer my perspective on the name change issue and then allow plenty of time for discussion. What I want to suggest is that the referendum on our district name is above all a referendum about our identity as Unitarian Universalists.

Thomas Jefferson left a very mixed legacy, and it's up to us to decide whether we want to perpetuate it. He is both a hero and a hypocrite. Let's look at the "hero" side first. Of greatest relevance to UUs are his championing of religious freedom and his self-identification as a Unitarian. In Jefferson's opinion, state-supported religion undermined not only individual liberty but also the aims of religion itself. He wrote, "The legitimate powers of government extend to such acts only as are injurious to others. But it does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods or no god. It neither picks my pocket, nor breaks my leg." [*Notes on the State of Virginia*, in Adrienne Koch and William Peden (eds.), *The Life and Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, p. 275] Jefferson's opposition to government-supported religion was widely misinterpreted, and it was used against him viciously during the presidential campaign of 1800. In New England rumors circulated that, if Jefferson was elected president, citizens would be forced to hide their Bibles to keep them from being confiscated and destroyed. He was labeled as an **infidel**.

Jefferson's views on the Christian faith reflect his humanistic sensibilities. He saw in Jesus a great teacher of **human** virtues whose role as a divine savior had been distorted by the Christian church. He wrote to his friend Dr. Benjamin Rush: "I am a Christian, but I am a Christian in the only sense in which I believe Jesus wished anyone to be, sincerely attached to his doctrine in preference to all others; ascribing to him all **human** excellence, and believing that he never claimed any other." [in Koch and Peden (eds.), p. 567] While he was president, he took the time to sift through the Gospels and extract what he considered to be the essential teachings of Jesus in what later became known as the *Jefferson Bible*. He retained the parables and teachings of Jesus, but eliminated the miracle stories, including the resurrection. To the pride of subsequent generations of UUs, Jefferson declared himself a Unitarian, even though he never joined a Unitarian congregation—nor any other church throughout his life. Four years before his death, he proclaimed, "I confidently expect that the present generation will see Unitarianism become the general religion of the United States." [Koch and Peden, p. 704] **Oh well!**

Now let's take a look at the **other** side of the Jefferson legacy. The most damaging case against him revolves around the issue of slavery. Even though he opposed slavery in principle, he kept an average of about 200 slaves in his servitude. On at least one occasion, he ordered that one of his slaves who attempted to escape should be flogged as an example to his other slaves. Unlike some other slave owners such as George Washington, he liberated only a handful of his slaves upon his death. He viewed people of African descent as inferior by nature, and he could not conceive of black and white Americans coexisting peacefully in the wake of slavery. At the most basic level, Thomas Jefferson feared blacks. Even though he advocated an eventual end to slavery, his proposals for a post-slavery America called for the removal of freed slaves to somewhere else: Africa, the Caribbean, perhaps to frontier settlements in the western part of North America, but not side-by-side as free citizens with their former slave masters. In his own words regarding slavery: "We have the wolf by the ears; and we can neither hold him nor safely let him go. **Justice is in one scale, and self-preservation in the other.**" [Koch and Peden, p. 698] The fact that Jefferson chose self-preservation over justice is a telling confession of how he resolved this contradiction between the lofty principles he professed and his comfortable life supported by his black slaves.

Among them was Sally Hemings. A mounting body of evidence indicates that Jefferson was indeed the biological father of Sally's children. Unless Jefferson's body is exhumed for a DNA sample to be matched with Sally's descendants, there will never be indisputable proof that he was their father. To me, the most disturbing aspect of the Sally Hemings story is the contrast between Jefferson's public statements and his private behavior. Jefferson wrote in 1814 that "the amalgamation of whites with blacks produces a degradation to which no lover of his country, no lover of excellence in the human character, can innocently consent." [Thomas Jefferson Biography, *Wikipedia*] If the allegations of his long-term relationship with Sally Hemings are true, then he qualifies as a hypocrite of the worst sort.

How can we possibly resolve the contradictions so evident in Thomas Jefferson's life? I don't think we can, and I'm not sure that it's worth the effort. He was both a prisoner and an **imprisoner** of the racism of his time. He could stand on a mountaintop and envision equality in principle, but he could not see through the thicket of racism that surrounded him and his contemporaries. So where does that leave me in the current discussion about changing our

district name? At the district meeting in 1997, I did **not** vote in favor of changing our name. In the thirteen years since then, I have gradually changed my mind. **I believe the time has come to let go of Thomas Jefferson.** His opinions about race stand in sharp contrast to the racially diverse, multicultural society that he thought was impossible. We also need to let go of our self-serving attachment to him as a Unitarian. In point of fact, he never joined a Unitarian congregation. His view of religion as an entirely private matter contradicts our movement's efforts to become a more visible force in our culture. Throughout our history, Unitarian Universalism has emphasized that deeds are more important than creeds. The disparity between Thomas Jefferson's creed and his deeds is no longer worth defending. He was indeed a "man of his times," and for this we should forgive him. But he is no longer a man for **our** times, and for this we should no longer enshrine him.

Whatever we decide to do, we should avoid the discrepancy between our principles and our actions that plagued Thomas Jefferson. We UUs have a regrettable tendency to substitute lofty words and symbolic acts in place of the hard work it will take to bring about social justice in our society. Changing the name of our district is far less important than how effectively we welcome people of different backgrounds into our congregations. During our potluck lunch last Sunday, Barbro Hansson told the story of how she and Hope Johnson, who read the protest statement at the 1993 General Assembly, gradually overcame their mutual discomfort to become friends and eventually colleagues in ministry. **Our actions are far more powerful than our words.** In the words of W. E. B. Dubois, "The prayer of our souls is a petition for persistence, not for the one good deed, or single thought, but deed on deed, and thought on thought, until day calling unto day shall make a life worth living." [*Singing the Living Tradition*, # 494]

DISCUSSION – including the TJD Board's proposal of the new name "Toward Justice District"

HYMN # 124 "Be That Guide"

CLOSING WORDS # 456 [led by Lay Leader]