

## **“With Eyes Open”**

*A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May*

*First Parish in Wayland*

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We’ve heard a bit about Frederick Douglass [in the news](#) this week. As you may know, Douglass was an escaped slave who became the most prominent African-American voice in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. What you may not know is that Douglass, like many enslaved persons, did not know his birthday. So he chose his own—February 14. Were he alive, he would be 199 in a couple weeks.

In 1925, Douglass’ birthday was chosen as one of two dates to anchor the newly declared [“Negro History Week.”](#) The other date in this special week was President Lincoln’s birthday. The week was the idea of [Carter Woodson](#), one of the first African-Americans to receive a doctorate from Harvard. A scholar of history, his studies had shown him the misrepresentation or absence of African-American history in the telling of U.S. history. In 1976, the week became a month. Though the duration and the name may have shifted over the last century, the intention of promoting knowledge about African American history has remained.

As I considered this sermon, my attention inevitably began scanning for references to Black History month. One title caught my attention, [“Let’s Not Forget the White People Who Made Black History.”](#) While I didn’t recognize the source of the article, an African-American friend who is a professor of African-American studies had posted it, so I clicked. The opening paragraph explains: “people forget how influential white people have been in black history. They’ve been a part of every civil rights movement, from ending slavery to ending segregation.” At this point, I was simply reading along and nodding . . . thinking about how we UU’s have been a part of the story for Civil Rights and Abolition.

Then, I began to read the list of white people. “1. Branch Rickey – Breaking the color barrier in baseball was a huge moment for civil rights in America. Thank goodness for Branch Rickey, the Dodgers’ General Manager who had the bravery, gusto, and foresight to let Jackie Robinson play the game.”

I paused as I comprehended. This was satire—yes, whites have played roles in black history, but does the story really center around *them*? Does whiteness need to hold the superior role *even in black history*?

Lately, I have been thinking a fair amount about whiteness and “white supremacy.” For many of us good liberals with white skin, such terms can inspire a defensive reaction. We

gird our moral loins to ready ourselves for the battle between what we know is right (racial justice) and our guilt for what we know to be true (our racial privilege). Such defensive reactions, however, hamper the capacity of white folks to be good allies in racial justice work. In short, rather than channeling our energy into listening, learning, and supporting the work of justice, our energy gets sucked into our own emotions.

It doesn't have to be this way. Or, more precisely, I don't think it needs to *stay* this way. For those of us who identify as white, I think we *do* need to wrestle with accepting our whiteness. The process of awakening to the legacies and privileges of whiteness can certainly be disorienting. There can be a loss of innocence that society is "fair" as injustices come into focus. There can be a crushing sense of guilt and confusion as one questions what harm one is personally responsible for and how to move forward. And yet, we *are* called forward—even when it's uncomfortable or when we inevitably make mistakes (like I did and have often done!). Despite the difficulty or the discomfort, justice beckons us to live with our eyes open.

In a recent book, African-American scholar, Eddie Glaude, quotes James Baldwin who wrote, "People who shut their eyes to reality simply invite their own destruction, and anyone who insists on remaining in a state of innocence long after that innocence is dead turns himself into a monster." In response, Glaude asks, "Are we a nation of monsters?"

Are we a nation of monsters? That's a powerful question. It's a question that emphasizes the importance and the challenge of living with eyes open to reality—even if that reality will shed our innocence. But, if Baldwin is right, then closing our eyes is far more dangerous.

Black history month arose to open the eyes of the nation to the contributions of African Americans throughout U.S. history. The roots of the effort may date back nearly a hundred years, but misrepresentations, the omissions, and the lies too often remain.

I was reminded of the power of such misrepresentation and missing knowledge this week when I watched the film *13<sup>th</sup>*. If you've not yet heard of *13<sup>th</sup>*, it is a documentary film about the legacy of the 13<sup>th</sup> amendment's exception to allow loss of freedom—slavery—for persons convicted of a crime. The film follows the story of how black men have been depicted as criminals from post-Civil War Reconstruction through today's Mass Incarceration. As criminals, they are effectively enslaved anew.

Some of the examples in the film are likely familiar to many here—such as the War on Drugs under Reagan and Clinton. Yet, I suspect fewer of us may be familiar with the 1915

film, *Birth of the Nation*. The first true blockbuster film, [nearly 10%](#) of the U.S. population watched the film. Based on a book, *The Clansman*, the movie purports to tell the story of the South after the Civil War. The first film ever shown at the White House, then President Woodrow Wilson lauded the film saying, "It is like writing history with lightning, and my only regret is that it is all so terribly true." ([pbs](#)) Except it wasn't true. The film was maliciously racist and factually distorted.

One central theme emphasized the perceived danger black men posed to white women. Portrayed as rapacious and animalistic, black men lunged after white women. Faced with such outrageous *criminal* behavior, white men organized to protect *their* women. In this way, *Birth of the Nation* romanticizes the crusade of the Ku Klux Klan and spurs massive recruitment to what had been a virtually non-existent organization. Moreover, the iconic image of the Klan burning a cross *originated* in the film. The director, D.W. Griffith, thought the burning cross was a nice cinematic effect. Those new recruits agreed. Life imitated art.

African Americans were horrified by the film. In Boston, an African American civil rights leader, William Monroe Trotter lobbied hard to stop the film from showing. His story of fighting against the film is told in a new film, [Birth of a Movement](#), premiering tomorrow night on PBS [Monday, February 6].

Although Trotter had successfully lobbied to ban a play based on the book ten years earlier, he could not stop the film *Birth of a Nation*. So he coordinated protests around the Tremont Theatre off Boston Common. Yes, the same one that is still there. Also in Boston today is the William Trotter Institute at UMass Boston, a Trotter school, and a Trotter Court. Anyone ever heard of him before? No, me neither.

So I started looking more into Trotter's story. I found Trotter listed in a 1905 issue of the leading Unitarian weekly. The rather lengthy article described the events surrounding the "Niagara Movement." Again something new to me. In short, W.E.B. Dubois, Trotter, and a couple dozen other civil rights leaders gathered to create a platform to fight for African American rights. The article in Unitarian paper describes,

"The leaders believe that the reform must come from the race itself, not be conferred by grace of the whites. So the country sees today this assertion of manhood and of self-respect, coming as the most important political movement among the black race since the close of the Civil War, looking to severe opposition, but entering the future with patience, loyalty to law, and strong resolution, determined to win the common rights of manhood, and to enjoy no rest until

substantial political equality before the law shall have been obtained.” (*Christian Register*, July 27, 1905, p. 10-11)

Reading this I think again of the satirical article. Here is change with African American leaders at the center. But I also notice the insistence that their movement will be loyal to the law. They resisted the misrepresentation of criminal black men—the kind of images present in the then popular play and novel, *The Clansman*. In the face of such widespread bigotry, the leaders of the Niagara Movement demanded their rights as citizens and actively planned for a more just future.

In learning about this story, I did not have time to figure out how the article ended up in the Boston-based Unitarian weekly. I’m guessing Trotter was known to pertinent Unitarians—which suggests something both about Trotter’s reaching out to white liberals as well the perceived interest of the Unitarian readers in issues of race in 1905.

In fact, a white Unitarian woman, [Mary White Ovington](#), is also connected to this story. A correspondent of W.E.B. Dubois since 1904, Ovington was the first white member of the Niagara Movement. When this group began to falter, Ovington was part of the group of white liberals who, along with Dubois and six other African Americans, founded the NAACP in 1909. Strongly committed to the racial goals of the organization, Ovington also worked to integrate black women into positions of power—including her friends at the National Association of Colored Women or the NACW.

One such woman from the NACW who joined the NAACP was Fannie Barrier Williams—an African American Unitarian from Chicago. Earlier in her life, Williams helped to organize a part of the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago. In a speech delivered at the Exposition, Williams declared it a “monstrous thing” for churches to close their doors to African Americans. “It should be the province of religion,” Williams said, “to unite, and not to separate, men and women according to the superficial differences of race lines.” A 75-year old Frederick Douglass was in the audience cheering her on.

I assure you that there will be no quiz about the names and dates of this sermon. That’s not the point. Rather, what I hope you take from these fragments of stories is two things. Firstly, I hope you take away a hunger to know more. If not about Fannie Williams or William Trotter, then of some other part of African American history that feels important or interesting to you. Pick up a book or watch a film (I’ve cited several!) and join the spirit of African American history month. Explore what you may not know or know well.

Secondly, in tracing the interconnections of civil rights leaders, black and white, I hope that you take away both inspiration and a model for racial justice work in the contemporary moment. Whatever issue you may find yourself engaging within, follow the lead and goals of those most impacted. Whites *were* and *are* involved in movements for racial justice. But the role for those of who are white is not to be the center, but to offer support. Such willingness to follow the leadership of people of color, of Muslims, of immigrants, is in itself a step towards racial justice.

As we look around the state of our nation, to me it is clear that advocates of white supremacy are enjoying a resurgence of power and visibility. Whether or not the bigotry and racism is blatant or cloaked in legalese, it is a time to be vigilant in keeping our eyes open to the reality within and around us. When the path feels difficult, I hope that you will remember the courage and example of some of the stories you heard here today. We walk in a tradition of justice and resistance, compassion and vision. May we live with eyes open to the vision of a better, more loving and just, world.

So may it be. Amen.