

In the early 18th century, English merchant and philanthropist Edward Colston established almshouses, housing for the poor, hospitals, schools and churches. He built a cathedral for the city of Bristol.

Although he was born into the upper class and inherited his father's trading business, he grew that business into a virtual monopoly...through the buying and selling of human flesh – the slave trade. His Royal African Company captured over 100,000 native Africans and shipped them to the new world for sale. Twenty thousand of them perished along the way.

On June 7, protesters in Bristol pulled down his statue, rolled it through the streets and dumped it in the harbor – the same harbor from which his slave ships once set sail. A sign left at the statue's pedestal said: Mass Murderer + Philanthropist = Mass Murderer.

On Thursday, June 18, protestors in Portland set fire to a statue of George Washington, strung ropes around his neck and pulled it to the pavement. "Genocidal Colonist" and "You're on native lands" were spray painted on the statue's pedestal. Days earlier, a statue of Thomas Jefferson was pulled down at a nearby Portland high school.

You likely already know this; and of course, I don't need to tell you about all the Confederate monuments that are coming down across the South.

Historical figures, and their actions, are often defended with the argument that "they were just people of their time...it's just what people did back then." Yet, back then, there were other people of their time who didn't do what people did back then. There were other people back then, who knew that slavery was wrong; who knew that the removal and genocide of native peoples were wrong.

...but even in these terms, it's not so simple. Reducing things...reducing people to the lowest common denominator; to right/wrong dualities, or to the worst thing they've ever done rarely gets to the heart of the matter; rarely does it give you a clear picture of the totality, and complexity, of a person.

In the 18th century, one of the key persons responsible for the abolition of slavery in France also happened to be the key person responsible for the French Revolution's reign of terror where thousands were either beheaded or perished in prison. Robespierre then ended up losing his own head. What sign could be placed at his unmarked grave: Abolitionist + Mass Murderer = ? It's not so simple.

Years from now, what might they say about us? In a future world where humanity, and several other species, are on the brink of extinction due to climate change, they might say, "Dave Dunn continued to use single use plastics though he knew it was wrong. He continued to drive cars

powered by fossil fuels though zero-emission vehicles were available. He purchased clothing, goods and services made in sweatshops around the world while he could have taken some extra time and spent a little more to purchase things locally made by union workers. He was ok with exploited workers picking his fruits and vegetables, cleaning his hotel rooms.” The list could go on and on.

The statues of us all just might end up in the bay.

Jewish rabbi and theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel writes, “In a free society, all are involved in what some are doing. Some are guilty, all are responsible (Abraham Joshua Heschel).”

I know that I’ve said this before but as Unitarian Universalists, if we believe in an interdependent web of all existence, if we believe in interdependence, interconnectedness; then we are responsible for everything.

It is not my intention to make you feel as if you must carry a burden around with you – absolutely not. It is my intention however to heighten your, and my, sense of awareness, responsibility and duty.

In Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*, a book I mentioned in earlier sermons (I got at least three sermons out of that book!), Father Zosima, the elder of the monastery, a holy figure instructs his novices. He says,

Remember...you cannot be a judge of anyone. For no one can judge a criminal, until he recognizes that he is just such a criminal as the man standing before him, and that he perhaps is more than all men to blame for that crime.... If I had been righteous myself, perhaps there would have been no criminal standing before me.... When one understands that, one will be able to be a judge. Though that sounds absurd, it is true. (Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, p277)

Bryan Stevenson of the Equal Justice Initiative, a man who has dedicated his life to representing those unjustly condemned to death row by a racist judicial system; a man who has resurrected the memory of thousands of people of color who’ve suffered the terror and horror on lynching in the United States says, “Each of us is more than the worst thing we've ever done (Bryan Stevenson, *Just Mercy*, p17).”

This is a simple, yet profound, declaration...for he means for it to be applied universally...universally...it includes all of us. It includes me, you, all of us at UUMAN. It also includes those who uphold the racist judicial practices he actively resists in his work; it includes those who terrorized and lynched his ancestors; it also includes Edward Colston, Maximilien

Robespierre, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson. It also includes those who believed in the Confederate cause.

This is Universalism. This is difficult.

The Jewish high holiday of Yom Kippur begins tonight at sundown. It is the Day of Atonement, the sabbath of sabbath's, the holiest day in Judaism. It is a time when one seeks atonement for one's transgressions. Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook elaborates on transgressions. He writes ,
"When one forgets the essence of one's soul, when one distracts [their] mind from attending to the substantive content of [their] own inner life, everything becomes [obscured] and uncertain (Rav Avraham Yitzchak Kook, Lights of Penitance, 15:10)."

On Yom Kippur the Jewish people atone to God through acts of teshuva. It goes without saying that our conceptions of God likely do not coincide with one another. We may choose to comprehend God expansively or not at all. We may choose to comprehend God as Nature, God as the spirit in all things in an interconnected universe, God as the evolving nature of existence, God as the breath of life breathed into you through the spirit of your ancestors and passed on through your descendants.

Keeping in mind your comprehension, Rabbi Kook continues, "The primary role of teshuvah is for the person to return to themselves, to the root of their soul. Then they will at once return to God, the Soul of all souls. ... It is only through the great truth of returning to oneself that the person and the people, the world and all the worlds, the whole of existence will return to their Creator, to be illumined by the light of life (Rav Avraham Yitzchak Kook, Lights of Penitance, 15:10)"

We all have that for which we must atone for we are all responsible for all; yet let not this be a burden for we are more than the worst thing we've ever done. We are most worthy of that atonement. We are worthy of that forgiveness. We are worthy of acceptance.

Writer Kent Jones says, "You gotta face yourself. The problem is actually forgiving yourself. It's hard. Many people can't even imagine it. And...maybe the word 'forgiving' is pompous...accepting yourself is what it is. Living with yourself. Because that might make it easier to live with other people, and be good to other people (Kent Jones, Parabola, Fall 2019, p18)." Amen.