

“The Light of Truth”

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Reading: An excerpt from the Unitarian Universalist Association’s General Assembly Ware Lecture given by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in June of 1966.

The idea whose time has come today is the idea of freedom and human dignity, and so all over the world we see something of a freedom explosion, and this reveals to us that we are in the midst of revolutionary times. An older order is passing away and a new order is coming into being. ... The role of the church [is] to broaden horizons, to challenge the status quo, and to question and break mores. ... The church has a major role to play in this period of social change ... [it must] remain awake through this revolution.

Sermon/Homily: “The Light of Truth”

“The only certain remedy is an appeal to law. Lawbreakers must be made to know that human life is sacred and that every citizen of this country is first a citizen of the United States and secondly a citizen of the state in which he belongs.

The strong arm of the government must reach across state lines whenever unbridled lawlessness defies state laws and must give to the individual under the Stars and Stripes the same measure of protection it gives to him when he travels in foreign lands.”

These words were spoken by activist and journalist Ida B. Wells in New York City on June 1, 1909 at the National Negro Conference, the forerunner to the NAACP. The words are offered as she spoke them 112 years ago.

Wells was speaking about the responsibility of the federal government to protect the civil rights of all people, especially when individuals break the law of the land. Wells was speaking from her life experience of racism and violence against African Americans.

I am going to speak today about Ida B. Wells investigative journalism that exposed that violence. I will not share gruesome details, and also acknowledge that this is a painful topic. Please take care for yourself and any young ones who may be present.

Wells was born into slavery in Mississippi in 1862, 6 months before the Emancipation Proclamation. Her parents moved into freedom with the ability to support their seven children with their skills as a cook and carpenter. They encouraged Wells' schooling and interest in learning. When she was 14, a Yellow Fever epidemic took the lives of her parents and younger siblings, so Wells left school and moved to Memphis to take a job to support her family. With the help of an aunt, she worked, raised her siblings and completed school as she was able. She was part of the urban migration of blacks to the cities where there were social clubs, cultural clubs and black newspapers.

Wells' formative years were during the Post-Civil War reconstruction era with promises of opportunity and freedom. She also lived through the dismantling of those promises. By 1877, federal laws protecting blacks were overturned by powerful Southern political leaders, and power was returned to the states. States in the North turned their backs as Southern states put in place systems to subordinate blacks, creating the era of Jim Crow.

While travelling by train in 1884, a white conductor asked Wells to move to a segregated train car, the Jim Crow car. When she refused, he tried to forcibly remove her. When he failed, he got two more white conductors to help him and they carried her off the train. The news at the time reported that the white passengers cheered her removal. Wells sued the railroad company and won a \$500 settlement. The railroad appealed and her win was overturned by the Supreme Court in 1887. This loss impelled her into activism and journalism.

Wells said: "The people must know before they can act, and there is no educator to compare with the press."

In 1889 Wells became a partner with Rev. Nightingale, pastor of Beale Street Baptist Church, in a newspaper called the *Free Speech and Headlight*. With the support of his large congregation and a growing black community in Memphis, the paper flourished, allowing Wells to leave her teaching position for full-time journalism.

Another formative event for Wells happened in 1892 when three of her male friends were lynched. These black men were owners of the People's Grocery Company, a small, thriving store that served the black community. White shop owners saw The People's Grocery as competition, so they attacked People's Grocery and its owners. The owners fought back, shooting one of the attackers in self-defense. Unfortunately, you know how this ends: Wells friends, the owners of People's Grocery were arrested. While in jail, a lynch-mob broke into the jail, dragged the men away from town, and brutally murdered them.

Wells wrote, "The appeal to the white man's pocket has ever been more effectual than all the appeals ever made to his conscience."

In her grief, Wells used the power of her pen to encourage black people to leave town, taking their money with them. It's estimated that 6000 people left Memphis moving West to the Oklahoma territory. Those who remained boycotted white businesses, including the trolley system, choosing to walk rather than spend money to support corrupt and violent business owners. You might recognize this as a precursor to the bus boycotts of the 1950's and 1960's in the South.

Wells reported on the murder of her friends and began reporting on the lynching of black people, predominantly black men. She described in detail what happened and why, keeping a tally of the number, questioning the rationale.

Wells said, "I am only a mouthpiece through which to tell the story of lynching and I have told it so often that I know it by heart. I do not have to embellish; it makes its own way."

In response to her investigative journalism and activism, Wells' newspaper office was destroyed and she was forced to leave Memphis in fear of her life. She moved to Chicago where she flourished. She was at the beginning of the Great Migration of blacks from the South to the industrial cities of the North. Wells worked on many projects in Chicago, including helping to create settlement houses for Blacks newly arrived there from the South and in need of help with practical things as well as adjustment to a new culture.

In Chicago, Wells helped develop many organizations for African American women and social reform. She became a tireless worker for women's suffrage, and participated in the 1913 march for universal suffrage in Washington, D.C. Wells worked with Unitarian Jane Addams to successfully block the establishment of segregated schools in Chicago.

Even though she no longer lived in the South, Wells remained diligent in her anti-lynching crusade, writing *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases in 1892 and The Red Record in 1895*, telling the truth and exposing the horror of lynching in America.

Wells said, "I honestly believe I am the only woman in the United States who ever traveled throughout the country with a nursing baby to make political speeches."

In 1895 Wells married an attorney and editor of one of Chicago's early Black newspapers, Ferdinand L. Barnett. In addition to Barnett's two sons from a previous marriage, the couple added four children of their own to the family. Wells did not retire to the home as was socially-expected, but continued writing and organizing.

She worked closely with Fredrick Douglas to proclaim that it was black labor built this nation. She joined with W.E.B. DuBois and others to further the Niagara Movement, and in 1909 she was one of two African American women who helped co-found the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, NAACP. Because she was among the few black leaders who criticized Booker T. Washington's strategies for black equality, Wells was labeled a radical and was kept from leadership positions in the new organization.

Wells said, "It is with no pleasure that I have dipped my hands in the corruption here exposed ... Somebody must show that the Afro-American race is more sinned against than sinning, and it seems to have fallen upon me to do so."

Wells worked diligently and relentlessly to bring the message of freedom from violence and oppression to the US and Europe. She was the voice for those who could no longer speak. She helped form anti-lynching groups here and in Britain.

In 1930, Wells was so frustrated by the nominees of the major parties that she decided to run for a seat in the Illinois State assembly. She was one of the first Black women to run for public office in the United States. She died just a year later.

Wells started writing her autobiography in 1928 because she wanted young black people to know true history. She never finished the book; it was published in 1970, edited by her daughter Alfreda Barnett Duster with the title *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells*.

Wells said, “Our country’s national crime is lynching. It is not the creature of an hour, the sudden outburst of uncontrolled fury, or the unspeakable brutality of an insane mob.”

I learned about Ida B. Wells Barnett in seminary in a course on anti-oppression, highlighting crusaders who lived lives dedicated to fighting oppression of all kinds. I didn’t learn of her amazing life and work in a history class in any of my previous years of schooling. In this month when we honor Black History and bring forward stories that are rarely told, I wanted to honor Wells. She worked hard to combat the racism and violence of her day, and left a lasting legacy that continues to this day. I hear Wells in the work of Nikole Hannah-Jones, developer of the New York Times *1619 Project*. This project “aims to reframe the country's history by placing the consequences of slavery and the contributions of Black Americans at the very center of the United States' national narrative.” I hear Wells in the work of journalist Isabel Wilkerson, who wrote *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration* and *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*.

Wilkerson was the first woman of African-American heritage to win the Pulitzer Prize in journalism. Last year in 2020, Ida B. Wells-Barnett was awarded a Pulitzer Prize Special Citation “for her outstanding and courageous reporting on the horrific and vicious violence against African Americans during the era of lynching.”

Wells wrote, “There must always be a remedy for wrong and injustice if we only know how to find it.”

The reading assignment for my seminary class included Wells pamphlet, *The Red Record*. I wept as I read her descriptions of horrific violence, page after page of savage attacks by whites against blacks.

In her analysis of these brutal events, Wells named three causes of lynching. The first was to stamp out protests between 1865 and 1872, labeled race riots, when newly freed slaves demanded their promised freedom and opportunities. The second reason for lynching was the stated fear that black people would take over if they could vote. And, the third reason for lynching was that black people, especially black men, were labeled as dangerous, especially to white women.

Those three reasons should sound familiar; they are part of the landscape we live in today. We see it in the vastly different response by the National Capitol police to the Black Lives Matters protests last Summer and the response to the invasion of the Capitol and attempted coup of our government by predominantly white people last month. We see it in the response of many states to the historic African American turnout in last November's election. In just three months there have been over 165 bills introduced across the country to restrict access to voting. And, we see it in the disproportionate number of black men arrested, prosecuted and incarcerated in what Michelle Alexander calls "The New Jim Crow." The underlying causes of violence from Wells' time remain with us.

As I have reflected on the intersection of Black History Month and our spiritual theme, my mind and heart return again and again to the barriers to beloved community. A fundamental and foundational barrier is racism. As activist Nelba Marquez-Greene says, "Racism isn't the elephant in the room. It is the room."

Our institutions were and are formed with a history of slavery and within an environment of racism, from the existence of the electoral college and the US Senate, to our systems of law enforcement, education, health care, and social services. The stories we tell about our country's founding and history are written by those with power. And, they—we who are white—have created a system that has said for centuries that the norm to be

revered and aspired to, is white, male, heterosexual, educated, possessing land and wealth. That is the foundation of white supremacy culture: there is only one ideal; all others are less than and unworthy.

Wells wrote, "The way to right wrongs is to turn the light of truth upon them."

We are in historic times. Perhaps every generation says that there is a revolution happening, that the old order is dying and a new order is coming into being. And yet, it seems that way to me right now. So many of us are shining light on our history, our nation, and our community. We, the people, are shining the light of truth.

The image that comes to my mind is that we as a nation, over time, have built a big rambling house we call truth. And, this is a time when we are shining a light throughout that house, in the dark corners, cubby holes, cracks and crevices. We are asking is this really true; is this still truth, and was it ever? And, we're asking: is this all, are there stories, truths missing? Should our house have more rooms, be big enough to contain many stories and truths?

As a people of faith, we are called to shine a light in our house of truth, the houses that we build as individuals and those that we build as a community. What do we as a community hold as true? What would we find if we shone a light in our dark corners, cubby holes, cracks and crevices? Is our house big enough to hold more truths, more stories? How would we invite and welcome them?

These are the questions the Unitarian Universalist Association has been exploring in the recently published "Widening the Circle of Concern," which lays out the experience of black, indigenous and people of color in our congregations. And, this is the work that a group of us at OUUC is doing as we apply "Widening the Circle" to our community.

Those of you participating in the Vision, Mission, and Ends project are also engaged in this work. These are the questions I will invite us to bring into our breakout rooms and into our lives.

The song today reminds us that there will be a light. Like a beacon of hope, may we be the light, shining into the dark corners and crevices, helping to illuminate a path to the beauty of beloved community. May this be so.