



Mark Morrison-Reed: Remark Upon His Retirement

*A transcript from a video recorded at Partners in Ministry breakfast
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Thank you. There are bunch of people I graduated with in this room, and I need to say that we didn't get through school on our own, and if you look around the [Unitarian Universalist] Association and look who is in leadership and look who has been here for decades with the Association, it's the people I went school with—Lee [Barker], Arvid [Straube], Jay [Atkinson], Bill Schulz, Stephan Papa, Donna Morrison-Reed, my wife. We did not do it alone; we actually did that together. So, it always looks like I'm up here by myself, but I know I'm not.

(Pulling out a handkerchief) Obviously I can't go any place without a tissue. We are talking about Beloved [Conversations], but I want to talk about before that. We really can't talk about racial justice or racism or black ministers without reference to Meadville Lombard. It's just not possible.

When Jenkin Lloyd Jones, a Union Army veteran, graduated from Meadville in 1871, he went on to found the interracial All Souls Church in Chicago in 1882—I repeat, in 1882 he founded an interracial church in Chicago. Danny B. Williams, an African American and co-founder of the Frederick Douglass Center with the Rev. Celia Parker Wooly, was a member of the congregation, and when Frederick Douglass attended the Columbia World Exposition in 1893, he attended regularly.

Franklin Southworth was Meadville's president beginning in 1902 to 1928, and he said this: "Whether labeled as Unitarian or not, I want Meadville to help in solving the race problem." 1902, gang. We've been at this for a long, long, long time. That is what he did: in 1903, he admitted Don Speed Smith, who went on to become the first principle of the Maryland Normal and Industrial School in Bowie for training students of color, which became Bowie State University. In 1910, Southworth admitted Egbert Ethelred Brown, a Jamaican, and when the entire AUA was resisting, did not want him to come, he went against that, and Brown went on to have 36-year-long ministry in Harlem. In 1915, Southworth invited Booker T. Washington to address the Meadville Convocation.

In 1939, Donald Harrington, who graduated from Meadville, went on to become a minister of the Community Church of New York, which began integrating in 1910, a third of its membership eventually, its minister of religious education, its board chair, were all black, it was the most integrated church in the AUA. They also founded BAWA: Black and White Action. There was this controversy; you have to read my new book about. [Laughter] I'm shameless! On the opposite side of the denomination of that particular conflict, supporting the Black Power was Aron Gilmartin. Gilmartin graduated three years after Harrington and went on to run as the UUA president in 1969, the only one that was supported by the Black Affairs Council and its white allies at fullback. So, we were on the both sides of that issue, we can't have a conversation without us being there.

1947, Lewis McGee attended Meadville, he did a survey outside of Chicago, and subsequently founded and was the first minister of the Free Religious Fellowship, a predominantly Black Unitarian congregation in southside of Chicago.

I remembered last night [at the Service of the Living Tradition] when they mentioned John Wolf, another Meadville grad. 1965, Selma. Everybody went, John did not go, because John knew... You know the Black Wall Street of America... Black Wall Street was in Tulsa, Oklahoma [where John served as the senior minister at All Souls]. There was a riot in 1921, destroyed it, and not healing. During Selma [riot in 1965], Tulsa's first interdenominational, interracial service was held at All Souls, and then they marched on to the court house. John was in the middle of that. Bless you, John.

I see my colleagues, and I can count on all of them. All I need to do is just call them, and they say, "Yes, Mark, what do you need? What do you want to know? What can I do for you?"

1968, Mwalimu Imara graduated from Meadville, became the minister in Champaign-Urbana, he was the second African American after Lewis McGee, who had served in Chico, California, to minister to a white congregation. Again I'm coming back to it, I'm echoing, but I'm talking about where it all began.

1986, Michelle Bentley graduated from Meadville Lombard, became the third African American woman ordained into Unitarian Universalist ministry.

I need to say that this list is suggestive. It's not exhaustive. And I repeat: you cannot talk about racial justice or African American ministers in Unitarian Universalism or race relations without reference to Meadville Lombard.

So, this brings me to the Sankofa Collection, a collection of papers by and about UUs of Color. It was Michelle Bentley's inspiration, it was my documents largely, now it accounts for about 134 boxes, more or less. We have 15,000 pages online that you can access, 10,000 of those 15,000 are from the Sankofa Collection. Its offsprings are Cuentos Latinx Collection, Mulani Global Collection, Heresies, the women's material that Lee was talking about, is another that was modeled after Sankofa. So you need to understand how the context of Sankofa is so important.

1971. I took UU History as we all did from our beloved professor John Godbey, and I decided to write about African American history. This is all I found [holding up a piece of paper with four short paragraphs]. Two books, four sentences, less than a hundred words. At least three mistakes. That's all there was.

Now, I should have been dismayed. But I was 28; I was just confused! I was confused because I was brought up in the First Unitarian Church of Chicago. It integrated in 1948, I was dedicated in 1954, I was in the Children's Choir, I was the second African American child in the Choir—Betty will remember this! Mwalimu Imara was the president of the Liberal Religious Youth Group in 1960s, he was my youth advisor, and just before I came back in 1970, Marshall Grainsby (spell?) was the congregation's assistant minister. I thought that was normal! It never occurred to me there was no Black African American UU history, because I hadn't lived it, what did I know? Until I tried to find out more. Now my shock and dismay turned into bit of an excitement as I began to uncover the hidden history of African American UUs. It all started with 10-page paper for John Godbey. Here it is [pointing at the display of his books on the table in front of him], 40 years later, over 1600 words... pages, sorry! 1600 words are not much, that

wouldn't even get me through a chapter—1600 pages! At least! I wrote these because I had to, I had to figure out the answer to my confusion.

This scholarship and Sankofa is our salvation, or can be. You see, we've been living a lie. We are neither as white as we believe, or as great as we claim. It's not how they are selling the story. It has broken my heart a thousand times. I cried my way through my thesis because there was no other way to write it. There was no other way to rant and to cry. And today there is no effective way forward without that truth. Part of the truth is our doggedness—we have tried and tried and tried and succeeded, but undeniably the progress has been slow. Take a long view, though, it leaves me feeling hopeful, because reality is that we have changes that are undeniable, irreputable. And reality is that I'm built that way—I'd much rather be hopeful.

I used to joke that *Black Pioneers in a White Denomination*, which is about Ethelred Brown and Lewis McGee, was my survival guide—except I stopped joking about it because I realized, it was. It was my survival guide. And I did survive, and it did help me. I perched on their shoulders, McGee and the others. I had chances they never had, I had successes and I was able to flourish the way they never had a chance to. Later the thesis became a book, inspired others, and their trials informed the generation that followed me, both black and white, mainly because ministers you know you had to read it anyhow. And now another generation is coming. They need education at Meadville that offered Goodloe, Brown, McGee, Bentley, Kristen Harper, and is Jacqueline here? Jacqueline Brett, and Qiyamah [Rahman], and Connie [Simon], where's Connie—all of us, and also my Latinx brothers and sisters, Tania [Marquez], Katie [Romano Griffin], Claudia [Jimenez]...—we need this education. The Association and the world need us.

Meadville therefore has needs for your resources, both to support them—you heard what Denny said, so they don't come out of this with enormous, debilitating debt loads—and Sankofa needs your support. Sankofa means “reaching back, in order to go forward”. I saw a picture up here of me with Jim Keys [in the slideshow], I wish there was a picture up there of me with Denny. But following Denny's example, we are going to talk about money a little bit. We can't do this without money. Now besides what's in our wills—Donna's and my wills—, we give happily, it's an honor to give, at least \$1000 a year, every year, for... I don't even know how long now. We just routinely do that. That's what we do, because it makes no sense to pour your life into this institution without pouring your resources into it to allow it to nurture others and do what it did for us.