

“Radical Worth and Dignity”

Rev. Chris Rothbauer

Keweenaw Unitarian Universalist Fellowship

August 20, 2017

I want to tell you about a guy named Bayard Rustin.

I find him a fascinating man, a person I often find myself disagreeing with yet continuing to respect in the end. He held some problematic views, especially towards the end of his life, but he’s just one of those people who was so influential in the grand scheme of things that I feel myself drawn to him and fascinated by this larger than life character. And, to hear me talk, you’ll know the larger than life, the more I’ll love ‘em.

Now you may be saying to yourself, “If this guy was so larger than life, why haven’t I heard of him?”

Well, there’s a good reason for that. See, unless you’ve studied a lot about the history of the Civil Rights movement, you probably have not come across his name. Rustin was a background character, serving as a strategist for leaders such as A. Phillip Randolph and Martin Luther King, Jr.

In fact, it’s been said that, had it not been for Rustin, there might not have been a March on Washington in 1963; it was a strategy of his that became a turning point for the Civil Rights movement and gave a platform for King to deliver his “I Have a Dream” speech. His legacy is keenly felt through and through in African-American circles, and many today still consider him a mentor.

I'd like to think Rustin is a mirror universe Steve Bannon, a man with the ear of leaders who used his influence for good.

But, you may ask, if Rustin was such an important figure, why was he in the background much of the time? Now you might guess that it might be because Rustin wasn't good at making speeches. By most accounts, though, Rustin was an amazing speaker frequently found himself addressing topics important to him.

No, Rustin wasn't in the periphery because he couldn't hold his own with King or Randolph. Rustin was in the background because the Civil Rights movement put him there, scared that he would damage their efforts to get Civil Rights legislation passed. In fact, Rustin was considered such a liability that King asked him to leave Montgomery during the bus boycott and he was even once shepherded out of town in the trunk of a car to keep a reporter from exposing his deep, dark secret to the world and possibly discrediting the Civil Rights movement.

What was Rustin's crime that was so heinous that a justice movement didn't want to be seen with him?

It may not be what you think.

Rustin was gay. And a former communist. In the 1950s and '60s.

Yes, the Civil Rights movement was proud to use Rustin's knowledge of organizing and pick his brain for theory and strategy. They were happy to have him on their side, and might even have said they accepted their brother for who he was. They just didn't want to be seen with him. If he could only hide himself so the neighbors all over America wouldn't find out that a justice movement was daring to harbor a man disenfranchised for more than just the color of his skin. If he could only just hang out in the back, there, somewhere.

I can imagine what they must have been thinking.

“We can’t become known as the gay movement!”

“We don’t want non-communists to think they can’t join us!”

“We’re scared what the white folks will say since their support is so fragile and tenuous as it is!”

“Well, if we accept Rustin, people might think we’re gay! Or a communist! Or gay communists!”

Now King is another man I respect greatly, and some would argue that his and other leaders’ treatment of Rustin was a strategic decision, that openly affirming a gay man would have been detrimental to their cause.

But this is flawed logic that denied a great man his dignity. To quote poet Emma Lazarus, “Until we are all free, we are none of us free.”

Too often through the history of humanity, we see instances where begrudging tolerance is granted to those who are different, where they are allowed to sit in the back of the class as long as they don’t make too much noise.

They’re not placed back there because we respect them.

They’re put in the back because we’re ashamed of them.

Early freethinkers like Thomas Paine and Voltaire.

Gay men like Ruskin and Oscar Wilde.

Transwomen such as Marsha P. Johnson, Sylvia Rivera, and Miss Major who were instrumental to the founding of the gay liberation movement but were pushed to the back of their own movement.

Women of color like Audre Lorde and bell hooks.

And countless others.

They're relegated to the back because people have been scared that their difference is catching, that somehow it will rub off on them, and they'll be forced to bathe in tomato juice to get the stench of it out of their clothes. Like Crispin, the dragon who couldn't breathe fire in our story this morning, they're banished for being different, only to have hipsters say decades or centuries after their deaths how important their contributions to society have been.

So imagine how radical it must have seemed when this strange little religion that some people claim is a cult decided, in 1985, to make their very first principle, "The inherent worth and dignity of all persons." Now we certainly weren't the first to think of this idea; we almost certainly borrowed it from our Humanist source. But, in light of how humans so often treat one another, just think of how radical a statement this principle is.

It's a statement to the Bayard Rustins and Crispins of the world that we're not going to ask you to sit in the back of the room.

It means we're going to look you, each of you, in the eye and declare, you, yes you, can be one of us! You can be a member of our church just as you are! You can explore your spirituality with us, befriend us, be a part of our community, and maybe even become a congregational leader or minister, all without changing an iota of who you are! It means you can stand right up front here and tell your truth, and we won't worry about what those nosy neighbors think! Let them think ill of us; we know there's nothing wrong with it even if they're right!

Whereas other churches may ask for repentance or change to sit in the best pews, we'll dare to say sit right up here with us, no prior approval needed! When we say all are welcome, we damned well mean it!

And we do take flack for it. I hear from my colleagues all the time that their church has been labeled the gay church, or the Black church, or the disabled church merely for who happens to be in the pulpit or who the leaders are. There may be only one Black person or gay person in the entire place, but, if they're visible, that's all people will see. The world gets scared and only sees a narrow definition of a person, unable to see how complex and beautiful they really are.

And our first principle calls us to say, "That's okay! Hospitality and justice aren't about being liked by everyone!"

It's testimony just how many groups we have welcomed in over the years. What started as two Christian heresies, the outsiders who were so extreme some Christians wouldn't claim us, turned into an unprecedented experiment in the power of radical love and acceptance.

Just think of all the groups who have found a home in these walls when no one else wanted them.

Transcendentalists.

Humanists.

Naturalists

Female ministers and leaders.

Communists and Socialists.

Anti-war activists.

Pagans.

LGBTQ people.

People from nearly every major world religion.

That's quite a list. And we didn't just welcome these people in because their name looks neat on our membership rolls and pledge cards. We welcomed them in because we believe in

them, believe they deserve a place of honor as well, because our faith has always been kind of outsiders in the greater religious world, daring to invite anyone to the table who is also able to recognize that inherent worth and dignity we hold so dear.

That's not to say we've always done this radical worth and dignity perfectly. Unitarian Universalists are merely human, no matter what we might think some days. Indeed, I've preached before about some of our shortcomings, about how our welcome hasn't always been perfect, especially when groups first come to us seeking shelter from the storm. And we'll keep getting it wrong, because we're not ever going to be perfect, no matter what Billy Joel tries to tell us.

We're going to keep stumbling, with the hope that, in the end, we'll find some way to get it right!

I'll come back to that stumbling next week, but, first, I wanted to touch on just how important this experiment we're engaged in is.

We've all been disturbed by the events of the last couple of weeks, with hatred and disregard of this inherent worth and dignity seemingly on full display. This follows years of watching Black, Brown, and indigenous people murdered in acts of extreme force.

I watched in horror as the events of Charlottesville unfolded, not surprised, but saddened, and read my colleagues' reflections on the ground about how they were being surrounded by Neo-Nazis and White Nationalists. I marched in solidarity with them the following Sunday, and spoke about how important it is that people of color and Jewish people see we have their backs at times like this.

We Unitarian Universalists held the line on our beliefs. We were out there demanding justice, declaring the truth of our first principle through word and action.

Indeed, it's true that marching alone will never bring justice, but it's making an impact. Yesterday in Boston, twenty-thousand counter-protestors descended on a hundred or so Neo-Nazis and white nationalists and made it clear as day: we will not allow them to push us backwards, force our siblings to go back in the shadows.

Our belief in inherent worth and dignity is spreading, and it's making a difference, as people stand up and declare that any force which would cause us to hate other people will not find a hold in our country.

We must continue to hold to our first principle, not only when crisis is brewing, but week after week in our congregation. It is much easier to demand the recognition of inherent worth and dignity when we are practicing it on a regular basis, and what better place than our churches, where we can be a testimony to the world.

It's also a place where we can practice our radical welcome. A wise colleague once said that the questions every church, every organization, should be asking is, "Who is not here?" and "Why?" We need to find out who's not here, or even who's not in leadership, and figure out how to widen the circle to include them.

We need to keep finding ways to bring in those who have previously not had a voice to come, sit in the front rows in a place of honor, and be with us as we struggle to make sense of the world we live in together.

I believe our movement will keep finding the Rustins of the world who have been seated in the shadows for far too long, their accomplishments credited to others, and ask them to sit near the front, not because it will help our congregations grow significantly in numbers, or because it will gain us friends in many parts of our community, but because it's the right thing to do. We

will look at them, and tell them, “Yes, sit up here! It must be hard to see back there where you’ve been all this time!”

And, when we bring this into the greater world, I believe we have the power to transform it radically into a world where no one need fear being an outsider again, affirmed for who they are, loved right through.

May it be so.