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Harriet Tubman: The Road to Freedom

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The year 2020 will be the one-hundredth anniversary of the Nineteenth Amendment, which gave women the right to vote. To commemorate this occasion, the U.S. Treasury Department announced last year that in 2020, **Andrew Jackson will be moved to the back of the \$20 bill, and Harriet Tubman will be the new face on the front.** This change means that African-Americans will appear on our currency for the first time in our nation's history, and a woman will be featured for the first time in more than a century.

Regarding the significance of this change, there are “more than 8.5 billion \$20 bills in circulation.... And **the seven white men on the seven notes in general circulation were all dead by 1885**.... More than half of American history has happened since.” There are other exciting changes coming as well, such as adding “images of Eleanor Roosevelt, Marian Anderson and Martin Luther King Jr. to the back of the \$5, which has Abraham Lincoln on the front.” But for now, I would like to invite us to focus on how the life and legacy of Harriet Tubman can continue to inspire us today.

Everything I learned in school about Harriet Tubman could fit in one sentence: she was a famous conductor on the Underground Railroad, who was known as a modern-day “Moses” for helping liberate so many enslaved people (85). The announcement that she will soon be featured on the \$20 bill motivated me to learn more. In reading Catherine Clinton's excellent 2004 biography Harriet Tubman: The Road to Freedom, the more I learned about Tubman, the more impressed I became. I was also intrigued to see the number of ways that her path crossed

with some of our Unitarian Universalist ancestors — including the Unitarian ministers Thomas Wentworth Higginson, who called her “the greatest heroine of our age” (131) and James Freeman Clarke who was impressed with her “great dramatic power” on the lecture circuit (191). But to take things in order, allow me to start at the beginning.

Harriet Tubman’s story hits close to home in a number of ways. She was born only a little more than a hundred miles southeast of here, likely on the Brodess plantation near Bucktown, Maryland in Dorchester County on the Eastern Shore. Estimates of her birth year range from 1815 on her death certificate to 1820 on her gravestone to 1825, which was the year Harriet herself said she was born. In the broader sweep of history, she was **born approximately two hundred years after the first enslaved Africans were sold** at the Virginia colony of Jamestown in 1619. Frederick Douglass was her temporal and geographic contemporary, “born in 1818 on a plantation on Maryland’s Eastern Shore, near present-day Easton — less than thirty miles from Harriet Tubman’s own place of birth” (8). **Tubman died around age 90 in 1913, the same year that Rosa Parks was born** (220).

Tubman’s birth name was Araminta Ross, leading to the nickname “Minty.” She was one of the last of around a dozen children born to the enslaved couple Harriet Green and Benjamin Ross. Tubman’s grandmother was brought to America on a slave ship (5), and there are a number of indications that Tubman’s grandfather was a white man, the plantation owner Atthow Pattison (6).

To begin to speak about Tubman’s early childhood, I invite you to picture a five-year-old in your life — or try to remember what you were like at five years old. When Araminta, the future Harriet Tubman, was five years old she was assigned to take care of the infant of a white woman in the neighborhood. Even though she wasn’t far from home, she had to live at her new master’s house full time, and was terribly homesick. Because she was so small, she had to sit on the floor to hold the baby. In addition to caring for an infant, she was given many other household chores, and “After a long day of doing her mistress’s bidding, the five-year-old Araminta remained on duty at night, instructed to rock the cradle constantly to prevent the baby from disturbing the master or mistress. **If the baby wailed, this mistress did not go to comfort her child but instead lifted her hand to grab a small whip from its shelf — to punish her**

[enslaved] attendant for negligence.” Tubman had scars on her neck from these whippings for the rest of her life (17-18). I have two nephews who are 5 years old and 3 months old respectively. And thinking about them in a situation anything like that is heartbreaking and horrifying on so many levels.

Even during this early period, Tubman sometimes resisted her oppressors. One account tells us of her biting her master’s knee. In this instance, her strategy paid off: “she was left alone in the future by this master” (19). **She served a number of families in similar capacities through age twelve, when she became big enough for hard labor in the fields** (18-20).

In another early sign of her bravery, Araminta blocked the path of an overseer seeking to whip an enslaved field hand, who had deserted his post. Tragically, a lead weight thrown at the deserter instead hit Araminta in the head, causing a serious wound. She slipped in and out of a “lethargic sleep” for weeks (22). And for the rest of her life, “she suffered from episodes that were likened to narcoleptic spells.” As frequently as several times a day, she would, without warning—no matter what she was doing—fall into a “stupor,” then a “deep slumber.” Soon she would rouse herself and carry on with whatever she was previously doing (29). Consider how impressive it is that **the entire time she was leading many successful runs on the Underground Railroad, she was often suffering from narcoleptic episodes multiple times a day.**

In 1844, when Araminta was in her early 20s, she married a free black man named John Tubman (24). Tubman was the family name of several wealthy white plantation owners in Cambridge, Maryland, and “Many blacks in the area were known by the name Tubman” (24). So **Araminta received the last name Tubman from her husband, but Harriet was the name she chose for herself—in honor of her mother**—when she reached freedom. Many enslaved people who escaped captivity chose new names for the pragmatic reason that it made it more difficult for fugitive slave catchers to track them (33).

There were many remarkable events to come in Tubman’s life, but her escape alone was remarkable. **“The overwhelming majority of successful fugitives were men. But here was a girl in her twenties, venturing out of her home counties for the first time, hoping to make it to freedom on her own”** (33-34). The ninety-mile journey from Maryland’s Eastern Shore to the

Pennsylvania line “would have taken Tubman anywhere from ten days to three weeks on foot” (38). During her escape, one of the first people to help Tubman head in the direction of freedom was a white woman. This act of allyship was significant because aiding a fugitive slave was a crime with stiff penalties (35).

But history remembers Tubman—and the Treasury department chose her for the \$20 bill—not merely for being an enslaved woman who emancipated herself, but for her courage in repeatedly risking re-enslavement in order to free hundreds of other enslaved human beings (73). Moreover, **although white northern males dominated the Abolitionist Movement, Tubman — a formerly enslaved black southern female with narcolepsy — personally led more than 300 enslaved people to freedom** (77). As Tubman famously said near the end of her life, “I was conductor of the Underground Railroad for eight years, and I can say what most conductors can’t say — **I never ran my train off the track and I never lost a passenger**” (192).

The first time Tubman risked returning to slave territory was in December 1850. She was motivated to free her favorite niece and her niece’s children, who were scheduled for the auction block (80). In spring 1851, she risked a second trip to free one of her brothers, and she freed two other men at the same time (82). In fall 1851, her third trip was to persuade her husband to come with her—only to discover that in less than two years, not only was he with another woman, but that woman was pregnant. Harriet and John never had children together. **Initially, she “thought she would go right in and make all the trouble she could,” but she changed her mind and decided “if he could do without her, she could do without him”** (83).

Instead, she continued to be a conductor on the Underground Railroad:

She developed a pattern that allowed her to successfully ferry at least ten fugitives at a time at least once a year. She kept to the backroads and never traveled by day while in the “land of Egypt.” One admirer notes, “She always came in the winter, when the nights are long and dark, and people who have homes stay in them.” (85)

Since most enslaved people were given Sunday as a day off, Tubman would begin on a Saturday night, so that the fugitives would not be discovered until Monday morning, giving them a significant head start (90).

The accounts of her journeys make it clear that **Tubman was not afraid to be authoritative when needed. She always carried a pistol**, and on one occasion when someone in her group became nervous and wanted to return to the plantation, there was fear that he would endanger the whole group. The others tried to persuade him to keep going, but he refused to move forward any further. Tubman finally pulled out her gun, pointed it at his head, and said, “Move or die!” Fortunately, there’s a happy ending to this story: they all made it safely to Canada (90-91)!

Along these lines, some of you will recall that among the Secret Six¹ who helped fund and supply John Brown’s 1859 raid on the federal armory at Harpers’ Ferry, five were Unitarians, and two were Unitarian ministers. Brown was so impressed with Harriet that he called her “General Tubman” and paid her “twenty-five dollars in gold to use to locate recruits for him in Canada” (129). Unfortunately instead of being able to aid Brown’s planning, Tubman fell ill in Massachusetts. In one of history’s unanswered question, **we’ll never know how things might have gone differently if Tubman had been able to advise Brown based on the meticulous planning that led to her many successful raids**—instead of Brown’s ill-planned impetuosity that got too many people needlessly killed (132-133).

Nicknames of “General Tubman” aside, Tubman did serve the Union cause during the Civil War. She “assisted the army with housing and hygiene for the hundreds and eventually thousands of contrabands who fled behind Union lines.” **She covertly went into the Carolinas “within the theater of war to save the Union, under the auspices of the secretary of war”** (193). And although it took thirty years, she succeeded in having her wartime contributions officially recognized in the Congressional Record. She was also rewarded with a long overdue government pension for her service (208-209).

I should also mention that although Tubman said that her first husband John Tubman “dropped out of [my] heart” after he chose another woman (84), Harriet never considered remarriage until John Tubman was tragically shot by a white man during an argument (198). **A little more than a year after becoming (from her perspective) “a widow in the eyes of God,”**

¹ <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/carlgregg/2014/08/the-secret-six-violence-nonviolence-in-unitarianism-universalism/>

she married Nelson Davis, a veteran from a black regiment in the Union army. When they wed in March of 1869, Tubman was around age 47, and Davis was age twenty-five, approximately two decades her junior (198). However, “by all accounts, the difference in their ages was insignificant to them” (199). They were married for nineteen years, and despite him being significantly younger, she outlived her second husband by more than two decades (205).

Even in her later years, she continued to work for social justice as the administrator of a home for elderly people of color who otherwise would not be able to afford somewhere to stay (209). But finally in March 1913, she succumbed to pneumonia (213). **She was buried with military honors, and “Booker T. Washington, the most prominent race leader of his day, traveled to upstate New York to make the keynote address”** (215).

As Unitarian Universalists, the second of our Six Sources is the “Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love.” So a few years from now in 2020, when you start seeing Harriet Tubman’s on the face of the \$20 bill, may you be reminded each time that **she is one in a long line of oppressed people throughout history who risked their lives to show that an “unjust law is no law at all.”** In so many ways, she is one of a long line of women about whom it can be said, “She was warned. She was given an explanation. Nevertheless, she persisted.”

Before concluding, however, I want to invite us to consider how prophetic activists like Harriet Tubman from history can challenge and inspire us today to “confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love” In that spirit, I invite you to hear the poem “If You Could” by Danny Bryck. He writes provocatively,

I know, I know

If you could go back you

would walk with Jesus

You would march with King

Maybe assassinate Hitler

At least hide Jews in your basement

It would all be clear to you

But people then, just like you
were baffled, had bills
to pay and children they didn't
understand and they too
were so desperate for normalcy
they made anything normal
Even turning everything inside out
Even killing...
they hid in their houses
and watched it on television, when they had television,
and wrung their hands
or didn't, and your hands
are just like theirs. Lined, permeable,
small, and you
would follow Caesar, and quote McCarthy, and Hoover, and you would want
to make Germany great again
Because you are afraid, and your
parents are sick, and your
job pays [too little] and where's your
dignity? ...and those kids sitting down in the highway,
and chaining themselves to
buildings, what's their...problem? And that kid
That's King. And this is Selma. And Berlin. And Jerusalem. And now
is when they need you to be brave.

Now
is when we need you to go back
and forget everything you know
and give up the things you're chained to
and make it look so easy in your

grandkids' history books....

Now

is when it will all be clear to them.