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A Journey of Racial Reconciliation Continues

My great-grandfather, W.H.G. Carter was the founder of the first black Unitarian congregation in the country in 1918. His church of the Unitarian Brotherhood was a storefront in the heart of the West End, which was then a poor black neighborhood in Cincinnati. It was still a poor black neighborhood when I grew up there in public housing projects, and it remains that now, although large parts of it have been demolished for urban renewal.

In my great-grandpa's day, some of the white Unitarian ministers snubbed him for having a church in a "rowdy area" and his congregation, which desperately needed it, never got any support from the national denomination. About five years ago, my cousin Leslie Edwards was in the congregation when the Rev. Sharon Dittmar, who is the pastor of First Unitarian Church in Cincinnati mentioned what had happened to my great-grandfather as an example of the kinds of things that happened in the city that should not be allowed to happen again. When the service was over, he went up and told her that she had been talking about his grandfather. So began an amazing series of events that have involved my family and the Unitarians in Cincinnati on a journey of reconciliation filled with fabulous coincidences and discoveries.

To give you an indication of the kinds of interesting things that have occurred since then, Bill Sinkford, whose boyhood church was First Unitarian Church in Cincinnati, was elected president of the Unitarians in the U.S. and Mark Morrison-Reed, who wrote the book *Black Pioneers in a White*

Denomination from which Sharon Dittmar had gotten her information about my great-grandfather was elected president of the Canadian Unitarians.

So here we have two black men becoming national leaders of a church which has less than 5 percent black membership and yet considers itself liberal. In Cincinnati Dittmar, has been urging her congregation to look for new ways to be relevant to the black inner-city neighborhood that surrounds it, and to fight the racism that exists in the city. Since I accepted their apology to my family four years ago, they have embarked on a number of projects and activities to continue their reconciliation work. Together with my family we have begun the best kind of journey of reconciliation. The kind in which people are freed to tell the truth and are led to face some unpleasant truths, the kind in which people learn to work together on the hardest tasks, and receive unimagined gifts.

I will tell you more about the specific activities of the members of First Unitarian Church and Northern Hills Unitarian Fellowship. First Unitarian, which even though it is an older church surrounded by a black neighborhood had not thought of itself as being an urban congregation has rewritten its mission statement to redefine itself as an urban congregation.

The Unitarians in Cincinnati have started a Carter Fund through which they have distributed more than \$13,000 through a ministry that is carrying on in the spirit of W.H.G. and Beulah Carter's work in the West End. At the beginning of the Depression my great-grandparents had their own breadline through which they fed more than 6,000 people at their home, and great-grandpa led a march of

thousands of people to Cincinnati City Hall demanding that something be done to feed the hungry. Now the new Carter Fund helps families in the community surrounding the church. Through the Carter Fund, the church has established partnerships with agencies in the neighborhood. When a family has an emergency need, these agencies tell the Carter fund committee which tries to help. An example is a mother who worked at a Kmart. Her car broke down and her rent was due. Without the car, she couldn't get to work – large stores or other workplaces are not plentiful in Avondale. She needed \$250 to keep from being evicted and got it from the Carter Fund.

Another thing the Unitarians did was to help purchase new headstones for my great grandparents' graves. In the early stages of discussions of Carter Weekend, someone had discovered that my great grandparents were buried just beyond the backyard of Northern Hills Unitarian Fellowship. The black cemetery had been in what was considered the country when it was established. Then the suburb where Northern Hills is located grew up around it. Ironically when I was a kid that area had been where some members of First Unitarian had moved when they took part in the white flight that hit Cincinnati and the nation became suburbanized and extremely racially segregated. Several of my great-grandparents' children also lie in that cemetery which is connected to the church by a sweet little pathway which church volunteers are beautifying. My great-grandfather's new stone reads "pioneering Unitarian minister."

Church members are taking an active part in the dialogue about race in Cincinnati, helping with integral research and other functions at the new National

Underground Railroad Freedom Center, and trying to move Cincinnati from racist hidebound small town conservatism into something more akin to the 20th century. I have really been impressed by the valiant stands that Sharon Dittmar has taken especially in the debate over police brutality. The spring after the first Carter Weekend riots broke out in Cincinnati over the police shooting of a young unarmed man. In the debate that followed, it was revealed that during five years in the 1990s, Cincinnati police had fatally shot 15 altogether, every single one of them was a black man. Rev. Dittmar did some very public and controversial things to show her solidarity with the black community. Members of the congregation are taking part in the discussions and activities that started after the riot to try to improve racial relations. The work keeps some of them very busy.

The church has also established an active partnership with the West End Presbyterian Church. One of my cousins is a member of their congregation. Okay, let me confess: W.H.G. and Beulah Carter had 15 children and scores of grandchildren, great-grandchildren and great-great-grandchildren. **Whatever** it is, one of my cousins does it.

Church members also became very interested in my family history, and began to do research on it. With their work and our work, we have learned some remarkable things. First I found that my great-great grandfather, William Henry Grey had been born free in Washington D C. in 1827. William Henry Grey was a prominent Reconstruction figure in Arkansas known for his oratory. He had the courage to stand in public gatherings when the Klan and other groups were violently retaking the South and call for the president of the United States to

eradicate those groups and promote black civil rights. William Henry Grey was the first black person to deliver an address in a national political convention when he gave a seconding speech for U.S. Grant in 1874.

I learned that as a boy William Henry Grey had worked as an aide to Henry A. Wise when Wise was a congressman from Virginia. Wise was known to be very fond of the boy, who was always described as a mulatto. He made sure the child learned to read and write -- something that was rare in those days. When Wise later became governor of Virginia and embroiled in the uproar over the treatment of John Brown, the crusader against slavery, people brought up "that mulatto boy you hold so dear." Wise's biographer wrote that William Henry Grey's mother Elizabeth had been the only slave that Wise ever freed. As I talked to some of my cousins, we became more and more confident that Henry A. Wise was probably William Henry Grey's father.

This was a momentous thing to process. We are a family of black people who are realizing that we had an ante-bellum governor for an ancestor. But that's not the hard part; black folks know that white men have black progeny everywhere. We have relatives who have passed into white society. As I said, we have everything in my family. But the hard part to wrap our minds around was our ancestor had signed John Brown's death warrant! As my older son said when I laid it out for him, "Uh, I don't think I'll tell the brothas that part of it."

First Unitarian Church members were spurred on in this research by tantalizing tips and possibilities. One of them sent me a packet of information including an article that one of my old journalist friends DeWayne Wickham of

U.S.A. Today had written about a Civil War museum that Alex Wise, one of Henry Wise's white descendants was building in Richmond Va. I decided to call my friend to find out how to reach Alex Wise. Before I called, I did some checking and found speech he had once made about racial reconciliation, so I knew he was at least aware that William Henry Grey had existed.

Still this was not the kind of telephone call that you make blithely. I called the number I thought might be the one and this very pleasant voiced white woman answered the phone. I introduced myself as a descendant of William Henry Grey. To my surprise, she said, "Oh Alex would want to talk to you" as if they had been expecting me to call for weeks. Alex was out quail hunting. She gave me the cell phone number, and I called this man.

We had the most cordial conversation, maybe it was that Virginia lilt in his voice. At the end of it I told him I thought we might be related. We agreed to keep talking and have continued to talk ever since. On one of his business trips for the museum, Alex came to Dallas and met several Grey descendants, including Leslie Edwards, the one who was in the audience that day when Rev. Dittmar had mentioned the snub of my great-grandfather, Donna Carter, an Austin architect, and her mother, who is one of Leslie's aunts, and my son. Alex has concluded that we all inherited the talking gene. Over and over an interest in public affairs, the world of ideas, education, history, and service through religion came up in common. Alex has degrees in law and English literature and history and is a former presidential speechwriter. You know about me and my interests. It is all in our blood.

Last month, First Unitarian Church invited Alex Wise, my third cousin once removed, to be its speaker for Carter Weekend. About 40 of us Grey descendants came to the service from as far away as Texas and Iowa to have a reunion with each other and to get to know Alex as another cousin. There are already more discussions of gatherings to come.

What does all this mean? That is something we are all still coming to grips with. I believe my family's story is emblematic of American history with all its terrible contradictions. Here was a man, Henry A. Wise, who had a black son, and white sons. Soon after we started talking, Alex sent me a portrait of Jennings Wise that he had placed next to William Henry Grey's and the two men, who would have been half-brothers, looked identical. But one man was considered white and the other black or mulatto. One man died at the age of 21 fighting for the Confederacy and the other lived to speak out against racism. One was proudly and publicly claimed as a son. The other was not.

This is our national history. It is no wonder that race relations are tortured and angry and riddled with deceit. There is so much to be done. We should never accept the idea of racial purity that has never existed. Whenever two groups of people come together, there is always intermingling whether it is by force or by love.

One thing Alex said last month in Cincinnati was that meeting the Grey descendants has made him realize that considering the history of the country, even if he is not related to this group of black people, he is related to some black people. This must be a most profound realization for him.

For me this series of events is a strange reckoning with the past. I have known all my life that I have European ancestry. Now I know that part of it comes from English forebears who arrived in the 1600s. But I also have to process the fact that one part of my family tree grew prosperous off the forced labor of another, and that one of my ancestors had executed someone who was willing to die for the freedom of my people. I will always have this dichotomy in me that claims as my people, the African Americans, the slaves and former slaves, and sees differently those like the Wises who designed a system in which my people suffered.

Yet Henry A. Wise is also the reason why my family had advantages that most other black people did not. William Henry Grey's daughter and son-in-law, a pale, straight-haired young African Methodist Episcopal minister for whom my grandfather was later named, helped start a college for newly freed slaves in Arkansas. They loved black people as their own too.

I still cannot fully understand how men could write laws that allowed them to own their black children and love their white ones. Alex says that if we think of whatever passed between Elizabeth Grey and Henry Wise as simply exploitation, we risk dehumanizing either him or her. I understand his point, and I am still sorting things out. I am most grateful for this journey, and I cannot wait to see what more it has in store for all of us.

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