

Thomas Jefferson Memorial Church – Unitarian Universalist
“Paul Robeson: A Memorial Tribute”
Rev. Tony Perrino
January 24, 2010

Thirty-Four years ago, yesterday, Paul Robeson died, and our nation, which never fully appreciated his greatness, failed to render him adequate tribute. This morning we shall endeavor to remedy that error—by honoring this incredibly talented man, whose passionate devotion to social justice made him much maligned and misunderstood.

You will be hearing several recordings of his magnificent voice, and, as you do, bear in mind this description of his artistry which appeared in the **New York Times** on the occasion of his first concert: “Mr. Robeson’s great gift is to make the spirituals tell, in every line, by an intense earnestness of inner conviction, the sorrows and hopes of a people.”

Paul Robeson was born in April of 1898 in Princeton, New Jersey. He was the youngest son of the Rev. W.D. Robeson, a former Plantation slave who had escaped north via the underground railway in 1860.

Robeson’s father, who worked his way through Lincoln University and became a Presbyterian minister, was idolized by Paul, who later wrote, “The glory of my boyhood years was my father. The text of his life was loyalty to one’s convictions and I was imbued with that concept...”

Young Robeson knew racial discrimination intimately when he was growing up. All of the Princeton schools were segregated, and, though his father was a respected member of the community, when the clergyman tried to get his eldest son, Bill, into the University, the distinguished President of Princeton, Woodrow Wilson, told him it would be impossible: “no negro had ever been admitted to the school.” (As Paul observed later, “This from the man who advocated democracy for the world...”)

Because his mother died when he was still a child, Paul was reared by his father, brothers, a sister and neighbors. Here is how he described them: “Hard working people: poor most if them, in worldly goods, but how rich in compassion! How filled with goodness of humanity, and a spiritual steel – forged by centuries of oppression.”

He continues: “There was the honest joy of laughter in these homes, hearty appetites for life—as for the nourishing black-eyed peas and corn meal bread they shared with me. And here, in this hemmed in world, where home must be theater and concert hall, there was the warmth of song: songs of love and longing, songs of trial and triumph, hymn song and ragtime, ballads and blues, and the healing comfort to be found in the sorrow of the spirituals.”

Young Paul graduated at the top of his elementary school class, and then went to high school in Summerville, N.J. where his father had taken a Church. There his talent for singing and acting were first recognized. His first role was that of Othello, Shakespeare’s tragic hero, whose greatness was flawed by an error in judgment.

During his senior year of high school, Paul learned of a competitive exam, open to all students in New Jersey (even Blacks) for a four year scholarship to Rutgers University. After intensive study, Paul finished first among the hundreds of bright students who contested for the honor. Later he recorded these feelings: “Deep in my heart, from that day forward, though equality might be denied me, **I knew that I was not inferior!”**

That proved to be an understatement. During his four years at Rutgers, Robeson was an outstanding scholar/athlete: earning a Phi Beta Kappa Key and 12 Varsity letters in football, baseball, basketball and track, twice be cited as an All-American in football.!

In 1919, after graduating from Rutgers, Paul enrolled in the Columbia University Law School in New York. There he met and married Eslanda Cardoza Goode, his beloved “Essie” who recognized his great gifts of voice and presence, and urged him to consider a career in the theater.

“To get her to quit pestering me,” as Paul affectionately put it, he finally agreed to take the title role in the play, “Simon, the Cyrenian” and won immediate acclaim as “a stunning new talent.. of majestic stature.”

But Robeson regarded acting as just another summertime job that would help pay his tuition costs. When he graduated from Law school in 1923, however, Paul had trouble getting a position because the American Bar Association excluded Blacks.

Shortly thereafter, The Provincetown Players invited him to join their company and play the title role in O’Neill’s “Emperor Jones, which was greeted with rave reviews. Other triumphs followed, and of his acting ability the **critic George Jean Nathan**, wrote, “Robeson, with relatively little experience or training, is one of the most thoroughly eloquent, impressive and convincing actors that I have seen in 20 years of theater-going.” Others agreed, and he seemed to be on his way to stardom and glory.

But in the 1920’s there were very few roles for Blacks in American theater and they were mostly stereotypes: calling for degrading buffoonery. “I made a decision,” the proud Robeson wrote, “If Hollywood and Broadway producers did not choose to offer me worthy roles, I would choose not to accept any other kind.”

The result was few opportunities to act, and Robeson finally decided to take his family to London, where Black artists enjoyed more freedom and he, particularly, was highly respected.

One British critic wrote of his singing, “He broke our hearts with beauty! It was not just the compassion with which he sang the spirituals, remembering in them the father who had been a slave, there was a wondrous, mysterious something in his voice that moved you to tears, something like what Wordsworth called ‘the still, sad music of humanity.. of ample power to chasten and subdue’” We shall now listen to another example of such music:

THE SERMON:

As is reflected in “**The Ballad for Americans**,” which Robeson made famous, he had great affection for his native land and its people. And it was his abiding belief that one day—America would live up to her noble ideals.

While he was in England, however, Robeson travelled widely throughout Europe, including the Soviet Union where he was greatly impressed with seemed to him a culture committed to social and economic justice.

Then he went to Africa, and discovered it to be sweltering in the misery of colonial exploitation. He met with its future leaders, among them Nkrumah of Ghana and Kenyatta of Kenya, and became caught up in their dreams of liberation.

When his British friends tried to convince him that the Africans were a different breed from himself, and wouldn’t be able to govern themselves for 1000 years, Robeson reacted strongly and pointed to the accomplishments of Russia, which had leaped out from feudalism to become a modern, industrial society in 20 years.

He became more and more committed to the ideals of socialism, writing later, “It is a form of society that is economically, socially and ethically superior to a system based on production for private profit.” He also noted that it was the Soviet Union which seemed committed to the liberation of colonial Africa.

World War II broke out. Now a world-famous artist, he came home to share in the fight against fascism. During the war years, when the Soviets were “our gallant allies,” all was well: and Paul travelled the country raising money for the war effort. But, with peace, came a change in the political climate and the onset of “the cold war.” Russia suddenly became our “enemy” and Robeson was being summoned before the House Un-American Activities Committee and accused of being part of a communist conspiracy.

Paul became characteristically stubborn. He later wrote, “I saw no reason why my convictions should change with the weather. I was not raised that way. In 1946 he testified under oath before the Congressional Committee, “I am not, and never have been, involved in any international conspiracy.. I am not a member of the Communist party and never have been.”

Thereafter, however, he refused to repeat this denial, saying simply that no one has the right to ask that question of an American citizen, or to penalize him for his political affiliation, standing firmly, and I think properly, on our first amendment guarantee of political freedom.

One Congressman asked him why he constantly praised the Soviet Union and he replied, “In Russia I felt, for the first time, like a full, human being NOT like I felt in Mississippi or Alabama.”

When another committee member then asked why he didn’t stay in the Soviet Union, Robeson flashed back, “Because my father was a slave, and my people died to build this country, I’m going to stay right here and have a part in it, and no fascist-minded people will drive me from it. **Is that clear??**”

Well, they couldn’t drive Robeson from America, but they could have him black listed and put pressure on any group that might invite him to perform

And they did.. virtually destroying his career. Not content with that, in 1950 the State department took away his passport, making it impossible for him to accept acting and singing engagements abroad. They argued that during his concert tours abroad, he repeatedly criticized the conditions of Negroes in the U.S. To which Robeson replied, “What is a Negro traveler to do? Keep silent about the injustices being experienced in this country? Not I!”

After eight years of litigation, Robeson’s case reached the Supreme Court—which ordered his passport returned, so that in 1958 he was able to travel again. But the ten best years of his professional life had been lost. And it is a remarkable testimony to his belief in the American people that he was able to write, “Wherever and whenever, we the Negro people, claim our lawful rights, with all the earnestness, dignity and determination we can muster, the moral support of the American people will be an active force on our side.”

A word of commentary: I regard Paul Robeson’s inability to see the evils of Stalin’s Russia, (the slave labor camps, the repression of civil liberties) as an error in judgment. I think that his angry awareness of the racial injustices in this nation—blinded him and blocked her perception of the Soviet Union. And, like Othello, this error flawed his greatness and contributed to his fall.

But that was never adequate cause for the denial of his civil liberties here in this supposedly free nation!

Our government’s treatment of this man, during those witch-hunt days, was an outrage and a disgrace: a blot upon our history. No nation can call itself free that would punish people for their political views—no matter how misguided you may believe those views to be. I greatly admire Paul Robeson for his willingness to pay an enormous price to uphold the principles of liberty and justice in this land.

Robeson did resume his concert tours abroad in 1958, but the following year his health began to deteriorate and he became an invalid. When his wife died in 1965, Robeson returned to his sister’s home in Philadelphia where he stayed until his death.

On that occasion The New York Times published an editorial which closes with these lines: “For reasons of politics, his native country had abruptly and callously turned its back on him long ago, yet Paul Robeson, like Othello on his deathbed could honestly say, **“I have done the state some service, and they know it!”**”

Whether or not many Americans knew it, Rutgers University, in a Citation issued by its President, recognized the greatness of this man. It said, “We are here to pay homage to a great American, a man who, through his world-wide acclaim, brought esteem to our nation and our University.” It goes on to cite his achievements as a scholar, athlete, artist, and concludes: “Were this the full measure of the man, it would be sufficient reason for us to honor him. But Paul Robeson is even more than this. He transcended his time, his race and his person to join that select group of souls who speak for all humanity.