

“Living Locally”
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First Church in Boston
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As a city, Boston holds a tremendous wealth of history. From our own Puritan founders to the many leading Patriots of the American Revolution, to the political legacy of the Kennedy family, Boston is an uncontested leader in American history. Part of that history is remarkable Black History. Today I want to tell a story of William Monroe Trotter, a black radical leader in the early 20th century. My hope is that by learning about Trotter we might find renewed inspiration for living locally with conviction and courage.

Indeed, Trotter was a force of conviction and determination. To illustrate, let me tell you the story of the 1919 Pan-African Congress. After the end of World War I, nations gathered in Paris in 1919 to negotiate the terms of peace. Adjacent to the peace negotiations, the Pan-African Congress sought to ensure that people of African descent held a place within the new global order. Trotter wanted to be there.

In the months before Paris, Trotter helped to organize a National Colored Congress for World Democracy in December 1918 in Washington D.C. The D.C. Congress included more than three hundred African American leaders from thirty-seven states. Together the attendees drafted an address to present in Paris. They also elected eleven delegates to send overseas—a list that included Monroe Trotter.

However, the War Department denied passports to all African Americans seeking passage to France, with two exceptions: W.E.B. DuBois and Tuskegee Institute president Robert Russa Moton, a racial conservative. Neither man represented Trotter’s own more radical “race-first” perspective. Prioritizing issues impacting African Americans over party affiliation, Trotter firmly believed not only in racial equality, but in the agency of African Americans to know best what they needed. For Trotter, African Americans deserved full civil rights—as promised in the Constitution—without accepting segregation or conciliatory gestures from white politicians of either political party. This approach did not win him favor with the government issuing passports to Paris.

Even so, Trotter remained determined to get to Paris. In a 2020 biography of Trotter, Kerri Greenidge reports that Trotter received a crash course on cooking so that he could be hired as a chef on a ship sailing to France. At Havré on the coast of France, Trotter slipped off the ship to “mail a letter” and then made his way to Paris. While the peace Treaty had already been sent to Germany for signature, Trotter still presented the D.C. Congress’ demands to all the delegates gathered to make them aware of the “racial situation” in America. Although the final Treaty did not reflect these demands, Trotter’s international advocacy on behalf of African Americans made waves in the press back home.

I find this story astounding. And until reading Greenidge’s biography of Trotter, I knew none of it. Did you?

Over the years, I have become more aware of all I do not know about Black History and the history of Black resistance. A few years ago, I set out to remedy some of my missing knowledge by visiting the Museum of African American History and walking the Black Heritage Trail on Beacon Hill. While vaguely aware that this area had been a site of African American residences, I had not envisioned the thriving community that existed on the north side of Beacon Hill and Boston's West End. From opening the first public school for African American children to hosting innumerable lectures, concerts, and worship services at the African American Meetinghouse, this Boston community cultivated economic, social, civic, religious, and political networks.

African American residents of Boston later began to move to the South End and the adjacent Lower Roxbury. William Monroe Trotter's own life reflected this geographic shift as well as a keen awareness of his place in Boston's black history. His own father had been a soldier in the famed MA 54th during the Civil War. After the war, his father became a political activist in Boston as well as a federal employee—including a lucrative, 2-year post as recorder of deeds in Washington D.C. Raised in relative comfort, Trotter graduated from Hyde Park high school, then Harvard College. After struggling to find employment fitting to his education, Trotter began both his own real estate business and a weekly newspaper, the *Guardian*. Significantly, to publish the *Guardian*, Trotter rented out the same downtown office space on Tremont Street from which William Lloyd Garrison had published the 19th century abolitionist paper *The Liberator*. Located near the State House and amidst a sea of white businesses, the impact of the *Guardian* was felt in Boston and beyond. Indeed, as an affordable weekly paper, the *Guardian* was picked up and read across class lines in cities around the nation.

Picking up the fight from his father's generation for black suffrage and racial equality, the effective removal of Black suffrage in the Southern states enraged Trotter. After decades of failing to guarantee either Black suffrage or civil rights, Trotter did not trust the Republicans, the party of Lincoln. In the *Guardian*, Trotter spoke up on these issues and did so in a direct, even angry, manner that was indeed radical for the time.

In contrast to the radical Trotter, the most prominent African American voice of the time was Booker T. Washington, president of the Tuskegee Institute. But, to Trotter and other radicals, Washington was an accommodationist who accepted the status quo of segregation in exchange for a handful of political appointments to weak positions in the federal government. While Trotter and the intellectual leader W.E.B. DuBois initially collaborated in 1905 on the black-led Niagara Movement, they fell out when DuBois included persons Trotter had grudges against. Let's just say author Greenidge portrays Trotter's actions in this episode as less than fully mature, even referring to them as tantrums.

So, Trotter wasn't perfect. And yet, by building out a coalition across class lines to support his "race first" politics, Trotter did something neither Washington nor DuBois managed. All from Tremont Street in downtown Boston.

When Trotter died in 1934, the power of the coalition Trotter had built was evident. As Greenidge writes,

“Alone amongst his contemporaries William Monroe Trotter appealed to the black genteel poor from Boston to Cleveland while attracting the ire, the uncomfortable tolerance, and eventually, the begrudging respect of the colored elite. At his death, everyone from Harlem politician Adam Clayton Powell Jr., to Howard University conservative Kelly Miller, to Pan-African Community [socialist] George Padmore, offered Trotter their heartfelt thanks. “Without the *Guardian* of Boston,” Adam Clayton Power stated, “the teeming masses in Harlem, in Chicago, in Detroit would have no heroes.” (xviii)

Trotter was a hero in his era because he spoke out without apology for racial equality. He did this as a columnist in the *Guardian*, as a public speaker in the innumerable rallies he organized at Faneuil Hall, in the “race first” organizations and institutions he helped to establish, and even when he met the President.

The first time Trotter met Woodrow Wilson, he was sizing up whether Wilson, a Democrat, would indeed promote racial equality and Black civil rights. Trotter was impressed by Wilson’s demeanor towards him and apparent sincerity in listening to Trotter’s concerns. And yet, when Wilson became president, he segregated the federal workforce. And so, when Trotter next met with the President, he expressed his dismay to Wilson. While Wilson’s administration would not change course, Trotter nonetheless became a hero for doing something astounding: speaking up for equality without apology to the President of the United States . . . as a Black man.

Speaking bold truth to power takes courage. Especially when those in power have the tools to inflict harm and damage upon those who challenge them. This was true for Trotter. This is increasingly true today as well.

Personally, I’ve never been comfortable with identifying as a radical. I’ve been much more in the white liberal camp of working within systems to make things better over time. Which is why reading about Trotter unsettles me. Looking back, Trotter so clearly seems to be right in his advocacy for racial equality, Black suffrage, and the enforcement of the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments. And Trotter’s demand for full racial equality remains unfulfilled today. More than a century of protests, policies, and programs has not eradicated racism or racial inequality. In fact, we are going backwards with the weakening of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, the recent erasure of “Diversity, Equality, and Inclusivity” (DEI) programs, and the open embrace of white Christian nationalist ideology at the highest levels of government.

In this moment, simply telling you the story of William Monroe Trotter in honor of Black History Month can be read as a political act. And yet, two years ago, I preached a version of this same sermon in another church with the same message of racial equality. As a Unitarian Universalist and religious liberal, my sermon emerges from the [shared value of equity](#)—the conviction that “every person is inherently worthy and has the right to flourish with dignity, love and compassion.” I do not believe in a God or cosmos where some people’s lives matter more than others OR where some people’s histories merit telling

while the stories of others are silenced. The God of my understanding loves us all—this is universalism without exception. Speaking out in defense of the value of equity while also condemning actions that erode equitable treatment of people is a *religious* commitment for me and for Unitarian Universalists.

While such principles of equity may be both religious and universal, the effort to protect equity so often emerges in a local and particular context. Trotter organized people here in the city, gathering crowds at Faneuil Hall as generations before him had done in the fight for freedom from kings and from enslavement. Trotter published issue after issue of the *Guardian* from Tremont Street—putting information and arguments in the hands of a diversity of people to build coalitions of action. By referencing the generations of activists in Boston before him, Trotter located his own actions within a rich legacy of resistance to fuel ongoing change.

As a congregation deeply rooted in the history and place of Boston, I believe we can find inspiration in the stories of Black resistance to meet our own moment. Like so many white allies before us, we can choose to respond to the calls for racial justice and an equitable society by joining coalitions and actions led by black activists and others most impacted by injustice. We can choose to deepen our knowledge and understanding of black history here in the city by reading a book like Trotter's biography, visiting the African American History Museum on Beacon Hill, or taking a walking tour of Roxbury from the UU Urban Ministry. (And you can choose to get more involved in the work of the UU Urban Ministry—we will have an info session on Sunday, March 9 after the service. Watch for more details in the e-news or contact me.)

I know that this is an overwhelming and fearful time for so many people. There are very, very many reasons to be concerned. And even as we must each care for our own well-being, we must also reach out to one another, especially to those, such as black folks, immigrants, and trans folks, who are being targeted right now. I do not mean to suggest I have all the answers or a ten-point plan of action. What you and I do have are the values that ground and guide us—values such as equity that challenge us to side with love for all. These are general principles, and they are values that can guide how we live locally.

In this time of fear, we need one another...not just as metaphor, but as local communities that intentionally strive to embody the values we cherish. There is much I do not know about history, this moment, or what will come. But from Trotter and so many others who have fought for a better world, I know there is power in coming together. So let us gather here and let us seek ways to connect with others here in the city of Boston and beyond.

May it be so.