

SOCIAL JUSTICE AND INCLUSION MINISTRY

GRAPPLING WITH THE HARD TRUTH

DONNA PERKINS

Our country is going through an awful time. It is deeply upsetting and disorienting, especially for those of us who have never had to deal with this country's true history of brutal discrimination, oppression, and what can arguably be labeled as genocide. But it is also a time of that truth's necessary revelation. Since August of last year, a group of your fellow church members and staff has been meeting to discuss how to deal with the very disturbing complicity of one of Neighborhood's co-founders, Dr. Robert A. Millikan, in furthering that oppression.

Millikan promoted eugenics. Eugenics led to the subsequently forced sterilizations of approximately 20,000 Californians in state and county institutions, according to state records. Eugenics is a pseudoscience, now debunked, that twistedly applied Darwin's natural selection concepts to humans. It ranked humans according to their race, using "whiteness" as the most desirable quality. It became a rationale to get rid of people seen as undesirable for a host of reasons that included poverty, lack of access to education, what was considered deviant sexual activity, disability, religion, and race. Irene Burkner, a member of our church for 41 years who has served as President of our Board of Trustees, alerted our church to this history at our Heritage service in November 2017.

As a result of the research of the Millikan Truth and Reconciliation Committee, we learned that Millikan was not the only Unitarian Universalist to promote

eugenics. David Starr Jordan, the first chancellor of Stanford University, was one such collaborator. And eugenics received help from the Unitarian Universalist Association, itself: the UUA's Beacon Press published books in support of the eugenics cause. Nationally, it is estimated that more than 60,000 Americans were forcibly sterilized.

Additionally, the committee has learned that eugenics was used in the United States to promote exclusionary immigration laws, including the Immigration Act of 1924.

The Committee has developed a set of activities for this church year to help us all learn the truth, reckon with it and, hopefully, contribute to the necessary work that must be done to eliminate classism, xenophobia, racism, ableism, transphobia, homophobia, genocide, and now, the dismissal of valid science at the highest levels of our government which threatens us the existence of us all. This reflection is among the first steps in grappling with that truth.

Another event coming up quickly is the establishment of the Social Justice Book Club, which has chosen *Bloodlines: Recovering Hitler's Nuremberg Laws, from Patton's Trophy to Public Memorial* as its first book. Researched and written by historians, *Bloodlines* traces Millikan's promotion of eugenics as well as other unsavory activities. I hope you'll join not only to learn about Unitarian Universalist involvement in the promotion of eugenics but also to discuss how this history relates to the long

list of horrors Americans are currently witnessing and experiencing: murders instigated by racism and homophobia; the cruel separation of migrant families and the internment of asylum-seeking refugees in ever more ghastly ways; what scholar and historian Alexandra Minna Stern calls the resurgence of eugenic thought among the “alt-right” and its use to judicially deprive women of reproductive autonomy; and now, Nazi-like calls to take away citizenship rights.

Stay tuned for more reflections from the Truth and Reconciliation Committee in the next two months. In these reflections, we will examine other aspects of this history, the status of a California bill to provide reparations to survivors of government-sponsored

forced sterilization, and the spiritual process of reconciliation.

As uncomfortable as this history is, I hope you will join in the necessary healing process of learning it, understanding the role of Unitarian Universalists in promoting it, and using it to help prevent further atrocities.

- The Social Justice Book Club will meet the following Tuesdays at Neighborhood House from 7:00 – 9:00 pm: September 24th, October 1st, and October 8th.
- A highlight of these discussions will be an appearance at our church by the book’s authors on October 13, 1:00 – 3:00 pm at Ross Chapel. More details to follow.

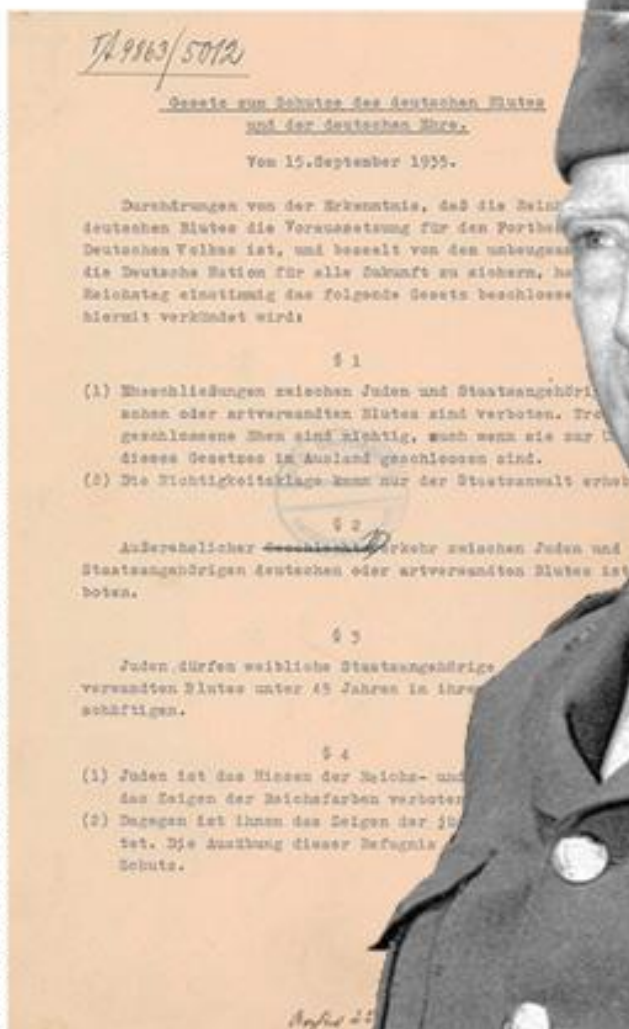
Millikan Truth and Reconciliation Committee Members:

Rev. Lissa Gundlach
Clyde Derrick
Cybele Garcia Kohel
Donna Perkins
Irene Burkner
Luis Sierra Campos

Past Members:

Rev. Christina Shu
Dinandrea Vega
Eugene Hutchins

Nuremberg Decrees of September 16, 1935 and U.S. General George Smith Patton Jr. (National Archives Gift Collection)



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THE DIFFICULT, MIXED LEGACIES OF ROBERT A. MILLIKAN

CLYDE DERRICK



Dr. Robert A. Millikan (National Archives Gift Collection)

In this extraordinary period of reassessment, of MeToo and the unveiling of abusers and users among the powerful and trusted, we continue to grapple with the mixed legacies of extraordinary people who have both moved the world forward and committed acts of unspeakable horror.

Thomas Jefferson was one of the key architects of the bold experiment called the United States of America, but he fathered two families, including one by his slave, Sally Hemings. He freed his biracial family but never interacted with them directly. For more on this story, read the heartbreaking picture book *My Name is James Madison Hemings* by Jonah Winter and Terry Widener.

Franklin Roosevelt was a brilliant U.S.

president who helped the nation through the devastating Depression and World War II but also turned away numerous Jewish refugees at the war's onset. This included Anne Frank and her family.

And Robert Millikan, co-founder of Neighborhood Unitarian Universalist Church (NUUC) and the first American to win the Nobel Prize in the sciences, was on the board of the Human Betterment Foundation, a eugenics organization that not only arranged for the unsolicited sterilization of people of color and the mentally challenged, but also provided a conscious model for the ethnic cleansing of the Nazis. Millikan's mixed legacy is the subject of *Bloodlines*, a stunning book whose authors, Tony Platt and Cecilia O'Leary, will be visiting Neighborhood Church for a post-service

discussion of their investigation and scholarship on October 13, 1:00 - 3:00 pm at Ross Chapel.

I was in the choir loft when Lyn Munro and Virginia Kimball read Irene Burkner's shattering unmasking of Robert Millikan. I will never forget the horror and anger visible on the faces of all present and I shared those feelings just as deeply.

When the Board of Trustees asked church members to weigh in on whether or not to remove Millikan's nameplate from the Neighborhood House Dining Room, we received only one brief email. The author did not make a recommendation either way but cautioned us instead to bear in mind Millikan's accomplishments as a scientist as well as the time in which he lived. Indeed, his legacy as a scientist is overwhelming and the Nobel Prize Committee devotes a full webpage to his scientific contributions.

As for the time in which he lived, it was indeed very different from ours. He was born in Illinois just three years after the end of the Civil War and he died eight years after the end of World War II. He studied at Oberlin College and Columbia University. He studied abroad in Germany. By his fifties, he was a professor, author, and scientist of very high standing. Per the Nobel page:

"As a scientist, Millikan made numerous momentous discoveries, chiefly in the fields of electricity, optics, and molecular physics. His earliest major success was the accurate determination of the charge carried by an electron, using the elegant 'falling-drop method.' ...his studies of the Brownian movements

in gases put an end to all opposition to the atomic and kinetic theories of matter."

These accomplishments are staggering, though I understand that the falling-drop method has since been discredited.

Nowhere on the page is the Human Betterment Foundation and its work mentioned, nor the letter unearthed by the Chicago Tribune in which Dr. Fritz Lenz, "one of Nazi Germany's leading eugenicists," offers thanks to the foundation for providing a useful ethnic cleansing model. Nor does the Nobel Committee share the photo of Millikan receiving the Nuremberg Laws signed by Adolf Hitler on behalf of the Huntington Library's Board from General George S. Patton, who brought the document to the U.S. after the war and whose diary entries indicate strongly anti-Semitic feelings.

Your Board of Trustees voted to remove Millikan's nameplate and photograph from the Neighborhood House Dining Room after recommendations by the NUUC History Committee and several church members.

So, where do we go from here? Do we negate Millikan or uneasily put his mixed legacy in the context of his time, as many have done with Franklin Roosevelt and Thomas Jefferson? This is one of the challenging questions we will explore in the coming church year through the Millikan Truth and Reconciliation Committee. Those of us planning for this spiritual journey hope you'll join us for what should be different from anything else we've experienced in the context of our church.

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ASSEMBLY BILL 1764 MATTERS AND THIS IS WHY

IRENE BURKNER



Los Angeles County Hospital, 1936. The Historical Society of Southern California Archives

Dr. Robert A. Millikan was many things to many people. He was a Nobel Prize-winning physicist and, according to *The Dictionary of UU Biography*, one of America's best-known scientists in the early twentieth century. He was a professor, textbook author, university president, science policy advisor and fundraiser in support of scientific research. At Caltech, Dr. Millikan served as Director of the Norman Bridge Laboratory of Physics as well as Chairman of the Executive Council. He was showered throughout his life with awards, buildings, rooms, streets, and even a postage stamp to honor him. The dining room in our Neighborhood House was named after him as he was also a co-founder of our church. He was also a member of the Pasadena elite and a trustee on the board of the Human Betterment Foundation, a staunch advocate of eugenics and supporter of California's forced sterilizations. According to state records, these amounted to 20,000 patients from 1919 to 1952.

I've been compelled to act and use my voice to let everyone in our congregation know about this episode

in our past. I found out about Dr. Millikan's role from reading an article in a newspaper. When I was asked to speak in church one Sunday, I leaped at the chance to share my knowledge. I had learned that California was considering passing a reparations bill for those impacted by forced sterilization and I hoped that together we could support this effort. I researched the question and was appalled to discover how many prominent people were active in the eugenics movement, including members of other UU churches. When I delivered my speech, it had a sobering effect on those listening. And not only was the plaque naming the room after Dr. Millikan removed, but also the Truth and Reconciliation Committee was formed to help us all come to terms with the legacy of our past and the needs of our present.

The California Assembly Bill 1764 Forced or Involuntary Sterilization Compensation Program matters because it rights a wrong. And I feel we are complicit in that wrong just by being members of this political entity, the State of California, that allowed it.

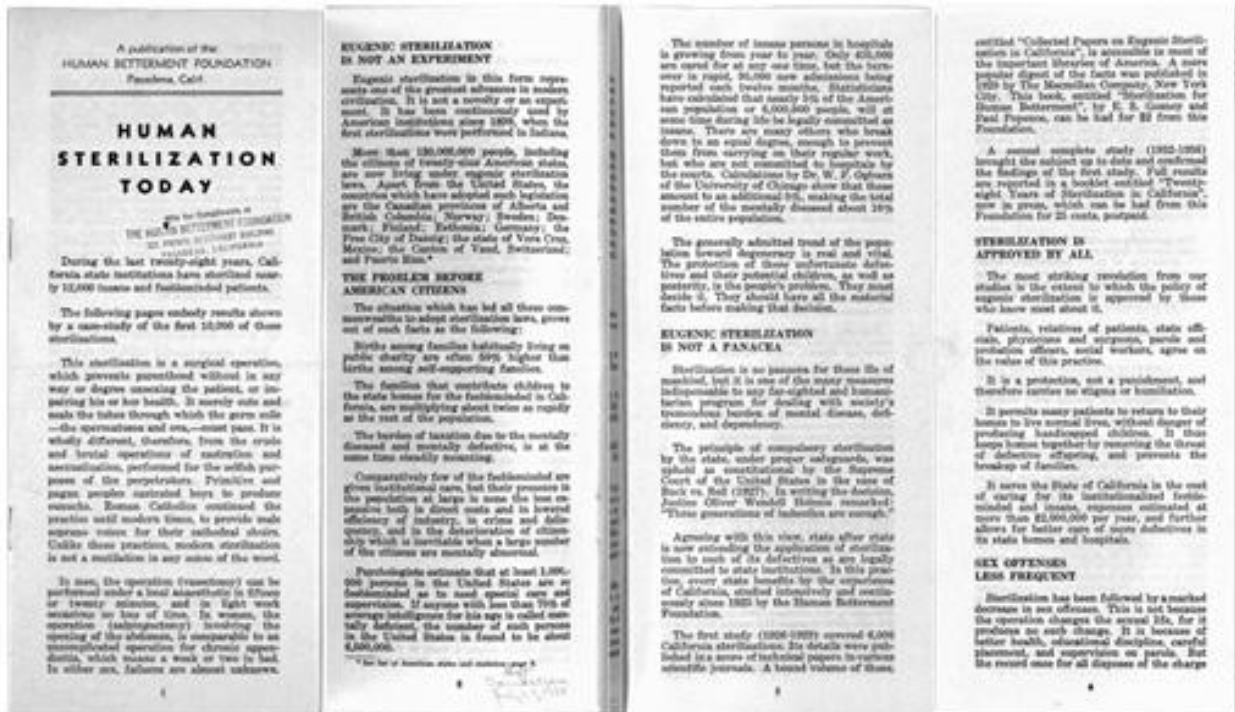
In addition, Dr. Millikan, by supporting the Human Betterment Foundation, fostered forced sterilization and support of Nazi ideology. I can't judge the motives of all the people who espoused theories of improving the human race, but I do believe that when you advocate actions that have such an impact on individuals it behooves you to see what the results are. If the eugenicists had checked, they would have discovered that their policies affected the poor, minority populations, and women disproportionately. It is significant that the eugenicists stopped their proselytizing when the horrible actions of the Nazis became known. Yet there was no public recanting or apology. We in this congregation have all benefited from Dr. Millikan directly. His work in uniting the Unitarian Universalist and Congregational congregations in the old Neighborhood Church formed a strong institution that eventually became the Unitarian Universalist church we attend today. The very buildings our church inhabits were built with the money acquired in that merger. By helping to pass a reparations bill we, as Unitarian Universalists and human beings, are saying to the victims of sterilization that we recognize the wrong done to them. We

are sorry. We pledge to be mindful of all our actions and attitudes.

As for the legislation, it was originally introduced by Assemblywoman Christina Garcia, handed over to Senator Nancy Skinner and then to Assemblywoman Wendy Carillo. It passed through various committees, the last being the Appropriation Committee, which is "holding it under submission."

This means authors or committee members want to work on or discuss it further. When the bill finally does come to a vote all of you will be asked to pitch in and contact your representatives and urge them to right the wrongs done to so many innocents.

We will also contact the state Unitarian Universalist reps and ask them to get the word out to every UU church in California. California sterilized more people than any other state and didn't repeal its eugenics laws until the early 1970s. Other states have passed reparation laws—so should we.



Human Betterment Foundation, 1938. Library of Congress.

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RECONCILIATION AS TRANSFORMATION

REV. CHRISTINA SHU

“When we engage in reconciliation, we invite change that will transform a relationship.”

“A new beginning can result from reconciliation where the parties, through their encounter and commitment to change, create a better future. Apology followed by forgiveness can be an act of generosity but still may not lead to change. It does not mean that the other person understands the problem and it may not complete the work of establishing a sense of trust and confidence. Reconciliation transforms the individuals and the present by bringing the parties to a new consciousness about the way they see, treat and represent each other.”


Paula Cole Jones, “Reconciliation as a Spiritual Practice,” 2003.

As a lifelong Unitarian Universalist, I had heard about reconciliation as a spiritual practice and goal for UU communities with regards to slavery, the genocide of American indigenous peoples, racial discrimination and oppression. I remembered when in 2007 the UUA’s then-president Rev. William Sinkford gave a report to the General Assembly and asked: “With whom do we need to be reconciled?” This led to a Resolution that congregations and the UUA “uncover our links and complicity with the genocide of native people, with slavery and the slave-based economy, and with all types of racial, ethnic, and cultural

oppression past and present, toward the goal of accountability through acknowledgment, repair, and reconciliation.”

Last year, as part of Neighborhood Church’s Truth and Reconciliation Committee convened by Donna Perkins, I read and learned about the history of eugenics and forced sterilization as connected to the state of California, the city of Pasadena, and Unitarian and Universalist leaders like Robert A Millikan and David Starr Jordan.

This history was shocking, painful, and illuminating as it revealed an oppressive philosophy operating at



the intersection of race, gender, class, disability and other social categories, which became codified in laws, education, healthcare, and many other social structures. As horrifying as this history is to learn, I believe that we have a duty and spiritual responsibility to examine the history of eugenics as Unitarian Universalists.

If we look to our seven principles, the first is our affirmation of “the inherent worth and dignity of every person.” The principles of eugenics and the belief in the superiority of certain races, classes, and the ability of people run precisely counter to that inherent worth and dignity. Our second principle of “justice, equity and compassion in human relations” also calls us to oppose systems and practices that were based on eugenics such as forced sterilization and the segregation, discrimination and oppression of various communities and groups who were deemed less worthy—all of which led to devastating and life-altering consequences for many. Lastly, our fourth principle, “a free and responsible search for truth and meaning,” calls us onward in this truth and reconciliation project. It calls us to uncover difficult and painful truths about the ancestors

of our faith tradition, to bring these sins to light, and to find meaningful ways to take accountability and move forward to reconciliation.

Reconciliation is a process of transformation. In entering this process, it is our hope that Neighborhood Church members will gain a new understanding of our history, and the way that history has impacted us and other communities today. This process is not an easy one and requires much of us—our time, energy, vulnerability, courage and faith. We take these first steps with courage and the hope that we will be transformed along the way. We may then approach our neighboring communities, and those in our own church, especially those with identities historically impacted by eugenics (women, people of color, immigrants, people with disabilities), with a new consciousness and openness to mutual relationship and recommitment to transforming structures of oppression to those of equity, equality and justice.