

## THE LIFE AND RELIGIOUS MESSAGE OF ASA PHILIP RANDOLPH

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26 February 2006  
First Unitarian Church  
Pittsburgh, PA

Asa Philip Randolph was one of the most remarkable and significant American leaders in the twentieth century. I have the impression, however, that many people do not know who he was and what he accomplished. I hope that my sermon this morning will provide a way for more people to appreciate the witness for social justice that he offered.

Asa Philip Randolph was born on April 15, 1889, in Crescent City, Florida. He was the younger son of James William Randolph and Elizabeth Robinson Randolph. James William Randolph had been born in 1864. At the age of twenty he became a self-trained ordained preacher in the African Methodist Episcopal Church. The African Methodist Episcopal Church had been founded 1794 by Richard Allen, a former slave, who had left the Methodist Church in 1787 in Philadelphia as a protest against segregation. Throughout the nineteenth century, the AME Church had encouraged independence, self-reliance, resistance, protest, and self-determination among African-Americans. The political militancy of the AME Church can be readily observed in the witness of the Rev. Henry McNeal Turner, a bishop of the AME Church and a member of the Georgia state legislature. In 1868, when the Georgia state legislature expelled its black members, Turner said: “. . . I hold that I am a member of this body. . . . I shall neither fawn nor cringe before any party nor stoop to beg them for my rights. . . . I am here to demand my rights, and to hurl thunderbolts at the men who would dare to cross the threshold of my manhood. . . . Whose legislature is this? . . . You have the elements of superiority on your side; you have our money and your own; you have our education and your own; and you have our land and your own too. . . . The black man cannot protect a country if the country doesn't protect him; and if, tomorrow, a war should arise, I would not raise a musket to defend a country where my manhood is denied.”<sup>1</sup> This heritage of political militancy remained with Asa Philip Randolph throughout his life, even though he had very little to do with organized religion in his adult years.

In 1891, when Asa Philip Randolph was two, James William Randolph accepted an invitation to serve a new church, and the family moved to Jacksonville, Florida. They were poor and lived without luxury. Mr. Randolph insisted that his two sons do considerable reading every day. They attended a public elementary school, then Edward

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<sup>1</sup> Henry McNeal Turner, quoted by Jervis Anderson in A. Philip Randolph: A Biographical Portrait (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), p. 30.

Waters College (an industrial school run by the AME Church), and then the Cookman Institute, which had been started by Northern white Methodists during Reconstruction. One evening, Mr. Randolph learned that a lynching was likely to take place, and he joined an armed group which held a vigil all night and successfully kept away the lynchers. From this incident, according to his biographer, Jervis Anderson, Asa came to have “a more positive view of the black situation: not one of powerlessness, but of the [possibilities] which resided in unity and organization.”<sup>2</sup>

Although he was a very promising student, college was simply an economic impossibility after Asa graduated from high school. He worked at several jobs and pursued academic and cultural interests on the side, buying his own books, giving public readings, singing with a barbershop quartet, and taking the lead role in several dramatic productions. As he followed the debate between Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. DuBois with regard to a strategy for the advancement of African Americans, Asa became deeply influenced by DuBois’ call to struggle for social equality and later claimed that The Souls of Black Folk was the most influential book he ever read.

In April, 1911, at the age of twenty-two, Asa moved to New York City to seek his fortune. He traveled by steamboat and washed dishes to help pay for his passage. After running out of money, Asa took a job as a porter in an apartment building. He attended young adult groups at several different churches, seeking companions who might share his intellectual and political interests. Eventually, he formed his own group, called the Independent Political Council. Asa registered for courses at City College, studying history, political science, philosophy, and economics. He listened to radicals speaking on street corners in Harlem. He learned about the Industrial Workers of the World. And he became acquainted with the ideals of Eugene Debs, leader of the Socialist Party. Asa joined the Socialist Party and identified himself as a socialist throughout his life. Jervis Anderson writes: “A believer previously in pure-and-simple racial radicalism, he now felt that if some of the conditions which victimized black Americans were endemic to the nation’s economic life—thus intensifying the competitive struggle between black and white workers, exacerbating racism, and politicizing hate—then the movement for racial freedom could not proceed independently of the movement for social and economic change.”<sup>3</sup>

Asa supported himself with a variety of jobs, none of which he took very seriously. As he said, “the jobs Negroes could get weren’t worth spending much time on.”<sup>4</sup> His reputation as a leader of the Independent Political Club eventually landed him a job with an African American employment agency called the Brotherhood of Labor. Down the hall was a beauty salon owned and operated by Lucille Green. Asa and Lucille became acquainted, and they were married in November, 1914. Lucille shared Asa’s political inclinations and interests, and her beauty salon was prosperous enough that she was able to provide the early financial support that enabled Asa to start pursuing his calling as a social reformer and labor organizer.

With his friend Chandler Owen, Randolph reorganized his Independent Political Council. His sense of purpose shines through its mission statement: “To create and

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 42.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 63.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 65.

crystallize sentiment against present conditions through an organized educational campaign; to compile and distribute literature, and to conduct public lectures on the vital issues affecting the colored people's economic and political destiny; to appraise men and measures in public life; to examine, expose, and condemn cunning and malicious political leaders; to criticize and denounce selfish and self-styled leaders."<sup>5</sup> Owen and Randolph also developed an admiring reputation as formidable street corner orators.

In January, 1917, Randolph and Owen were offered a job editing a magazine for the Headwaiters and Sidewaiters Society of Greater New York. Their publication was called The Hotel Messenger. Later that year, after Randolph and Owen were relieved of their editorial responsibilities for this magazine, they decided to keep publishing a magazine anyway. They called it simply The Messenger. A sympathetic writer called The Messenger "one of the most brilliantly edited magazines in the history of American Negro journalism."<sup>6</sup> The United States Department of Justice, however, called it "the most able and dangerous of all the Negro publications."<sup>7</sup> Randolph and Owen wrote: "Our aim is to appeal to reason, to lift up our pens above the cringing demagogy of the times, and above the cheap peanut politics of the old reactionary Negro leaders. Patriotism has no appeal to us; justice has. Party has no weight with us; principle has. Loyalty is meaningless; it depends on what one is loyal to. Prayer is not one of our remedies; it depends on what one is praying for."<sup>8</sup> Jervis Anderson states that The Messenger's mission "would consist not only in the advocacy of an economic solution to the racial problem, but also in a broad attack upon the following: the country's political and economic system, which, it was felt, fostered racism and social inequality; the 'conservative Negro leadership,' most of which urged a continued allegiance to the Republican party; the predominantly racist and craft-oriented American Federation of Labor, which, in excluding all but a handful of blacks from the working-class movement, made a mockery of the black radicals' call for working-class solidarity; protest radicals of the DuBois and NAACP school, whom the Messenger and like-minded black radicals considered no longer radical enough; and Marcus Garvey's doctrines of black capitalism, black nationalism, and emigrationism, which, in the political and economic nature of American life, were seen as palliatives rather than solutions."<sup>9</sup>

Randolph and Owen edited and published The Messenger from 1917 to 1928, throughout the Harlem Renaissance. But since neither Randolph nor Owen had good business sense, the magazine was always in debt and eventually it became impossible to keep it going any longer.

In addition to editing and publishing The Messenger, Randolph had started several organizations, including the Independent Political Club, the 21st AD Socialist Club, the United Brotherhood of Elevator and Switchboard Operators, the National Association for the Promotion of Labor Unionism, the National Brotherhood Workers of America, the Tenants and Consumers League, the Harlem branch of the Journeyman Bakers and Confectioners Union, and the Friends of Negro Freedom. None survived.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 77.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 82.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 83.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 90.

With The Messenger in decline and Lucille's beauty salon faltering, Randolph was in a difficult position. Jervis Anderson writes: "For Randolph, by 1925, these were not only the shambles of radical dreams, but the ruins of a career. He had no profession, except that of a propagandist and self-employed journalist, and, as far as he or anyone else can remember, nothing fresh to contemplate. In Harlem, the possibilities of radical propaganda had been exhausted, and in American as a whole, [Attorney General] A. Mitchell Palmer . . . had slain the liberal dream."<sup>10</sup>

But 1925 brought a new opportunity for Randolph when he accepted an offer to organize a trade union among the Pullman sleeping car porters. Jervis Anderson writes: "At first, the comfort and luxury of a Pullman traveler were in the hands of conductors, but conductors alone . . . could not provide the sort of hospitality Pullman had in mind for his passengers. There had to be . . . porters to help receive and discharge passengers, handle baggage, prepare beds and berths, care for linen and equipment, keep the cars tidy, and wait upon a passenger's every wish and desire. In 1867, when he first felt the need for such a service, George Pullman turned to what he considered a uniquely appropriate source: the recently freed slaves. Thus from the very beginning the porter's job was 'a black man's job.' . . . When it occurred to Pullman that blacks were singularly suited to fulfill his requirements for what a sleeping car porter should be, it was because—certainly at the end of slavery—he saw the history of their servitude and habits of obsequiousness as distinctly qualifying black men above all others. . . . it also followed that they were used to hard work, long hours, poor pay, and mean boss men."<sup>11</sup>

The Pullman Company was not eager to have its porters organized into a trade union, and thus Randolph faced a difficult task as a union organizer. In the past, many porters had been fired when company management learned about their attempts to organize. When Randolph began his organizing work, one porter recalls that his supervisor said to him: "Remember, this is a white man's country, white people run it, [white people] will keep on running it, and this company will never sit down around the same table with Randolph as long as he's black."<sup>12</sup> The Pullman company, which ran its own employee organization for the porters, used a spy system as well as "threats, firings, and suspensions" in its opposition to Randolph's organizing efforts. The Pullman company also benefited from the anti-union sentiment prevalent in the black church and the black press. For several years, the Pullman Company simply refused to bargain with the newly-formed Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. Randolph and his team of organizers had a very difficult time. Without results, it was hard to maintain morale, membership, and money. But without morale, membership, and money, results were hard to achieve. Randolph himself, never much interested in his own financial well-being, would travel for days at a time to visit organizers in other cities—Chicago, St. Louis, Omaha, San Francisco, and so on—without a change of clothes, and without money for a return trip, because funds were scarce. With regard to this period of sacrificial deprivation, one union organizer recalls that "one Christmas [another union organizer] didn't even have carfare to visit his wife and children out it Queens. He and I

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 150.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., pp. 158-159.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 181.

slept in the office [in Harlem], on Randolph's desk . . . We spread newspapers on it for a mattress and slept there that Christmas. It was the one time I saw a grown man cry."<sup>13</sup>

In 1933, once Franklin Roosevelt became President of the United States, the Railway Labor Act was strengthened, and the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters finally won recognition as the legitimate bargaining representative of the Pullman porters. Randolph characterized the importance of this event as follows: "This is the first time that Negro workers have had the opportunity to vote as a national group in an election, under federal supervision, for their economic rights. It is an extraordinary occasion. It is the result of ten years of militant, determined, and courageous fighting by a small band of black workers against one of the most powerful corporations in the world. It may be interesting for you to know that on the Pullman Board sit J. P. Morgan, R. K. Mellon, Alfred P. Sloan, . . . Harold S. Vanderbilt, . . . and others. These men rule Wall Street, America, and practically the world of capitalist finance and industry. And yet the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters has, in the face of nameless opposition and terror, stood its ground through one of the worst depressions ever witnessed in America, and has come to the point where it has caused a national election to be called to determine the organization the porters really want. . . . This election . . . will mark an historic point in the efforts of the Negro workers in the trade union movement. . . . The porters . . . are the vanguard of the black workers of America."<sup>14</sup>

An agreement between the Brotherhood and the Pullman Company was signed on August 25, 1935—the twelfth birthday of the union. Randolph now had a reputation of considerable prestige as one of the principal African-American reform leaders in the country. He used this reputation in the service of justice. With the beginning of World War II, industrial production experienced a dramatic increase, but segregation prevented African-Americans from working in the defense industries. Randolph began to organize a march on Washington with a project attendance of 100,000 people to press for inclusion of African-American workers. After some reluctance, on June 25, 1941, President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 8802, which outlawed racial discrimination in the defense industries. A similar incident took place when Harry Truman was president. On July 26, 1948, faced with another popular movement organized by Randolph, President Truman issued Executive Order 9981, which outlawed segregation in the United States military forces.

When United Mine Workers leader John L. Lewis led the Congress of Industrial Organizations out of the American Federation of Labor in 1935, Randolph kept the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters in the American Federation of Labor, despite the fact that John L. Lewis had been one of Randolph's strongest supporters. True to his socialist vision of solidarity among workers across racial lines, Randolph had decided that an important task for him was to continue to press the American Federation of Labor to eliminate segregation in its member unions. Accordingly, each year for many years Randolph introduced an anti-segregation resolution, despite public accusations by American Federation of Labor President George Meany and others of not being a team player.

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 213.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 220.

Randolph's major accomplishments took place in the 1930s and 1940s, but he retained a significant leadership role as the civil rights movement gathered momentum in the 1950s and 1960s. It was Randolph who set in motion the organizational machinery that produced the March for Jobs and Freedom on August 28, 1963, where Martin Luther King, Jr., gave his "I Have a Dream" speech. It was Randolph, in fact, who gave the first speech at that gathering of 200,000 people, and it was Randolph who introduced Martin Luther King, Jr., there on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. In 1964, no longer considered "the most dangerous Negro in America," as the government had tagged him forty-five years earlier, Randolph was awarded the Medal of Freedom, the highest civilian honor of the United States, by President Lyndon Johnson. Asa Philip Randolph died on May 16, 1979, in New York City.

Asa Philip Randolph was not a Unitarian Universalist. Nevertheless, we may discern in his life and his work a religious message of significance to us.

We may find it admirable that Randolph had a humble background and yet rose to a position of prominence. We may find it admirable that he remained happily married to Lucille. We may find it admirable that he met in the White House with at least five different Presidents. But for us as religious people, his message really has three principal aspects.

First, Randolph was a humanitarian who believed in justice. You might say that he affirmed and promoted the inherent worth and dignity of every person, especially those economically marginalized and socially dismissed. As an African American reformer, he avoided the accommodationism of Booker T. Washington, on the one hand, yet he also avoided the nationalism and separatism of Marcus Garvey on the other hand. Although his particular activity took place within the African-American community, his larger allegiance was with working people, and he consistently pursued unity among blacks and whites within the labor movement.

Second, Randolph took his commitment seriously. On the one hand, this might mean avoiding frivolous organizations masquerading as reform organizations, such as the Society for the Prevention of Calling Sleeping Car Porters George, an organization which really did exist from 1916 to 1941, at one time claiming a membership of 33,000 Pullman passengers named George who did not like being confused with the Pullman porters, who were customarily called "George" by white passengers who did not bother distinguishing one porter from another. More to the point, taking a commitment seriously might mean understanding the importance of sustained and organized effort. Randolph once wrote that "only power can effect the enforcement and adoption of a given policy, however meritorious it may be. The virtue and rightness of a cause are not alone the condition and cause of its acceptance. Power and pressure are at the foundation of the march of social justice and reform."<sup>15</sup> However, Randolph continued with the observation that "power and pressure do not reside in the few, and intelligentsia, they lie in and flow from the masses. Power does not even rest with the masses as such. Power is the active principle of only organized masses, the masses united for a definite purpose."<sup>16</sup>

Third, Randolph did not give up. Whatever one's particular cause—whether we feel drawn to work on behalf of civil rights for gay and lesbian people in this country, or

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 248.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

on behalf of the elimination of racism in this country, or on behalf of justice and human rights in Palestine, or on behalf of the elimination of poverty and hunger in one's local community or around the world, or on behalf of environmental protection in one's local community or around the world—the task may seem impossible. The example of Randolph's life offers encouragement: sometimes, tasks which seem hopelessly beyond accomplishment may yet be accomplished.

Asa Philip Randolph was a remarkable leader and reformer. His vision and his commitment enabled him to accomplish much. May his vision and his commitment encourage and inspire within us our own vision and commitment.

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