

Towards Justice

Sermon for Martin Luther King, Jr. Service
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Blacksburg

Note: this text version are notes from a sermon delivered in real time, content delivered in real time may differ from the text version.

Celebrating MLK Day

Today we celebrate the birth, the life and legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King! King's birthday was on the 15th of course, but we join with the country tomorrow in celebrating the national holiday in his honor. So today, in worship, we offer an MLK Day service. In your Order of Service you can see all of the many ways to participate in honoring MLK's legacy through service and action by connecting with broader community events.

Now, it would be easy for me to just share with you today the more famous poetic and prophetic words of this dear leader. His writing is so very powerful. Yet in particular, this year, I want to share a *few powerful but often unsung or under-heard* portions of his writings... and think with you about the spiritual and religious underpinnings of his messages!

A few MLK and UU Connections

Dr. King and Coretta Scott King visited Unitarian Universalist congregations, especially when King was getting his advanced degree at Boston University. And as I mentioned last week, the well-known quote "the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends towards justice", which is well known from King, and reinterpreted by President Obama, actually come from Theodore Parker, the Unitarian minister who I spoke about last Sunday! So, Dr. King and his wife were both very much aware of Unitarian Universalism.

Dr. King also addressed the UU General Assembly of Unitarian Universalists back in 1966. In that speech he asked that UUs not "sleep through the revolution" but instead urged us to "stay awake".

Dr. King the Pastor: Courage, Moral Clarity & Hope

One thing I'd like to underscore this morning is that before becoming the well known civil rights leader, Dr. King was primarily a pastor — that was his background and his primary identity.

In 1967 he said:

I did not come to Mount Pisgah to give a civil rights address; I have to do a lot of that ... But before I was a civil rights leader, I was a preacher of the gospel. This was my first calling and it still remains my greatest commitment. You know, actually all that I do in civil rights I do because I consider it a part of my ministry. I have no other ambitions in life but to achieve excellence in the Christian ministry. I don't plan to run for any political office. I don't plan to do anything but remain a preacher.

(Full text here: http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/documentsentry/doc_why_jesus_called_a_man_a_fool.1.html)

So, what was it that was so grounding to King? Or, put differently: how was it that his faith was such a wellspring for his activism? From his faith grew courage and a moral clarity — which was unabashed and unmistakable. And also: hope. I do believe that courage, moral clarity and hope of are some the important things that King has left us with.

Where did King's courage, his moral clarity and his hope come from?

I believe the short answer is the very thing which led him to his ministry: his faith.

Writing, speaking and teaching is rich with references to the sacred books and stories of his Baptist tradition. He frequently wove in parables of Jesus from the New Testament with imagery from the Hebrew bible to make his points evocative — and also because those teachings and stories were the framework of his own understanding as a person of faith.

Hear this from King after outlining the shape of his dream in his well known, "Dream" speech:

With this faith we will be able to hew out the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith we will be able to work together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom, knowing that we will be free one day.

(Full text here: <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkhaveadream.htm>)

With this faith.

He has an abiding faith in a dream. But that dream itself is born of a moral clarity anchored in his faith about what is true about the human family, *from his own Christian faith*; a faith in God, a faith in teachings and messages of Jesus, whose own ministry was with people on the margins, the people left out, cast aside, the stranger, the “other”.

Some UUs may not have the same theology that King did.

Yet, I do believe that we arrive at rather the same place — also by our own faith.

For King’s faith had him viewing that we are all brothers and sisters, cousins and connected as children of God.

As UUs we tend to say it this way: all have inherent worth and dignity. We are connected in this profound web of life. We also understand human community — this is what our Universalist strand talked about, *universality* — that all matter.

And indeed our Unitarian forebearers understood that there was a oneness to all life. We arrive then in fact right where King arrived in his journey of faith and living his faith in understanding ***a deep human unity, deep human bonds which connect each to all.***

I believe a question King asked which remains relevant today is this: what will be our response if and when we come to understand this knowledge of connection?

What will we do when we understand that we are brothers, sisters, neighbors, cousins, bound together, inextricably so, wearing, as he said, one garment of destiny — what if we understood that as truth — not just as a lofty idea, not just an image that makes us feel good — what if we were to come into a deeper understanding, a spiritual understanding that we are all connected.

What would this mean?

What ethics then emerge? What is a faithful — faith-filled response to this interconnection? How do we keep faith with *that* reality?

Back in the 1960s the way we did it as UUs was to send more than any other denomination to march with King.

They went out of faith. Today, UUs have made very public stances in solidarity with Black Lives Matter — for the very same reason.

Not because it seems like a “pretty good idea”, “a political idea”, but rather because it is our response to the world of inequity.

When we try to live our faith and consider what our faith asks of us we know that we must show up, stand up, to champion one another’s humanity and a more just, equitable society.

What’s Easy to Talk About and What’s Not Easy to Talk About on this Day

It’s easy on MLK Day to sing out the beautiful, prophetic words in his historical sermons. It would be easy to side step the more difficult conversations.

But King called us to be courageous.

So today I want to name one of things that keep us from more deeply living our calling to champion one another’s humanity at this time.

And that is called **“White Fragility”**.

And to talk about this I want to share about how a culture of whiteness has shaped my own frame of reference growing up and living in the US.

Example: What I could not see

Years ago I was working in radio at a very racially, culturally and ethnically diverse station in which I was a minority being white and Jewish. I learned a lot at the time about whiteness, and how I had been uncultured into white culture — without even realizing it. I recall a conversation I had with a co-worker. I said how depressing the fight for justice could be. And my co-worker, who was not white, looked at me, in a pointed way and said: *Despair is a luxury I simply cannot afford.*

I spent a few years taking those words into my heart and thinking about what she meant.

I realized that my budding sense of despair was at my own lack of ability to change things *myself*. My experience being raised in whiteness told me that, at least in a daily way, individual efforts yield clear, measurable results and this is why justice work seemed so grueling... it was so slow and it was impossible to do alone.

In the reality I had known results for individuals efforts typically came quick — were rewarded. *I did not realize then, the way my co-worker did, that positive efforts of non-white people often did not gain rewards just as a matter of course, because in a white world, entrenched prejudicial condition-*

ing in society add up to non-white people often being blamed or presumed guilty of something just due to the perception of race.

The ABC Experiment

Its not easy to talk about... but we know that race is a social construct. Sometimes people say in the US they are "color blind", but a powerful video ABC did ten years ago shows how perceptions of race and racial prejudice continue to shape how humans relate in the US in the most basic ways.

A video shows three people stealing a bike, and the responses of passersby in a public park...

First, we see a young white man — people ask him what he is doing, some shake their head, no one intervenes. When interviewed later, some say they were going to call the police later, or that they presumed he worked for the park or lost his key.

Next, an African American man — same height, build and age, dressed similarly, starts to take the bike. Within seconds he is surrounded by people who question him, and start taking pictures, people raise their voice at him. Someone, an older white man, calls the police, and before the the whole thing is revealed to be an experiment, another man, also white, tries to steal the man's tools to show him a lesson.

Finally, a white woman steals a bike, and not only go people seem undisturbed, but someone, a white man, comes over to help her complete the effort, even though she indicates the bike is not hers (!)

(video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ge7i60GuNRg>)

The world I was raised in is one that presumes the innocence of white people in particular, and the helplessness of white women especially.

Another Experience - Culture of Whiteness & Another America

Another experience: I was waiting tables New York City, this was before I worked at that station in Berkeley. And, at the time, I realized we were not getting the \$2 dollars per hour the state of New York said by law we were entitled too. Now \$2 is not much. But it was the principle of the thing, to me. So I went to my co-workers, aghast.

I said, "This was completely unfair."

"Let's do something", I said.

"Let's get everyone together to take about this."

Then, my co-worked said "Dara, I should tell you my story... " Then, she told me she was an undocumented immigrant, and nearly so was everyone else

who worked there. She told me then about her own story to come to the US, how she had sewn her personal items (papers, etc) into her underwear and swam for her life across the Boarder. She said almost everyone there — the waitresses, the cooks, etc. were all undocumented, too.

She asked me not to go to management with my concerns, she said everyone would just loose their jobs.

I never quite realized that lacking citizenship could mean such clear vulnerability, and risk for ill treatment. A citizen of the US, who had never *experienced* being denied access to just treatment or recourse if I felt I was being treated unfairly, I was aghast that my employer could do this. My co-workers were upset too, but *unsurprised*... they said this was par for the course in the American they knew.

(Now, years later, and thankfully, I am very pleased to say that the restaurant workers in NY have banded together to pressure employers to fulfill their legal commitments to fair pay and fair treatment, dignity on the job!)

But the point is from these two examples, it took me a while to see that I was missing... a lot.

At the time, there was another America I had little to no ***direct knowledge*** of. Rather, I had knowledge born of walking in the world in a body which reads as white and woman. I hadn't really yet seen how my own conditioning had shaped me to see the world very differently from this point of view.

It's funny because at both of these points I had take anti-racist trainings, and learned about historical racism, but what I hadn't really delved into was a more diligent study of how whiteness had shaped *my own reality*. From that point on I started to more deliberately look into how whiteness shapes my own frame of reference and commit to ongoing exploration to understand it.

The thing is, to be white in America is to miss a lot. There is a lot we are just... missing. It's the stuff we just can't know directly, because it is so out of our direct experience as white folks... at least until we start to really, listen...

[So I read a book about how *Jews became White folks and what that says about Race in America*, I learned about the ways in which my own family of origin was shaped by a liminal or in-between place — Jewish — not quite white, until after World War II when Jewish folks received many GI benefits, and ascended into the white assimilated class at the same time African Americans were sometimes denied GI benefits.

My family *became* white. And today I walk through the world in a body which is white in the US, and it is only through listening closely again and again to my non-white friends, co-workers, congregants, and reading about non-white experiences in the US as a discipline that **I am continually made aware that to be white in America is to miss a lot** — to miss the realities of how it feels to hardly ever see someone who looks like you on the books and magazines, how the white person is a universal standard while someone who is not-white is still considered other, followed in stories, harassment, due to racial profiling, asked, when in all white spaces, to speak as a representative of one's race again and again, more at risk to be shot, to live in an area where the environment is so polluted it threatens your access to clean water and air, or a place called a food desert where there is little access to nourishing food. No one has ever come up and touched my hair — just to see what it feels like, and I can assume being treated more or less respectfully when I apply for car loans, or a house. The more I listen and learn the list goes on.]

Now, again I'll say — this is really hard to talk about, especially talking to other white people about. And, I think the reason why is because of this...

Hard to Identify It When We Swim In It

Said the seagull flying in the sky to 2 fish in the sea:

"How's the water there?" To which the fish replied, *"what water?"*

As a person who is white in the US it's hard to see the way in which whiteness and a culture of whiteness shapes our perception of what's normative in the US. When we start talking about whiteness it can get uncomfortable or confusing — sometimes folks get angry or defensive, feel awash in guilt or have all sorts of paralyzing feelings because they feel like someone is trying to make us feel guilty — and so people either get furious or shut down, or walk away, and there's a word for that... it's called **white fragility**.

I say this with a lot of compassion and also faith because — and this is my main point in the sermon — white fragility becomes part of the reason we sometimes fail to champion one another's humanity, even when our faith traditions and deepest values call us to honor the inherent worth and dignity of all people and the interconnected web of life, or call us to understand that we are all children of God and therefore all deserving equality.

Becoming aware of white fragility is one of the ways we can take responsibility for reshaping a US to be more just for everybody.

So I want to share with you a bit more about white fragility — so we know what it is, how it works.

White Fragility ... is a defensive stance in real conversations about race.

Researcher and educator Robin DiAngelo writes extensively on this:

White people in North America live in a social environment that protects and insulates them from race-based stress. This insulated environment of racial protection builds white expectations for racial comfort while at the same time lowering the ability to tolerate racial stress, leading to what I refer to as White Fragility. White Fragility is a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. These moves include the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation. These behaviors, in turn, function to reinstate white racial equilibrium.

For white people... identities rest on the idea of racism as about good or bad people, about moral or immoral singular acts, and if we're good, moral people we can't be racist – we don't engage in those acts. This is one of the most effective adaptations of racism over time—that we can think of racism as only something that individuals either are or are not "doing."

In large part, white fragility—the defensiveness, the fear of conflict—is rooted in this good/bad binary. If you call someone out, they think to themselves, "What you just said was that I am a bad person, and that is intolerable to me." It's a deep challenge to the core of our identity as good, moral people."

(Source: <http://libjournal.uncg.edu/ijcp/article/viewFile/249/116>)

One of the points this educator makes, is that we white people often confuse comfort with safety. We say "we don't feel safe", when what we mean is that "we don't feel comfortable".

So naming white fragility and how it operates is one way of challenging racism, and another way to talk about this especially in our worship, is to say that I already about the foundation of human unity — found in UUism, and the interconnected web of life, the understanding that we are all deeply connected — and the way King is motivated by this understanding as well — that we are connected more than we often talk about.

Dissolving the Barriers to Championing One Another's Humanity

There are barriers to witnessing and then standing of one another's humanity — and that is when we can't really see, know or imagine another's humanity — and racism gets in the way, **and whiteness for people who are not familiar with how white fragility can operate can often miss — miss a human being trying to share what is actually occurring, miss**

hundreds of people talking and sharing about what is actually occurring, miss the evidence showing the way in which the criminal justice system denies justice and locks out thousands of non-white people from democratic process — simply because we are afraid, afraid of having hard conversations that challenge what we think we know, afraid of the various emotions that come up, afraid of what we don't know and is very hard for us to understand.

So, this requires some **courage**, and some **faith** — **faith to stay in conversations even if we may become a bit uncomfortable, and it requires us to stay open to what we may not yet know, and that takes a great deal of humility.**

But I have a great faith — not in power of white fragility but in the power of moral clarity, born of my own faith tradition: that we are connected, all children of this universe, deserving of equity, compassion, decency and fairness.

If I take it seriously, my UU faith means I cannot be indifferent to exploitation or widespread oppression. I believe in our desire to live in wholeness, a world transformed by our care, our collective care and that brings, just as King calls for, a moral clarity about why it matters to press on, to care, to listen and stay in struggles for racial justice and not sit it out. To stay awake.

With courage we can break into new spaces in which we as individuals and communities are more whole than we thought, in which the true value of human life is honored and esteemed.

Calling out/calling in

You know, I learned something new that I'd like to share with you today. In countering oppressions sometimes people say they feel they have been "called out" — this can make people feel ashamed or put on the spot — but there's another way, another way to think about this which is calling one another in — instead of calling one another out on the floor, exposed, which heightens defensiveness, there's a way we can *call each other into a deeper connection*.

I do believe that is the power Dr. King. He both called out injustice as he saw it, he was not shy or afraid, but also **he called people into a dream, a dream that so many people still share, one rooted in the spiritual and religious knowledge of the power of love and power of interconnection. The human power that comes of a people who are not distorted by distortions but can see one clearly.**

That dream is where the hope lives. Thich Nhat Hanh talks about "peace in every step", I believe **hope** can be in our every step when we commit to dismantling the power of racism from within and understanding white fragility

— discovering the creative power that comes when we do not collapse in the face of learning about racial realities, rather we come together, called into participating in a better world, inspired by our living faith in love.

So, here are a few things that we white folks can do to counter white fragility:

Step 1: Opening to the idea that there might be something we just don't know.

Step 2: Listening, really listening to non-white people who right now are speaking powerfully and peacefully regarding what must change and why because their very lives are at risk. Sharing what it means to be non-white, and non-affluent— in the US.

Step 3: We can also read the luminaries in Black literature and intellectual history — DuBois, Langston Hughes, Angela Davis, Cornel West, Ronald Takaki, Cesar Chavez, and King (beyond the I have a dream speech!) people who talk about the sharing of non-white and Black experience in the US. And about how spirituality undergirds human life.

And we can believe. Believe what is written, what people are saying when they share again and again about the patterns of systemic harm and abuse, we can believe about the suffering.

And when we believe, then we can start to imagine the reality of this suffering, and when we do that we can stand for one another's humanity, understanding this as a moral imperative because our liberations are bound to one another's, together. And when we can do this, we all get free.

I'm almost done now....

I would love to just have shared with you the beautiful poetry and hard hitting moral commentary King has to share.

But, then I realized I would be giving into white fragility.

...King knew about white fragility long before it had a name.

In his day, King was often disappointed by folks who would have been "friends". He was, in fact, frequently disappointed by white moderates.

King wrote powerfully to his fellow white Christian clergy in ***Letter from a Birmingham Jail***, and in that letter he suggested that it was far too easy for

white Christian clergy to sit back, sing of ideas and concepts, and not to show up and stand up.

His language is unsparing:

First, I must confess that over the last few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Council-er or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate who is more devoted to "order" than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says "I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I can't agree with your methods of direct action;" who paternalistically feels he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by the myth of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait until a "more convenient season."

Shallow understanding from people of goodwill is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection.

...

In spite of my shattered dreams of the past, I came to Birmingham with the hope that the white religious leadership of this community would see the justice of our cause, and with deep moral concern, serve as the channel through which our just grievances would get to the power structure. I had hoped that each of you would understand. But again I have been disappointed. I have heard numerous religious leaders of the South call upon their worshippers to comply with a desegregation decision because it is the law, but I have longed to hear white ministers say, "follow this decree because integration is morally right and the Negro is your brother." In the midst of blatant injustices inflicted upon the Negro, I have watched white churches stand on the sideline and merely mouth pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities. In the midst of a mighty struggle to rid our nation of racial and economic injustice, I have heard so many ministers say, "those are social issues with which the gospel has no real concern.", and I have watched so many churches commit themselves to a completely other-worldly religion which made a strange distinction between body and soul, the sacred and the secular.

So here we are moving toward the exit of the twentieth century with a religious community largely adjusted to the status quo, standing as a tail-light behind other community agencies rather than a headlight leading men to higher levels of justice.

(Source: Martin Luther King, Jr. "Letter From The Birmingham Jail" April 16, 1963)

These words were a tough tonic. But they have led to many UU clergy, myself included, to take seriously the call of justice and to heed the moral and ethical imperatives that arise from our own faith traditions.

We then called to keep King's questions with us and stay awake — asking always: are we more devoted to "order" than to "justice"? How much are we willing to press past white fragility to the opportunities to deeper connection to ourselves and others?

King didn't see the 21st century. But here we are. May our faith be a headlight, pointing us to grow in capacity for courage and connection, commitment to stand for the world we dream about. We can join King in a legacy of love and caring, rooted in our faith's intrinsic understanding of human unity. Let us not fear fragility, but grow a fierce love of life, standing tall with others for the ceasing of needless suffering. Let us stay awake, and let us be called in, once again, to the dream.

Blessed Be and Amen.