

A Dangerous Vision?

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Earlier this week I saw a commercial which has stuck with me. The commercial was for a sale taking place at Sears. It began with a shot of a tall, well dressed African American man followed by big letters introducing the Martin Luther King Day event. The rest of the commercial featured images of appliances, apparel and other items that will be on sale. That was it. The commercial didn't even make an effort to link the reason for the sale with any of the reasons that people still honor the life and legacy of Dr. King. I suppose it might be better that the ad executives didn't even try to make a direct connection between the King holiday and shopping, for that would have been even more offensive. The message of the ad seemed to be nothing other than, if you have the day off on Monday for the King holiday, come shopping and save!

Truth be told, there are lots of people who make no special note of the King holiday, even if they don't go shopping. Perhaps it seems like its all been said before, that there is nothing new to learn. I don't think that is true, which is why I persist in offering a King Day sermon every year. Other years I have focused on the ongoing problem of racial injustice. Indeed that is the part of his message that most people lift up in the annual remembrances. I have a dream! Everybody remembers that part. I think it is worthwhile to consider the progress we've made toward the dream and assess the work that remains. But today I have a different focus in mind. Today I want to talk about the later years in King's ministry, the years when he began talking about his dream turning into a nightmare.ⁱ

This was after Montgomery and Birmingham and the March on Washington. This was after Selma and the passages of the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts. This was after the cities started to burn. Five days after Johnson signing the Voting Rights Bill into law, Watts erupted leaving whole city blocks burned to the ground. King was supposed to be enjoying a well earned vacation but he couldn't get the images out of his mind. He ended his vacation early to go speak to young black people who had participated in the riot. He was shocked to learn that many of them didn't know who he was and didn't care about his message of non-violence. He was even more shocked to realize that the political victories for which he had fought so long and so hard had no real bearing on the quality of life for poor black people living in America's inner cities. Those conversations marked the beginning of a turning point in his thinking.

With great clarity he came to see that political gains were nothing without economic justice, that poverty was not an unfortunate happenstance but a predictable consequence of the decisions made by those who wield economic power. King persuaded his supporters to take the civil rights movement North, targeting the city of Chicago. There he moved into a run down apartment in a slum on the South Side. After a short time living within that context he began to talk about the ghetto as a "system of internal colonialism."ⁱⁱ He concluded that the problem was primarily economic and began calling for a serious examination of socialism as an alternative to our capitalist economic system.

The more he learned about the extent and the impact of poverty in America's cities, the more King talked about America as a morally sick society. His supporters began to desert him and those who previously

lauded his achievements began to ridicule his ideas. Looking back King understood the efforts in the South in a light. [Those who came to march with us in Selma] took a stand for decency, but it was never really a stand for genuine equality . . . Genuine equality will cost the nation something, because it involves economic justice.”ⁱⁱⁱ

While King was sharpening this new direction in his thinking, he also began to grow increasingly concerned about the war in Vietnam. He first spoke out publicly against the war on a CBS television program in 1965. Many leaders, both white and black as well as officials in the Johnson administration pressured him to refrain from taking any further stands. For a time King quieted his criticism, but after reading an article about the children of Vietnam he realized he could be silent no longer. “I want you to know that my mind is made up,” he told his staff. “I backed up a little when I came out [against the war] in 1965. My name then wouldn’t have been written in a book called *Profiles in Courage*. But now I have decided. I will not be intimidated. I will not be harassed. I will not be silent and I will be heard.”^{iv} And that is precisely what he did. From that day forth he spoke frequently against the war in Vietnam linking it with the great evils of racism and poverty. These three together, racial injustice, poverty and war, formed the cross which King determined he would carry in his efforts to help create the Kingdom of God.

“In 1963.... in Washington D.C., I tried to talk to the nation about a dream that I had had, and I must confess... that not long after talking about that dream I started seeing it turn into a nightmare.... It was when four beautiful...Negro girls were murdered in a church in Birmingham, AL. I watched that dream turn into a nightmare as I moved through the ghettos of the nation and saw black brothers and sisters perishing on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity, and saw the nation doing nothing to grapple with the Negroes' problem of poverty.... I saw the dream turn into a nightmare as I watched the war in Vietnam escalating.... Yes, I am personally the victim of deferred dreams, of blasted hopes.”^v

But despite his disillusionment, King led on. He led on because he was convicted. He believed that God was on the side of the movements he led and that God had called him to be a prophet to America. As the pressure on him increased and the losses mounted, King remained strong. “You can't give up on life,” he told the people of Ebenezer. “If you lose hope,... you lose that courage to be, that quality that helps you go on in spite of it all.” King retained that courage, that hope, faith that allowed him to lead on even as he knew his own life was at risk. King knew that many saw his as a dangerous vision, but he tried up till his dying day to persuade people to see it otherwise, to see his God given vision of beloved community that could save all our souls.

We know the dream he lived and died for has not yet become a reality. Racial injustice persists in new forms for a new century. Levels of poverty in this country are actually higher than they were when King began his poor peoples campaign. And whenever war is not a reality in our time, it seems a near perpetual threat. So what shall we do? All of us just want to live our lives, I know. We want to have someone to love and goals we can realize. We want a nice place to live and good food to eat. We want a friendly community we can be at home in and people around us who we enjoy. We want little pleasures everyday and occasionally really big ones we can treasure in our memories. All of us just want our own version of the good life. That is what we are working so hard to achieve. And when we come to church on Sunday we want to hear a good word, something to lift us up a little bit as we dive again into another week.

Well here is the good news I have to share today my friends. There is something we can do. And it doesn't necessarily have to involve going out to march in the streets, though I believe there is a time for that. There is something else we can do, something less physically strenuous but potentially as demanding and exhilarating as the nearest protest march. Something we can do in the midst of our daily lives. We can ground ourselves ever more deeply in our religion. We can dive into our history. We can learn how to sustain a spiritual practice. We can take our faith seriously and let its influence shape the way we live our lives. This isn't to say that our way of being religious is better than any other way. There are many good paths. It is just to say that we can only walk one path at a time and if we have chosen to be here, this is the path we have chosen. By taking it seriously, we can let this faith help heal our own lives. By taking it seriously, we can let this faith help us heal our world.

Dr. King was grounded in the Christian faith. Raised in the black Baptist tradition and educated in the Northeastern bastions of liberal white Protestantism, his faith reflected both of those influences. His writing and his speeches are filled with the references to his religious vision. I want to lift out two elements of his faith that have powerful resonance for our own tradition.

The first is love. Now by love, you know, King didn't mean anything sentimental or romantic. He meant love as in agape – redemptive goodwill. "Love those who don't love you," he said. Love those whose ways are distasteful to you. Love every person because God loves every person."^{vi} For King, love was the means by which the end of justice was to be attained. It was also the goal of the struggle for freedom, which he believed would allow all people to realize the beloved community. He said in his Nobel acceptance speech that love is the supreme unifying principle of life, "the key that unlocks the door which leads to ultimate reality."

That element of his faith was intertwined with his belief in interdependence. King spoke frequently about the "inescapable network of mutuality" in which we find ourselves. "What affects one directly, affects all indirectly," he said. That doesn't sound like radical speech, but it was at the time. It may still be. In his Nobel Lecture, King spoke of the "great world house" in which we all have to learn to live together. We still haven't learned.

Our faith can teach us and can help us lead the way for all who are willing to follow. I lifted out these two elements of King's theology because they resonate so clearly with us today. They are the bookends of a Unitarian Universalist faith as expressed in our seven principles. The first calls us to love, though we use different words. Today we talk about affirming the inherent worth and dignity of every person. An earlier Universalist faith statement from the 1930's avowed the "supreme worth of every human personality." And that statement was a reflection of 19th century Universalists' central claim that God is love and that no one, no matter how hard their heart or how heinous their crime, no one is ever permanently beyond the hope of being reconciled to God's love. That is why Universalists have a long record of opposing the death penalty and advocating for prisons to be a place of rehabilitation and not just punishment. This is why Unitarian Universalists today have so eagerly embraced the Standing on the Side of Love campaign. Like the ones who have gone before us, and like Dr. King, we still believe that hate can be transformed by the redemptive power of love. That is our first principle.

Our last principle puts all the others in their proper place. King spoke of an inescapable network of mutuality. We speak of an interconnected web of all existence. Earlier we sang together about this

element of our faith. “Our world is one world. What touches one affects us all.” And not just us, but everything. For everything is ultimately connected. This is the vision of God that Shug discovers when she realizes she can no longer accept the image of a white father God in the sky. God is in everyone and everything and thus everything is connected. This understanding of interdependence is not unique to us. Many religious traditions affirm an underlying unity. “We did not weave the web of life,” wrote Chief Seattle, “we are merely strands in it. Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves.” We hear it often enough perhaps it is hard to appreciate how radical this claim is. Everything is connected. That means that every single choice we make about how we are going to live our lives has implications for other people and the planet. And I do mean every choice, from what and how much we eat, to where we will go and how we will get there, to what we will do with our waste and how we will get our energy. Every choice we make has implications. How will we live? That is a question which requires serious consideration.

Racial injustice is alive and well. Poverty persists. Militarism endures. The exploitation of the earth continues. The dream is still deferred. Dr. King lived his life trying to make it a reality. The work now is ours. The work does not require that we become revolutionaries. It does require that we make little choices that can help bend the arc of the universe toward justice for people and the planet. Little choices like deciding to speak up and say we don't appreciate it when we hear someone make a racist remark. Little choices like deciding to learn about the forces that put and keep people in poverty rather than buying into the stereotypes. Little choices like teaching our kids how to resolve conflicts with peaceful means. Little choices like turning out to a meeting to learn about how fracking is affecting our water supply. Little choices that involve little trade offs in the ways we spend our time and money. Little choices that can ripple out and inspire other little choices. Little choices that add up over time into something larger. Little choices that sometimes lead us to bigger choices.

How will we live? Paying attention and being mindful is hard work. It is easy to become cynical, jaded, apathetic. Our religious tradition can help us remain open, committed, faithful and hopeful, even and especially when the work seems too hard. With love as our guide and reverence as our touchstone, we can help heal the world.

ⁱ A wonderful resource which I used extensively for this sermon is by James Cone. *Martin and Malcolm and America: A Dream or a Nightmare*. (New York: Orbis Books, 2001).

ⁱⁱ Cone, James. *Martin and Malcolm and America: A Dream or a Nightmare*. (New York: Orbis Books, 2001), 223.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid, 233.

^{iv} Ibid, 237.

^v Ibid, 213.

^{vi} Ibid, 130.