

REMEMBERING THE REV. DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

For several years, while Barack Obama was President, it was easier to get through MLK day, almost as if his Dream had actually been fulfilled. Over the last couple of years, it has been much harder to watch rampant Racism, Sexism, Heterosexism, Ableism, and divisions of wealth and power and anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim sentiments reassert themselves with a vengeance. In fact, it has often felt in the last 2 years that the anger and even hatred between groups and parties has increased to levels not seen since the 1950s and 60s. As significant parts of the Federal Government remain shut down over Trump's Tantrum and Mitch's Machinations over the wall it is particularly discouraging to recall the respectful grace and competence that the Obamas brought to the White House. Two years ago in my MLK sermon, I shared part of Obama's final speech as President, and even after the election of Trump it offered such hope and promise for the future of our nation. This year, even after the Democratic wins in the House in the Mid-Terms, we face a long uphill battle to first stop and eventually undo the damage that Donald Trump and his followers have done to our nation. In the troubling context of this moment in history, I invite us to remember the visionary prophet, The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who would have been 90 this year, and the Dream that he shared with America more than 5 decades ago.

Slavery was outlawed by Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation and the 13th and 14th Amendments to the U.S. Constitution affirmed that decision and went on to insure that former slaves and their offspring would be counted full citizens of the United States. Many of those steps toward equality were countered by Jim Crow laws and the doctrine of separate but equal, which took almost another century to overturn. The Voting Rights Act marked further progress in 1965 in the upheaval after the Selma March, violence around which claimed the lives of Unitarian Minister James Reeb and Unitarian laywoman Viola Liuzzo who had both come South to support the demonstrations.

The Racism and Classism of recent times has sometimes seemed more subtle, appearing in efforts to insure that voters provide often hard to obtain state issued photo identification to insure that the ‘widespread cases of voter fraud’ feared by Republicans which have actually involved as many as a handful of individuals in some states not be encouraged. The recent gerrymandering of voting districts by Republicans to limit the impact of minorities has been far more effective than that attempted previously by either party. The efforts to eliminate equal opportunity programs through countersuits by whites alleging discrimination have also been quite successful even in California. And even though some blacks and other minorities have become quite successful in business, medicine, and politics, few could argue that racism or classism have been eliminated. Whites, and especially white males continue to be wealthier and better paid than blacks and most other minorities.

The lifework and assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. shaped the lives of those of us alive in the 1960s and those born since. Those of us who have been involved in civil rights marches, demonstrations, and peace work owe a great debt to Dr. King. His courage, determination, commitment to non-violent change, and his eloquent pleas for justice changed the world and set a course of human progress that continues today. Younger generations have also benefited from the work of Dr. King, but his memory is fading and the monument constructed a few years ago in Washington is a meager tribute to a great man.

The best tribute to Dr. King would be an inclusive, accepting, color-blind society where each person is valued and encouraged to succeed. We certainly aren’t there yet. We have made progress, but we have a long way yet to go. Sometimes it even seems as though we are going the wrong way, but younger generations are more accepting of people who are different, and less concerned about the color of anyone’s skin or their sexual orientation. Times are changing with the generations, but the journey continues.

I like to remember Dr. King through his own words, the prophet calling for justice, peace, and civil rights! In December of 1956, Dr. King told the 1st Annual Institute on Non-Violence and Social Change in Montgomery, that:

“We must blot out the hate and injustice of the old age with the love and justice of the new. This is why I believe so firmly in nonviolence. Violence never solves problems. It only creates new and more complicated ones. If we succumb to the temptation of using violence in our struggle for justice, unborn generations will be the recipients of a long and desolate night of bitterness, and our chief legacy to the future will be an endless reign of meaningless chaos.”

(from King’s address before the First Annual Institute on Non-Violence and Social Change, Montgomery Alabama, December 1956, in I Have A Dream, ed. James M. Washington, p.21)

In June 1957, in an address at UC Berkeley, King said:

“...there are some things within our social order to which I am proud to be maladjusted and to which I call upon you to be maladjusted. I never intend to adjust myself to segregation and discrimination. I never intend to adjust myself to mob rule. I never intend to adjust myself to the tragic effects of the methods of physical violence and to tragic militarism. I call upon you to be maladjusted to such things.”

(address at UC Berkeley, June 4, 1957, in I Have A Dream, ed. James M. Washington, p.33)

In the 1963 Book, *Why We Can’t Wait*, King asked:

“Of what advantage is it to the Negro to establish that he can be served in integrated restaurants, or accommodated in integrated hotels, if he is bound to the kind of financial servitude which will not allow him to take a vacation or even to take his wife out to dine? Negroes must not only have the right to go into any establishment open to the public, but they must also be absorbed into our economic system in such a manner that they can afford to exercise that right.” (*Why We Can’t Wait*, p. 136)

From the Birmingham jail in April 1963, King wrote white religious leaders who were counseling patience and advising that he wait for change:

“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable web of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial “outside agitator” idea. Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere within its bounds.” (p. 77)

From 1955 to 1968, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was at the front of the civil rights movement. During those years, he alone insured that change came with a minimum of violence from blacks. King powerfully articulated the reasons that the hypocrisy of segregation must end before the United States could live up to the values of liberty and equality. King also spoke against the Vietnam War and in 1966 agreed to serve as co-chair of Clergy and Laity Concerned about Vietnam.

At a meeting of Clergy and Laity Concerned at the Riverside Church in New York City in April of 1967, Dr. King said:

...a few years ago...it seemed as if there was a real promise of hope for the poor—both black and white—through the poverty program...Then came the buildup in Vietnam and I watched the program broken and eviscerated as if it were some idle political plaything of a society gone mad on war, and I knew that America would never invest the necessary funds or energies in rehabilitation of its poor so long as adventures like Vietnam continued to draw men and skills and money like some demonic destructive suction tube. So I was increasingly compelled to see the war as an enemy of the poor and to attack it as such.

Perhaps the more tragic recognition of reality took place when it became clear to me that the war was doing far more than devastating the hopes of the poor at home. It was sending their sons and their brothers and their husbands to fight and to die in extraordinarily high proportions relative to the rest of the population. We were taking the black young men who had been crippled by our society and sending them eight thousand miles away to guarantee liberties in Southeast Asia which they had not found in southwest Georgia and East Harlem.

Men of color, and increasingly women of color still tend to play a disproportionately large role in the military. The wars of the last several years have cost an obscene amount of money and an unacceptable number of lives. A fraction of that money could have fed everyone on the globe and provided health care for all Americans.

In comments that also seem especially relevant in a world of globalization, dominated by mega multi-national corporations, endowed with corporate personhood, King went on to say:

Increasingly, by choice or by accident, this is the role our nation has taken—the role of those who make peaceful revolution impossible by refusing to give up the privileges and the pleasures that come from the immense profits of overseas investment.

I am convinced that if we are to get on the right side of the world revolution, we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin the shift from a “thing oriented” society to a “person oriented” society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered.

A true revolution of values will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies...A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death...

We must move past indecision to action. We must find new ways to speak for peace in Vietnam and justice throughout the developing world—a world that borders on our doors. If we do not act we shall surely be dragged down the long dark and shameful corridors of time reserved for those who possess power without compassion, might without morality, and strength without sight.

(from Dr. King's address to Clergy and Laity Concerned at the Riverside Church in New York City on April 4, 1967 in I Have A Dream, ed. James M. Washington, pp. 137-151)

Martin Luther King, Jr. was a visionary leader, a modern prophet calling for justice. He was committed to the highest values of honor, justice, equality, and acceptance. He was a spiritual and religious man, finding comfort, encouragement, and empowerment in the life and teachings of Jesus. He was also a wise and worldly man, seeing that equality must not put blacks over whites, but rather bring all persons to the status of equals. Dr. King's efforts brought our nation to a new place.

Five decades after his death, Dr King remains the theologian of civil justice, **the great hero of several generations of liberal, progressive, and moderate** religious practitioners. Dr. King was an agent for change in a turbulent and challenging time. If he had lived the changes might have gone further. Unfortunately, there was no one else who could so ably give language and energy to the process of change. Several black leaders have had an impact, but none have accomplished so much so quickly.

While accepting the Nobel Peace Prize in Dec. 1964, Oslo, Norway, King said:

Civilization and violence are antithetical concepts. Negroes of the United States, following the people of India, have demonstrated that nonviolence is not sterile passivity, but a powerful moral force which makes for social transformation. Sooner or later, all the peoples of the world will have to discover a way to live together in peace, and thereby transform this pending cosmic elegy into a creative psalm of brotherhood. If this is to be achieved, man must evolve for all human conflict a method which rejects revenge, aggression, and retaliation. The foundation of such a method is love.

This weekend as we once again remember the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., I am discouraged by the lack of progress our nation has made in the direction of recognizing *the inherent worth and dignity of every person; justice, equity and compassion in human relations; and the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all*; our 1st, 2nd and 6th UU Principles. I am discouraged that so many of our national resources, both material and human, continue to be wasted. I am discouraged that King's prophetic words seem to have been forgotten.

In his letter from the Birmingham jail, Dr. King said: *"I must make 2 honest confessions to you.... 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 Citizens Councilor 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" ... "Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection."* (from Letter from a Birmingham Jail, April 16, 1963, in I Have A Dream, ed. James M. Washington, p.91)

The challenge of bringing justice across racial and class lines remains daunting today. Issues including adequate health coverage for all, voter protections for all citizens, fair taxation, equal educational opportunities, a living wage, a fair and welcoming immigration system, and an adequate welfare safety net remain problematic. Much of our social safety net has been dismantled in recent decades, and few if any opportunities have been gained. The inequalities in our society remain pandemic. The present and future remain in our hands and that of younger generations. Dr. King remains an important symbol of what love and nonviolent direct action can accomplish. May we remember his life through our commitment and our actions. By joining our hands together may we renew our commitment today to make this nation a land of justice, freedom, and compassion!

Shalom, Salam, Blessed Be, Namaste, and Amen!