

Martin Luther King and the Etiquette of Protest

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Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Las Vegas

Sunday, January 18, 2015

Time for All Ages

Yertle the Turtle by Dr. Seuss

Reading

from "The Other America"

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Speech to Grosse Pointe High School March 14, 1968

<http://www.gphistorical.org/mlk/mlkspeech/>

But let me say that it has been my experience in these years that I've been in the struggle for justice, that things just don't happen until the issue is dramatized in a massive direct-action way.

I never will forget when we came through Washington in 1964, in December coming from Oslo. I stopped by to see President Johnson. We talked about a lot of things and we finally got to the point of talking about voting rights. The President was concerned about voting, but he said Martin, I can't get this through in this session of Congress. We can't get a voting rights bill, he said because there are two or three other things that I feel that we've got to get through and they're going to benefit negroes as much as anything. One was the education bill and something else. And then he went on to say that if I push a voting rights bill now, I'll lose the support of seven congressmen that I sorely need for the particular things that I had and we just can't get it. Well, I went on to say to the President that I felt that we had to do something about it and two weeks later we started a movement in Selma, Alabama. We started dramatizing the issue of the denial of the right to vote and I submit to you that three months later as a result of that Selma movement, the same President who said to me that we could not get a voting rights bill in that session of Congress was on the television singing through a speaking voice "we shall overcome" and calling for the passage of a voting rights bill and I could go on and on to show. . .and we did get a voting rights bill in that session of Congress. Now, I could go on to give many other examples to show that it just doesn't come about without pressure and this is what we plan to do in Washington. We aren't planning to close down Washington, we aren't planning to close down Congress. This isn't anywhere in our plans. We are planning to dramatize the issue to the point that poor people in this nation will have to be seen and will not be invisible.

Sermon

We come, once again, to the time in our year when we honor the life and work and vision of the Revered Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr. Yearly, we stop to take the time and make the effort to focus our attention on this radical thinker, this devoutly religious man whose thinking and faith called him out of his pulpit and into the streets, into the work of changing the world for the better, the work of making this country truly reflect and live up to the promise spoken that it claimed as its birthright — freedom and justice for all.

And there are many, many ways to work for change — to have an effect on the systems of our our society so that more justice and equity are a reality. We can do work to influence the legislative process, like we did around human trafficking last year, lobbying to change unjust laws or create new ones to ensure the health of the community. We can engage in one-on-one conversations and education around issues of importance. We do this each and every time we speak up with neighbors and friends and family about issues that bring us grief or anger or hope. Every time we say, “Actually, I disagree with you,” or “I think it’s important to talk about this.” Every time we tell our story, or listen to the story of someone else. We can choose to march in planned marches, in large and small acts of protest. Whether we participate in a well planned march with permits and police protection or we participate in acts of civil disobedience, breaking unjust laws or challenging others to pay attention by using our bodies and voices as symbols of resistance.

This year, as we approach the fiftieth anniversary of the events taking place in Selma, Alabama, we’re going to focus on change a little differently — we’re going to ponder how we think about proper behavior and the response to these actions of civil disobedience. The history of the events in around Selma half a century ago play a large part in our Unitarian Universalist history — our story of who we are and what we stand for — and we played a large role there as well. If you’ve seen the film *Selma*, you saw actors playing two Unitarian Universalists — James Reeb and Viola Liuzzo — whose lives and deaths became important in the movement for civil rights. In March, on the anniversary of the Selma to Montgomery march, we’ll explore these events and our part in them in more detail. As we move toward that date, I encourage you to read this book, *The Selma Awakening: How the Civil Rights Movement Tested and Changed Unitarian Universalism*, by my colleague Mark Morrision-Reed. Before that Sunday service, I’ll host a gathering where we can discuss the book and our responses to this crucial part of our history.

We are in a time of new protest. In Boston and Ferguson and New York and Berkeley and Minneapolis protesters and allies are taking to the streets and the malls and the highways to protest the injustices of our justice system, the injustices of the society we live in and benefit from in various ways. And so, today, we take a step back from the specific events of King’s civil rights movement and ponder protest and movement work in general. There are times when we have the space and focus to plan and lay out strategy for change — and there are times when we feel called to say that there is something broken in the world and we are done with being polite about it. There are times when caution is crucial and times when action is what we are called to. Sometimes we don’t agree with even our allies on the best course of action. Students of history will know that within the Civil Rights

movement there was often disagreement amongst leaders and groups about how to move forward. And outside the movement itself, there was disagreement among African Americans about the the best and most appropriate actions toward change. The differences between King and Malcolm X in their approaches were very clear.

King and his organizations also often disagreed with supporters and collaborators outside the movement. Think back to that conversation that King had with President Johnson about the best way forward:

And then he went on to say that if I push a voting rights bill now, I'll lose the support of seven congressmen that I sorely need for the particular things that I had and we just can't get it. Well, I went on to say to the President that I felt that we had to do something about it and two weeks later we started a movement in Selma, Alabama. We started dramatizing the issue of the denial of the right to vote and I submit to you that three months later as a result of that Selma movement, the same President who said to me that we could not get a voting rights bill in that session of Congress was on the television singing through a speaking voice "we shall overcome" and calling for the passage of a voting rights bill and I could go on and on to show.¹

I think that what's happening in our country now is a bursting forth of a demand for change. A demand that we all see what is the reality of life — the realities of the education system, the realities of the prison system, the realities of the justice system — for people of color and especially for our neighbors who are black. Voices and bodies put on the line demanding that we wake up and change. Whether it is holding a mass rally in the middle of the Mall of America in Minneapolis on Black Friday or lying down on the freeway in Boston for four and a half hours just this week, we are seeing and hearing cries for justice in ways that we haven't in a long time.

And these cries are being made in some disruptive ways. Blocking traffic on a major freeway for four hours causes more than minor inconveniences. Shutting down a shopping center on the busiest shopping day of the year has direct impact on merchants and employees. I will come to Ferguson a little later. And the reaction to these actions from some circles was swift and condemnatory. "How dare they?" "Don't they realize they're causing x to happen?" and worse.

Some of you, over the weeks since Ferguson have asked me to think and speak about these reactions and what they might mean for us as religious liberals committed to the work of social justice and building the beloved community. And so I share with you my responses in the hopes that my pondering will challenge you to find your own — and share them with each other in community and conversation.

¹ MLK - March 14, 1968 - "The Other America" - speech to Grosse Pointe High School - found at <http://www.gphistorical.org/mlk/mlkspeech/>

My initial reaction to these protests has been to wonder — not for the first time — about the effect that 24-hour media has had on public discourse. When you as a pundit or reporter or public intellectual are forced to have a reaction — and a public one — because the camera is always on, how do you decide what to say and how to say it? Does there always need to be an immediate response? Do you have the time to ponder and assess what is going on and what a meaningful and responsible response would be? I don't honestly think that you do have the time or the focus when there is such demand for immediate speech. I struggle with this need as a minister as well. While I don't have the camera on me all the time, I feel called often to respond more quickly that allows me for meaningful pondering and discernment. Sometimes I give in to the call to respond quickly and sometimes I am afforded — or I simply take — the time to find understanding before I speak. I hope that the latter is more often the case. Facebook and other social media also demand attention and response even from those of us who aren't professionally called to a response.

Another reaction I have had is to remember my the experience of being in college and watching and hearing about the angry protests of a group calling themselves ACT-UP — the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power. Formed in 1987 this group was angry and fed up with the government's lack of response to the continuing AIDS epidemic and restrictive access to life-saving medications, the Catholic Church's blocking and lobbying against safe-sex education, and the mainstream gay activist community's "impotent response" to the crises at hand.

ACT-UP staged protests on Wall Street, at the FDA, against *Cosmopolitan Magazine*, and the Centers for Disease Control. Most memorable to me was the protest which disrupted mass at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City.

All of these protests were critiqued in the media and in activist circles for being stupid and wrongheaded, disruptive and disrespectful. And I do have to confess that I shared these critiques. I, too, was confused and offended by the actions of these radical activists. But, my feelings about ACT-UP shifted as I got older and grew to know people who had lost everyone they loved to HIV and AIDS — one after another. Profound grief and deep anger at the indifference and disdain of society for their dying neighbors and kin.

My third response to the reactions to these protests bring Ferguson into the conversation. The response to the riots in Ferguson included the same kinds of responses as I mentioned to the other protests before. But also included the quoting of MLK himself — and his deep commitment to non-violent means of protest — to dismiss and condemn the events in Ferguson. "And I would be the first to say," King said, "that I am still committed to militant, powerful, massive, non-violence as the most potent weapon in grappling with the problem from a direct action point of view."

Those less critical of the riot also quoted King's words, specifically his statement that a "riot is the language of the unheard."² Interestingly, both of these statements come from the same speech, the same speech I read from in our reading today. In fact, they both come from the same paragraph. Here it is in full:

Now I wanted to say something about the fact that we have lived over these last two or three summers with agony and we have seen our cities going up in flames. And I would be the first to say that I am still committed to militant, powerful, massive, non-violence as the most potent weapon in grappling with the problem from a direct action point of view. I'm absolutely convinced that a riot merely intensifies the fears of the white community while relieving the guilt. And I feel that we must always work with an effective, powerful weapon and method that brings about tangible results. But it is not enough for me to stand before you tonight and condemn riots. It would be morally irresponsible for me to do that without, at the same time, condemning the contingent, intolerable conditions that exist in our society. These conditions are the things that cause individuals to feel that they have no other alternative than to engage in violent rebellions to get attention. And I must say tonight that a riot is the language of the unheard.

I don't stand in front of you this morning asking for your blanket acceptance of these acts of civil disobedience or support for violent rioting. You will come to your own conclusions about the effectiveness and appropriateness of these acts — I hope inspired and supported by your own deep convictions and commitment to the beloved community. What really worries me, though, is that we not use our distaste at these specific actions to relieve us of the responsibility to hear and grapple with the underlying reasons for these outcries of protest however they are expressed, to deal with the real needs of the community or the person in front of us.

People who feel marginalized or unheard experience this practice of deflecting as a well-known tactic for denying the reality of their lived experience. "If you weren't so angry I might respond better." "How do you expect me to see what you see when you say it so rudely." "People aren't going to listen if you disrupt their lives or make them uncomfortable!"

And what are we not seeing when we allow ourselves to be distracted by deflection? What are we avoiding?

Anger. And Grief.

Anger at a system that over and over again has created a reality in which black lives matter less than other lives. Anger at a system in which black men are killed by law enforcement at a catastrophic rate usually with little or no consequences or serious investigation. Anger at a society that believes that it is OK for children of color to be suspended at three times

² MLK - March 14, 1968 - "The Other America" - speech to Grosse Pointe High School - found at <http://www.gphistorical.org/mlk/mlkspeech/>

the rate of their white colleagues — beginning in preschool.³ Anger at a culture that creates the situation in which transgender women of color make up the majority of victims of anti-LGBT homicides.⁴

And when these issues are brought up — politely or angrily — when someone says “Black Lives Matter” and the response is to critique tone of voice or method of protest — or to insist that we should be saying “All Lives Matter” — We are ignoring the fear and exhaustion and anger of a community which is shown repeatedly that we actually don’t think that their lives DO matter.

And we are ignoring and avoiding the grief of communities which are too used to burying their dead without answers or watching their children diminish or having to teach their children how to avoid getting harassed or killed while they walk home from school.

I do not stand in front of you today and condone violence or looting. It saddens me and angers me and worries me. I do not stand in front of you today and say to you that anything goes if one is fighting for a worthy, justice-demanding cause.

I am standing in front of you today and saying, before you — before I — before we raise our voices in condemnation of tone of voice or singular focus or disruption of daily life or even violence we must remember our commitment to justice and the responsible search for truth and meaning and ask ourselves “Why is this happening?” “Where is this anger and grief coming from?” “What am I not seeing?”

On that day in March of 1968, King began the conclusion of his speech with these words:

“Let me say finally, that in the midst of the hollering and in the midst of the discourtesy tonight, we got to come to see that however much we dislike it, the destinies of white and black America are tied together. ... And somehow, we must all learn to live together as brothers in this country or we're all going to perish together as fools. Our destinies are tied together.”

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., gave his life — both the living of it and the sacrifice of it — for the cause of mutual justice and peace and freedom for all. He wrote and preached and acted for the birthing of the beloved community here in this country and in our lives. On this day when we honor his memory may we also recommit — not just today, but every day of our lives — to the vision he shared through his words and deeds: the creation of a beloved community of justice, peace, and hope here in this place — where we see and hear each other deeply and work together for the thriving of life and for the triumph of love, “the only creative, redemptive, transforming power in the universe.”

³ <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/she-the-people/wp/2014/03/21/study-black-girls-suspended-at-higher-rates-than-most-boys/> + http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/06/education/black-students-face-more-harsh-discipline-data-shows.html?_r=0

⁴ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/addison-rose-vincent/state-of-emergency-for-tr_b_5792722.html