

**Icons and Agitators:  
Maladjustment to the Way Things Are**

**Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Sunday**

Rev. Roger Jones, Acting Senior Minister  
Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento  
January 19, 2014

Hymns: #116, I'm on My Way; #155, Circle Round  
for Freedom; #1018, Come and Go With Me

Choir: Hush! Somebody's Callin' My Name

Piano:

*Prelude:* Lift Every Voice and Sing.

*Meditation:* Precious Lord, Take My Hand

*Offertory:* Amazing Grace (My Chains Are  
Gone)

*Postlude:* It is Well with My Soul

Sermon

What fascinates me about the study of history is learning how the social advancements we consider to be normal, to be “the way things are,” did not come about easily. To people who lived in the past, the achievements of equality and fairness that we take for granted were not assured or guaranteed. Indeed, every step toward equality involved struggle and upheaval.

Should women have the right to vote and run for office? Of course! Few in public life would now say that's a debatable question. But until 1920, the road toward voting equality was messy and full of setbacks. Some states allowed voting, others did not. After the Senate approved the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the United States Constitution, and enough states ratified that amendment, voting equality became the way things are. Twenty-five senators had voted no, but history moved on, passing them by. Many women who had begun the struggle in the 1800s were dead by then. They had given themselves to a cause that would outlive them. Success was not predictable or guaranteed.

Likewise, ending American slavery was not predictable or guaranteed. Nor were any of the gains of the Civil Rights Movement, of which Martin Luther King Jr. was the most prominent and

inspiring leader. But after we expand the circles of opportunity and freedom, it becomes easy to talk as if justice was obvious and success inevitable.

It is tempting to frame the history of a struggle for freedom in sweet words and warm images. We can use the words of daring women and men not to urge us to achieve more, but merely to comfort ourselves, to make ourselves comfortable with the status quo.

We can use the words of heroic people only to honor them, while we avoid hearing them.

Martin Luther King worked against racism and segregation. But he also preached against militarism and economic inequality. According to scholar Michael Eric Dyson, in the later years of his brief life Dr. King's views grew more radical. Upsetting his colleagues and staff, Dr. King became one of the first high-profile leaders in America to oppose the American military involvement in Vietnam. King highlighted the hypocrisy of suppressing freedoms in the name of protecting freedom. We could not defend freedom by supporting rule by generals in Southeast Asia, he said.

Many politicians and the press ridiculed him for expressing his opinions about the war. They questioned the ability of a southern black Baptist preacher to analyze international affairs (according to Dyson). However, King had a Ph.D. from Boston University. He had won the Nobel Peace Prize. The historian Taylor Branch writes that King was the “the moral voice of America,” more than any office holder or elected leader.<sup>i</sup> His opinions mattered, and he felt compelled to speak out.

His colleagues didn't want his involvement with another controversy to dilute and distract from civil rights. They feared he would alienate the Congress and President Lyndon Johnson, who had been a forceful supporter of the civil rights agenda. Indeed, Johnson did feel betrayed by King's opposition to the war, according to Dyson.<sup>ii</sup>

King's response to his critics was this: “I have worked too long now and too hard to get rid of segregation in public accommodations to turn back to the point of segregating my moral concern.” By articulating the linkages among types of injustice and oppression, he raised our discomfort, raised our national tension.

This was Dr. King's gift and his role as a leader. He could orchestrate a mix of tension and inspiration, the right blend of discomfort and conciliation. To change, America needed challenge. This took standing up and sticking his neck out. That is a challenge that many of us can recall having in our own lives from time to time. Dr. King did it for all our lives, for our common life and the common good. Many times, Dr. King said: "If a man hasn't discovered something that he will die for, he isn't fit to live." Such words, and his commitment to them, unsettle my comfort with the way things are.

Since his assassination in 1968, Dr. King has been turned from a strategist and an agitator into an icon. Leaders from all across the political spectrum and the range of religions now salute Martin Luther King. It's easier to honor someone who's dead. You don't have to listen to him for real. Leaders from across the spectrum make their own assertions about what Dr. King wanted for our society and what he would want. This is what you can do with icons. With real people who carry out real movements for change, you have to wrestle. They make us uncomfortable. They unsettle our adjustment to the way things are.

We may be comfortable imagining Dr. King and his challenges to the America of 50 years ago, but what would his challenges be for us today? What tension and what inspiration would he bring to us?

In King's last years, he addressed poverty and economic injustice. He launched the Poor People's Campaign and argued for another March on Washington, like the one in the summer of 1963, but one lifting up economic injustice and poverty. Men on King's staff opposed this campaign—and they were all men on his staff. They feared it would be a disaster, generating only the resistance of Congress and the anger of President Johnson.

According to Michael Eric Dyson, in 1966, King admitted that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 had failed to improve the condition of poor blacks. He said that progress had been "limited mainly to the Negro middle-class" (Dyson, 87). With his Poor People's Campaign, King endeavored to focus on the need to

lift *all* people out of degrading poverty, including all black people.

He saw people as connected, no matter our identity and life circumstances. "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere" is how he said it. "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny."

In private, Dr. King told colleagues that he believed America must move toward democratic socialism. However, in public he did not use the term *socialism*. The FBI under J. Edgar Hoover had waged a campaign to discredit the movement by smearing Dr. King as a Communist sympathizer.

King did not have Communist sympathies or alliances. Communist regimes were anti-democratic, and Communist theory was anti-religious. King said: "I didn't get my inspiration from Karl Marx. I got it from a man named Jesus." He said that Jesus was "anointed to heal the broken hearted" and to deal with the problems of the poor, and those in captivity" (Dyson, 130). In this spirit, King called for job creation programs, for full employment and for a guaranteed minimum income.

Dr. King said that full-time work should yield a person enough money to support a family. In the years since 1980, for most of this nation's people, income and wealth have stagnated, even shrunk when you consider the eroding effects of inflation. Wealth has been concentrated more and more in the hands of a smaller percentage of people at the very top. Two years ago, the Occupy Wall Street Movement brought to public attention the idea of the 99% and the 1%. At the top, the 1%, are those who have gained by the shifting structures of economic policy, international trade agreements, tax breaks, and lax regulation in the financial services industry.<sup>iii</sup>

Meanwhile, for a growing mass of people, it has become harder to support a family on full-time work, even if two parents work full-time.

If Dr. King were alive right now, perhaps he would embrace campaigns for better funding of public schools and a restoration in financial aid for college. Perhaps he would lead campaigns for a single-payer health care system available to all and for a higher minimum wage. In pursuit of economic

fairness, he might advocate for regulation of the financial services industry, and a reform of crop subsidies to move away from industrial agriculture and toward smaller, sustainable farms. Perhaps he *would* speak for these goals, but I can't be sure.

Such goals have come to seem less radical in these times, as ordinary Americans have grown more desperate, and as more working people feel the loss of economic security, and the loss of food security. I am sure Dr. King would have made us uncomfortable. He would have turned up the tension that political leaders feel about these issues. Maybe he would call for more subsidized housing for low-income families and more mental health care for the lost souls wandering and sleeping on the streets. He said: "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny."

If he were speaking to most of us right now, *would he* ask us if we need all the square footage many of us enjoy in our homes? Would he challenge us for having a car of our own and the petroleum to run it, given what oil extraction does to local and global environments, not to mention to indigenous tribal communities who live near oil wells? Would he ask us if we couldn't still do okay financially without investing in portfolios that grow by pushing down worker's wages and benefits, and by tearing down rain forests for beef grazing?

In India, Martin Luther King met with Mohandas K. Gandhi, to learn about the "soul force" of nonviolent resistance, which had been a tool of the Indian Freedom Struggle. King saw dissent and rivalries among Gandhi's inner circle, something he would find among his own leaders and staff members at home. And he saw the massive poverty of people sleeping on the streets in Calcutta, hungry children and begging parents and elders.

Ten years ago I traveled in India, during a sabbatical for five weeks. In cities around the country, I saw masses of barely housed and homeless and hungry people. Many were begging, but some only were sitting in the heat, exhausted. I even saw some of them weeping. What came to my mind on my journey was the idea that most Indians seemed to accept this as normal, inevitable, the way things are. There will always be destitute people

around you. Your task is to learn how to refuse the destitute, walk around them, ignore them. The task of one who is not hurting in that way is to do anything except ask why such hurt persists. If this is the way things are, you need not imagine how to change the system or why. I could be wrong about Indian social attitudes—I bet I am wrong—but it made me think about *us*.

I see people begging for money at street intersections around here, holding cardboard signs. I see more of them at more corners than I did just a year ago.

In thinking about India, I'm thinking about the person I saw Friday night at my apartment building in a sleeping bag, lying in the carport by the dumpster. I'm doubtful that a handout of money would change such a situation. But I wonder how normal we have let it become that so many people live on the street. Is this now the way things are? Is the choice now merely whether to give a dollar, or smile, or look the other way?

Is the question no longer, how did we let this happen? Is the question now just whether to call the cops or the landlord so the person can be roused from beside our dumpster, and find another dumpster to sleep near?

In May of 1966, Dr. King addressed the ministers and lay delegates of the General Assembly of Unitarian Universalist Association, meeting in Florida. Every year the General Assembly holds a major lecture, the Ware Lecture, and he gave this lecture in 1966.<sup>iv</sup>

He called on our congregations to assert the basic sinfulness of racial segregation, refute the idea of racial superiority, and engage in action on legislation to expand the circles of equality and fairness.

And he cautioned us against the "myth... of exaggerated progress," the idea that we've arrived. He said: "We should be proud of the steps we've made.... On the other hand, we must realize that the plant of freedom is only a bud and not yet a flower." He said we cannot stop with the way things are.

He spoke about the psychological term or label of a maladjusted personality. He said: "I must say to you this evening, my friends, there are some things in our nation and our world to which I'm proud to be maladjusted.... I call upon ... all

people of good will to be maladjusted to those things until the good society is realized.”

He listed the problems of life in America to which he wished we could remain maladjusted. He said: “I never intend to adjust myself to economic conditions that will take necessities from the many to give luxuries to the few, and leave millions of people perishing on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity.”

King’s life, and the deeds of so many people in the struggle for civil rights, unsettled a country that had adjusted to the way things are, as if it was always how things were going to be.

His words and life and the movement he led continue to challenge us to pay attention, take steps toward healing, stretch ourselves and let ourselves feel discomfort and maladjustment/ for the sake of a better world.

King said that life’s most urgent and persistent question is, “What are you doing for others?” His legacy is the legacy of standing up for others, and standing up *with* others.

This legacy *should* discomfort us, and unsettle us, but it shouldn’t paralyze us. His words and deeds should not freeze us in a sense of smallness or shyness or shame. We should hear his words as the call to community, the call to standing up with others.

Part of the King legacy is the fact that today many organizers, leaders, volunteers and advocates of all generations are doing this work, bringing attention to unfair and unsustainable conditions.

I give thanks for those who give of their time in service, their treasure in generosity, and their courage and hope toward a better country and a better world. I give thanks for those who dedicate their lives to the needs of others and those who risk their lives for the betterment of all of us, everywhere.

May the deeds of all those who struggle, serve, hope and give of themselves give us the courage not to get too adjusted to the way things are. May their deeds challenge us.

May they awaken us into attention, imagination, action and courage. So may it be.

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> Branch, Taylor. *The King Years: Historic Moments in the Civil Rights Movement*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013.

<sup>ii</sup> Dyson, Michael Eric. *I May Not Get there with You: The True Martin Luther King, Jr.* New York: Free Press, 2000.

<sup>iii</sup> See more analysis and stirring comment in [columns by Chris Hedges](#) on truthdig.com.

<sup>iv</sup> See [www.uua.org/ga/program/highlights/14600.shtml](http://www.uua.org/ga/program/highlights/14600.shtml)