

A Hero in the Shadows: Bayard Rustin



Rev. Dr. Roger Jones, preaching

Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Martin Luther King Sunday, January 18, 2026

Hymns: #1018 Come and Go with Me to that Land; Be Still and Breathe; Never Turning Back (with choir, from Emma's Revolution). Special Music: choir: Let Me Believe (R. Goldsmith); piano: Precious Lord, Take My Hand (T. Dorsey).

SERMON PART 1

For me, watching the past few weeks in this country has been like a nightmare. So much of the last 12 months has felt like a nightmare. An ugly, scary, and unbelievable nightmare from which I can't wake up. I don't have a way out, but I do find some hope when I consider the history of the civil rights movement. Centuries old, this resistance movement arose in this country because African Americans had been living in a series of nightmares. Over generations, these included enslavement, emancipation followed by the backlash of lynching, race massacres, Jim Crow segregation, police repression, and a denial of the freedom to vote.

Yet civil rights history shows that many acts of resistance to these nightmares took place from the beginning. The lessons of this history for me are these: Sustained resistance relies on a spiritual grounding and a commitment to our moral values. We need this grounding to move beyond our own comfort zones into the land of uncertainty. To sustain courage, we need the fellowship and support of other people. And we need a long-term perspective, to hang in there for the long haul. These lessons have jumped out at me while I've been reading about the life of Bayard [bye-urd] Rustin, who lived from 1912 to 1987.¹

An organizer for civil rights and the cause of international peace, Rustin was a special advisor and speechwriter to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Rustin worked for many organizations for peace, civil rights, refugee support, nuclear non-proliferation, and economic justice. To me, his moral and spiritual grounding provides an inspiration for our many current crises, and his acts of sacrifice are a challenge to wrestle with. I want to tell you a few things about him.

Bayard [BYE-urd] was born in 1912 in a suburb of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. His young parent ere unmarried, and he was brought up by his mother's parents. They reared him as the ninth of their 12 children. His grandmother was a Quaker and a member of the local chapter of the NAACP, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Rustin was arrested for his activism 24 times over his life. At age 16 he was arrested for distributing a campaign leaflet for Al Smith, a presidential candidate who was Roman Catholic. In 1928, much of the country was hostile to Catholics. (462)²

As a young man, Rustin openly refused to be drafted into the military when this country entered the Second World War. He was a pacifist and would not take up arms. For this he spent 28 months of the war in a federal penitentiary. After the war, he advised young men in refusing to register for a peacetime draft in resistance to a racially segregated armed forces. He told them to write a letter to tell President Truman of their refusal so they would not be seen as “mere draft dodgers.” Of course they would still be punished, but accepting that is key to nonviolent resistance. President Truman faced pushback on military integration from Southern officers, especially General Omar Bradley, a recent war hero. Thanks to relentless activism by Rustin and others, however, Truman did finally end military segregation.

In 1946, the Supreme Court ruled that bus and train companies with interstate routes could no longer segregate passengers by race. Then Rustin organized a group of 16 Black and white men to ride buses from Washington into Southern states to test the bus companies’ compliance with the court’s ruling. Black and white men would sit together, and another man would observe the driver’s actions. By the way, one of the white men was Homer Jack, a Unitarian minister and pacifist who was a co-founder of CORE, the Congress on Racial Equality. This 1946 campaign is remembered as the first one of the Freedom Rides. Rustin called it a Journey of Reconciliation.

Eight years later in Alabama, civil rights worker Rosa Parks refused to move to the back of a city bus so a white man could have her seat. This instigated the Montgomery Bus Campaign. For 381 days without a break, most Blacks in Montgomery and some whites avoided using a bus. With Dr. King as the spokesman, Rustin worked on organizing carpools, private rides, and long walks to work. Unarmed volunteers followed the walkers for safety. The Montgomery Bus Campaign is often referred to as a boycott. But Rustin said that word made it seem as if the passengers were causing economic harm, when it was the bus companies that were hurting the local community.

Some civil rights organizations focused on making legal challenges in courts, and they still do. Rustin, on the other hand, was a master of peaceful mass action. He was the lead organizer of three different marches on the nation’s capital, starting in 1957. The first was the Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom. It brought 25,000 people to the Lincoln Memorial. Dr. Martin Luther King spoke, using the refrain: *Give Us the Ballot*. Rustin convinced Dr. King to emphasize the spiritual and moral basis of the struggle for democracy. And he got him to call for direct action that was nonviolent. According to writer Michael G. Long, the 1957 march put Dr. King “in the top echelon of civil rights leaders.”

Rustin did much of his organizing work behind the scenes because he was gay. As a youth, he had told his grandmother of his same-sex attraction, and she accepted and affirmed his identity. Reportedly he never struggled to gain self-acceptance; he was confident. Yet in that era, homosexuality was illegal. There were few ways for gay people to meet. In the 1940s, Rustin was arrested three times for picking up men in public or for trying to. In 1953 he was arrested in Pasadena on a “morals charge” and put in the Los Angeles County Jail for a month. At the time, he was a leader at the Fellowship of Reconciliation, an interfaith peace organization based in New York. Because of the bad publicity of his arrest, the board of the asked him to resign. He did. Yet because of his brilliance at organizing, two years later his former boss [A. J. Muste] founded a new peace organization and recruited Rustin to run it!

In 1960, Rustin pitched a plan for mass demonstrations at the upcoming presidential nominating conventions of the Democratic and Republican parties. This plan angered Adam Clayton Powell, a powerful African American congressman from New York. To stop it, Powell threatened to tell the media that Rustin and Dr. King were lovers, which was a lie. Rustin offered his resignation from the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. When it was accepted, he was crushed. After all, he had been a co-founder of that organization. Suddenly, his colleagues ignored him. Dr. King kept his distance for two years. But Rustin kept working. For example, in 1962, he led the largest peace demonstration to date at the United Nations headquarters in New York City, with 8,000 people. He went to Africa to urge anti-colonialist leaders to rely on the power of nonviolence, and he trained volunteers in its practice. (249)

Back in college [in New York City], Rustin had joined the Young Communists League, but he broke with it after three years [during the Second World War]. Two decades later, both Rustin and Dr. King were smeared as Communists. U.S. Senator Strom Thurmond, a white segregationist from South Carolina, denounced Rustin on the Senate floor as a “sex pervert” and a Communist.³

Rustin wrote a public reply to Thurmond’s remarks, calling them a measure of the desperation of the segregationist cause. First, he said, he would leave it up to the leaders who had hired him to evaluate his moral integrity. Second, he was not a Communist. He wrote: “I have given abundant and public demonstrations of my opposition to totalitarianism and undemocratic elements everywhere—in Russia as well as in South Carolina.” (265)

Fortunately, Rustin was never shunned by his mentor. This was A. Philip Randolph, who was 23 years older than Rustin. A. Philip Randolph had founded the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, a union of Black men who worked on passenger trains. During the Second World War, Randolph had agitated successfully for President Roosevelt to ban segregation in the defense industry. It was Randolph who proposed the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, which would happen in August of 1963.

By the time the march was taking shape, Dr. King had been reaching out to Rustin, asking how he was—and asking again for his advice. During a planning meeting for the march, Rustin’s name came up as a possible director for it. Some civil rights leaders objected. Instead, the group decided to recruit A. Philip Randolph as the March on Washington’s director. Randolph accepted the role—on the condition that he could appoint his own deputy director. He appointed Rustin.

In his role, Rustin led the staff and volunteers that coordinated so many things. They organized the transportation of marchers from all parts of the country. They recruited Black police officers and veterans to be parade marshals, unarmed, of course. They trained marchers to lobby Members of Congress for civil rights legislation. They organized nonviolence training. The resulting crowd of 250,000 people represented the largest turnout of protesters to that point in American history. It’s where Dr. King stirred our spirits with his famous oration, “I Have a Dream.” As a result, in the next two years, the U.S. Congress approved the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act, and President Johnson signed them.

In one of his first campaigns, in 1948, Rustin gave this advice to volunteers about nonviolent resistance: “We are depending on the goodwill that we can express to win not only freedom and liberty but *more important*, to win over to our side as many people as we can.”

Hence, he told them: “Behave in such a fine, dignified manner that the police officers become ashamed to arrest anyone who behaves so well.” (113-114)

This advice can seem naïve in 2026 when ICE agents shoot unarmed protestors with no investigations conducted, let alone charges filed. No doubt it seemed naïve also to say this to young Black American volunteers in 1948, when lynching murders were seldom prosecuted. But Rusin was not naïve. After all, he had been beaten and jailed. He had spent 30 days on a prison chain gang in North Carolina.

Rustin explained that nonviolent resistance means to refuse to cooperate with injustice or cruelty and to accept the suffering that results from your noncompliance. It is a sacrifice of one’s comfort and safety. But it is a sacrifice for a vision of a future with more justice and freedom and peace. Rustin said: “We must be willing to face uncertainty now if our children... are to be reared in a world where they can grow freely and live beautifully.” Amen. [end of part 1]

READING 1

This is a reading from Bayard Rustin. It shows that nonviolent demonstrations did not always go well and demonstrates that the principles of nonviolence always remain to be tried again. This is from a letter he wrote to the *New York Times* in 1985, when he was 73. Rustin writes:

“Dr. King’s last march, [in solidarity with sanitation workers] in Memphis [Tennessee] only a week before his assassination, turned violent when some disorderly youths ‘broke ranks and vandalized downtown stores.’ This failure devastated him, and it was of course a great disappointment to all of us dedicated to non-violent social change. When he was killed on April 4, 1968, Dr. King was organizing a follow-up march [which] he hoped would be so peaceful as to wipe out the memory of the one that failed.

“On learning of Dr. King’s death, I determined that this second march must be held and must be successful. I rounded up a number of young people who had worked with me on organizing the March on Washington in 1963 and left immediately for Memphis....

“For three days and nights, despite a dusk-to-dawn curfew, we obtained special police passes and worked feverishly planning the line of march and coordinating the participation of the NAACP, the Urban League, churches and sanitation workers. To insure order, we trained many of the very youths who had rioted in the first march. [We] appointed them as marshals to maintain order in the second [march]. Despite the anger set off by the assassination, on the day before Dr. King’s funeral, thousands marched peacefully in Memphis.”

GIFT OF MUSIC: Precious Lord, Take My Hand (Thomas A. Dorsey)

Our gift of music on piano this morning is the tune from Dr. King’s favorite hymn, Precious Lord, Take My Hand, which is in our gray hymnal at #199. It was composed in 1938 by Thomas A. Dorsey, who is considered the father of African American gospel music. After the music, we invite you to let it settle into your body and soul, without applauding.

READING 2

This next reading is a letter by Rustin, which explains the spiritual principles which had motivated his long life of humanitarian service and nonviolent activism. In the 1980s, an author asked him to participate in an anthology of histories of African American Gay Men. Rustin was 74. He declined, saying: “It would be dishonest of me to present myself as one who was in the forefront of the struggle for gay rights.”

Rustin added this: “My activism did not spring from my being gay, or for that matter from my being black. Rather it is rooted, fundamentally, in my Quaker upbringing and the values that were instilled in me by my grandparents who reared me.

“Those values are based on the concept of a single human family and the belief that all members of that family are equal. Adhering to those values has meant making a stand against injustice, to the best of my ability, whenever and wherever it occurs.

“The racial injustice that was present in this country during my youth was a challenge to my belief in the oneness of the human family. It demanded my involvement in the struggle to achieve inter-racial democracy.... Needless to say, I worked side by side with many white people who held these same values.”

SERMON PART 2

In 1954 Bayard Rustin wrote: “*Our* truth is an ancient one: that love endures and overcomes; that hatred destroys.” (160) Rustin said that whatever “is obtained by hatred and violence becomes a burden” to those who take it. But whatever “is obtained by love will remain.”

Nonviolent resistance is part of this country’s history. It has made this a better country. But nonviolent resistance is not found only in the pages of books or the black and white images of a documentary film. It’s found right now on the streets of Minneapolis, where ordinary people risk their comfort and their safety to protect their neighbors and their democracy from 3,000 federal ICE agents with guns.

Nonviolent resistance is found right now on the streets in the cities of Iran, where snipers have killed thousands of adults and children protesting in the street.

To be sure, not everybody can be like Bayard Rustin or Martin Luther King. Not everybody can do what they were able to, and most of us wouldn’t choose to try. But we can *learn* from them.

For me, the lessons from Rustin’s life are these: Working against injustice and cruelty is work we must do in community. It takes everyone to win justice and freedom. We have different roles to play, and we all have skills to learn. And, if we clarify our moral and spiritual values, our values can sustain us for the long haul. As Rustin said: “We must be willing to face uncertainty now if our children... are to be reared in a world where they can grow freely and live beautifully.”

An older minister friend in Minneapolis is not able to be out on the cold streets of that city to resist ICE agents. Yet she is making food for volunteers and for immigrants and other neighbors of color who are hiding at home. On social media, she’s telling the rest of us what’s

going on there. She sent a list of local organizations that need monetary contributions.⁴ To be sure, they need our support. At the same time, however, we can do our part in whatever place we call home. As you heard, there is a forum after the service to meet the executive director of Sacramento ACT. That's one place to do our part.

Only some people are called to lead, but all of us can participate. We can learn, raise questions, write letters, and get out the vote. We can give money, contact our legislators, pray, sing, speak out, and show up.

I feel that right now we are being called to the edges of our comfort zones. By our conscience, by the source of divine love, by the suffering of our neighbors, we are being invited to move beyond those edges into uncertainty.

Rusin believed that all members of the human family are equal in dignity and rights. He based his actions in love. Today we are asking: what are we called to do in the name of love?

Whatever is obtained by love remains. It remains to nourish, gratify, inspire and give us courage. Love endures. Through us and beyond us, love endures. May we all find courage, together. May we demonstrate that love endures. Amen.

¹ "Bayard Rustin," Wikipedia.com. Accessed January 16, 2026

² Michael G. Long, editor, *I Must Resist: Bayard Rustin's Life in Letters* (San Francisco, 2012: City Lights Books). All parenthetical page numbers and all quotations by and about Rustin are from this fascinating book. Happy to lend!

³ Given that the United States has a Justice Department currently violating the Constitution, it's worth noting that the FBI had provided information about Rustin's past to the Senator and it was tapping the phones of Dr. King and other civil rights leaders, without a warrant.

⁴ Find ways to provide support and solidarity at standwithminnesota.org