

“Where do we go from here?”

Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull
Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden
Meriden, CT

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“It is the best of times; it is the worst of times.” And so we adapt that iconic observation of Charles Dickens and add yet another observation that it is the most interesting of times. Blessing, curse, crisis, opportunity. They are all here. They are all now.

Whatever the IT that we observe happening, whatever the IT that we thought could never be happening here, we know that there are forces stirring that cry out for us to echo what Dr. King asked half a century ago, amid another most interesting time: “Where do we go from here?” Let us ask this morning: “Where DO we go from here?”

Where is here? However some of us might want to assume that we’re all in the same “here”—the same spiritual/social/political space—let’s not assume. What might be a fair guess is that we’re all in a space of quandary, of high uncertainty, of bewilderment, and of yearning for deep community that embraces us and calls us to the transformative process of morphing into the higher angels of our oh so human nature.

Whatever our lens, whatever our choices made and pending—and we do have choices each and every day—all that we hold up in the endless variations on the themes of our guiding principles is on the line. *The inherent worth and dignity of every person*. Really? Every one of us? *The interconnected web of all existence*. “Am I really connected to her, to him, to creatures and life forms commonly referred to as “it”?”

What happens on Sunday mornings as our youngsters are invited to wonder what’s in that mysterious box? What happens for many of us? Do we wonder with them? What moves through our spirits when our children in their wisdom correctly guess what’s in there or, even more amazingly, guess that what is in there as far more of an epiphany than what I placed in that simple box? Some of you may remember when Rhiannon guessed that the wonder box held a butterfly. It was the morning when our theme was “Becoming who you are!” And the contents of the box were not nearly as imaginative as a butterfly! What happened today, when our youngsters discovered that nothing at all was in the box? What followed the invitation to think outside the box? How did we get from “nothing” to “beloved community”?

I wonder if this morning we struggle to imagine a butterfly state of being. I wonder if trepidation bordering on paralysis describes our state inside a cocoon that holds no apparent promise whatsoever. Where does one go from a cocoon? Where does one go from emptiness? How does one take a leap of faith from nothing to Beloved Community and indications of Beloved Community in our midst?

Where do we go from where we are?

Let's return to that hot summer day that held Dr. King's speech before the 11th Annual Convention of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, or SCLC, as we called it then. It was August 1967. We know now what was to come. But let's recall what had begun, as Dr. King recalled it:

"...over the last ten years the Negro [remember this was 1967] decided to straighten his back up."

"YES!" rang the affirmations.

"...realizing that a man cannot ride your back unless it is bent."

"YES, that's right!" sounded the pews in that church where he spoke.

"We made our government write new laws to alter some of the cruelest injustices that affected us. We made an indifferent and unconcerned nation rise from lethargy and subpoenaed its conscience to appear before the judgment seat of morality on the whole question of civil rights."

Subpoenaed its conscience! "Yes," I would have blurted out had I been there.

Such were Dr. King's pronouncements of accomplishments during the first decade of that mid-century movement that rocked this nation to its core.

Did Dr. King allow anyone present to rest on their laurels? Absolutely not.

"In spite of a decade of significant progress, the problem is far from solved," he proclaimed. Moments later, he upped the ante. "With all the struggle and all the achievements, we must face that fact that the Negro still lives in the basement of the Great Society." The dream was far from realized.

[pause]

"If I had told you eight years ago, that America would reverse a great recession, reboot our auto industry, and unleash the longest stretch of job creation in our history [applause] if I had told you that we would open up a new chapter with the Cuban people, shut down Iran's nuclear weapons program without firing a shot...if I had told you that we would win marriage equality, and secure the right to health insurance for another 20 million of our fellow citizens..."

Ah yes, another voice, another affirmation of accomplishments, another time—just five days ago in another great city. Many of us watched, enrapt, as the still President of the United States delivered a Farewell Address holding up what had been achieved communally. Again and again he credited you, us. "You were the change. You answered people's hopes." As with Dr. King, President Barack Obama consistently affirmed the strength of community when there are hopes and dreams to be realized.

Where do we go from here? Let's be clear that we're NOT all on the same page. We are seeing and hearing and witnessing through variable lenses. There were disagreements and passionate arguments within the Civil Rights movement of the mid-20th century. There are disagreements and arguments within the civil rights and human rights and planet rights movements of our own time. "Democracy does not require uniformity," observed Obama. But "our founders...knew that "democracy does require a basic sense of solidarity—the idea that for all our outward differences, we're all in this together; that we rise or fall as one."

It is no less the case as we in this congregation observe and proclaim and imagine and plan and strategize. It is no less the case as we form alliances and coalitions with other congregations—Unitarian Universalist, yes, but also other denominations and other faiths altogether.

Democracy is a muddy business, but in functional democracy we walk through the mud together, slowed down enough to listen and perhaps even understand that ours is not the be-all and end-all op-ed of the day, that the evidence (not the rumors, but the evidence) must ground our opinions rather than our opinions shaping what we put forth as evidence. This is not a walk around the block. A muddy road is not for the faint of heart. Again echoing President Obama: "Democracy can buckle when we give in to fear."

Was Dr. King afraid? Was Dr. King human? Did he give in to fear? Dr. King and all who gave their lives—not just fatally, but in the fullness of their energy and time and intellect and imagination—were vulnerable to fear every step of the way up that slippery muddy slope toward the mountaintop of Beloved Community.

So are we vulnerable to fear now. Some are hopeful, buoyed even, by a new administration that promises change. Is change intrinsically good? Good for what? Good for whom? What are the means and methods of change? I can't respond to these questions in the abstract. I just can't. Tell me about change for the common good. Tell me about the means that you're willing to use to bring about change even for the common good. Tell me about the means that you're willing to quash change with which you disagree. "The times, they are a changin'..." Yes, they are. They always do. Change simply IS.

Transformation holds another set of nuances. Transformation digs deeper, tunneling into the terrain of the soul—individually, communally, geologically, cosmologically. What about intentional transformation? I recall a man I met many years ago during my first experience of anti-racism training, a white man. He was a professional facilitator with the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond, an organization known for what one of my friends calls "industrial strength" anti-racism training. As a youth he had thrown rocks at the Freedom Fighter buses in Mississippi. Between his youth and adulthood he experienced a transformation that allowed him to see people of color as sisters and brothers, as family. He dedicated his life to leading with colleagues of color workshops that were transformative for many of us, probably thousands of us. Those of us who were there commonly speak of the anti-racism training to which I refer as "that weekend", that weekend when we began to see and be differently through the transforming power of what I can only call love.

Today across congregations Unitarian Universalist and beyond begins a season called Thirty Days of Love. Inspired through the Standing on the Side of Love campaign of our Unitarian Universalist Association, it's a time set aside for being intentional about shouting out and living out and acting out the power of love in our families, our communities, our congregations, our nation. It's about love and it's about power and how they coalesce in what we are and what we do to stop oppression wherever it occurs. This is a tall order! Will we get it done in 30 days? Did Dr. King get it done in a lifetime? Did President Obama get it done in two terms as president? Did the First Reconstruction or the New Deal or the Second Reconstruction or the Great Society or the movement that elected this nation's first President of color have staying power into the time that is now? Have liberty and justice for all come to fruition? Has Beloved Community moved beyond aspiration to realization?

In the words of Robert Frost, we have "miles to go before we sleep." This doesn't mean that we haven't taken a few steps.

We find ourselves at a crossroads, at a temporal intersection of movements seeking to serve the common good and movements seeking to ditch the common good on behalf of the precious few. Where do we go from here? Where do we go from this intersection? Straight home, to our comfy apartments or houses or whatever domain promises refuge from the plight of our times? Or out into the intersection, out into the public square, out into the communal spaces that invite the most inclusive participation, the most kaleidoscopic mélange of ideas, the most loving rendering of power, and the most powerful rendering of love?

Where do we go from here? Dr. King's words ring as true today as they did fifty years ago.

"What is needed is a realization that power without love is reckless and abusive, and that love without power is sentimental and anemic."

It is the "collision of immoral power with powerless morality which constitutes the major crisis of our times," he proclaimed.

What is the opportunity in this crisis? What is the opportunity for the transforming power of love to make itself known and affirmed and practiced and sustained?

Own your power; own your power, and feel the love. Share your power, and share the love. Whatever the circumstances of our time, from here we can move forward with all due energy of heart, mind, and soul toward community that is Beloved.

So may it be. And Amen.

Sources

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