

“How to quiet that ornery alarm clock”

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Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Sunday
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“Preacher, reformer, citizen, man of peace, lover of justice, in any history he will be appraised as one of the truly great men of this century. We offer him not only our respect, but our love and our loyal support.”

With these words and a few more, Dr. Dana McLean Greeley introduced him. The setting was plenary hall of the convention center in Hollywood, Florida. The occasion was the Ware Lecture of the Fifth Annual General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association. It was the night of May 18, 1966, almost a half century ago. The War in Vietnam was raging. The struggle for civil rights was strewn with murders and beatings of people of color and white allies. It was just one year and two months since the historic march from Selma to Montgomery. It was not quite two years since the passage of the highly contentious Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. rose to the lectern as this assembly of Unitarian Universalists hushed in expectation. He conveyed delight in being there and his appreciation to those who had invited him. He recalled his personal experience with Unitarian Universalism when he was at Boston University in the early 1950s. He held up those Unitarian Universalists who had joined him in the struggle and those who had given their lives in doing so—Rev. James Reeb and Viola Liuzzo. He cited the contributions of Unitarian Universalists to the family of Jimmie Lee Jackson, who had given his life in the struggle the previous year, along with others who paid with their lives. And he moved deftly into his topic: “Don’t sleep through the revolution!”

Specifically, he addressed “the church.” Just because some Unitarian Universalists don’t consider themselves “a church,” I trust that they knew he was speaking to them too, even as he speaks to us now.

Dr. King tapped the story of Rip Van Winkle, authored by Washington Irving. Rip resided in a late 18th century village in the Catskills. He was an amiable fellow who who took every opportunity to flee responsibility in all its forms. One such opportunity was borne by a fine day that suggested a walk in the woods. Deep into the forest he headed into an adventure with a curious group of men who offered him a draft of what they were drinking. Near a little inn that bore a sign with the image of King George III, Rip fell fast asleep. He slept for 20 years. He awoke to return to his village and find that nothing and no one were the same. Everything had changed. The most jarring change was that which he beheld directly upon waking. The sign that bore the image of King George II now held the likeness of George Washington! Rip Van Winkle had slept through a revolution.

“There is nothing more tragic,” proclaimed Dr. King, “than to sleep through a revolution. And...a social revolution is taking place in our world today. ...The great question is what do we do when we find ourselves in such a period?”

How tempting it is to miss the implications of what it means to stay awake when so much is in tumult. Why *not* a nice long nap? Why *not* settle solely for some form of instant spiritual gratification? There are lots of choices. Why *not* adopt a theology that we can rattle off as a bunch of principles without discerning their layers and their accompanying sources? Why *not* tend to Dr. King through a comfy annual remembrance and then return his legacy and even likeness to a closet or a low-traffic hallway for another year?

Yet I realize that you are a congregation with what we sometimes call “fire in the belly.” You are a congregation who has refused to glaze over in a la-la-land spirituality with no expectations for moral accountability. You are a congregation with apt mistrust of smiling reassurance that all will be well without us on board thank you very much.

Let’s take a look at what King counseled, what Mark Morrison Reed proclaimed as our task, what Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley called us out of and into, and what it means to transcend inspiration and engage in transformation. Let’s take a look at how prophetic words and prophetic lives resonate for us amid the revolutions (in the screaming plural) that we know in the slice of history that we occupy. Let’s take a look at what we are doing, what we can do, what we might do, and what we have the will to do to stay awake, and, in the spirit of our Unitarian Universalist Association’s Standing on the Side of Love venture, to harness the power of love to stop oppression wherever it occurs. The alarm clock is ringing: “Wake up! Wake up!” I don’t know anybody who LIKES the sound of an alarm clock; but we all know there are consequences if we simply roll over and press “Snooze!”

What did Dr. King counsel in his address to our Unitarian Universalist forebears of the 1960s? What might he be telling us across the years?

First, adopt a world perspective. Globalization was not quite a household word in 1966. Its resonance for good and ill is very much with us in 2013. We’re connected not just on-line, but in the tangle of global capitalism, trans-national corporations, regional wars with resonance across continents, models of democratic aspiration credible and hypocritical, bacteria and virus clusters that need no passport, and climate change evident locally and globally. In Dr. King’s words: “...all life is inter-related, and somehow we are all tied together.” Sound familiar?

He counseled that “the church reaffirm over and over again the essential immorality of racial segregation” and the necessity of refuting the notion “that there are superior and inferior races.” Lest we think that segregation and the brutal realities of white supremacy are the *status quo* of the past, I invite us into deeper dialogue about the realities of white privilege, educational privilege, health access privilege, housing privilege, etc. that fracture the soul of what Dr. King referred to as Beloved Community.

Dr. King counseled the church to “move out into the arena of social action.” I have shared with many of you that a core attraction for me coming to this congregation as your minister was the passion I felt in your commitment to social action as central to what you’re about as a faith community. I’m not saying, “we’ve arrived.” There are miles to go. But I honestly think that most of the members and friends of this congregation “get” the difference between *noblesse oblige* charity and justice making through actions of solidarity.

Again and again I witness in Unitarian Universalist congregations evidence of a blur between understanding charity and discerning justice. It's thoughtful—perhaps—to lend a hand to those among us who are hurting economically at Christmas time and even other times. But if we do this without turning our heads upstream to identify the source of the toxic realities in the waters before us of poverty and street violence and school violence and more, then we've pushed that button called "Snooze" on behalf of just a few more minutes, just a few more years, just a few more generations of precious comfort.

Dr. King counseled us also to crash a couple of myths. One is the myth that legislation doesn't really change things. This myth lends relief to folks in our congregations who say that politics don't belong in the pulpit, that politics and religion don't mix. Politics is simply the term given to how we structure ourselves in society. Religion is the institutional manifestation of accountable spirituality in that society. The separation of church and state is a boundary to be sustained, but it is not a separation of politics and religion, rather *a separation of systems* that can too easily become systems of domination. Wakefulness is paramount for responsible spiritual witness and truth telling. King bids us to be mindful that "while [legislation] may not change [human hearts], it does change [human habits.]"

Yet another myth to crash is that of "exaggerated progress." We've all engaged in this, when we refer to "the civil rights movement of the '60s," as if there were none today. We know that "progress" however defined is not linear. What might we call it? Episodic? Not quite random? Elusive?

In that 1966 address, Dr. King was beginning to take on issues in addition to racism, pervasive as racism is across issues. On the evening of April 4, 1967, a year to the day before he was shot down in Memphis—and we might recall that his was a death from gun violence—Dr. King spoke out against the war in Vietnam. It was, as his topic denoted, "A Time to Break Silence." And the matter of urgency, of waking up and staying awake, rose again:

"We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. In this unfolding conundrum of life and history, there is such a thing as being too late. Procrastination is still the thief of time.

...We still have a choice today: nonviolent coexistence or violent co-annihilation. 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."

A year later, Dr. King headed to Memphis to lead a march in solidarity with the city's sanitation workers, who were on strike in response to the brutally racist environment in which they worked. Plans for a peaceful march were delayed by resistant city officials. Early on the evening of April 4, Andrew Young had returned to the hotel where he and Dr. King and their colleagues were staying. He was bringing news that he had reached agreement with the District Court Judge for the march to proceed on April 8. They were preparing to leave for dinner, when Dr. King stepped out on the balcony of their hotel.

The alarm clock is ringing. It's still ringing.

Racism as a fault line of this nation as we know it continues to produce tenacious tremors across this country, tremors rarely felt by those among us who identify as “white” and deeply felt by those among us of color. Hear the words of my late and dear friend and colleague, Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley, as she addressed our colleagues at a conclave of Unitarian Universalist ministers in Birmingham, Alabama in 2002, a full 34 years after the murder of Dr. King and 37 years after the march from Selma to Montgomery.

“In most of our congregations that I have been a part of or worked with, structures that create and sustain whiteness are normative. There is presumption from some clergy and some laity that these canons of music, and literature, and art, and language, and social discourse, rooted in the European experience, are normative. Euro-centrism is seen as logical and rational, and those who express a need for a spirited form of worship or those who use a different language set are somehow made to feel less educated, less than worthy. These presumptions make it extremely difficult for culturally oppressed groups to find a place in our congregations. Speaking personally, while I enjoy and appreciate a wide variety of cultural traditions, when I cannot find myself in a worshipping community, it drains the life of the spirit out of me, and I must go elsewhere to nurture my soul.”

How many individuals and families of color and non-European norms visit and never return for the reasons Marjorie describes? How many don’t find a place at this table because of the shape, design, and selective cuisine on that table? What structures has this church created that presume “whiteness as normative?” How does this congregation make it difficult for any among us who are “culturally oppressed” to feel at home? How can this church feed the spirits of a wider community of searching, seeking, yearning souls?

“If you will stand with me in solidarity in an expanding circle of culture so that it includes *all of us*, you too will be keeping the faith,”

proclaimed Marjorie. That was 11 years ago. What have we done, what are we doing, to “keep the faith,” to honor the promise of this faith that presumes *universalism*, the inclusion of all in the kingdom of heaven on earth, and that presumes *unitarianism*, the oneness of love that many call God with the reverence deserved by Ultimate Love. A cultural allergy to that term alienates many who find in the notion of God a sanctuary of inclusiveness, a promise of love, a possibility of Beloved Community. How, in the name of loving solidarity, might we take the God many of us disclaim out of HIS parochial box into the larger sphere of love, compassion, and justice?

Why are we here? To feed our souls, yes, but not at the expense of gorging our egos. To expand our minds, yes, but not at the expense of relegating our feelings to “those churches that are SO EMOTIONAL!” To awaken our senses, yes, and yes, to all that it means to be awake, to notice, to move into a radicalized consciousness of what it is that’s going on in minds and hearts with which we are intimately connected because we inhabit this planet at the same time in history.

“The central task of the religious community,” claims Mark Morrison-Reed, longtime Unitarian Universalist minister and writer and observer of how we do and don’t do beloved community, “is to unveil the bonds that bind each to all. ...The religious community is essential,” he observes from a lifetime of inhabiting and observing it, “for alone our vision is too narrow to see all that must be seen, and our strength too limited to do all that must be done.”

What are we about in this religious community and our larger Unitarian Universalist world if not to awaken to the call of Dr. King, to connect oppressions with a theology and spiritually activist behavior that bear witness to the roots from which all oppression stems, to expand the “circle of culture [palpable in this church] so that it includes *all of us*,” and to kindle “the fire of commitment” that transforms inspiration into perspiration for what it takes to usher in Beloved Community.

May ours be a church whose justice is done not just by a Social Responsibility Committee, or a Task Force on Anti-Racism or Immigration Reform or Ethical Eating or Gender Identity Justice or LGBT Rights or Universal Health Care or any of the issues that we are addressing. May ours be a church whose justice is done in wakefulness to what is and what can be across generations, across the boundaries that keep “each from all” into the wider sphere of the dream dreamt by Dr. King, by Marjorie, by Mark, by all who have dared to believe that we are capable of quieting that blankety-blank alarm clock by waking up, getting up, and staying up to join the sacred struggle of harnessing the power of love to stop oppression in all its forms—overt, covert, and barely discernible except to those of us who are downwind of it.

We can do this, you know. We really can—together!

Amen.

Sources:

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