

January 20, 2008
UUFTC, Sonora

Strength to Love: Remembering Dr. King

Today - both this morning and this afternoon - we remember Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and we honor his legacy. As I was thinking about what to say to honor Dr. King's birthday, I came across a collection of his sermons, entitled "Strength to Love." During the 1960s, I felt tremendous respect for Dr. King and his struggles, but from my Northern white perspective, I saw him primarily as a civil rights leader. The more I read of Dr. King's writings, the more impressed I am with the breadth and depth of his vision. He was way more than a civil rights leader - he was a visionary and a modern-day prophet. He challenged America to live up to its highest ideals. He voiced the concerns of oppressed people everywhere, realizing that no one could be free until all of us are free. He was a founder of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which had a purpose far broader than uplifting the rights of African-American people -- although that in itself remains a monumental task. No - tellingly - the motto of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference was "To save the soul of America." **[Repeat]** Dr. King dreamed of an America - and of a world - in which people of all races and ethnicities, all religions, men and women, would live in peace, harmony, and justice.

In her preface to the 1981 edition of "Strength to Love," Dr. King's widow, Coretta Scott King, wrote:

The struggle to eliminate the world's evils – evils so flagrant and self-evident that they glare at us from every ghetto street and rural hovel – can only occur through a profound inner struggle. By reaching into and beyond ourselves and tapping the transcendent moral ethic of love, we shall overcome these evils. Love, truth, and the courage to do what is right should be our own guideposts on this lifelong journey. Martin Luther King Jr. showed us the way; he showed us the dream . . .

"Love, truth, and the courage to do what is right should be our own guideposts." Yes, and they could serve pretty well as guideposts for Unitarian Universalists as well. Despite the fact that he was immersed in a bitter struggle, one that often turned to hatred and violence, Martin Luther King maintained his commitment to the power of love. He refused to give in and to respond in kind to the hatred that was often directed at him and at other African-Americans. He continued to believe that Love was the only way to change things for the better.

When I first read the title, "Strength to Love," I had to think about it. Isn't Love, after all, kind of wimpy; kind of soft and anemic? What does love have to do with strength? The answer resonates throughout this collection of sermons, and indeed throughout all of Dr. King's writings. Exactly one year before he was assassinated, Dr. King gave a sermon at Riverside Church in New York. This was the speech in which he came out forthrightly against the US war in Vietnam; a position that would cause him to be criticized by people on both sides who thought he should stick to civil rights. You have heard me read these words

before; I'm sure you will hear them again. For me, this is the heart and the core of Dr. King's vision:

When I speak of love, I am not speaking of some weak and sentimental response. I am speaking of that force which all of the great religions have seen as the supreme unifying principle of life. Love is somehow the key that unlocks the door which leads to ultimate reality. This Hindu-Moslem-Christian-Jewish-Buddhist belief about ultimate reality is beautifully summed up in the first epistle of St. John: "Let us love another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.

Elsewhere in his writings, Dr. King addressed those of us who might be uncomfortable with this sort of reference to God. This is what he said:

I am quite aware of the fact that there are persons who believe firmly in nonviolence who do not believe in a personal God. But I believe that every person who believes in nonviolent resistance believes somehow that the universe in some form is on the side of justice. That there is something unfolding in the universe whether one speaks of it as an unconscious process, or whether one speaks of it as some unmoved mover, or whether someone speaks of it as a personal God. There is something in the universe that unfolds for justice.

So the love that King was talking about wasn't some weak and wimpy response; he spoke about a love that spurs us to action; about a love that enables us to be present for our suffering brothers and sisters; about a love that enables us to put ourselves out there for each other. So Dr. King spoke of love in the broadest, deepest sense - he spoke of a love that includes all human beings as brothers and sisters. This love is not merely romantic love (what the Greeks called *eros*); it is not merely a sort of reciprocal love between friends (which was known as *philia*). We could speak of *agape*, the Greek word that means a creative, redemptive good will for the community of all people. Or, to use modern language, we could speak of compassion, which comes close to his meaning. But somehow, love is the right word for what Dr. meant. He meant a love that is "the supreme unifying principle of life;" he meant a love that is the key to ultimate reality; he meant a love that unifies all the great faith traditions; he meant a love that impels us to act on behalf of other people everywhere. He meant a fierce, intense, motivating love of humanity.

And out of that sense of love, Martin Luther King formulated his concept of nonviolent struggle for justice. He realized that reacting violently to oppression is self-defeating and simply creates more hatred and violence. He realized that reacting with hatred plays into the hands of the oppressor; that it simply continues the oppression. Having studied Gandhi's nonviolent struggle for Indian independence, he came to see that the point is not to humiliate or defeat the opponent but to win the oppressor's friendship and understanding. The aim is not to defeat the white community, not to humiliate the white community, but to appeal to our community humanity and thus to win the friendship of those who had perpetrated this system in the past. "The aftermath of violence is bitterness," he wrote,

The aftermath of nonviolence is reconciliation and the creation of a beloved community. A boycott is never an end within itself. It is merely a means to awaken a

sense of shame within the oppressor, but the end is reconciliation, the end is redemption.

Thus, for Dr. King, the struggle was not so much between white people and black people. The struggle was – and still is -- between justice and injustice, between the forces of light and the forces of darkness. And if there is a victory, it will not be a victory merely for African-Americans. But it will be a victory for justice, a victory for good will, a victory for democracy.

And why does Martin Luther King's kind of love require strength? Because it means that we have to overcome our fear; that we have to be willing to let our hearts be open; that we have to be willing to let ourselves be vulnerable. We have to be willing to see the humanity of others; to be willing to try to win people over by the strength of our commitment; to persuade, not to try to prevail by force; to demonstrate, over and over again, the strength of our love.

My favorite sermon in the book is entitled "Antidotes for Fear." In it, King argues that our world, domestic and international, is shot through with fear – fear of "the other" – other people, other tribes, other nations. And that fear begets hatred, and that hatred produces violence, which only produces more fear and more hatred. And so it goes. But the antidote to fear is love; fear is mastered through love. Quoting once again from the first letter of John, Dr. King wrote: "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear." Perfect love casts out fear!

We can see so clearly today how fear of the "other" leads us to resort to violence, in the false belief that people can be brutalized into submission. In his sermon on fear, Dr. King showed how systems of racism and oppression are based on irrational fears about loss of economic privilege, altered social status, and adjustment to new situations. Envy, jealousy, lack of self-esteem, feelings of insecurity, and a haunting sense of inferiority are all rooted in fear. Which leads back to love – and nonviolence as a way of life. Once again to quote Dr. King:

Hatred and bitterness can never cure the disease of fear; only love can do that. Hatred paralyzes life; love releases it. Hatred confuses life; love harmonizes it. Hatred darkens life; love illumines it.

Love in opposition to fear caused Unitarian Universalists – clergy and laypeople alike – to travel to Alabama in 1965 to help in the struggle against racism. Dr. King had planned a march from Selma to Montgomery to dramatize the struggle for voting rights for African-Americans, and to protest the killing of a civil rights marcher, Jimmy Lee Jackson. Rev. James Reeb and two other UU ministers were attacked and beaten as they exited a restaurant in Selma. James Reeb died from that beating. Several days later, Viola Gregg Liuzzo, a UU from Detroit was shot and killed as she drove African-American protesters in her car. Dr. King delivered the eulogy at James Reeb's funeral. As we heard in the reading, King told listeners that they must not give in to despair; that they must not become bitter or harbor the desire to retaliate; that they must not lose faith in their white brothers and sisters, however misguided; that they must continue to stand up for the dignity and worth of every person. When an individual or group dares to love – dares to love – they rise to a new level of moral maturity; they carve a tunnel of hope through the mountain of despair.

So this love, of which Dr. King spoke, requires strength because it must be the kind of love that enables us to overcome our fear. It requires that we put ourselves out there, that we open our hearts to the “other.” And this kind of love requires that we allow ourselves to feel our vulnerability – to love in spite of the fragility of human existence, to love in spite of our tenderest, innermost feelings. And yet the beauty of his message is that this strength is not something that we have to find outside ourselves; it is not something that we have to work to develop. Paradoxically, it is already there inside us, and we gain access to it in those moments when we are in touch with our most fragile selves.

[Pause – Meditation]

So, I’d like to do something a little different this morning. I invite us into a period of meditation and reflection. **[Posture, breathing, etc.]** I invite us to enter into a few moments of silence for prayer, meditation, reflection, according to our personal practice. I invite us to take a few moments to feel with our hearts. I invite us to hold an image of our heart beating softly, yet strongly - that innermost part of us that is so vulnerable. If it should stop beating, we die. And yet, we can hold an image of a heart that is so strong - no matter what, it goes on beating, steadily, pumping blood through our bodies literally every second of our existence.

And let us take a few moments to feel that part of us that we imagine when we picture our deepest being -- that part of us that is our spiritual, moral, ethical center; that part of ourselves that feels most deeply. And I invite us to let our hearts soften for these few moments; to let ourselves feel our vulnerability. And as we feel our vulnerability when we open our hearts, we are also finding incredible strength -- strength to love.

And so we can see that the strength to love isn’t something that we look for from outside; it isn’t some skill that we have to develop. Instead, the strength to love is inside us, it is something that we can touch, that we can access. Let’s take a few moments for silent reflection.

[Silence]

And so, today, as we remember Dr. Martin Luther King, may we remember his message of a love that runs through all the great religious, moral, and ethical traditions. A love that unlocks the door to ultimate reality.

May we remember that this love depends on strength - on our ability to open our hearts to the world around us, to our brothers and sisters; on our ability to be in touch with our own vulnerability.

And may we remember Dr. King’s message that this strength to love is something that comes from within us; that we find the source of this strength when we touch our innermost selves.

May we make love, truth, and the courage to do what is right our own guideposts on this lifelong journey.