

Faith and Freedom: Where Do We Go From Here?
A Sermon by Reverend Lynn Strauss

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. remains the prophet of our time. We can recall the passion and timbre of his voice; we can still feel the power of the Biblical sources from which he drew his strength and his message.

His words, delivered here in Washington DC in 1963...his dream, the dream for which he gave his life, still motivates us as a nation.

"No, no we are not satisfied, and we will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream."

"I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character."

"With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith, we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith, we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day."

"This will be the day when all of God's children will be able to sing with a new meaning, 'My country 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing. Land where my fathers died, land of the pilgrim's pride, from every mountainside, let freedom ring.'"

And we have come so far. And Dr. King's pressing question...Where do we go from here?...is still our question.

I want to bring that question close to home, down to earth, into this time and place.

Consider the issue of racial justice and multi-culturalism here at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Rockville. What have we done as a people of faith to counter oppression, to address the evils of racism, classism and cultural exclusion?

What is the story, the history of UUCR on these issues? What have we done in the name of UUCR? What have we failed to do to address systemic racism, and cultural blindness, here in our own religious community? Where do we go from here?

1963 seems like a long time ago- some of us weren't even born in 1963.

For some of us, the Civil Rights Movement and anti-racist, anti-oppression work seems out-of-date...no longer necessary.

It's old language...past glory, not relevant ...nothing to tweet about.

Things have certainly changed for the better in race relations and racial equality in America. The Civil Rights Movement succeeded in changing the laws of the land. And eventually made those laws work. Soon there will come a day when there is no longer a white majority in this country.

But, today we celebrate the power of the people that brought more fairness and more hope to so many. It was a movement of non-violence, a movement where people put their bodies on the line.

And some, Dr. King among them, gave their lives for the cause of freedom.

Dr. King was surely a prophet in our time.

A prophet is a person who puts themselves between what God wants...what is righteous... and what the people want...what is safe and comfortable.

The Bible is full of prophets...and most of them were reluctant to serve, and most of them grew weary, and downhearted...and many went to prison, and all were strangers in a strange land...alone and bereft...they wandered among the people, prophesying.

The prophet brings hard truth to light, the prophet calls the people to a revolution of values...to an overthrow of the status quo. The prophet tells it like it is...calls the people out....

Dr. King was such a prophet.

Beacon Press has recently re-issued King's fourth book...*Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?*. So much of his message is still relevant today- he speaks of economic disparity, the cost of militarism, the need for moral solutions.

Martin Luther King believed in spiritual freedom...and there was an essential thread he followed throughout his life and ministry...it was the thread of non-violence. He returned to it again and again, no matter the circumstances, he never let it go...the wide thought horizon -- the truth of non-violence -- carried him through his darkest days...carried him through to spiritual freedom.

It never let him go.

There have been times in the 55 years since the founding of the UU Church of Rockville, there have been times, that this congregation has been called to prophetic action on behalf of racial equality.

In the church's earliest years, we supported the cause of integration and civil rights here in Maryland and DC.

In 1965, members of the congregation joined their second minister, Reverend David Cole, in responding to the call of Dr. King and other civil rights leaders to come to Selma, Alabama and participate in the marches for voter registration rights for Blacks in Selma.

Seven members of this church went to Selma: Gerry Bailey, Fred Beckner, George Leonard, Barbara Makris, Martha Warner, Jim Wyckoff and Dorothy Millon Ladd. There were three marches during the course of that week in Selma. UU minister James Reeb was beaten the night following the march to the Pettus Bridge. The Selma hospital would not admit him so he had to be taken to the Montgomery, Alabama hospital where he died two days later.

There was, during that week, a gathering of 1,000 people at Brown's Chapel where they heard speeches by many religious leaders, including the president of the UUA, Dana Greeley. Those present also heard Martin Luther King, Jr. as well as President Lyndon Johnson.

It was a momentous event in the cause of freedom and racial equality and UUCR was there.

But 1965 was a long time ago...where do we go from here?

In late 1989, Reverend Don Robinson, the UU minister who was to become the founder and director of Beacon House in Washington, DC, came to UUCR as the ministerial intern. Beacon House was always his dream...and this congregation, along with others around the Beltway, have been strong supporters of Beacon House both financially as well as with volunteer time. UUCR continues to be a support to the children and youth and staff at Beacon House.

But even 1989 was a long time ago....where do we go from here?

Over the years, there were many other ways UUCR was involved in promoting racial justice. Members of the church worked with the NAACP, fair housing organizations, the Montgomery County Human Relations Commission, the National Capital Clearinghouse for Neighborhood Democracy and many other groups and causes.

But it's 2012, a new century, where do we go from here?

I must make a confession here. Even though I was deeply involved in the Civil Rights Movement; even though I grew up in a racially and culturally diverse neighborhood in Chicago; even though I began my adult career path as an elementary school teacher in an inner city school; even though I have always had close friends who were Japanese, and African American and gay and lesbian; even though my grandchildren are bi-racial; even though I was part of the transformation team of the Journey To Wholeness project when I served at the Knoxville church; even though I always took my family and marched in the MLK Day Parade...

Even though...I must confess,

I haven't always bought into the anti-racist agenda and programs promoted by the Unitarian Universalist Association.

I've tried. I've read all the right books. I've tried to lift up anti-oppression, multi-culturalism values in my ministry.

But, I sometimes feel at a loss about where to go from here. Sometimes the UUA approach felt too much about guilt, and too limited in its definition of diversity. Sometimes I feel at a loss.

I want to recognize all the good consistent work that Deborah Kahn has given to these issues through both the children's RE program and the adult RE program. Together, she and I try to keep anti-racist/multi-cultural work in front of the congregation.

But it hasn't become a deep, passionate agenda of UUCR. And there is still work to be done.

Perhaps someday, soon, this congregation will want to call a minister of color. Perhaps we'll want an intern who is not blessed with white privilege...or perhaps a director of religious education who is transgendered.

Are we ready? I have to tell you that, in spite of all the good works of UUCR as an institution, we are not fully ready for this kind of diversity.

As friendly and warm as we can be, there are issues to be addressed, conversations that need to happen, sensitivity that needs to be developed.

There are barriers to multi-racial, multi-cultural expansion that we don't even see.

The UUA will not recommend a minister of color to apply to a congregation that has not engaged deeply in the work of anti-racism, multi-culturalism.

In his book, Martin Luther King writes:

"Among the forces of white liberalism the church has a special obligation. It is the voice of moral and spiritual authority on earth. Yet no one observing the history of the church in America can deny the shameful fact that it has been an accomplice in structuring racism into the architecture of American society.

The church as a whole has been all too negligent on the question of civil rights. It has too often blessed a status quo that needed to be blasted, and reassured a social order that needed to be reformed.

If the church does not recapture its prophetic zeal, it will become an irrelevant social club without moral or spiritual authority."

I am proud of the continuing commitment of our UU faith to the principle of equity and justice for all. I am proud that our leaders within the UUA continue to put our resources and our passion into the unfinished business of racial, class, and cultural diversity, within our churches and seminaries and our movement as a whole.

For our most deeply-rooted religious conviction is that every person is heir to a legacy of dignity and worth.

Taquinna Boston is on staff at the UUA.... She has a new lens to offer to our congregations as we think about this issue. As I understand it...

She suggests that we consider all the places we are involved in our lives...all of our commitments to family, community, business, government, education, social issues...consider all of your relationships....

Consider all the social justice issues we are actively supporting: immigration rights, GLBTQ rights, women's right to choose, freedom of assembly and support of the Occupy Movement, support to the relief in Haiti...think of all of our relationships and commitments.

And then expand your notion of church, of this congregation, to include all of those other parts of your life...draw the circle larger...those people in your larger life do not need to be here in this worship space, they don't need to be members of UUCR...but we can consider them part of us...and we can become the church, the religious community of which they might be a part.

What might we change if we design for them...choose music for them, hang art shows for them, create lectures and classes for them, projects for them to be involved in, prepare meals and parties for them...prayers for them...sing hymns for them?

How might our faith and freedom come together if we imagined this broader, deeper congregation of which we are already a part?

I hope there are three people here today who will be inspired by this vision of who we are and who we can be. We need a team to lead us toward our dream of justice and equality for all. Not outside our walls, but inside our hearts.

Tolerance, diversity, inclusion, equality, justice, compassion... these are the threads of our faith...these are the virtues, the values that we hold dear...let us hold to them as a thread that sustains us and leads us toward where we go from here.

May this thread of faith and freedom lead us home...to our dream.

So may it be.

Amen/Blessed Be