

Martin Luther King Sunday

READING AND SERMON

January 15, 2012

READING Excerpt from the Ware Lecture given on May 18, 1966 at General Assembly in Hollywood Florida by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

I would like to use as a subject the church remaining awake during a great revolution. I'm sure that each of you has read that arresting little story from the pen of Washington Irving entitled *Rip Van Winkle*. One thing that we usually remember about the story of Rip Van Winkle is that he slept twenty years. But there is another point in that story which is almost always completely overlooked: it is the sign on the inn of the little town on the Hudson from which Rip went up into the mountains for his long sleep. When he went up, the sign had a picture of King George III of England. When he came down, the sign had a picture of George Washington, the first president of the United States. When Rip Van Winkle looked up at the picture of George Washington he was amazed, he was completely lost. He knew not who he was. This incident reveals to us that the most striking thing about the story of Rip Van Winkle is not merely that he slept twenty years, but that he slept through a revolution. While he was peacefully snoring up in the mountains a revolution was taking place in the world, that would alter the face of human history. Yet Rip knew nothing about it; he was asleep. One of the great misfortunes of history is that all too many individuals and institutions find themselves in a great period of change and yet fail to achieve the new attitudes and outlooks that the new situation demands. There is nothing more tragic than to sleep through a revolution. And there can be no gainsaying of the fact that a social revolution is taking place in our world today. We see it in other nations in the demise of colonialism. We see it in our own nation, in the struggle against racial segregation and discrimination, and as we notice this struggle we are aware of the fact that a social revolution is taking place in our midst. Victor Hugo once said that there is nothing more powerful in all the world than an idea whose time has come.

The idea whose time has come today is the idea of freedom and human dignity, and so all over the world we see something of freedom explosion, and this reveals to us that we are in the midst of revolutionary times. An older order is passing away and a new order is coming into being.

SERMON Lessons From The 60's

In many ways it is very hard for me as a white woman from the wilds of New England, to speak about the horrors that plagued the south during the civil rights uprisings of the 60's. I could not imagine what it must have been like to be born a second class citizen, with few rights and even less respect only because of the color of ones skin. Thankfully I grew up a Unitarian Universalist blessed by the teachings of my parents and my faith that encouraged me to think for myself... to observe, to question and to stand behind my UU generated convictions. In that respect I was a minority, growing up in a neighborhood and a community of those whose churches dictated their thinking... It was especially hard for me in school where my obtuse questions and verbal expressions of doubt were seldom answered or appreciated.

From my earliest years, my UU upbringing was quite apparent. Many of you of my generation may remember back to your elementary school days, days that were free from the worries of the world. Days when our greatest challenge was to do what we were told to do, or at the very least not to get caught if we disobeyed. To disagree with anyone over the age of 15, was always a losing battle- for we were just kids. Hey, what did we know, anyway?

Every morning we said the Pledge of Allegiance and read from the Bible, at least one psalm if not two. Every month we had a civil defense drill and that was the first time I remember getting really angry in school.

Not because of the disruption, as we all looked forward to anything that would break up the rigid schedule, but because it was a kind of comedy routine. Of course being warned that something bad was about to happen is wise, but scrambling under a wooden desk tucked up like a chicken in an egg was truly ridiculous, even to me who was just a kid.

We all knew about the BOMB and what it did. The memorial edition of Life Magazine showed us that. But hiding under a puny wooden desk? That would keep us safe? Excuse me? Besides, my teacher Mrs. Cook was a bit hefty and her reaction was always the same. When the siren sounded she'd jump straight up in the air and flap her arms like a chicken, let out one startled squeak and dive for her desk, but she never did quite fit and her caboose would stick out, kind of like a Saint Bernard hiding in a bird house! Her antics seldom preserved the seriousness of what we were doing as we were all smothering ourselves in our shirtsleeves and petticoats, trying not to laugh.

Well, after the 3rd or 4th drill of year I finally got up the courage to raise my hand and told the teacher just what I thought about the absurdity of our Air Raid drills and wondered out loud just how that would protect us?

For my efforts, I spent the rest of the morning in the corner, punished for questioning authority and my insolence. So from that day on I tolerated the exercise, kept my mouth shut and quietly fumed under my desk, the humor was gone... knowing that should a bomb hit the school I would be dead as a door nail. How ironic, I thought, to be crushed by my desk, the very fixture that was intended to save my life!

My discomfort around the Air Raid incident and not being heard, began to clarify itself even more to me with the onset of my second indelible childhood memory, which came from a photograph in Life Magazine. It was taken in a southern city park in either Memphis Tenn. or in Birmingham Alabama. There were two water fountains in the photograph plumbed side

by side to the same brick wall. One had a sign over it that said “WHITES” the second also had a sign, marked “COLORED.”

There was a long line of children trailing behind the “COLORED” drinking fountain. No one was in line at the fountain marked “WHITES.”

At the very end of the article that followed the photo was a quote in large type and I assume it was in response to a question like, “Why aren’t you using the empty fountain? The response read, “ CAUSE, MAM, WE DO WHAT WEE’S TOLD.”

They were tolerating a situation that should not be happening and in a small way just like I did when I asked a simple question and was punished. The difference was I had a support system for my needs and questions, and the resources for creating change. This little boy did not until Martin Luther King Jr. stepped forward.

I could not imagine what it must feel like to be denied such basic human comforts because of the color of ones skin. That photo really angered me and stayed with me, nagging in the back of my mind. What was so awful about black skin? What really confused me was the time, energy and money us waspy whites spent lying in the sun trying to darken our skin. Somehow that was considered beautiful, but being born with dark skin was not. I just could not wrap my head around the absurd discrepancy of values. There were no black children in my school or town to ask, I thought they must only grow black kids down south. Growing up in the very vanilla Northern suburbs it was very hard to understand any of the black/ white issues that were devastating the south.

In 1955 When Rosa Parks was arrested for simply sitting in a white seat and Martin Luther King became forefront in the news with the bus boycott, I found a way to be heard and got involved through my youth group at church. The merged Unitarian Universalist Association was not quite four years old when the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. sent an urgent telegram

to its Boston headquarters on March 7, 1965, asking religious leaders and concerned citizens to join him in Selma, Alabama.

We not only became familiar with the work of Martin Luther King, but wrote letters to him in support, we raised money for our ministers to join him in the march on Selma and at the reflecting pool in Washington.

Our Northern UU congregations and ministers became the biggest advocates for Civil Rights. I finally I felt someone was not only listening, but we were doing something critically important.

By being brought up a Unitarian Universalist in the 60's, one point was made very clear; just because we are not personally affected by an issue and not directly impacted, does not mean that we have permission to sit back and do nothing.

My faith taught me to never to stop asking questions, even when the answers are not readily forthcoming, and finally to trust and to pursue the gnawings of my conscience. Martin Luther King helped make that a reality.

During the intensity of the Civil Rights conflict, as each despicable event came into focus, with more violence and more deaths at the hands of bigots, my need to fight back, violence with violence, was transformed by the role modeling and actions of Dr. King:

He said:

“Do to us what you will and we will still love you. We cannot in all good conscience obey your unjust laws because non-cooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good. Throw us in jail and we will still love you. Threaten our children, bomb our homes, send your hooded perpetrators of violence into our communities at the midnight hours and drag us out on

some wayside road and beat us and leave us half dead;
and, as difficult as it is, we will still love you.

Send your propaganda agents around the nation and make it appear we are not fit morally, culturally or otherwise for integration and we will still love you. But be assured that we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer. And one day we will win our freedom.

We will not only win freedom for ourselves, we will so appeal to your heart and your conscience that we will win you in the process and our victory will be a double victory.”

I was a Junior in college Martin Luther King was assassinated. He had been true to his word, never lifting a hand to anyone and he died for his convictions. During those years, the most valuable lessons I came away with as a youth, were the teachings of my faith, and the support of my parents to act on my beliefs, which gave us all an outlet and a constructive path and a voice for our feelings, our anger, and our love- the most critical components of a spiritual self.

We created a route and a means for how to respond to life's joys as well as its unreasonable demands and meaningless injustices. We also learned that being a true UU is a lifelong pursuit and then we were up to the challenge. We loved believed in what Martin Luther King stood for and had we been able we would have walked with him. For those ministers who came back without The Rev. James Reeb, a white UU minister who was bludgeoned to death in Selma in 1965 there was much sadness and many tears when Dr. King gave his eulogy just 4 years before his own assassination.

King spent many hours with our UU Ministers, in our churches and with members of our congregations, teaching us the ways of love and non violence. After his death, in an interview with Coretta Scott King, The Reverend Rosemary Bray McNatt brought out this revealing insight as she wrote of their conversation.

During an hour of wide-ranging conversation, I mentioned to her that I was in seminary to become a Unitarian Universalist minister. What frankly surprised me was the look she gave me, one of respect and delight.

"Oh, I went to Unitarian churches for years, even before I met Martin," she told me, explaining that she had been, since college, a member of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, which was popular among Unitarians and Universalists. And Martin and I went to Unitarian churches when we were in Boston."

What surprised and saddened me most was what she said next. Though I am paraphrasing, the gist of it was this: "We gave a lot of thought to becoming Unitarian at one time, but Martin and I realized we could never build a mass movement of black people if we were Unitarian."

That is food for serious thought. Since Martin Luther Kings words and actions changed history, forty four years have passed. Our communities are now integrated with many races and ethnic traditions. On this day of remembrance as we move into the future, let us examine the lessons we have learned and the ways we have changed, or not, as we decide our mission and our purpose in the days to come.

So be it Amen.

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