

The Radical King  
A sermon by Rev. Steven Epperson  
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UCV

## Always it is easier to pay homage to prophets than to heed the direction of their vision.

(Rev. Clinton Lee Scott, Universalist minister, 1887-1985)

Had he lived, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. would have been 88 years old today. But as it is, in this all-too-often cruel world of ours, he was cut down before his fortieth birthday. I marvel and grieve at that. Marvel as well, that though he lived, ministered and died in the United States, we here in this nation, and this Sanctuary, do remember and commemorate him and his work. But then, upon receiving the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964, he came to discern that his mission was global in reach and importance; and so he lived and ministered. And we here today do bear this witness: in a deep way, he's our Rev. Martin as well.

One more thing about our communion with this man, and that is a Unitarian connection which we acknowledge, not in pride—how could we?—but humbly. A handful of Unitarians, including our own Arthur Hughes, responded to his call for support in March 1965 and traveled to Alabama. Two of them—Rev. James Reeb and Viola Liuzzo—were martyred there.

Two weeks after Rev. Reeb's death, and at the conclusion of the march from Selma to the steps of the state capitol building in Montgomery, Rev. King delivered one of those remarkable speeches whose words will outlive us all.

*Yes, we are on the move and no wave of racism can stop us. We are on the move now. The burning of our churches will not deter us. The bombing of our homes will not dissuade us. We are on the move now. The beating and killing of our clergymen and young people will not divert us. We are on the move now.... Like an idea whose time has come, not even the marching of mighty armies can halt us. We are moving to the land of freedom.*

And as he reached the climax of his remarks, his whole being expanding with emotion and conviction, his words rang out, four times quoting words written by Unitarians:

*I come to say to you this afternoon, however difficult the moment, however frustrating the hour, it will not be long, because "truth crushed to earth will rise again."* (William Cullen Bryant)

*How long? Not long because "no lie can live forever."*

*How long? Not long, because "you shall reap what you sow."*

*How long? Not long:*

*"Truth forever on the scaffold,*

*Wrong forever on the throne,*

*Yet that scaffold sways the future,*

*And, behind the dim unknown,*

*Standeth God within the shadow,*

*Keeping watch above his own."* (James Russell Lowell)

*How long? Not long, because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.*  
(Theodore Parker)

*How long? Not long, because:*

*"Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord;*

*He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored*

*He has loosed the fateful lightning of his terrible swift sword;*

*His truth is marching on."* (Julia Ward Howe)

Though he once considered it, Martin Luther King didn't become a Unitarian—he realized our sunny theology wasn't tragic and realistic enough to temper him for the crucible through which he would be severely tried; but there were a select few times, when our ancestors helped give him voice. And for that, I am grateful; grateful for that moment fifty-two years ago; grateful that it's not such a stretch for us to be remembering him here, today.

Recent polls in the United States indicate that Martin Luther King Jr. is one of the most admired persons of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A national holiday commemorates him; over 700 streets and plazas throughout the States and elsewhere bear his name. He is most remembered, perhaps, for his "I Have a Dream" speech delivered at the apex of the "March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom" before a half million people gathered before the Lincoln Memorial on August 28, 1963. We know and cherish these words:

*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...I have a dream where*

*little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls and walk together as sisters and brothers.*

*When we let freedom ring...from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black...and white..., Jews and gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, "Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!"*

It would take a stony heart not to thrill and assent to that dream. And truly, this is how we mostly remember the man: possessed of a forward looking spirit of peace, amity, and universal kinship.

But here's the thing: during his short life, he was not only divisive; more, he was, at the time of his assassination in April 1968, a deeply unpopular public figure with approval ratings similar to those of George W. Bush when he left office as President in 2009. On one flank were those who thought him not militant enough; on the other, those who found his increasingly outspoken criticism of systemic racism, militarism and economic injustice misguided, unpatriotic, dangerously provocative and counterproductive.

Indeed, after his speech "Beyond Vietnam—A Time to Break the Silence," which he had originally entitled "Why America May Go to Hell," delivered to 3000 people packed inside the Riverside Church in New York City on April 4, 1967—this was mere months before he delivered Canada's 1967 Massey lecture, and exactly one year before his death and the same year—after this speech, 168 major newspapers in the States denounced his remarks. And no wonder:

*"These are revolutionary times," he said. "All over the globe people are revolting against old systems of exploitation and oppression....It is a sad fact that, because of comfort, complacency...and our proneness to adjust to injustice, the Western nations that initiated so much of the revolutionary spirit of the modern world have now become the arch anti-revolutionaries....."*

*"I am convinced that if we are to get on the [right] side of the world revolution, we must as a nation undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin the shift from a 'thing-oriented' society to a 'person oriented' society. When machines and computers, profit*

*motives and property rights are considered more important than people, [then] the giant triplets of racism, materialism and militarism are incapable of being conquered.*

*“A true revolution of values will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies. On the one hand we are called to play the good Samaritan on life’s roadside; but that is only an initial act....We must come to see that the whole Jericho road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life’s highway. True compassion is not haphazard and superficial. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars need restructuring. A true revolution of values will look uneasily on the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth.*

*“With righteous indignation, it will look across the seas and see...the West investing huge sums of money in Asia, Africa and South America, only to take the profits out with no concern for the social betterment of the countries, and say: ‘That is not just’....The true revolution of values will lay hands on the world order and say of war: ‘This way of settling differences is not just.’*

*“ This business of burning human beings with napalm, of filling our nation’s homes with orphans and widows, of injecting poisonous drugs of hate in the veins of people normally humane, of sending men home from dark and bloody battlefields physically handicapped and psychologically deranged, cannot be reconciled with wisdom, justice and love. A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death....I watched the real promise of hope...the new beginnings of our [anti]Poverty Program... broken and eviscerated as if it were some idle plaything of a society gone mad on war...”*

*“There is nothing, except a tragic death wish....to keep us from molding a recalcitrant status quo with bruised hands until we have fashioned it into a brotherhood.....Let us love one another, for love is God and everyone that loveth is born of God...if we love one another, God dwelleth in us, and his love is perfected in us.”*

And then, King reached back once again, as he had in Montgomery, Alabama, two years before, to echo the words of the Unitarian minister and poet James Russell Lowell, to bring this iconic, radical speech of April 4, 1967 to a close:

Once to every soul and nation/Comes the moment to decide,  
In the strife of truth and falsehood/For the good or evil side....  
Though the cause of evil prosper/Yet tis truth alone is strong;

Though her portion is the scaffold/And upon the throne be wrong;  
Yet that scaffold sways the future/And behind the dim unknown,  
Standeth God within the shadow/Keeping watch above his own.

*“Once to every soul and nation/Comes the moment to decide...”?*

Well, the nation pretty much decided in that moment: three quarters of people polled in the US turned against King after the “Beyond Vietnam” speech, including 55% of those in the Afro-American community. Response by opinion leaders in the media was damning: *Life* magazine called the speech "demagogic slander that sounded like a script for Radio Hanoi, the *New York Times* called it wasteful and self-defeating, and the *Washington Post* declared that King had "diminished his usefulness to his cause, his country, and his people." Lyndon Johnson revoked an invitation to King to visit the White House; and previous friends and colleagues in the civil rights movement like Roy Wilkins, Whitney Young and Ralph Bunche repudiated his insistence on the connection and interrelationship of racism, militarism, violence and economic injustice.

We are so accustomed to hearing King’s dream of a colour blind America that we forget radical aspects of his thinking, his heart and his deeds—that, and his own intense, personal struggle to place his dream of what he called a “radical revolution of values” squarely on the stage of his times, and ours. I want to return to the beginning of the “Beyond Vietnam” speech to drive this home.

*“A time comes when silence is betrayal.... The truth of these words are beyond doubt, but the mission to which they call us is a most difficult one. Even when pressed by the demands of truth, we do not easily assume the task of opposing our government’s policies, especially in time of war. Nor does the human spirit move without great difficulty against all of the apathy of conformist thought within one’s own bosom and in the surrounding world. Moreover when the*

*issues at hand seem as perplexing as they often do in the case of this dreadful conflict we are always on the verge of being mesmerized by uncertainty: but we must move on.*

*“Some of us who have already begun to break the silence of the night have found that the calling to speak is often a vocation of agony, but we must speak. We must speak with all the humility that is appropriate to our limited vision, but we must speak...and move beyond the prophesying of smooth patriotism to the high grounds of a firm dissent based upon the mandates of conscience and the reading of history.*

*“Over the past two years, as I have moved to break the betrayal of my own silences and to speak from the burnings of my own heart...many persons have questioned me about the wisdom of my path....Peace, [economic justice] and civil rights don't mix, they say. Aren't you hurting the cause of your people, they ask. And when I hear them...I am...greatly saddened, for such questions mean that [they] have not really known me, my commitment or my calling. Indeed, their questions suggest that they do not [even] know the world in which they live.”*

On that April night in New York City, Rev. King was introduced by Abraham Joshua Heschel, a Jewish refugee from Nazi Germany, who was one of the foremost theologians, scholars and mystics of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Heschel had marched from Selma to Montgomery arm-in-arm with Rev. King. He said of that occasion: “I was praying with my feet.” When he introduced King to a Rabbinical Assembly ten days before Martin's assassination, Heschel said this: “Where in America do we hear a voice like the voice of the prophets of Israel? Martin Luther King, Jr. is a voice, a vision and a way. The whole future of America will depend on the impact and influence of Dr. King.”

Abraham Heschel was unusually qualified to use that expression: “like the voice of the prophets of Israel.” His magisterial book on the ancient Hebrew prophets began with a chapter seeking to answer the question: “what manner of person is the prophet?” Its first sentence reads: “This book is about some of the most disturbing people who have ever lived.” And then Heschel goes on to describe the salient characteristics of ancient prophets that would explain how

disturbing, how maladjusted and how essential they were to ancient Israel; and how they continue to confront, provoke and inspire. “The prophets, he wrote, “endure and can only be ignored at the risk of our own despair.”

They were iconoclastic, austere and compassionate; they were lonely and miserable, fearless in opposition to coalitions of callousness and authority, intolerant of oppression, and certain that they were messengers of a mysterious, righteous and grieving God. They were, in a memorable phrase: tuned “one octave too high”—persons “who knew more about [and felt acutely] the secret obscenity of sheer unfairness [and] the unnoticed malignancy of established patterns of indifference.” Their ears heard the “silent sigh” of the world and its people. Along with censure and critique, they were also persons of hope. Behind their austerity is love and compassion. The prophet is sent to “strengthen the weak hands and make firm the feeble knees.”

(see Heschel, *The Prophets*, Harper & Row, Publishers, 1962, pp. 3-26; and Is. 35:3)

On the one hand, with breathtaking fierceness, they would say to those revelling in power, wealth and empire:

*Behold, the nations are like a drop from a bucket,  
And are accounted as the dust on the scales...  
All the nations are as nothing...,  
They are accounted by [the Divine] as less than nothing and emptiness.* (Is 40:15, 17)

And on the other, simply, powerfully, they implore us to “seek justice, undo oppression; defend the fatherless...defend the rights of the needy.... To the thirsty bring water, Meet the fugitive with bread...For they have fled from...drawn swords...and from the press of battle. (Jer. 5: 27-8; Is 1: 17; 21: 14-15)

“What manner of person is [a] prophet,” Heschel asks. “Instead of dealing like a philosopher with timeless issues of being and becoming, of matter and form...a prophet is thrown into orations about widows and orphans, about the corruption of judges and affairs of the marketplace. Instead of showing us a way through the elegant mansions of the mind, the

prophets take us to the slums.... To us, injustice is injurious to the welfare of the people; to the prophets it is a deathblow to existence; to us an episode; to them, a catastrophe, a threat to the world.” (Heschel, 3-4)

When Abraham Heschel introduced Rev. King and called him like one of the prophets of Israel, he knew full well, and better than most, the full measure and the radical nature of King’s calling and work; knew that Rev. King had moved on from the causes of Southern integration and voting rights to the volcanic issues of economic redistribution, segregated housing, and anti-war activism; knew that he had become unrelenting and fearless in attacking racism, poverty and militarism.

In the last three years of his life, though it was, as he called it, a “vocation of agony,” and came at the cost of constant surveillance, threats to himself and his family, the massive loss of public support, and ultimately his death, King pressed forward with calls for a radical redistribution of economic power: a living wage, enactment of a guaranteed income, universal health care, and funding for the construction of 500,000 affordable housing units per year; as well as an end to US support for oppressive regimes abroad and for the end to the US war against Vietnam.

In early 1968, King said, “For years I laboured with the idea of reforming the existing institutions of society, a little change here, a little change there. Now I feel quite differently. I think you’ve got to have a reconstruction of the entire society, a revolution in values....the solution is to confront the power structure massively.... Human salvation lies in the hands of the creatively maladjusted.”

As we honour him today, may we remember the radical King; and, that far from being a disorder, being maladjusted to society is a necessary condition for its redemption.

