

## **A Religion for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Transformative**

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I am sure all of you were as shocked as I was at the unexpected violence that occurred in Tucson Arizona last week. Politically motivated violence is something we are used to seeing in other countries. It is still a shock to us Americans when it happens among our own people.

I am not one who believes that Sara Palin pulled the trigger in Tucson. We could no sooner blame JD Salinger for the death of John Lennon, or Jodi Foster for the shooting of Ronald Reagan. However it is hard to deny that there is an increasingly violent rhetoric that contributes to some deranged people thinking violence is OK. Sometime in the 80s movies like First Blood and Iron Eagle put a spin on America's involvement in the world. Influenced by Vietnam and the hostage situation in Iran, a new mentality started to take shape. We need to solve more problems with violence and fewer words and negotiations. Actually this isn't really new; it was just a resurgence of a particularly

nasty and bloody penchant for solving problems with guns that exists in the American psyche, both collectively and in some cases individually.

Although it has a conservative pro-gun bent to it these days, we must remember that political violence was popular among the left for a while too. You could trace it back to John Brown attempting to start a slave riot on the eve of the Civil War. But certainly some of the violence of groups like the Black Panthers, showed that political violence among the left was alive and well in the sixties. Having not lived through that time, I can't comment too extensively on it. But it is worth observing that history tends to deal a lot harsher with the groups who used violence than the ones who practiced peace resistance.

This brings us, of course, to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., whose birthday we will celebrate tomorrow. King eschewed the temptation to react violently to oppression. Indeed, in many ways this is his defining characteristic. He was no less outspoken about the injustice he saw around him or the oppression he experienced firsthand. However the religious genius of Martin Luther King was that he saw how reacting to violence with more violence is a progressive cycle that leads nowhere. From a very pragmatic point of view, violence just didn't work as a tool of ending oppression and institutional racism. Gandhi provided to be an example in this case. For both King and Gandhi non-violent means accomplished effective political ends. It still confronted the oppressor with their act, and shamed them into changing. Violence only makes the

oppressor more defensive and resistant. It is astounding how quickly we have forgotten this lesson as a society. Hence the violence in Arizona.

A while ago I was counseling a colleague of mine who is going through some conflict with a member of her Board. Not the whole church mind you, just one key lay leader. She and I went through seminary together, and she was calling up old friends asking for advice. This conflict she is in isn't violent, obviously, but the tension between her and this man in her church reaches the boiling point at times. "It is just so hard," she told me one day, "to even be in the same room together. What can I do?"

These kinds of situations are difficult, especially when it is with a minister. Church can be like an extension of our family, and it is not easy for anyone when there is such deep discord and distrust in a house normally filled with love and compassion for each other. I am no wise seer when it comes to these sorts of things, so I gave her just some simple advice. "Just talk to him. Be in the same room together. Be in dialogue together; you don't have to make yourself emotionally vulnerable. But you do have to be in relationship together. That bond of minister and congregant can be strained but at the end of the day you are his minister. His soul is in your care, even and especially in those moments when he is interfering with you caring for him."

Easy to for me to say, I guess. But follow my advice she did. She stayed in communication with this fellow, at least throughout his time on the Board. It was no fun. In the beginning it was all she could do to stand his presence. He would critique everything, down to the minutia. Nothing was good enough for him. As time went on, he wore down. Slowly and gradually his venom began to at least ebb a bit. I am not sure it ended entirely. Eventually this man left the Board, but stayed in the church.

She stayed in relationship with him, even when it was hard. My friend's ability to be in the presence of her enemy took tremendous courage. Courage to stay connected but not simply roll over and appease the person or party you are having the conflict with requires a great deal of spiritual maturity. In addition to being our theme for the month of January, courage is the foundation of non-violent resistance. Martin Luther King stayed in relationship with the oppressor. He actually cared about that person's inner life, and their transformation from a person filled with hate to one filled with love. He felt that non-violent resistance brought that out in people, and slowly, one person at a time, love would begin to spread throughout the land. Violence, quite obviously, cuts off relationships. It is a coward's way to solve problems.

So often we mistake being in relationship with glossing over differences and hiding real problems. This is not the case. The trick is to balance confrontation with connection. We know as Unitarian

Universalists about the interdependent web of existence of which we are all a part. We have no choice—we are connected to people who are dictators and evil doers. Yet we are also called to stand up and speak out against such oppressive actions. The prophet Amos in today’s reading is our example here. King would often draw heavily from the book of Amos. Amos was a prophet of Israel who called his people to behave at a higher standard. He was not merely an advocate of Yahweh being the only God, he was also calling them to treat each other with justice and morality. He was confronting power with love. That is why he inspired Dr. King. Amos points the way to another feature of the religion for the twenty-first century; it must be transformative. It needs to confront injustice. It must be courageous. And at the same time it needs to stay in relationship with the rest of the culture and not run away and hide in some enclave somewhere. The Benedictines are the religion of the second century; the Amish the religion of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. We are called to be the religion of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and therefore we cannot hide from the rest of the culture. But that does not mean going along with everything we see. Dr. King taught us that we can be the leaven which makes the dough rise. That is why we speak those words in our Unison Affirmation to “Challenge injustice with courage.”

When I was young I used to attend a number of Martin Luther King lunches commemorating him and telling the story of his life and the struggles of African American people from then until today. This

was quite educational for a kid raised in a mostly white middle class environment. Of course what I did not really understand at the time was that Martin Luther King Day was a relatively novel thing. These lunches were acknowledging a history and a story rarely told in public among racially mixed groups. This was undoubtedly a good thing.

Recently though, a new way has emerged to remember Dr. King: the day of service. This year we will join with our friends up in Germantown Pennsylvania and other Philadelphia area UU congregations to serve the community on Dr. King's birthday. The plan is to do this a year or two up there, and then start our own day of service locally. I saw this past week in the News Journal that the city of Wilmington is doing something similar. Instead of taking out the bust of Martin Luther King, dusting it off, and then putting it back for another year, we will follow his example and do what he would have wanted us to do on his birthday. No better way to remember someone's legacy than to emulate them. It keeps his spirit alive in us and in our community. Doing the day of service practice also helps to grow our own faith into that religion of the twenty-first century that is transformative.

Ours can be a transformative faith at many levels. In our reading today Dr. King speaks of this very clearly. Certainly religion can be transformative at the national level as Dr. King's was. It is hard to do that though as a single individual. Institutions are what make a

difference on the national scene. Even at the international level you see institutions like UUSC, whom we are also celebrating this Sunday, ensure that Unitarian Universalism is a transformative religion throughout the world. Closer to home ours can be a transformative religion at the individual level too. Simply getting together and rolling up your sleeves and doing something for someone on a free day off once a year, can transform their lives and it can transform yours in the process.

As many of you know last summer a number of Unitarian Universalists went to Phoenix Arizona to protest the racist immigration laws that were past there last year. Fortunately a judge overturned the key provisions in that law the day before they were to go into effect. (The judge—Michigan Law School class of '65 thank you very much!) A good friend of mine, and another colleague, Jim decided to go down to Arizona last July. It was pretty much sweltering heat. He told me that that whole dry heat thing is nonsense! Jim serves a church in the Midwest, and at General Assembly last June immigration was the hot topic. You could not get away from it. Word among some of the people I knew was that there was going to be a good old fashioned smack down on the floor of General Assembly, Unitarian Universalism meets the WWE, over whether or not we would have the 2012 GA in Phoenix. But a funny thing happened on the way to our big floor fight. The people who wanted to boycott Phoenix, and the people who wanted us to

go and protest, got together and they talked behind the scenes. They worked through their differences and came up with a third way that both of them could live with. GA will happen in Phoenix but without the opulence that normally accompanies it. There will be minimum business and workshops and more time spent out in the local community working for immigrants rights and anti-profiling issues.

Well my friend Jim was so taken by this non-violent, peaceful resolution brought about by Unitarian Universalists who stayed in relationship with each other, but still had the courage to confront the hard truths that separated them, that he felt he had to do more. He was moved, he went so far as to say he was “called,” to do more. So Jim cut short the family vacation, and went down to Arizona.

There Unitarian Universalism was in full force. People were arrested, Jim was not among them, but he saw it. He witnessed it happen. And even though this was the day after the judge’s ruling, the protests went forward regardless. They held the same fervor and power that they would have with everything at stake. For you see, it wasn’t just about what got passed or what got overturned. For Jim it was a call to action that he heard and took up.

That was the kicker really. That his faith called him to do something other than gaze at his navel. It called him to do something a little scary, a bit outside of his comfort zone. Jim isn’t really a social

justice guy per se. But he told me he just couldn't go back to his congregation and look them in the eye with his authentic self intact and call himself their minister if he did not respond to that call somehow. At some level it was not about the effectiveness of the protest for him, it was about who he was and how he lived his faith in the world. Even doing a small thing can transform us if it resonates with our soul. For it is in that moment when we understand that religion is more than a set of philosophical ideals that one gives their intellectual assent to. Rather religion is the truth that you live your life by. It goes beyond knowing to actually doing or not doing something because you are called by God or by your innermost conscious to do it. That takes real courage.

For it is when we follow that deep stir of the soul, and we have the courage to let it burst forth into the world in some concrete way that our faith becomes transformative. Martin Luther King pointed the way with his Amos-like vision for our nation. It was a quantum leap forward in the spiritual life of America. And now one hundred and fifty years after the start of the Civil War, an African American man is President of the United States. 150 years is too long, granted, but that we have arrived at this point at all, given where we started, is something to celebrate and to take note. Even the most fantastic and seemingly unrealistic dreams can come to reality if we nurture a faith that is transformative.

Whether the issue is GLBT rights, signing up for the day of service that Allies for Racial Justice is having tomorrow, or some other thing

that moves your heart and calls to your soul, go and do that thing. It may be as small as writing another check to the UUSC before you turn in that box for the year, or it might mean going to Germantown instead of to the movies tomorrow. Whatever it is, make sure that it reflects your heart's deep yearning and is consistent with the values you proclaim as sacred. It may not be easy, but courage never is.

May ours become the transformative faith of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. May we not only remember Dr. King but live by the example he set. And may justice roll down like water and peace like an ever flowing stream. Amen Blessed Be.