

Free at Last

Delivered to the First Unitarian Church of Wilmington Delaware

January 15, 2012

By Rev. Dr. Joshua Snyder

It all started because I forgot to go to the bank. I was in a hurry, rushing to the airport last fall to attend a meeting of the Unitarian Universalist Minister Association, of which I am the Treasurer. This was my first full meeting of the national organization, and it was taking place in Phoenix Arizona. If I missed this flight it would be hours until the next one.

So I was rushing to get to the airport. It seems I can never get to the airport too early, ever since they changed the security rules, the lines seem to rival the Great Wall of China. In my haste I forgot to swing by the bank. There was a check I had meant to cash, about \$80 for walking around money in Phoenix. Surely there is a bank somewhere in the airport.

There isn't. At least none I could find, nor any that the people at the information desk knew about. I had rushed and rushed to get to the airport, only to find that I was extraordinarily early and now I am in hurry-up-and-wait mode. While there was no bank in the airport, the

information folks did point out to me one of those check cashing places that you see on TV. I had never been to one of those places before, but I figured I would check it out since I had the time and I really would like that \$80.

I went up to the counter and spoke with the woman behind the glass. As is the case with some banks, this woman was behind a Plexiglas shield. I told her I was a rookie at this process and asked if she could explain how it all worked. The fee was extraordinary—something like 17% to cash the check and part of it would come in the form of a debit card which I could only use with that check cashing company. There was even a first time check casher's fee which would be applied. I was incredulous! I politely took my check back and made my way to the gate. I walked away without my \$80.

When I got back, I told my Dad about this. My Dad worked at a bank for about 30 years. He too was shocked at the terms of this deal. And while he and I were speaking, I came to realize the privileged nature of my position. While I don't exactly roll up to the church in a Ford Mustang, I do have the means to put my money in a bank. Not everyone can. My check was basically an "extra" \$80; the source of my next meal was not dependent on me getting that check cashed in that moment. I could walk away when I didn't like the terms of the arrangement.

For many, those options simply aren't there. Furthermore being placed in a position in which one cannot choose keeps people in a system of poverty. The check cashing company perpetuates that system by gouging those who can't go elsewhere. They are not alone in doing this of course. My favorite is the cash for gold people. Where they try to convince you to mail them your gold and then they will mail you the money. Even a kid on the playground who is trading marbles with his friends knows not to give away his marbles without first getting the others in exchange. Its schemes like this that preys off people's desperation in financially difficult times.

Our economic system is dramatically different than it was in the days when Dr. King was preaching the sermon that was our modern reading this morning. At the time he had just struck a significant blow to segregation in the South. He was beginning to see the commonalities of oppression not just among African American people but among all people who suffered from the life-draining effects of poverty.

What King hints at in this sermon, but says more explicitly elsewhere, is that we are not separate from each other. Racism and poverty and war and environmental damage and political corruption and homophobia are all connected to each other in complex ways. From a distance they may appear separate but up close they are the same. The high toxicity levels in housing projects as a result of industrial waste disposal is an issue that touches both racial and environmental justice.

The problem is one no matter how you choose to categorize it. Be it a race issue or an environmental issue, it is still a major problem that hundreds of inner city youth are exposed to higher than average amounts of radiation and industrial waste simply because of where they can play. It isn't Jim Crow segregation, but the effects are just as evil.

The first step toward addressing these problems, of course is recognizing them. We have to be able to see and understand how we are connected to each other and to people who are suffering. That is the first step; but it cannot be the last. As religious people we need to engage beyond the comfort of rational discussion and debate of the issue and move toward experiencing and feeling and empathizing as much as we possibly can. We could all have a very analytical dissection of the problems facing our country during our coffee hour, but we won't do anything about it until we feel it in our bones and our hearts break for the people right around the corner from us.

That was the lesson I heard in our Ancient Reading this morning. I really liked that story told by the Kalahari Bushmen in east Africa about the origin of the world. It has a kind of Adam and Eve vibe to it in a way. In the beginning we were all connected to each other, men, women, people of different races, animals—we could all speak the same language. “But when the sun disappeared fear entered the hearts of the people. They could no longer see each other as they lacked the eyes of the animals which were capable of seeing in the dark. They lacked the

warm fur of the animals also and soon grew cold.” Cold, afraid and in the dark. Notice that it was only after they lit the fire that the separation between humans and animals and each other finally came about. They may have felt cold and darkness but they were actually all connected together. What if they had spoken to the animals at that point and leaned on them for help? Instead humans became separate and individual.

Individualism was the ultimate virtue to our spiritual ancestors. Emerson wrote whole essays devoted to praising the individual. He encouraged people to strike out on their own and not to follow the group-think of a herd mentality. His language can be very empowering, and that is why is quoted so often in the self-help movement. But as the two centuries that have intervened between him and us have shown, individualism can go too far. We have taken things to the extreme. Bowling alone is far more popular than forming a league. The internet gives us tremendous advantages in connecting to each other virtually, but in real life it is all done by a single individual experiencing this virtual reality through the portal of a screen. In so many ways it is like that fire in the story. They lit the fire because they were lonely and even though they could see, they became more separate. So too are we.

I believe that we have real power to effect change only when we work together in community. As isolated individuals, as much fun as it might be to do your own thing in your own way and be accountable to no one, the fact is that we become like the proverbial herd of cats that all

take off in their own direction. Acting in concert around a common goal or vision makes it possible to truly change things. The civil rights movement grew out of the experience of the African American church in the South. Obviously it was not limited to that institution, it grew beyond it, but civil rights would not have been possible without the church. I don't mean that the language could have been different or the symbols they used could have been different. Surely it could have been. And yes other cultures, institutions, and religions have created their own versions of the civil rights movement in their respective countries. When I say church I am referring less to the theological beliefs of any given denomination. What I mean when I say the civil rights movement could not have come about without the African American church I am referring more to the church as a community of people who are committed to each other. You see you can't be a Unitarian Universalist just by reading about it in a book. I could give you every book in my library on William Ellery Channing, the father of Unitarianism, have you read them all, and you would still not be a Unitarian Universalist. The ideas are a part of it, but it's the community of a church that makes it real. You are not a Unitarian Universalist until you have come into a building with other people. When you have scooted past them on the pews, snaked through them at coffee hour to make your way to get a doughnut, or sat through their boring committee meetings. You are a member of a church when you have laughed, argued, and cried with the

same group of people week in and week out. You are a Unitarian Universalist when you love the people here not in spite of your frustrations with others but because of them. When you get to that level of commitment then you are patient with the rugged individualist sitting next to you no matter how bone-headed you think his path may be. You still love him, and one day you realize he loves you too despite the fact, or maybe because of the fact, that you are gay, straight, black, white, rich, poor, Republican or Democrat. Only in a committed religious community are we able to develop the spiritual practices of patience, understanding and love. Then Unitarian Universalism is not words on a page of a book or a pamphlet, but the way we live and treat each other every week and every day.

So when you take a group of people who have a deep commitment to each other and to the mission and purpose of their church, their beloved institution, then you have perhaps the most powerful force on earth. People are supported in community to keep moving forward toward the goal long after they would have given up had they been on their own. “Keep your eyes on the prize” as the saying went. That is why institutions like the church, the school, the community organization, have far more power than if all those people were Emersonian individualists. I don’t need to prove it to you because history has already proven that the most oppressed people in America in the 1960s

could change centuries of injustice by organizing together. It happened. It can happen again.

In fact it is happening now. Last year at this time a group of us went up to Germantown in Philadelphia to work with our fellow Unitarian Universalists on the Martin Luther King Day of service. Our Allies for Racial Justice group sponsored the team from our church that went up there; I would say perhaps twenty or so of us. Pretty much everyone who went was assigned to a project of some kind. I had the privilege of following the minister of the Germantown church around that morning. Kent Matthias and I are friends from literally my prospective student visit at seminary. When he and I greet each other we call each other “brother.” I don’t even do that with my own brother!

Kent and I roamed from site to site doing trouble shooting. We checked in at various places to make sure A. People actually showed up! B. the folks in charge were relatively pleased with the volunteer work they were getting. For you see the places he and I went were Boys and Girls Clubs of Philadelphia. They were community centers. Occasionally they were just streets where folks were picking up trash, but by and large the Martin Luther King Day of Service was not the work of a single church. It was not even the work of the seven Philadelphia area UU churches that officially sponsor it. It was the partnership of a whole network of institutions, secular and religious, coming together to try and make life a little better for at least a few

folks. There were even corporate sponsors. Like in the African story, the connections may not be visible but they are there.

Martin Luther King Jr. is famous for having quoted the spiritual in his I have a Dream speech that goes, “Free at last, free at last, thank God Almighty I am free at last.” Freedom is one of those words that means a lot of things to a lot of people and it is easy to get confused. Freedom, in this context, does not mean the extreme forms of isolated individualism that Emerson praised. Rather King is referring to freedom in the sense that one can make choices without fear. I could walk away from the check cashing place in the airport with my check in hand, grab a sandwich and a coffee, and barely note the experience as I boarded the plane. However under the oppressive heel of poverty and racism one can still make choices in the existential sense, but it is not without a deep sense of dread for the consequences. We are not “free” until no one experiences that deep level of fear. In Dr. King’s words, “Let us march on poverty until no American parent has to skip a meal so that their children may eat. March on poverty until no starved man walks the streets of our cities and towns in search of jobs that do not exist. Let us march on poverty until wrinkled stomachs in Mississippi are filled, and the idle industries of Appalachia are realized and revitalized, and broken lives in sweltering ghettos are mended and remolded.” That is the dream made real.

This year we are not going up to Germantown, but rather starting our own tradition of a Martin Luther King Day of Service right here in Wilmington. We are the official church for the city's Day of Service activities. We are partnering with groups such as the UU Fellowship of Newark, the DuPont Diversity Choir and the YWCA of Delaware. Those are powerful institutions coming together to effect change. We should be proud of the work we will be doing tomorrow and especially grateful to the work of the Allies for Racial Justice Team for leading us. Together we don't need to build a fire to feel connected; the fire lies in the passion of the work we do when we are committed to each other.

May it be so today, tomorrow, and always, so that the memory and legacy of Martin Luther King shall forever live on. Amen Blessed Be.