

On NOT Honoring Martin Luther King

*Sermon by Rev. Ken Jones, delivered January 20, 2019
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(Traveling Black History exhibit.)

I sometimes feel like Martin Luther King Day is our most important national holiday.

I also sometimes feel – especially as a professional Unitarian Universalist Minister – that Martin Luther King Day is our most important religious and spiritual holiday as well. This may be, in part, because of my somewhat ambivalent feelings about the Christmas holiday season which we just braved together. Think about it: after we upend pretty much everything in our daily routines for a couple weeks to celebrate the birth of an historical figure from two thousand years ago, one who many of us aren't even sure existed or, if he did, was labeled a God by some of his more fanatical followers after his execution, and who speaks to us through ancient texts of dubious translation in mystical parables that we struggle to understand, let alone what any of it meant in historical context, now we have the opportunity to honor a more recent child of God who lived, breathed, and ministered in a world very much like our own – indeed, during the lifetimes of many of us here – who spoke eloquently and concretely about how we can strive to live a compassionate and genuine life and work to fight the injustice that exists in our very own day and community. Which one is more relevant to us Unitarian Universalists, who claim the relevant sources of our religious life are actual lived experiences rather than ancient texts? I sometimes wonder, given our national holiday and annual rites of praising and holding up Dr. King's life as exemplary, if

some council of religious leaders will sometime in the next couple of centuries decide that certain of his texts and those of his followers should be canonized into something akin to sacred collection, and then more followers millennia from now might read these texts and come to the conclusion that the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was – is – a god who was martyred and then rose from the dead to save the souls of all humanity.

I wonder.

But fanciful imagining aside, we can certainly make a case for our living tradition, which holds in our second source the “words and deeds of prophetic people which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love,” that a day honoring one of the most exemplary souls of this sort in recent times should be a pretty big deal, indeed.

But as I said, I’ve believed in recent years that this prioritization should hold not just as a religious observation for Unitarian Universalists, but as a civic holiday for all Americans. To embrace this, we need to acknowledge that Martin Luther King was not, indeed, a saint or a god, but a regular, in some aspects broken, human being, flaws and all. We can look back today and say he didn’t do enough to promote the leadership of women in his organization, nor advancing the cause of rights for LGBTQ people, etc. But within the context of his time, which is still very relevant to our own, it is clear that he is an exemplary person who embodied the principles of liberal democracy and advocated courageously for these principles to be embraced by all people for all people. And of course we can see and hold up that his prophetic witness was not just about removing

barriers for people of color – as important as that was, and still is in our time – but his work took him, quite logically, into the realms of economic justice and demilitarization at the same time all his work was firmly rooted in the process of nonviolent direct action. In all these areas, I believe that he is about as close as we can get to a modern prophet for our times, a national symbol of not just what this country was when it was founded two and a half centuries ago, but as one who holds up for us a vision of what we can yet become – a nation that more fully realizes and embraces the noble principles on which it was founded. I won't go so far as to say that his picture should be on our flag, but if it were on, say, a ten dollar bill I think that would be fitting – even though the anti-materialist in him would probably bristle at the thought.

Like I said, this is all in line with how I've felt about the annual Martin Luther King holiday for a number of years now, especially since I started working as a professional Minister. And yes, one thing I look forward to each year, on MLK weekend, is preaching a sermon about him and his work, holding up not only his worldly achievements, but also his spiritual and prophetic leadership. Similarly, I look forward each year to participating in many of the community-wide activities that mark this weekend, including the Community Worship Service held each year on Sunday afternoon, and the Community Peace March and program held on Monday. And of course I'm not alone – Ministers and other leaders in just about every church or house of worship in this country acknowledge our debt to this fallen hero, as just about every civic, government, and community organization also supports or sponsors some special recognition of Martin Luther King. And after all, we don't have any other

contemporary figure for whom we close federal and most local offices for a day.

So yes, this is all good. But I say all this to preface what I really want to talk about today: that this year, anyway, I'm feeling more troubled by this holiday than I am inspired; feeling less like joining the national euphoria of honoring the man Martin Luther King than usual. I think this feeling is arising in me for at least three reasons: 1) in light of how far away we are as a nation to actually fulfilling the dream that MLK fought for, it seems too distracting to focus on honoring him when he himself would probably counsel us to do otherwise, and 2) as a white person who still enjoys the undeserved privilege bestowed upon all white people, and the seeming increase in white people finding more creative ways to deny that we actually do enjoy such privileges, I feel as if this should be, if anything, a day to actually feel quite uncomfortable about the reality of the world I live in. It should be a day of difficulty – indeed, it should mark a calling into a more difficult life, and, finally, 3) it is too easy for me to pull out my well-worn copy of MLK's speeches and say something inspiring on this day every year, when I really need to be doing this – or something similar – every day.

On the first point, I'd like to say a few words about some of the community events we have here in Yakima honoring MLK. Many of you, like me, enjoy participating in the annual Community Peace March on Monday – the 34th this year. It is a wonderful event, often peppered with laughter, hugs, and other signs of camaraderie of those participating. We can feel good knowing that we are not just there to have fun, though, but also to come together as a community and make a statement about the

value of promoting justice and liberty for all people – as well as the other values King promoted such as peace and dignity for workers, even though efforts are made by the march organizers that it not be an overtly “political” message. Which is odd since Dr. King never shied away from making things “too political” to assuage people’s discomfort. Many of you also go to the community gathering at the Convention Center after the event, which is also intended to be inclusive of everyone not overtly political – and, in fact, very few politicians that I know of would object to the event because it is, more or less, obligatory in American politics to at least feign admiration for this prophet who was under continual surveillance by the FBI and other agencies for being too radical in his own time. Usually the gathering features many young people from schools around the area, which adds to the feeling of optimism and hope by promoting the image that we are raising our kids with King’s message of radical love and justice, so our future is in good hands.

I wonder, if he were alive today, if Martin Luther King would find these kinds of events inspirational, or even helpful? Or would he decry them as a distraction from the work we need to do?

Fewer of you attend the Community Worship Service on Sunday afternoon of this weekend (today’s is at Central Lutheran Church.) I usually do, as I will today as I’m participating in a small way as well. I go as an act of solidarity of sorts with my African American siblings in this community. I often find at least some aspects of this community worship troubling, in large part because it is a Christian worship service (not interfaith) and specifically Christian messages don’t really speak to me. But it seems like every time I attend, at some point during the service, between all the

gospel and patriotic songs and fiery preaching about salvation through Christ and the zealous prayers, while my head is holding my spirit back because I don't agree with the theology, I find the courage to just let go of that. It comes as I look around the room, and see all these people – mostly African-American, many older than I – worshipping to their hearts content, shouting out and dancing and yelling with complete abandon – like, I imagine, many of them do regularly in their own churches – but this time not just in their small community but in the presence of all their neighbors, including people like me. I usually imagine that many of these people don't feel, under “normal” circumstances, i.e. in majority-white situations, like they can let their guard down in this way and be their true selves. Maybe this is their one chance to be seen for who they are in this community by their neighbors and not have to apologize for it. When that feeling comes to me, I usually feel grateful that I can be there, in spite of my discomfort at having to hear a bit more “Jesus is your savior” than I normally feel comfortable with, just so I can say to my neighbors “I see you, and I can put aside my privilege and comfort for a few hours once a year to meet you in your comfort zone.” It's one way that I attempt to say with my presence rather than my words, “yes, Black Lives Matter.”

The real question, though, is why for only a couple hours once a year? I believe that many people of color have that feeling every day – maybe not about Jesus per se, but of being a stranger in the room, having to speak and act carefully so as not to offend or make waves, and maybe often feeling discomfort at having to be more of a spectator rather than a participant. If my siblings of color have to experience that every day, it is

the least I can do to expose myself to it as well when I can. If nothing else, it's a learning experience for me.

I also realize, upon reflecting on the community worship service, that it is perhaps one answer to that first objection I raised about the MLK holiday: that we should really focus not on the man, but on the work he undertook and, unfortunately, bequeathed to us as unfinished business. I have come to realize that the community worship, by focusing on God and not on the man, does this in a way that is consistent with many African-American Christians in this country and city. I've come to see that for many of the participants, "God" can be thought of as that force of justice, compassion, and love that we speak of in our second principle. This is a time, they say, to focus not on one man, but on the one that is behind the bending of the moral arc of the universe toward justice. So when I hear the expressions of praise for God and Jesus, I interpret it this way – that we are gathered as a community to hold up and praise the force for love and justice that has the power to transform people's souls as well as our community.

One of the reasons, as I said, that I admire Dr. King so much and love pulling out my book of his writings at least once a year, is because of his holistic thinking – he connected the dots between racism, militarism, and materialism so well. He went against the counsel of many of his advisers when, in December 1967, he delivered his famous speech advocating for an end to the Vietnam War. He explained in that speech that when he and others founded the Southern Christian Leadership Conference ten years earlier they adopted as their motto "To save the soul of America." "We were convinced," he said, "that we could not limit our

vision to certain rights for black people, but instead affirmed the conviction that American would never be free or saved *from itself* unless the descendants of its slaves were loosed completely from the shackles they still wear” (emphasis added.) As he also famously said in that speech “I am convinced that if we are to get on the right side of the world revolution, we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values...When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered.”

I am not the first liberal white person to find inspiration in these words, and others of his advocating for peace, economic justice, and a more person-oriented society. I admire Dr. King for being a prophet for all people who yearn for a more humane world, not “just” a civil rights leader advocating for his “own” people. I believe this is true, yet in some way when people like me hold him up this way, it is a bit like responding to the claim “Black Lives Matter” by saying “All Lives Matter.” That is, it may be true, but it is also a convenient and easy way for a white person to bypass the very difficult task of earnestly and realistically seeing and trying to feel how it is to live as a person of color in our society. As our nation and our community gives our annual obligatory salute to this man who seemed too radical in his time to be trusted and today is the focus of all sorts of adulation, I hope we can all feel some of the discomfort that he must have lived with, his family and friends certainly lived with, his siblings of color today still live with; the discomfort that drove him to challenge the status quo at considerable cost.

The kind of discomfort I am feeling today was brought into sharp focus this weekend as I – after some deliberate hesitation – watched that viral video of young white teenagers bullying a Native American elder at the conclusion of an Indigenous People’s March in Washington DC on Friday. It is discomfort I get from looking closely at the lead taunter’s face and seeing in it the power and privilege of centuries of white supremacy made manifest. He was just a boy, by all rights he should be bowing to the elder in respect, but his mind has been poisoned by a legacy that has taught him that he is better than others, he is more worthy than others, just by the nature of who he is and the color of his skin. It would simply be pathetic and sad that one small group of boys suffers from such delusions, but it is a much greater tragedy since this is not isolated. I’m sure we’ll hear plenty of denouncements about this particular incident, about how this particular group of kids were “bad apples” that took their ideology “too far” and need to be disciplined. But I recognize the look on that boy’s face as something far more common, and far more sinister. It was and is the arrogance of white supremacy that has not died five decades after Martin Luther King’s death, and, it can be argued, is rising again in prominence and social acceptance to a level not seen since before the Civil Rights Movement. It is the arrogance that gives people the notion that they – we – have a right to build a wall across two thousand miles of natural ecosystems in order to try to control the movements of people of color.

Feeling this discomfort, I want to close with a quote from Martin Luther King, and rather than trying to wrap up with some inspirational words about faith and love and community that might allow us all to feel better at this point in time in our lives, leave his words to speak alone in

these troubling times. These words are from a speech he delivered to the NAACP in 1956 – near the beginning of his public ministry, and as such I believe give lie to the myth that it was only in his later years that he connected the dots between the major issues of his day.

But I say to you, my friends, as I move to my conclusion, there are certain things in our nation and in the world which I am proud to be maladjusted and which I hope all men of good-will will be maladjusted until the good societies realize. I say very honestly that I never intend to become adjusted to segregation and discrimination. I never intend to become adjusted to religious bigotry. I never intend to adjust myself to economic conditions that will take necessities from the many to give luxuries to the few. I never intend to adjust myself to the madness of militarism, to self-defeating effects of physical violence...

In other words, I'm about convinced now that there is need for a new organization in our world. The International Association for the Advancement of Creative Maladjustment--men and women who will be as maladjusted as the prophet Amos. Who in the midst of the injustices of his day could cry out in words that echo across the centuries, "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream."



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