

Are Unitarian Universalists Ready for Dr. King... Yet?"

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Sermon:

Come. We come into this community carrying life in our arms
amidst the rumors of death

We come. Calling out to everyone who will listen

It is time for us all to move into another century

Time for freedom and racial and sexual and religious and political justice

Time for women and children and men to know unity

Time to explore a new sense of belonging

Time to exercise a new kind of community

Time for hands unbound

Time for healing old wounds

Time for a new life

We come into this community carrying life in our arms

Amidst rumors of death.

Come. In this last couple months I have talked to a good number of people who have heard a call to come. A good many of them heard the call long before they even knew this place existed. They simply heard a call to find a way out of their isolation. They heard a call to find a place where they could gather together with people who were expressing commitment to something beyond themselves. Something about the collective good. And a commitment that didn't require they give up any part of their identity. Where they would be welcomed along with others into a diverse mosaic of people and ideas.

Over the last couple months I have heard many stories of people who are feeling alienated from the people in the neighborhoods. From the people at their places of business. From the people who govern cities or counties or states. People who run our schools or who put bumper stickers on their cars or signs on their lawns.

Over the last couple months I have met many people who have been on a frustrating search for community. Needing a place where they could feel safe. Where they could let down their guard. Be themselves. Find some sort of oasis within this desert of rigid ideas and dogmatic beliefs.

And over the last couple months, as I have met these people, I have heard stories about doors being closed to them and outstretched hands pulled back in judgment. Their children being turned away from playgroups – because their color, or their religion, or the politics, or their class, saying, 'you don't fit.' 'You don't belong here.'

'Is there a place where we can belong?' they cry, one after the other, 'Where we don't have to wear that label, 'outcast,' or 'rebel,' or 'heretic,' or 'heathen?' And I tell them about this community and they look at me in almost a state of shock, that such a place actually exists. "We had no idea," they say. And the weight of concerns seems to slide from their shoulders as though they have just received immunity from a sentence of social leprosy.

And they come. In disbelief at first. But they come. Grateful for the welcome respite. They come. Tired of feeling trodden upon. They come. Ready for a good word. Ready for something about love. Ready for something that offers hope. Ready for something that speaks of justice. Ready for this place. I have heard them on the phone, seen them in my office, watched them walk through our doors. They come. And they continue to come.

There is a yearning – very much alive today - in the people coming to us. A yearning to belong. A yearning to be free. A yearning to stop pretending to be something their not just to avoid being judged and labeled as ‘unworthy,’ or ‘unwelcome.’

I know that some who have come here have said that it was a yearning that called to them after the US went to war – and the inherited feeling of alienation with the rest of the world. Others said they started having that feeling during the elections with so much name-calling and partisanship. For some it was a feeling that came after the elections. Some said it was the mean-spiritedness of the amendment to ban same-sex marriages. Some said it was just a feeling in response to the lack of compassion, cooperation, and the widespread divisiveness that is rampant in our country.

When I hear this explained – in all the variety of ways it has been expressed – I listened and nodded a lot. I found myself shaking my head in agreement. Yearnings have been triggered in me for these same reasons.

But, I know, for me, these reasons also existed long before these specific examples of fractioning and brokenness in our society. I remember long ago noticing the feeling, deep in my soul, around fractioning and brokenness much deeper and much more basic than a lot of this political and social strife we witness today. It centered around the strife I saw in my neighborhood growing up. Strife based on our most basic identities. Strive between men and women. Between whites and people of color. Between Jew and Christian and between all manners of Christianity. Between rich and poor. White collar and blue. College degreed and laborer. I identified these distinctions and categories as a source of conflict early on. When they were mixed with dogmatism and arrogance I realized I could only find peace by giving way and denying who I really was. But then noticed I felt cheated out of the only thing that was really mine. And yearning for a place where I could be me amidst a world of absolutes. A place where I could fit in. And belong. Where I could rise above the brokenness and feel bound and connected with what was around me.

It took me a while to discover that what I was feeling was more than circumstantial. It was more than the neighborhood *I* was in, just as I believe that the yearning expressed by the people coming through our doors now has to do with more than just the society *they* find themselves in.

What we are drawing from is deeper than that. It is what sociologists and theologians and scholars and wise-men throughout time have recognized as the ‘religious impulse.’ Religion – a word from Latin – translates as ‘re-ligare.’ ‘Re’ means ‘again.’ ‘Ligare’ a word from which is derived other common words like, ‘ligament,’ means to bind together again. Re-ligare means ‘to bind together again.’ To take what is broken and make it whole.

It is an interesting metaphysical theory that each one of us carries around the world in our memories and our hearts. And we can feel it’s brokenness. It feels a little like we are broken – because we are part of the world or the world is part of us – whichever. The impulse we carry with us is to heal. To restore to health. To bind together again.

There is an ancient story from the Hindu tradition which explains this phenomenon. I’ve told it before. It’s the story of the clay pot, which says that at the very beginning of time all of existence was part of a single clay pot. Which meant that, at one time, every single particle and fiber within the universe found a way to fit together so that every thing contributed. No individual piece had to cut off an arm to fit in, or fold itself in half. Like a great puzzle, it fit so that every part belonged. And the result was a clay pot.

The energy that was created when all this came together interdependently, was powerful. Some called this collective creation, God (that was the theists). Some just called it harmony (those were the new age neo-pagans). Some called it ‘oneness,’ (those were the Buddhists). Some just thought it was very cool (those were the modern humanists).

But the power of the energy that was created when all things came together was greater than even the cumulative energy that brought it together in the first place - and so an explosion resulted. One which sent every piece of that clay pot to a different part of the world.

That was the story of creation – not quite intelligent design, or evolution, or the big bang. But there you go. The interesting thing about the story is that it says that everything that eventually came into being in the world received just one piece of that original clay pot. Every thing that came into being shared a memory of what it was – what it felt like – to be part of something that fit perfectly together. It is from that one piece – alive within our consciousness – that we get this inkling of unity. That feels pain when we experience brokenness. That yearns for a sense of unity. That gives us that ‘religious impulse’ – to bind together again.

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Come.

This past week, a number of folks came together at UUMAN and were talking about just this very thing. The yearnings that have brought so many people to UUMAN of late. It was part of our policy governance meeting. Policy governance is a name that describes how we operate at UUMAN. How we are structured so that we can best do the work and meet the needs of those who are counting on us. Depending on us. And one of the questions that came up had to do with stakeholders. And we wondered, ‘who are the primary stakeholders at UUMAN?’ Who are the people who have a stake in our existence? In our future? And we listed some of the obvious: our members, our children, our staff. And then we began talking about visitors. The people who have expressed this yearning. The people who have heard a call to come together and found themselves here.

When someone mentioned they thought that these visitors were one of our primary stakeholders, everyone nodded. But just then someone countered that it was possible that not all visitors were necessarily stakeholders. Some, they said, might be guests from out of state and don’t really have an investment in the success or health of the church. This led to some nodding and people saying that, in fact, there were even some visitors *in state* who didn’t really have such an investment. In fact, there may be some visitors who would disagree with us. Make us feel uncomfortable. Or unsafe. Some, we thought, may even be predatory. We agreed and nodded. The idea of taking precautions was mentioned. After all, we thought, considering why people are yearning for this place is that we are all about having safe relationships. Then someone joked that we didn’t want to become known as the church that practiced unprotected visitation. Because, as it was pointed out, practicing unprotected visitation has been known to lead to membership.

Well, we laughed. And I didn’t think much of it. Till I started thinking more about the yearning that brought people here. And the yearning that went in to making Unitarian Universalism what it is – as the name implies, a ‘unifying’ faith – one that believes we have one planet (Unitarian) that is home for all people (Universalism) so it is time that we listened to our yearnings, learned how to get along and figured out a way to bind together again.

And that seemed to make sense. And then I started to think of this morning’s sermon – and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. for it is something of an expectation that – as UU’s are pretty oriented to justice and equality and inclusivity – we celebrate Dr. King as one of our modern prophets. Many people feel that his ideal of breaking down barriers of exclusion and oppression are founded on the very principles that led Unitarians and Universalists to the conclusion that there is no one absolute truth, nor any core belief that

supercedes the call to be in right relationship with all persons. No race, no creed, no theology, no political persuasion is so important that it should be laid down over the backbones of human beings, keeping them down, discouraged, and disenfranchised.

It seemed to me that the yearning in the hearts of the people who have been coming to this place, and the yearning at the heart of our free faith, and the yearning of this man who struggled and died for the promise that all people will one day join hand in hand... It seemed to me that these three shared a common element of truth between them. A desire to choose another way from what has, so long, kept us apart. To re-join, re-gather and re-claim what is our common humanity – and, indeed, our interdependence, from which all human worth and dignity is sourced.

So, it seemed to me, that if we were considering stakeholders, and we were considering visitors who would be welcome here, ones who we would even practice unprotected visitations with, in the hopes it might lead to membership... would Dr. King be such a stakeholder? Would he be the 'right kind of visitor' for us?

Two things come to mind as I think of this. The first is information which some of us may find surprising. And that is Dr. King has been a visitor to many UU churches. And not just to preach – although he was the keynote speaker at our 1966 General Assembly in Florida. Long before that, however, he attended many Unitarian churches when he was a liberal seminary student in Boston.

Listen to these words by Coretta Scott King as she spoke with UU minister, Rosemary Bray McNatt: “I went to Unitarian churches for years, even before I met Martin.” She explained that she was a long time member of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, which was popular among UUs.

She continued: “Martin and I went to Unitarian churches when we were in Boston. We gave a lot of thought to becoming Unitarian at one time, but Martin and I realized that we could never build a mass movement [that addressed the yearnings of] black people if we were Unitarian.” [UU World Nov/Dec 2002]

Pretty sobering statement. Especially when we might think of ourselves in common cause. Which brings me to my second thought. I don’t think we are quite ready for Dr. King in our UU world, despite the yearnings that he had being similar to the yearnings that our visitors have and the yearnings that UUs claim.

For one thing Dr. King knew he had a different target audience than Unitarian Universalism. And he had a different approach and style to reach that audience. Twenty five years ago, when Dr. King was assassinated, his theology was a little challenging for many of us. And though, we have grown in those twenty five years, I’m not sure all of us would be any more comfortable today. I know that his economic views of a complete redistribution of wealth would still make most of us pretty uncomfortable today. And his lifestyle of sacrifice for his cause would be something that not many of us would be eager to live up to. If he were a Unitarian Universalist today, he would be calling us to

Come into the hood
Come into the barrios
Come to the schools
Come into the abortion clinics
Come into the prisons
Come into the places that are darkest in division and discrimination and I know that would make many of us very uncomfortable. I’m not sure if 25 years is long enough for us to be ready for Dr. King’s message. He was ahead of his time and we are still catching up.

But I believe that we need Dr. King today for at least one thing. There is one message that we might be ready to hear him say. One message that might lead us to that place we are yearning to go. We need him to remind us that our yearnings that brought us here, our yearnings which have long called us to find a place where we can be who we are without fear of judgment or reprisal, our yearnings which have called us to connect together and find solace and heal old wounds – that yearning – is not the final call.

We need Dr. King today to remind us that the 'religious impulse' runs deeper than finding an oasis and calls us to follow it further than seeking an enclave of common thinking. We need Dr. King to remind us that it is of little use for us to 'bind together again' in small bands while great divides still exist between institutions and ideologies. We need Dr. King to call us to listen to that memory we hold in our hearts of a world that was once united – that world that feels fragmented and yearns to return to wholeness. And that means everybody must carry their piece back to where it fits. We need Dr. King to remind us that our piece doesn't always fit together with what's convenient or with what's comfortable. It fits in where it is needed to hold the world – and it's people - together.

It is said that there are two kinds of people in the world – people who seek unity with all things and people who believe there are two kinds of people in the world. We need Dr. King to remind us which kind of people we are.

It is said, in that ancient Hindu story, that a day will come when all the people of this world listen to that tiny piece, deep within their hearts, that calls them to come together as one. And they will find a way to fit together in a way that honors the size and shape and color and quality of every piece. And when the last piece is in place, that clay pot will once again come into being. And all the pieces will look around – beside them, beneath them, above them and around them – and all they will see will be stakeholders. And that is when the conditions will be met for the second coming. And we will witness the return of Jesus – and Buddha, and Mohammed, and Abraham, and Rama, and Zeus... and Ghandi... and Dr. King. And they will all return to show us the way.

The irony is, on that day, we won't need any of them. For we will know the call of the prophets. We will know what Dr. King would ask of us.

Come, I say come
And return to the fight
This fight for the earth
This fight for our children
This fight for our life
Come. We need your hurricane voices
We need your sacred hands
I say come, sister, brother
To the battlefield
Come into the rainforest
Come into the hood
Come into the barrio
Come into the schools,
Come and caress our spines
I say come, wrap your feet around justice
I say come, and wrap your tongues around truth
I say come, and wrap your hands with deeds and prayers
You brown ones
You yellow ones
You black ones
You gay ones
You white ones
You lesbian ones
Come, to this battlefield called Life.
Come.

To the Glory of Life.

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