

**A Look at Some Theological Sources  
for Dr. Martin Luther King's Philosophy of Non-Violence  
UUMAN, Sunday, January 15, 2012  
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From today's anthem: I have heard the Good News, Too!  
Hallelujah! Hallelu!

Like many of us here at UUMAN, music, for me, and particularly choral music, is a key to the worship experience. Five years ago, it was this singing congregation, and this choir, that drew Rick and me into further exploration of this place we now call our religious home, our place of spiritual grounding, our holy place.

And if you have heard recordings, or watched videos or YouTube clips of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. speaking, - or if you were lucky enough, and are now OLD enough to have actually heard him in person, or live on a TV set in the 1950's or '60s that, for some of us, carried only black-and-white images, then you have surely heard the importance of that which IS music - in his strong, bass voice with resonant timbre, perfectly paced rhythm, carefully repeated phrases. His voice: a voice that now "sounds along the ages."

Hallelujah Hallelu!

This morning I invite you to look with me at some of the theological sources that, it seems to me, anchored, and grounded Dr. MLK's creative, society-challenging and society-changing non-violent philosophy. The first is a set of Bible verses with which many of us are familiar. The translation I'm sharing, today, though, is a new one. I was attracted to this translation when I read a review in the New York Times. I know! A review of a Bible translation in my Sunday Required-Reading -*New York Times* Book section? Yes, well, this is a different kind of translation, as the title makes clear: *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*.

Perhaps a bit of background is in order . . . Growing up Southern Baptist here in what was then a smaller and more southern Atlanta, I read the Bible. I read it pretty much daily, and in order not to embarrass myself, or my parents, I memorized Bible verses every Saturday night to recite in Sunday School class the next morning.

When this way of understanding no longer nourished my soul, I did what many do, including many new to Unitarian Universalism. I tossed the proverbial baby out with the bathwater. I left it ALL behind.

But just as our parents seem to grow in understanding and perception once we have passed beyond our teens, so, too, I have come to realize that there is merit in what I had summarily dismissed. So I've gone back to reading the Bible, in various translations, to find inspiration, and, at times, to be comforted.

I wondered how the Jewish scholars' knowledge of the literature studied by a young rabbi like Jesus would enrich my understanding. How would their insights into the issues faced by the

Jewish and Christian communities of the first two centuries of the Common Era help me to glean meaning behind the stories?

I invite you to let your mind drift back 2000 years or so as I read part of the Sermon on the Mount. It is found in Matthew chapter 5, verses 38 - 41:

"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'  
But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer.  
But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also;  
and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well;  
and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile."

Martin Luther King, Jr., a man who taught by word and by deed that non-violent actions have more power than violence, seems to me to embody these three ways of standing up to an evildoer.

Let's look at the first non-violent response Jesus urges: if someone strikes you on the right cheek, you turn the other also. The right cheek. To be struck on the right cheek, these scholars assert, presumes not an all-out attack, but a back-handed slap, like this: (show)

So there you are, standing, having been given not a blow to the head, not an all-out attack on your person, but a degrading, backhanded slap to the cheek.

Show that you can take it, but "Respond with neither violence nor abjection."

Challenge, embarrass your opponent with your steadfast calmness, your solitary stance, your silence, your determination.

Do not slink away, but neither give your opponent cause for arrest or further violence. Stand. Be.

And your actions will speak louder and call greater attention to your cause than any angry, violent response.

In the second example from this story, Jesus says that if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give him your cloak as well. I did not see much power in this image - the handing over of a second cloak. But I've learned that "to give your cloak" for a humble Jew, or for anyone not wealthy in this time and place, would be to give over one of only two outer garments that you owned. Therefore, to give a second cloak or garment would be to stand before your oppressor nearly naked.

This act, your stripping, as you stand for all to see, would surely be a clever, and perhaps dangerous, way to highlight the injustice done to you. It's non-violent for sure, but there is an element of ridicule here - of spotlighting injustice in such a way that turns the light a full 180 degrees around.

Now it is squarely on the one who has done wrong, but for this to be so, you must be willing to stand, to be exposed, in order to bring injustice to light.

And finally, Jesus says "go the second mile," which has come to mean something today that was not at all the experience of his listeners. Today we may be urged to "go the second mile" to show that we're dedicated, we're capable, we're willing. Not for the Jews of Jesus's day.

They knew, as all who lived under Roman governance did, that any Roman soldier could conscript locals to carry their gear for one mile. So if the soldier says to you, "Go," you'd better pick up his gear and go, and you'd probably better be sure you go the full mile lest you anger this man who has power over you.

I can imagine the abuse this might have caused. Perhaps a healthy young soldier conscripts an older, weaker man to carry his gear, generating some amusement for him and his friends. But what if that man then "goes the second mile"? What does the soldier look like now? What does the group gathered to watch this spectacle see when they look at the older man? At the soldier?

Going the second mile is non-violent resistance. And it is not truly shaming your oppressor?

When I read these examples from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, I think of a particular time in Dr. King's life and ministry. I see a dusky country road, a bridge over a river in Southern Alabama, and it's 1965.

Dr. King had been in Atlanta when about 500 African-American men and women were beaten with billy clubs in a cloud of tear gas as they attempted to march peacefully across that bridge from the small town of Selma, on the road to Montgomery. Why were they doing such a thing? They were walking to protest both their lack of civil rights, including the basic right to vote, and the brutal murder a 26-year old black man, Jimmy Lee Jackson, who'd died at the hands of an Alabama State Trooper three weeks before.

So they marched, and so they were beaten. Two weeks later, King went to Selma to lead about 2,500 marchers out to the Pettus Bridge to hold a prayer session before turning back around, thereby obeying a court order that prevented them from crossing. Some of his followers were disappointed when King followed the court order. Knowing the many times he'd been attacked, arrested, and jailed in the recent past, it seems to me that King was, here, turning the other cheek.

He asked the marchers to remain in Selma for another attempt once the injunction was lifted. He was not going anywhere. He did not plan what happened next. Murderous men waited for the white ministers from New England who had answered King's call for ministers to join him in marching for freedom and justice.

As Unitarian-Universalists, however, we can be proud that three UU ministers did heed the call and were beside King that day in Selma. As the three left a diner on foot, walking to their

hotel, they were attacked and beaten. One, James Reeb, a 38-year old father of four, was the worst injured of three.

He was removed from life support two days after the attack and died from head injuries. His is not a well-known name, perhaps, but we can be grateful and proud that one of our own heeded the call, even at the cost of his life. After Reeb's death, King planned another march to Montgomery, and this time they crossed the bridge, watched over by regular Army units ordered by President Johnson to protect the marchers. By the time they reached Montgomery, their numbers had swelled to 25,000. King told the crowd,

"The end we seek is a society at peace with itself, a society that can live with its conscience."

King had metaphorically stood before Alabama state troopers, having given over his second cloak.

He had turned the other cheek, in walking from Selma to Montgomery as well as on so many other peaceful protests that resulted in his spending time in jail.

Didn't he walk the second mile in shining the light on those who would prevent people from voting because of the color of their skin?

I was directed by my friend, Angela, one of few African-Americans at my workplace, to another Bible story King used in a speech. Angela is tiny, and I am tall. Angela is black, and I am white. But every graduation - which our school requires that we attend - we seek each other out to walk down the sidewalk and aisle together. Are we just enjoying the attention that our differences attract, or are we making a small statement about the nature of friendship?

Angela asked if I'd read her favorite of King's speeches, "The Drum Major Instinct" and was appalled when I told her, some years ago, that I had not. She would have our students, many of whom come from privilege and money, know that speech as well or better than they know the famous "I have a Dream" speech.

In the "Drum Major" speech, King invites his listeners to consider Jesus's response to two of his followers, James and John, who seem to ask, rather egotistically, if they can sit at his "right and left hand in glory." Jesus's response is not an admonishment for their selfish request, but instead, a direction for serving one another:

"Whoever wants to become great among you  
must be your servant,  
and whoever wants to be first  
must be slave of all."

One must be a servant to lead.

King points out that we all have, "the drum major instinct. We all want to be important, to surpass others, to achieve distinction, to lead the parade." He calls "this quest for recognition,

this desire for attention, for distinction . . . "the basic drive of human life, this drum major instinct." And he warns that when "one fails to harness this instinct, he ends up trying to push others down in order to push himself up." King tells us that "the great issue of life is to harness the drum major instinct."

For King, these words of Jesus about greatness belonging to the servant leader meant that "everybody can be great, because everybody can serve." Here he hits close to home with us as a denomination that sometimes prides itself on its level of higher education and advanced degrees. when he says,

"You don't have to have a college degree to serve.  
You don't have to make your subject and your verb agree to serve.  
You don't have to know about Plato and Aristotle,... or Einstein's theory of relativity to serve. ... You only need a heart full of grace,  
a soul generated by love.  
And you can be that servant."

It seems to me that his words point us to a way of thinking that is sorely needed today, as much, if not more, than it was during King's own lifetime. So, I wonder, what would Martin Luther King, Jr. say to us on this, the 83rd anniversary of his birth?

I feel Dr. King would have us be that Servant Leader

He asked that if people wished to call him a "drum major" then we should say of him, that he was "a drum major for justice; that he was a drum major for peace. And all of the other shallow things will not matter."

I believe that King would hope, following our UU tradition -- the trail blazed by James Reeb and the other two UU ministers -- that we, in 2012, would be willing to put aside fear, to put aside partisanship, to put aside surface-level differences, and do the hard work of bridging the gaps in our society.

And I believe that he would have us act, and act non-violently, but act now.

In his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail, King reminds us that

"Human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability; it comes through the tireless efforts of (people) working to be co-workers with God, and without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation. We must use time creatively in the knowledge that the time is always ripe to do right."

May the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr, inspire us to turn the other cheek give the second cloak, walk the extra mile in order to shine light on injustices in our society this day.

Amen. May It Be So.