

Living the Dream:

Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. PhD to President Barack Obama

On August 28th, 1963, on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King Jr. proclaimed his dream for our nation. On January 20th, 2009, in front of the Capitol Building, Barack Obama will take the oath of office to become the first non-white President of the United States of America. From the Lincoln Memorial across the National Mall to the steps of the Capitol is a distance of 1.9 miles.¹ It will have taken 45 years, 4 months and 23 days for us to make the journey from one historic spot to the other, from a dream declared to a dream realized. King predicted that summer day would be remembered as the “greatest demonstration for freedom in the history of the nation.”² He declared Lincoln’s Presidency and the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation to be “a great beacon light of hope to millions of Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice...a joyous daybreak to end the long night of ...captivity.”³

Of course, King stood on those steps not to celebrate the end of slavery but to draw attention to the unfulfilled promise of Lincoln’s legacy. Lincoln’s Executive Orders issued in 1862 and 63 held great hope for an enslaved people. But, 100 years after receiving the right to vote, black men were still not free to enter polling places and radical segregationism had eroded the hope of deliverance. So King stood on those steps declaring this the beginning of a new liberation, of a non-violent revolution to restore the hope of America.

If you’re wondering, 1.9 miles in 45 years comes to just about 7 inches a day, a fabulously slow pace, but one which was only accomplished because of the bravery, patience and audacity of so many dedicated workers for justice. This week’s inauguration has sparked for many of us deep reflection on where we’ve been, where we might be heading and, hopefully, what role we’ve played in helping or preventing the march of progress toward full equality.

As Unitarian Universalists, we can claim a proud part of this struggle for racial, political and economic justice, especially during the height of the Civil Rights movement

¹ According to Rev. James Kubal-Komoto in an e-mail correspondence.

² King, Martin Luther. I Have A Dream. Washington, DC, 1963.

³ Ibid.

in the 1960s. But our history isn't clearly on the side of justice, as much as we want to think it is. We have always valued diversity of thought, which has meant that in our ranks were folks from every side of most issues. Unitarians and Universalists can claim both abolitionists and slave holders, civil rights workers and segregationists. In many ways, we've been ahead of the curve on issues of inclusivity, and diversity, but it's also true that we've been guilty of prejudice and blatant racism.

I'm calling attention to both sides of our history because in our search for justice, we must always be willing to face into Truth, especially during this national celebration of Martin Luther King, and the historic inauguration of Barack Obama, both of whom are or were sincere purveyors of great and difficult truths.

I have to agree with Mark Morrison-Reed who says of the Unitarian Universalists: "Our history in regard to racial justice is brave enough to make you proud, tragic enough to make you cry, and inept enough to make you laugh once the anger passes."⁴

Our history is mixed. Nonetheless, Universalists and Unitarians were ahead of many or even most churches in their work for civil rights, behind, by my calculations, only the Quakers. Social justice has been part of our theology from our inception, giving us plenty of strong examples of ordinary people living out of their convictions for racial equality. We have the stories of brave folks like the southern UU doctor who had the first integrated waiting room, the UU attorney who was the only lawyer in his state to accept civil rights cases, and the Rev. David Thompson who was shot and killed by the Ku Klux Klan because he braved the wrath of racist culture in Mississippi by opening his church doors to people of all races. (They killed him for inviting people to pray together.) Our UU ministers in the hot-spots of the South invited speakers threatened by the KKK, integrated their congregations, marched in protest, worked to integrate schools, organized sit-ins, wrote protest songs and ultimately offered their lives in the service of equality.

In 1965 when Martin Luther King put out a call to clergy to join the march for freedom in Selma, AL, 100 UU ministers answered the call. The UUA board adjourned in Boston and moved their meeting to Selma to be in solidarity with Rev. King, and Rev. James Reeb, a Unitarian, became a martyr for the cause after his skull was crushed in an attack, the vicious response to his work. Martin Luther King gave the eulogy for

⁴ This oft quoted statement from Mark Morrison-Reed may be followed to a sermon he once delivered, although the text is not currently available.

Rev. Reeb and declared him a martyr for justice, and we now know that his death helped push President Johnson and Congress to secure voting rights for African Americans.

Forty-three years after the death of their father, Reeb's daughters sat on the floor holding hands and crying as they watched Obama's acceptance speech. One daughter said "In that moment, when he became president, it was ... an affirmation of [my father's] life. People were dying to make a way for this little boy to one day become president." ⁵

It is a real and significant change that the political party that depends on African American votes now controls both the Congress and the Presidency. More importantly, winning the Presidency came about because of a strategy aimed at mobilizing grass-roots voters, especially black voters. Racism is about power, and the balance of power has shifted.

I don't want to overstate this fact, though, largely because I'm having trouble believing it. I do a good deal of anti-racism work and even with this historic election, I haven't yet seen any sign that institutional racism is being dismantled. White privilege is certainly secure in its place. I live as a white woman in a white neighborhood in a white town with white towns all around us. Not only have I never been harassed by the police, I've gotten out of punishment for things I've clearly done because of the assumptions made by both black and white police officers about me. In other words, I've benefitted directly from the power structure as it stands.

White people - many of whom don't see us as having race in particular, as if we're race neutral, the norm from which everyone else has deviated - prefer to see racism as a series of unkind, unfortunate or even unjust acts rather than a system of power, saturated into our culture and working mightily on our behalf. I was in an anti-racism training some time ago and, after 3 days of very difficult work, the woman on my right began to describe her life as an Arab American. She spoke with ferocity as she described what it means to live in a culture where even your neighbors doubt your trustworthiness and in which she has to watch her daughter seeing over and over again the faces of Arabs on TV all of whom are terrorists hiding beneath western clothing waiting to kill as many Americans as possible.

⁵ Lambert, Clay. [Half Moon Bay Review](http://www.hmbreview.com/articles/2008/11/12/news/doc491b50f509276949150920.txt). November 12, 2008. Accessed January 12, 2009.
<http://www.hmbreview.com/articles/2008/11/12/news/doc491b50f509276949150920.txt>

After she poured her rage into the center of the room, the white woman on my left said that in all her life, she'd never had reason to feel such anger. It was then that a black woman asked what I believe is the real question. The question that white liberals and do-gooders all over the country don't want to consider. With a glint of both defiance and terror, she looked to the circle and said, her voice breaking, "Are white people willing to give up power?"

There was silence in the room. After an uncomfortably long time, my own voice breaking, I whispered "No. The answer no one is speaking is No." The black woman smiled at me while tears soaked her face.

I don't want to convince any white person here that we live privileged lives, regardless of our particular circumstances. There's often a lot of resistance around this subject and I'm in no position to confront any of it. This is especially true for liberals who take pride in our work for justice, who are very comfortable claiming our role as liberators, always on the side of right. But for all our work, we continue to enjoy our place in American culture. As a white woman, I am never followed in a store, I'm generally believed when speaking to authority, my race is affirmed as strong and important in every history book with plenty of examples to chose from, I see my face reflected in most of the faces on TV and my life experience affirmed as the norm in every media outlet. My opinion is generally respected or at least judged on its merit when I speak in a room whether I'm the only white face or one of many, and I can chose to be with people of my own race at any time and am never required to socialize or work as an equal with any group my race has a history of being mistreated by. I know, as the Reeb daughters know, that if my father gets killed fighting for civil rights, the President and Congress will be moved to action. In this nation, I live a life of privilege. And, as a result, I can't but help to have internalized this racial superiority in the same way people of color who are followed in stores and whose faces aren't reflected back to them in history books or on TV and who's opinion or voice is often greeted with suspicion and whose deaths often go unnoticed, have to have internalized some racial inferiority.

And as I begin to get overwhelmed by all the ramifications for our prison systems and unemployment lines and soup kitchens and inner city schools, I toy with the idea of pretending I never heard any of it and go on about my generally happy and quiet life.

The curse of education is that once you know, you cannot not know. Once you

know what prevents the dream from becoming reality, what has transformed too many dreams into nightmares, there is no turning back.

Barack Obama understands the dream of equality, the dream of hope. In his book Audacity of Hope, he reflects on his place in history and all that had to happen, all the dreams realized that raised him up to become a US Senator and even to dream bigger dreams. He writes...

"At night, the great shrine [the Lincoln Memorial] is lit but often empty. Standing between marble columns, I read the Gettysburg Address and the Second Inaugural Address. I look out over the Reflecting Pool, imagining the crowd stilled by Dr. King's mighty cadence, and then beyond that, to the floodlit and shining Capitol dome.

And in that place, I think about America and those who built it. This nation's founders, who somehow rose above petty ambitions and narrow calculations to imagine a nation unfurling across a continent. And those like Lincoln and King, who ultimately laid down their lives in the service of perfecting an imperfect union. And all the faceless, nameless men and women, slaves and soldiers and tailors and butchers, constructing lives for themselves and their children and grandchildren, brick by brick, rail by rail, calloused hand by calloused hand, to fill in the landscape of our collective dreams."⁶

Martin Luther King spoke of his dream, as we heard read today, on the steps of that "great shrine," the dream that one day little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers. And at the ground breaking of the MLK memorial, Obama said of this dream "we are reminded that this different, better place beckons us, and that we will find it not across distant hills or within some hidden valley, but rather we will find it somewhere in our hearts."⁷ In his famous speech on race, A More Perfect Union, Obama claimed that in 2008, we could see strong coalitions of white and black voters working together toward common goals, an indication of the racial harmony once dreamed, now lived, at least in some way.

In preparation for this sermon in honor of Martin Luther King, I went back into all my notes from years past and was again reminded of the striking parallel between King and Moses, two men who led their people out of the chains of bondage and into the

⁶ Obama, Barack. Audacity of Hope. Crown First Edition. Washington, DC. 2006. Epilogue.

⁷ Obama, Barack. "Martin Luther King National Memorial Groundbreaking". Washington, DC. 2006.

Promised Land. Two men who died before ever seeing the fruits of their labor.

Moses, according to ancient Jewish stories, physically lead his people from the "land of bondage" to the "land of milk and honey". King's people were searching for the promised land in their own home towns. He didn't have 10 plagues or any of the other fancy tricks Moses had up his sleeve, but he had his voice and his vision. Persuasive, sophisticated, uncompromising, commanding and absolutely confident in his own truth. When people heard him, they believed freedom was coming because of the power of his conviction expressed in the boldness and command of his voice. They experienced liberation in their hearts, transformed by the potency of his belief grounded in hope and the force of great love. And when he spoke, everyone was invited in: black and white, Jew and Christian, atheist, evangelical; even the racists had room in King's great voice.

There were many critics of Rev. King, folks who accused him of this or that, some of which might be grounded in something real and some which might not be. The greatest of leaders, the ones who really fight for transformation, are always targeted by those who are afraid. Let's not pretend Obama won't be one of them. And let's not pretend that some of what they say won't be true. Ordinary people are never going to be sufficient vessels for all the grace we require them to carry.

Regardless of all our insufficiencies, the world remains alive with a divine spirit brought forth through ordinary people like Martin King and Barack Obama, and dare I suggest like any one of us willing to commit ourselves with equal fervor and equal heart. Like Moses or Lincoln, those who are awake to the fullness of our reality, respond passionately to the grace of the ordinary world. It isn't that King or Obama or Lincoln or even Moses I imagine are or were special or radically different from anyone else. In fact, I am declaring here that they are not. As ordinary men, they seized the one chance they were given, filled it with their impassioned breath and offered it back out to the world abundant with hope.

And in that offering of hope we find the dream. The dream of unity and solidarity, of shared power and equal opportunity, of communities that care and love and work for each other, who are replenished over and over again by the wells of grace that fill this ordinary world, making all of us sufficient vessels, calling all of us to lift our voices loud and bold enough to include everyone in its resonance. We are all called to become the embodiment of the dream, to seize this chance we're given, to fill it with our impassioned breath and to let it loose into the world abundant with hope. We are all

called to dream and to move beyond the dream to inspired action, calling forth the grace of endurance, vision, conviction and that profound love emboldened by great hope.