

Remaining Awake Through A Great Revolution

SERMON Presented by Reverend Scott Sammler-Michael

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At The

Accotink Unitarian Universalist Church

In his History of Liberal Theology, Dr Gary Dorrien from Union Seminary places Rev Martin Luther King, Jr., in the same chapter as James Luther Adams, the great Unitarian Theologian from the twentieth Century. Adams and King shared a critical stance against Liberal Theology's over-optimistic view of human nature, an optimism posing as a myth of inevitable progress, that humankind is moving onward and upward forever. King and Adams felt any doctrine of Human Nature that does not account for evil is foolish.

This becomes easy to understand when one realizes they both wrote their major works in the middle of the twentieth century, amid the horrors of Hitler, Stalin, Mao and Vietnam. King and Adams remind us that the moral arc of the universe bends toward justice *only* when we apply pressure to the forces of greed and destruction.

I too am a critic of our Liberal Religious tradition

Too often we have fallen prey to complacency.

Too often we have taken our eyes off the prize.

Too often we have allowed ourselves to believe we have finished when we have actually only reached the starting block.

Today's reflection for all ages is just such a warning. When Rip Van Winkle ascended the mountain he passed a picture of King George III. When he awoke and stumbled home twenty years later, the picture was one of George Washington. Rip Van Winkle slept through a great Revolution.

The story calls us to stay tuned and keep our eye on the ball. Too often liberals succumb to the sleepy notion that because a war ended, a law was passed, or their candidate was elected that the work was accomplished. This is not so.

There are two examples from Unitarian Universalist history that inform this lesson. One is the end of the Civil War. When the Civil war ended, many Abolitionists, led by William Lloyd Garrison, officially and publicly retired from the cause to free the slaves. Garrison, a member of Unitarian minister Theodore Parker's West Roxbury church, was so thoroughly convinced that the surrender of the Confederacy meant victory for African Americans that he like many abolitionists shrugged the mantle of responsibility off their backs and onto the government – and went to sleep. Nine short years later Rutherford B Hayes, in contested presidential election, killed Reconstruction in a smoky back room deal, thus postponing Black liberation for at least 100 years.

The Universalists, who were Abolitionists since their founding in 1770, also turned away from the responsibility to deliver freedom to African Americans following the Civil War. At their 1870 Centennial celebration Universalists preached one after the other that “the Kingdom of God is finally at hand.”¹ They suggested the rest of the country now realized how correct they had been all along. They began to lose their institutional identity in a haze of triumphalism and self-congratulation. They spent the next twenty-five years arguing over various statements of belief.

¹ See George Hunston Williams monograph, *American Universalism*.

Finally, in 1895, they virtually re-established their old belief statement – the Winchester Profession – with its “liberty clause,” declaring that no belief statement could be used as a test of membership. They ended up back where they started. But sadly, the country had passed them by. In 1860 Universalism was the sixth largest faith in the United States. By 1895 it had shrunk to fewer than 30,000 members. Navel-gazing and arguing about belief statements, Universalists slept through a great and turbulent time, missing the opportunity to enact the Black Liberation they labored for 100 years to bring forth.

Sometimes I worry about today’s Unitarian Universalism repeating these mistakes. Many folks in our churches seem giddy about the future – the election of Barack Obama has rightly inspired many to think that the upcoming time may be ours. There is reason for hope. Yet Obama himself said on election night that his election was not the change we were seeking, only the beginning of that change’s potential. I cannot emphasize this more.

We must be more focused than ever on the public sphere. We must speak up when policies do not advance justice, and applaud when they do. We must be present when our allies in government need us to demonstrate our power and support. We must certify that the people placed in positions are the right people doing the right things. This is more important now than ever because in the Bush administration there was no one listening to us, no one knowing we were partly responsible for putting them into power. Yes, now with our allies in power we must speak loudly and hold them to the highest of standards.

Additionally I hope the Unitarian Universalist Association doesn’t get lost in a protracted word-smithing fight over our new purposes and principles. UU history contains periods of sustained navel gazing. I pray – and will toil until the dawn’s early light – to prevent that from happening.

No, indeed, we must look outward. As a church our work is outside these walls. Our work lives in the hurt and pain of a world that needs our power and witness. Our work begins by coming here to gather our spiritual food, then marching out there as ministers – yes, ministers, every one of us is a minister – to a world that longs for our life saving message. Our mission is nothing short of saving the world. This mission I learned long ago from Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.

You may have noticed that when I speak of Martin Luther King I prefer the title Reverend to Doctor. There’s a good reason for this. When asked how he could persevere in the face of bigotry, bombings, and death threats, Reverend King always cited his deep faith. This is not to say that King was not learned or dedicated to reason, rationality and logic. But reason and logic are not what saves us – the most evil of men use reason and logic to their advantage. King declared, “Reason, devoid of the purifying power of faith, can never free itself of distortions.”² An honest, deep, abiding faith based on love – this is what propelled King through the toughest times – this can be our fuel as well.

Many people have profoundly wrong-headed ideas of faith. Faith never means we *assume* everything will be fine – it never means disengagement. Faith means we persevere – knowing we will find the strength, courage, eloquence and resources we need to compose a world more just. Faith means we never allow someone to convince us that what we do is *futile*. Faith means we *model* the truth that Justice requires us to give of ourselves – our time, our compassion, our money, or all of the above.

² Testament of Hope, p 36

Though he was a confessed Christian, Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr's faith was very broad minded. Consider these words, words that any Unitarian Universalist might use to describe the holy: "Whether we call it an unconscious process, an impersonal Brahman, or a Personal Being of matchless power and love, there is a creative force in this universe that works to bring the disconnected aspects of reality into a harmonious whole."³ We must allow the Spirit to move us and fill our souls with hope and courage.

Most of the quotes I share with you today come from King's Sermon, "Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution." In this sermon King laments the greatest disappointment of his life. Early on King was convinced that once the white clergy had encountered nonviolent black protest that his white clergy colleagues would flock to his aid. They did not, and this drove King to realize he could not count on the white clergy – he even began to question their status as true Christians.

Indeed, many Black theologians and preachers of the 1950's and 60's developed a critique of White Christianity based on the failure of white clergy to stand up en masse and demand Black Liberation. Among those were James Cone, whose *Black Theology & Black Power* remains a riveting indictment of white churches. Reverend Jeremiah Wright from Trinity Church in Chicago had his critique and suspicion of white culture formed during this time. Reverend Wright, with whom I had the privilege to work in Chicago, remains stuck in that critique and as a result his life's work has been misunderstood. But the outrage these faithful black leaders feel at the silence and outright opposition of white churches to Black Liberation partly explains why churches to this day remain the most segregated places in American culture.

I call us to invite critique of white culture and inaction, to sit with anger of African Americans, and to listen, without question or comment, to the pain caused by racism.

Now there were White Allies – Black Liberation could not advance without them. In 1965 Dana Greeley, president of the Unitarian Universalist Association, put out a challenge to all UU clergy to answer Martin Luther King's "Call to Selma" following the murder of Jimmie Lee Jackson. One out of three UU clergy answered the call – a higher percentage than any denomination. One of those clergy, James Reeb, was bludgeoned to death on the streets of Selma by a racist mob. They knew who their enemies were. King knew who his friends were – that is why he asked to perform Reeb's eulogy. Unitarian Universalism was on the vanguard of fighting for Black liberation.

King claimed Justice "came through the tireless efforts and the persistent work of dedicated individuals who are willing to be co-workers with God."⁴ King cried, "We are going to win our freedom because both the sacred heritage of the nation and the eternal will of the almighty God are embodied in our echoing demands."⁵ Yes brothers and sisters, Justice requires that we give something – time, compassion, money – maybe our lives. When Martin Luther King broadened his movement to create "The Poor People's Campaign" – he was assassinated. When King criticized how wealth is created and distributed, demanding a system of greater equity and fairness, he was murdered.

³ *A Testament of Hope*, p 20

⁴ *A Testament of Hope*, p 269.

⁵ *Ibid*, p 272.

I am reminded of Barack Obama's presidential campaign, when he used the phrase "re-distribution of wealth" and was quickly labeled a socialist. But the lie behind that name-calling is one of omission – Wealth is always re-distributed. It's the wealthy who usually steal from the poor, in countless ways – whether it's higher interest rates on mortgages, auto loans or credit cards - pay-day lending scams, seizing people's homes in "eminent domain actions" or stealing their labor, the very sweat and work of their limbs, with unfair wages – the rich steal for the poor. Wealth is *always* being re-distributed – from those who do not have much to those who are the richest class of people this world ever saw. It is time to turn that conduit around, lay a pipeline to give money and services to the needy and make the rich payback what they have stolen for generations. It is time to resume Martin Luther King's Poor People's Campaign and give birth to a society that at least attempts to reward people for a fair share of their labor and provide for basic human dignity and decency with dollars and services we would all expect.

About this task, King cautions – "Cowardice asks the question – is it expedient? Expedience asks the question – is it politic? Politics asks – Is it popular? But Conscience asks – is it right?" Our questioning must always begin and end with "is it right?" Thank God we have a president with the courage to utter the phrase "Redistribution of Wealth." You see, Justice is all of a piece. Racial and economic Justice go hand in hand with gay liberation and environmental justice, and all the others.

Truly, this Martin Luther King Day is like no other. Today we meet in holy worship two days before the inauguration of the first African-American president in our nation's history. Hopefully Barack Obama can tell the tale of how the forces of greed have stolen labor and wealth from the working people of this nation, of how the true value of a business resides more among the people on the factory floor than those in the boardroom. If he tells that story with compassion, maybe we can turn the tide at least for a while, and privilege the least among us – those in whom the true ownership and value of our nation resides – the common, working people who make businesses and government possible. But Obama needs our help. We must stay awake, remain alert, and keep on raising our voices so he keeps his eyes on the prize.

I'll end with a prayer by Reverend Martin Luther King. "God grant that we will be participants in this magnificent development... [and] bring about a new day of justice and brotherhood and peace. And on that day the morning stars will sing together and the sons [and daughters] of God will shout for joy."⁶

God bless you all
God help the least among us
God protect our new president
And God bless America
Amen

⁶ Ibid, p 278.