

UUMAN

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In the Steps of Dr. King

Words to enrich the spirit...

Rather than saying, "What would Jesus do?" I always think, "What does Martin Luther King want me to do today?" Then I decide what Martin Luther King wants me to do today is to go out into the world and in every way that I can, small and large, build a beloved community... It's about humanization. And I can't think of another way to imagine how we're going to get out of the crisis of racial hatred if it's not through the will to humanize. —bell hooks

Sermon: In the Steps of Dr. King

The National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis is attached to the Lorraine Motel. Tours end at the balcony where Dr. King was felled by a bullet from the house across the street, also part of the museum. On that threshold, everyone falls silent, every time.

Once on a visit to the museum, I hugged a wall. I must have made quite a sight, spreading my arms awkwardly to link two constellations in a lighted firmament starred with civil rights heroes, one hand on James Reeb, the other on Viola Liuzzo. On another level of the museum I breathed against the glass fronting a life size photo-replica of Pete Seeger at the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee where Rosa Parks got her training in non-violent resistance.

I was there at the ministers' convocation in Birmingham (ca. 2001) when Rev. Clark Olsen told through tears of the night he and his friends James Reeb and Orloff Miller were attacked in Selma walking home from dinner. Reeb died the next day. We all knew that—but as his colleagues we also knew that for Clark to be able to talk about that hellish night at last was brand new.

I've preached. I've marched. Once I gave the opening prayer at a Martin Luther King, Jr. commemorative breakfast in Macon. The largely African American audience was sweet, but visibly unimpressed by my dry UU presentation style. Did you know Martin and Coretta King considered *becoming* Unitarian Universalists? We were generous in our support, but we were typically reserved about the religious part. Like the audience in Macon, the Kings were sweet in making their point that as a spiritual home, we were too staid for them, not to mention too white.

With help from those good stories and more, in all I've celebrated Dr. King's birthday from the pulpit eighteen times as of this morning. Why was this year's MLK sermon the hardest one I've ever written? Is it because Dr. King's dream has been so fully realized there's nothing else *left* to say? *I don't think so.*

2015 was quite a year. Ferguson. Police shootings. *Black Lives Matter*. Syrian refugees. Terrorism. Islamophobia. Hard to know where to begin. Since UUMAN is a religious community I'll start with religion.

A recent Public Religion Research Institute survey reports that while around 80% of *black* Christians believe police-involved killings are part of a *pattern* of police treatment of African Americans, around 70% of *white* Christians believe they are isolated incidents. Subtract the word *Christian*, as many a Unitarian Universalist might, and the percentage drops *only* to 65%. White people in church are *less* likely to *believe* the experience of African Americans is genuine. In surveys of this type, Unitarian Universalists are considered mainstream. We are not absolved.

Moving on to Unitarian Universalism *specifically*, in an article in the UU World, Rev. Rosemary Bray McNatt writes, *My sons are third-generation Unitarian Universalists. After his... Coming of Age ceremony at our congregation, my older son, Allen, asked me whether I would be offended if he joined another religion when he grew up...* When I asked him why he thought it would be better to be a different religion, he said, *It's not that I don't like being a UU. I am just tired of being the only black kid in the youth group, and the only black kid at camp, and the only black kid everywhere.* He loves our faith, but he is lonely.

Newcomers and long-timers alike say how much their Unitarian Universalist congregation is a haven for kindred souls. All of our congregations have folkways and systems influenced by class, culture and histories of UU and liberal religious thought. Rosemary Bray McNatt calls these our *habits of being*. In our quest for congregational diversity, we underestimate these habits at our peril. Take youth and perhaps racial diversity. How does a person connect with a UU congregation whose experience of self, truth and spirit has been forged through hip-hop, *Black Lives Matter* and Ta-Nehisi Coates in *precisely* the same way a previous generation of us was shaped by Pete Seeger, the Vietnam War, and Martin Luther King, Jr?

King's message and mission are timeless, but cultural surroundings have changed gravely and dramatically since he was assassinated in Memphis on April 4, 1968. The world we live in *right now* is enveloped in political and cultural crisis. Politics and culture are never *only* that. The world we live in *right now* is in *spiritual* crisis too. Unitarian Universalists are called to navigate the gap between our egalitarian ideals and the down-to-earth complexities of walking our talk in a political and social minefield. Historically, that's always been our religious assignment. At our best, we are committed navigators, who don't shy away from the task.

Whether your inclinations are religious or secular; theist or humanist, two spiritual practices mark a Unitarian Universalist point of view: empathy and a yearning, if ambivalent, relationship to non-violence as espoused by Dr. King.

Non-violence is not merely a matter of turning the other cheek and getting pummeled in consequence. Non-violence is not a one-size-fits-all philosophy.

A handy guide in this month's Sojourners magazine attests that to this day there are evolving understandings of non-violence. However they do build on one another, so let's start with the classic.

Martin Luther King's mentor on the theology and practice of non-violence was another African American theologian, Howard Thurman. Thurman introduced King to his own mentor and personal friend, Mahatma Gandhi.

Oppressed people develop survival mechanisms such as fear, deceptive submissiveness, and

anger amounting to overt acts of hatred toward their oppressors. These may work out in the short-term, but ultimately they *dehumanize* the people who adopt them. *Non-violent* resistance is an alternate strategy by which the powerless can unsettle, and even disable, the oppressor.

Archbishop Helder Camara is a forefather of liberation theology, known as a *preferential option for the poor*. He worked among the poor of Brazil, that is before he was assassinated too. Dom Camara asserted in his book, *Spiral of Violence*, that violence dehumanizes the oppressed eventually. But he was adamant in not *demonizing* those who respond to social injustice with violence, especially youth. He did not judge them.

Dorothee Soelle was the Belgian Catholic nun I spoke of on Christmas Eve. She also lived among the Brazilian poor. Soelle wrote, *To exist free of violence means to think and act with other living beings in a common life... [Nonviolence] is the mysticism of being at one with all that lives*. She acknowledged the difference between self and enemies, but considered it not sufficiently absolute to justify the enemies' destruction. [Soelle was in her nineties when I heard her speak in 1995. She died not long thereafter.]

William Stringfellow trained as a lawyer. He was an outspoken lay theologian in difficult relationship with the Episcopalian church. I expect he was a pal of William Sloane Coffin in the 60s and 70s. Stringfellow believed that United States society is the *embodiment* of violence. Trying to save an America like that is futile. Living a life committed to resisting the culture of violence is what matters: speaking truth to power, living humanly, exposing and challenging ideologies of violence. Stringfellow did not rule out violent resistance either, but only when non-violent approaches had failed repeatedly.

I must be absolutely clear before moving on to touchy ground for UUs. I am NOT anti-empathy. Empathy with the suffering of others makes us better people, with or without religion. To Dr. King *only* love can transform an unjust world. Empathy is fundamental to love and to non-violence.

The problem steps in when we make a common assumption: If we can only educate people by encouraging victims of oppression to tell their stories, empathy will bloom, and oppressors will be transformed into lovers. But what if the differences between, say, you and me, can't be understood, let alone reconciled? What if you or I can't discern a path through our own confusion, pain and doubt? In *The Baby and The Well: The Case Against Empathy*, Sam Bloom writes *Empathy is inherently limited in that it only goes as far as one can imagine, and one's imagination is necessarily bound by their experiences*. Furthermore, empathy is exhausting to targets of oppression who must relive their pain over and over out loud to stay on the public radar. No wonder a violent response can be tempting, especially among angry young people whose lives to date have rendered them feeling powerless. Empathy makes us better people. But empathy *alone* won't save us. Adds bell hooks, *If someone's worth is framed only by how much of me I can see in them, far too much of them is invisible*.

bell hooks is a Buddhist Christian, an African American woman, and a prolific, acclaimed author on the intersections where race, class and gender meet. She is what we seminarians called a *public intellectual*, although bell hooks herself chuckles at the term.

These days bell hooks lives in a small Kentucky town where she teaches at tuition-free Berea College. One day a Berea police officer stopped bell hooks in her car, *because I was doing something wrong*. [We who live in small towns like Pendleton, SC tend to do things like bolt yellow lights when no one is coming.]

In all her 60-some years, never before had bell hooks feared the police. Suddenly, she was frightened. In her words, the police officer was *total sweetness*. Yet she drove away with a sigh reflecting on how pervasive estrangement now is for African Americans. It had infiltrated even her small town Kentucky life.

The human family is a beautiful concept, but go no further than the latest GOP debate to witness that concept hurtling down a very slippery slope. Empathy alone will not save us. Differing understandings of non-violence may spark debates among us—we're UUs after all—but they must not be allowed to divide us—*or another oppressor wins*. An indispensable step in affirming the inherent worth and dignity of others, is to become deeply acquainted with our own humanity—not just our likes, dislikes and opinions—but our souls.

Rev. Rosemary Bray McNatt, whose son Allen is a third-generation Unitarian Universalist—for now. *For if we are really practicing what it means to be human, in an ever widening circle of humanity, our congregations may become some of the most dangerous places we know, because they will become faithful communities of change...*

What does Martin Luther King want us to do today?