

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Ablany, New York
“From Civil Rights to Human Rights”
Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore January 15, 2012

Reading

My reading selections for this morning come from the [speech](#) made by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference at their eleventh Annual Meeting, August 16, 1967. This speech isn't one of the famous ones everyone likes to quote or read for dramatic effect. But in this speech King begins to outline his new vision of moving from civil rights to human rights. This vision was not fully formed but in the process of evolving. That direction and evolution is the legacy I seek to bring to us this morning.

In assault after assault, we caused the sagging walls of segregation to come tumbling down. During this era the entire edifice of segregation was profoundly shaken. This is an accomplishment whose consequences are deeply felt by every southern Negro in his daily life. ...

In short, over the last ten years the Negro decided to straighten his back up, realizing that a man cannot ride your back unless it is bent. We made our government write new laws to alter some of the cruelest injustices that affected us. We made an indifferent and unconcerned nation rise from lethargy and subpoenaed its conscience to appear before the judgment seat of morality on the whole question of civil rights. We gained manhood in the nation that had always called us "boy." ... But in spite of a decade of significant progress, the problem is far from solved. The deep rumbling of discontent in our cities is indicative of the fact that the plant of freedom has grown only a bud and not yet a flower.

Where do we go from here? First, we must massively assert our dignity and worth. We must stand up amid a system that still oppresses us and develop an unassailable and majestic sense of values. We must no longer be ashamed of being black. The job of arousing manhood within a people that have been taught for so many centuries that they are nobody is not easy...

I want to say to you as I move to my conclusion, as we talk about "Where do we go from here?" that we must honestly face the fact that the movement must address itself to the question of restructuring the whole of American society. There are forty million poor people here, and one day we must ask the question, "Why are there forty million poor people in America?" And when you begin to ask that question, you are raising a question about the economic system, about a broader distribution of wealth. When you ask that question, you begin to question the capitalistic economy. And I'm simply saying that more and more, we've got to begin to ask questions about the whole society. We are called upon to help the discouraged beggars in life's marketplace. But

one day we must come to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring. It means that questions must be raised. And you see, my friends, when you deal with this you begin to ask the question, "Who owns the oil?" You begin to ask the question, "Who owns the iron ore?" You begin to ask the question, "Why is it that people have to pay water bills in a world that's two-thirds water?" These are words that must be said...

What I'm saying to you this morning is communism forgets that life is individual. Capitalism forgets that life is social. And the kingdom of brotherhood is found neither in the thesis of communism nor the antithesis of capitalism, but in a higher synthesis. It is found in a higher synthesis that combines the truths of both. Now, when I say questioning the whole society, it means ultimately coming to see that the problem of racism, the problem of economic exploitation, and the problem of war are all tied together. These are the triple evils that are interrelated.

Sermon

The long hot summer of 1967 wasn't a very good one for Dr. King or the Civil Rights movement. On June 11, the shooting death of Martin Chambers by police sparked a race riot in Tampa, Florida. Buffalo followed with riots from June 26 till July 1 with 200 arrests. July 14, serious riots erupted in Newark, New Jersey. July 19 race riots broke out on the North Side of Minneapolis during their Aquatennial Parade. Then on July 23 came the Detroit Race Riots, one of the worst riots in United States history. 43 were killed, 342 injured and 1,400 buildings burned. July 30, the Milwaukee race riots began, lasting through August 2 and leading to a ten-day shutdown of the city. By August 1, race riots were in the nation's capital. Over 150 race riots occurred that year. These riots were provoking a feeling the nation was in crisis.

The SCLC wasn't doing that well either. King served as the Executive Director but also had his own church, Ebenezer Baptist, and a national public speaking presence. These multiple hats interfered with keeping good control over his staff. They were demoralized over a lack of clarity of their mission, a decline of funding and the need to cut staff. At a Quaker retreat center on St. Helena Island off the coast of South Carolina, he told his staff of his evolving vision. He said:

It is necessary for us to realize that we have moved from the era of civil rights to the era of human rights. When you deal with human rights you are not dealing with something clearly defined in the Constitution. They are rights that are clearly defined by the mandates of a humanitarian concern. (p. 322)

Stewart Burns in his book on King titled, *To the Mountaintop*, has a good analysis of this transition. King could see that civil rights laws by themselves could not sweep away racism

and poverty.

He grasped that “civil rights” carried too much baggage of the dominant tradition of American individualism and not enough counterweight from a tradition of communitarian impulses, collective striving, and common good... According to this deeper view that King took on, rights were more than private possessions. They were a moral imperative that transcended individual needs...Rights, rightly understood were not whatever a person claimed as his or her due, with no boundaries, but what was required for all people, and thus for each, by the higher laws of justice and love. They were those entitlements that constituted the moral foundation of the beloved community. (p. 322-3)

Whatever you think about Jesus, he was not a free enterprise capitalist, no matter what prosperity focused evangelical Christian ministers may say. He did not say to the rich young ruler, invest your wealth, live off the profit and follow me. The lifeblood of the African-American churches had always been cooperation and mutual support for the good of all. The fragmentation of focusing on each person having the right to get ahead economically on their own undermined that unifying power. King believed “It is morally right to insist that every person have a decent house, an adequate education, and enough money to provide basic necessities for one's family”... On the sunny sea island that day, he was calling for a full-blown human rights movement, a 'human rights revolution' that would place economic justice at the center. (p. 324)”

NAACP leader and “Queen Mother” of the American Civil Rights movement, Septima Clark, in her eulogy of King said:

“Racism, poverty and welfare remain, yet our hearts retain the righteous dream of God's revolutionary kingdom. His peace was not in a cozy rally, but in a re-ordering of our national priorities from military power to that of human empowerment.”

In the reading I offered, you heard that raising of certain basic questions. Comparing Communism and Capitalism was pretty radical stuff during the Cold War. King challenged basic assumptions about our society by saying “the problem of racism, the problem of economic exploitation, and the problem of war are all tied together.” It is the kind of challenge that can get you labeled a terrorist and get you killed.

The dominant power structures are the ones ready and willing to resist truths like these. King ran headlong into them toward the end of his life. He didn't have the political power and sophistication to navigate these treacherous waters.

Thomas F. Jackson's analysis in his book on King titled, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights*, is very useful here. He points out:

Working class Americans of all races saw little in the War on Poverty for themselves. They bore the brunt of fighting in Vietnam and the inflation triggered by war spending

in 1966. They were profoundly disaffected, not just from the Democratic party, but from the entire political process.

King had trouble working with the larger, less progressive unions. Support for the war by unions like the AFL-CIO and their resistance to the desegregation of jobs and neighborhoods made them unreliable allies.

Many Americans came to see the War on Poverty as benefiting undeserving and riotous blacks, as conservative politicians loudly asserted it as the media focused on urban violence and the radicalized welfare-dependent poor...

King was already being domesticated as “the American Gandhi” by our celebrity culture that likes pigeon-holed icons much better than real people. The public preferred his focus on nonviolence to his rhetoric of opposition to racism, militarism and poverty. And after all, no one really likes those irritating prophets who make us see things in ourselves we’d rather not see. America likes King so much better as a dead martyr we can canonize and neutralize at the same time.

I recognize these problems from my own social activism. Working for Marriage Equality was similar to 1960's civil rights work. Same sex couples were identified for discrimination based the the intrusion of religious values into the public sphere clearly defining the issue. Building coalitions was easy. The struggle wasn't easy but keeping people together and focused was.

That wasn't my experience at times in ARISE as President of this congregation based community organizing project. When we were advocating in general for youth, education and employment in the Capital Region, we were fine. When we started looking at specific programs for specific groups with specific price tags, we'd start fighting with each other over who should get what. Economic considerations of resource allocation and redistribution are the hardest to come together around in my experience. But it is through community organizing and empowerment that a difference starts being made. Remember, Saul Alinsky was hard at work in Rochester in 1967 working to change the hiring practices of Eastman Kodak.

Jackson writes that:

King joined local activists in insisting that poverty would not be eliminated until poor people overcame their own political powerlessness through participation in institutions controlling their own lives and shaping their prospects. In arguing for democratic empowerment as a social policy imperative, King and his circle challenged assumptions held by welfare reformers since the Progressive Era that social change must proceed under the guidance of professional experts, that poor people are clients more than citizens. Only a movement that empowered people in the context of community could promise to reduce victimization and augment mutual aid and self-

help among poor people, King held. Institutions matter. The urban uprisings were not simply responses to socioeconomic inequality but also violent protests against police violence and unresponsive institutions.

Empowerment is critical to a community like Albany. The descendants of slaves who live here have never had an effective communal voice. Certainly individuals have had influence, but Albany politics has evolved to support a strong patriarchal mayor who holds the power and decides who gets what. This isn't a recipe for helping reverse the demoralizing legacy of slavery that resides in the heads of those growing up in multigenerational poverty.

While I disagree with much of former Presidential candidate Herman Cain's policy agenda, as a motivational speaker he is right when he said Friday night on [Bill Maher's Real Time](#), the problem is in our heads. Internalized self-devaluation is one of the toxic legacies of slavery. The struggles of immigrants and poor whites are not the same as those with a heritage of slavery when confronting oppression. This difference often works to undermine the rainbow coalition of minorities working for economic justice.

What those of us who identify as white must also recognize is that toxic legacy of slavery lives on in us as well. The internalized inherited self-devaluation of slavery can be easily reinforced by the residual racism in whites. This is why our efforts to heal the culturally transmitted social disease of racism is so important for all of us.

We have an opportunity to do that today by supporting SNUG.

SNUG is a violence intervention program that uses a public health approach to reduce shootings and killings. Initiated by New York State Senator Malcolm Smith, SNUG is based on the [Chicago Ceasefire](#) model. Albany and nine other locations were pilots for this program last year until the funding ran out. More funding has been allocated recently, but not enough to fully implement the program.

The public health view of violence asserts:

- Violence is learned from role models
- Violence is caused by social forces like racism, lack of opportunity and poverty.
- Violence becomes endemic in subgroups with a higher rate of homicide.
- Violence escalates to homicide through a series of events and interactions between co-disputants.

The goal of SNUG is to stop violence and killings by:

- Building relationships with those most closely associated with the problem;
- Establishing an ongoing presence in violence prone neighborhoods;
- And allocating resources based on when and where violence is occurring.

SNUG employs specially trained people to work as violence interrupters. These street wise individuals from the affected neighborhoods use their connections to actively mediate conflicts and prevent violence. At [the SNUG press conference on Thursday](#), I heard the head of Albany Medical Center's Pastoral Care Program, Harlan Ratmeyer, sing the praises of these workers in preventing violence. Specially trained Outreach workers work one-to-one with individual participants serving as role models and helping with connections to school, employment, family and relationships. SNUG leaders motivate residents, businesses, service organizations and faith communities to work together to build a better community.

I ask for your support today for this program, because it is doing exactly what Dr King was calling for in advocating for human rights. The base of any kind of human rights is safety. SNUG very effectively prevented gun violence last year that brought praise from Albany Police Chief, Steven Krokoff. And the program goes beyond that, by getting at the root causes of violence and building community. They are working with the young men and women who should be the future of the African-American community. They cannot be part of that future if they are maimed, dead or wasting away in prison. The violence interrupters send them a message that their lives matter. This congregation needs to send them that message too by supporting SNUG. SNUG is the best program that I've seen here in a long time. I'm putting \$100 in the collection plate this morning because I think this message is so important. I hope there are some of you who can join me. Whatever you can give will be appreciated.

Ultimately, the work of Dr. King or SNUG is taking another step in building the beloved community. We are a long way from that community today, but we are not a long way from the dream. It is alive here right now in this room when we remember Dr. King and hear his words. We know it was in his heart – but it didn't start there. It started with his Christian faith, a faith based on the transforming power of love. I close with a few more words on that transforming power from his 1967 address:

And I say to you, I have also decided to stick with love, for I know that love is ultimately the only answer to mankind's problems. And I'm going to talk about it everywhere I go. I know it isn't popular to talk about it in some circles today. And I'm not talking about emotional bosh when I talk about love; I'm talking about a strong, demanding love. For I have seen too much hate. I've seen too much hate on the faces of sheriffs in the South. I've seen hate on the faces of too many Klansmen and too many White Citizens Councilors in the South to want to hate, myself, because every time I see it, I know that it does something to their faces and their personalities, and I say to myself that hate is too great a burden to bear. I have decided to love. If you are seeking the highest good, I think you can find it through love. And the beautiful thing is that we aren't moving wrong when we do it, because John was right, God is love. He who hates does not know God, but he who loves has the key that unlocks the door to the meaning of ultimate reality.

(If you are moved to support SNUG, you can send a check to Trinity Alliance of the Capital Region with SNUG on the memo line and send it to 15 Trinity Place, Albany, New York 12202)

Benediction

I end with these words from the conclusion of Dr. King's 1967 speech:

And so, I conclude by saying today that we have a task,
and let us go out with a divine dissatisfaction.

Let us be dissatisfied until America
will no longer have a high blood pressure of creeds
and an anemia of deeds.

Let us be dissatisfied until the tragic walls
that separate the outer city of wealth and comfort
from the inner city of poverty and despair
shall be crushed by the battering rams
of the forces of justice.

Let us be dissatisfied until those who live on the outskirts of hope
are brought into the metropolis of daily security.

Let us be dissatisfied until slums
are cast into the junk heaps of history,
and every family will live in a decent, sanitary home.

Let us be dissatisfied until the dark yesterdays of segregated schools
will be transformed into bright tomorrows
of quality integrated education.

Let us be dissatisfied until integration is not seen as a problem
but as an opportunity to participate in the beauty of diversity.

Let us be dissatisfied until men and women,
however black they may be,
will be judged on the basis of the content of their character,
not on the basis of the color of their skin.

Let us be dissatisfied until from every city hall,
justice will roll down like waters,
and righteousness like a mighty stream.

Let us be dissatisfied until that day
when nobody will shout, "White Power!"
when nobody will shout, "Black Power!"
but everybody will talk about God's power and human power.