

“When Tyrants Tremble”  
Rev. Carol Allman-Morton  
January 17, 2010  
UUMSB

Readings:

Excerpt from “We Must Keep Going” by Vincent Harding

“What was new in the late 1960s was where the movement was going—into the midst of men, women and children whose lives were often forced against a host of harsh and dreadful walls, with no apparent way out. Reflecting that experience, searching for an exit, his voice could not be untrue to the serrated edges of the people’s lives, could not be unfaithful to his vision of the need to organize the poor for confrontation with the powers of oppression. So, by the end of 1966, King was calling SCLC to prepare itself to lead, “the poor in a crusade to realized economic and social justice”<sup>1</sup>

Excerpt from “A Time to Break Silence” by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King – delivered at Riverside Church in New York City, April 4, 1967. One year before his assassination.

“I am convinced that if we are to get on the right side of the world revolution, we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin the shift from a “thing-oriented” society to a “person-oriented” society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered.”<sup>2</sup>

Sermon:

The Civil Rights Museum is in Memphis, Tennessee. It chronicles the civil rights movement in the United States and is located at the site of the Lorraine Motel, where Dr. Martin Luther King was assassinated. When the museum was built in the 1980s, it was built around the motel, preserving the motel as it was in 1968. King’s car is still parked outside the building and is part of the exhibit. As you probably remember, King and some folks from the Southern Christian Leadership Conference were in Memphis to help organize striking sanitation workers. When you walk through their motel rooms, you can still see the empty coffee cups on the table. Outside the room there are videos running of interviews with people who were with King that afternoon. The one I remember most was with the young Jesse Jackson soon after the assassination talking about King’s last day. He recalled they had moments of fun and I think I remember him saying something about a pillow fight. They got ready for the event that night, headed to the car and as we all know, when he left the hotel room, King was assassinated. Across the street the museum recently purchased the building from which King was shot and have devoted the space to exhibits exploring the various theories about who killed King and why. The building houses everything from a replica of the car James Earl Ray was driving to FBI documents and King family papers.

How was the work of Dr. King so dangerous to those in power that one could make a whole museum building devoted to the different theories about who might have wanted him dead and how they might have done it? He was so dangerous first because of his success in

---

<sup>1</sup> Vincent Harding, “We Must Keep Going”, *Fellowship*, January-February 1987.

<sup>2</sup> Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, “A Time to Break Silence”, April 4, 1967

organizing a non-violence movement for the rights of African Americans in one of the most racially segregated areas of the United States. When he was killed, he was especially dangerous to the powerful because he was organizing not just for African American citizens, but for all the poor. He spoke out against the Vietnam War and made connections between poverty, militarism, and racism. As we celebrate the birthday of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King we honor and remember him as a prophet for many reasons. Tonight I am going to focus on the connections he made between types of oppression, and most importantly, connections he made between people.

In his speech, “A Time to Break Silence”, given exactly one year before his assassination, King spoke out about connections between poverty, war, and race. He reflected about the mid 1960s, “It seemed as if there was a real promise of hope for the poor—both black and white—through the poverty program. There were experiments, hopes, new beginnings. Then came the buildup in Vietnam and I watched the program broken and eviscerated as if it were some idle political plaything of a society gone mad on war, and I knew that America would never invest the necessary funds or energies in the rehabilitation of its poor so long as adventures like Vietnam continued to draw men and skills and money like some demonic destructive suction tube....It became clear to me that the war was doing far more than devastating the hopes of the poor at home. It was sending their sons and their brothers and their husbands to fight and die in extraordinarily high proportions relative to the rest of the population.”<sup>3</sup> King explained that more than any nationalist identity, he was called as a Christian minister to in his words, “speak for the weak, for the voiceless, for victims of our nation and for those it call enemy, for no document from human hands can make these humans any less our brothers.”<sup>4</sup>

In the Hebrew Bible, there is a prophetic tradition about which Rev. King would have been intimately aware. These prophets called their communities to task for breaking covenants with their God. Prophets called out their communities for not keeping their commitments, especially around issues of worship, and in the case of the prophet Amos, for the treatment of the poor. Amos preached in a time when his community experienced a period of peace which led to prosperity for a few. This prosperity dismantled the traditional ways the community understood landownership and wealth. A wealthy class emerged and was not fulfilling its commitments to God and their community.<sup>5</sup> Amos threatened that because of their choices, his people would experience the wrath of God, and the destruction of their society. In Amos chapter 2 verses 6 and 7, he says, “I will not revoke the punishment; because they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals—they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted out of the way.” Forty years later, Assyria came and conquered Israel, and in a sense, Amos’ prophecy came true, his community was destroyed. Wrath of God kind of language and narrative is not part of Unitarian Universalist theology. We don’t understand God or any power to be working to punish people through war or disaster. However, many Unitarian Universalists look to Amos as a prophet who spoke for the poor. His methods for seeking change were culturally appropriate to his time, if not what we would say.

Dr. King was a prophet in the tradition of Amos. He called the people of power in the world to task. He warned us all that if the system was not changed and if we did not “undergo a radical revolution of values”, then we would doom ourselves to repeating over and over the same mistakes that were just as much a part of the Amos’ time. As we heard in our reading earlier, King said, “We must rapidly begin the shift from a “thing-oriented” society to a “person-

---

<sup>3</sup> King, “A Time to Break Silence”

<sup>4</sup> King, *ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Gene M. Tucker, “Amos”, *HarperCollins Study Bible*, NRSV 1993.

oriented” society.”<sup>6</sup> How have we done on this task? Not so well. In fact this speech could have been written yesterday about our situation in the United States today. We are suffering economically, with few having much, and many having little. We are in the midst of two wars, and as a world, we are coming to terms with hard choices in our environmental future. In Haiti this week, millions of people are suffering not only because of an act of nature, but moreover because of a lack of infrastructure available to protect the people from harm, and to serve them in times of disaster. King’s dream for a radically changed society has not yet happened.

Vincent Harding, who we heard from in our first reading, was an advisor to King and helped to write King’s speech “A Time to Break Silence”. Harding reflected on the struggles within the Southern Christian Leadership Conference about this change in focus to such a radical idea of changing the way that we organize ourselves as a society... to become people-centered. In Harding’s words some in the SCLC, “were simply unable to face the fact that Martin Luther King has become far more than a civil rights leader and was offering leadership toward the humanizing transformation of the entire nation.”<sup>7</sup> Harding even anonymously quotes one member of the conference who said, “I don’t think that many of us on the staff would have been ready to take the risks to life, possessions, security and status that such a move would have involved...I’m pretty sure I wouldn’t have been willing.”<sup>8</sup>

Martin Luther King was a prophet, seeing the truth in the world that when few hold power, and the powerless are unconnected, there is no one to truly hold the powerful accountable. When the powerless are brought together, they have the combined agency to force change. Together, the oppressed have power. When prophets are able to bring together people without power, and inspire them to do extraordinary things, they are dangerous to structures of power. King had the skills and the willingness to move forward because he believed that the work he did for the oppressed was his calling. He worked to build connections between people, and to build our understanding of how oppression works on many levels. We have seen in our history, that in the United States, the powerless can make change when their numbers are large enough. We have seen political change happen for African Americans, for women, for many groups of people. And yet... we have not changed the system. It is still true that in the United States large amounts of power are concentrated in the hands of the wealthy few. The poor are not a minority, they are a majority, and that is why organizing the poor is dangerous work. The powerful are not often willing to give power away and facing a sea of people who want them to change the way they live their lives is frightening. This is why the work of Martin Luther King in the last year of his life was and is so important.

I was reading updates on the situation in Haiti this morning and came across an article on cnn.com. It talked about a field hospital where the head of the medical unit pulled their staff out overnight because they were concerned about security. Apparently CNN’s medical correspondent, Sanjay Gupta was the only doctor who stayed, with a Haitian nurse to tend to the patients overnight. CNN went to Retired Army Lt. Gen. Russel Honoré for a comment on the situation because in 2005 he led relief efforts for Hurricane Katrina. CNN reported, “Honoré drew parallels between the tragedy in New Orleans, Louisiana, and in Port-au-Prince. But even

---

<sup>6</sup> King, *ibid*

<sup>7</sup> Harding, “We Must Keep Going”

<sup>8</sup> Harding *ibid*

in the chaos of Katrina, he said, he had never seen medical staff walk away. "I find this astonishing these doctors left," he said. "People are scared of the poor."<sup>9</sup>

King said, "I am convinced that if we are to get on the right side of the world revolution, we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin the shift from a "thing-oriented" society to a "person-oriented" society."<sup>10</sup> Today, as a world, we must also undergo this revolution of values. In the moment, when there is massive suffering, often we as a world community are there with help. In Haiti, aid is pouring into the country. But when will we as a world, and as a country make the decision to share our wealth in different ways so that all might have enough? When can we learn to live in community in such a way that when disasters strike, there is not such despairing need?

The work of Dr. King continues to be our work. Powerful people are not lining up to share their power with the world. The way to empower the oppressed and poor is to build connections.... To form new communities, and to share the power we have with others.

May it be so.

---

<sup>9</sup> "Security concerns cause doctors to leave hospital, quake victims", CNN's Justine Redman, Danielle Dellorto and John Bonifield contributed to this report. January 16, 2010, [cnn.com](http://cnn.com)

<sup>10</sup> King *ibid*