

Building a New Way  
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UUMSB

As Unitarian Universalists, we do not have an official liturgical calendar we are encouraged to follow as many of our friends in other religious traditions do. That said, the topics for our services tend to follow the rhythms of our seasons, and the historical holidays our parent traditions are connected with. We have Unitarian Universalist traditions like Water and Flower Communion Sundays among others. Another holiday that we and most Unitarian Universalist congregations connect with strongly is Martin Luther King Sunday. Unitarian Universalists were strongly engaged with his work and the Civil Rights movement, and a commitment to working for justice for all people is part of the fabric of our tradition. All that said, as time goes on, and as new leaders come and go, we can sometimes forget the power of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King's oratory and his vision. Sometimes I think about the stories of his failings, or worry about how much and how little has changed, I think about the tragedy of his murder and wonder at conspiracy theories. But in this service each year, we go back and hear his words, I get to re-read speeches, sermons and essays and remember the genius of this man. When I hear his voice in my head as a read, fifty years later I am ready to follow him into danger and stand for justice. The transcripts of his speeches usually include the audience's *wells*, *amens* and *yeses*. I can imagine that I am there in the room. King had a gift not only for complex social analysis, but for using the Bible and people's shared experience to tell stories within stories, to take shortcuts into people's hearts and memory. He tried through his words and deeds to bring people to their best selves, and consciously remake the world into one that was faithful to his understanding of what his God called him to do. People like that don't come around very often.

How fortuitous that King lived in a time when his vision and gifts could make such a profound difference in the movement for civil rights for African Americans. In the year before his death, King had begun the fundamentally important work of helping the people who work for racial justice, economic justice, and peace come together to see how profoundly racism, classism, economic inequality and war are bound together to block fundamental change in how power is held in our society, work we are still struggling with today. What might have changed, what work could have been done in our lifetimes if he had not been killed so young? We go to King and his work throughout the year for inspiration, and today, we celebrate his life, and the profundity of the change to the world he made through his love, faith, and choices.

In King's speech we just heard, he says, "If you are seeking the highest good, I think you can find it through love."<sup>1</sup> The kind of love he is talking about is not romantic love, but "strong, demanding love." In other writings he uses the Greek term *agape* for this love, which we talked about two Sundays ago in reference to Paul's first letter to the Corinthians in Christian Scripture. Paul also writes of this kind of selfless, community love and King references it in another part of this same speech, "And so I say to you today, my friends, that you may be able to speak with the

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1 MLK, 16 August 1967 "Where Do We Go From Here?," Delivered at the 11th Annual SCLC Convention, Atlanta, Ga., [http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/documentsentry/where\\_do\\_we\\_go\\_from\\_here\\_delivered\\_at\\_the\\_11th\\_annual\\_sclc\\_convention/](http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/documentsentry/where_do_we_go_from_here_delivered_at_the_11th_annual_sclc_convention/)

tongues of men and angels (*All right*); you may have the eloquence of articulate speech; but if you have not love, it means nothing.”<sup>2</sup> James Luther Adams, the great 20<sup>th</sup> century Unitarian theologian wrote about love and *agape* in many of his essays. He also wrote extensively on reframing the language and meaning of God. In the language of his Unitarian faith he wrote, “Love is “the dearest freshness [of] deep down things,” the dynamic ground of viable and meaningful community. It is the divine “call” to humanity... The very meaning of history is to be found in the struggle for community... in this struggle the only reliable “object” of faith and devotion is Agape, the power of God which reconciles and reunites.”<sup>3</sup> He also wrote, “The love of God, then, is the giving of oneself to the power that holds the world together and that, when we are tearing it apart, persuades us to come to ourselves and start on new beginnings.”<sup>4</sup> These are some of my favorite words for describing the force in the universe that some call love, spirit of life, god, hope, unnamable, unknowable, oneness, a foundation of our humanity. What we call that center then, “is the giving of oneself to the power that holds the world together and that, when we are tearing it apart, persuades us to come to ourselves and start on new beginnings.”<sup>5</sup>

In King's speech to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, he was asking them to continue the work to rebuild the world. In the language of his faith he framed it as being born again. He asked that the whole structure be changed, that the values that held together a system of oppression be overrun by love and lead to a new way of being a community and government.

Let us be dissatisfied [*applause*] until from every city hall, justice will roll down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream. (*Yes*)

Let us be dissatisfied (*Yes*) until that day when the lion and the lamb shall lie down together (*Yes*), and every man will sit under his own vine and fig tree, and none shall be afraid.<sup>6</sup>

President Obama echoed King in his final State of the Union speech last week saying:

...Whatever you may believe, whether you prefer one party or no party, whether you supported my agenda or fought as hard as you could against it -- our collective futures depends on your willingness to uphold your duties as a citizen. To vote. To speak out. To stand up for others, especially the weak, especially the vulnerable, knowing that each of us is only here because somebody, somewhere, stood up for us...

It is not easy. Our brand of democracy is hard. But I can promise that a little over a year from now, when I no longer hold this office, I will be right there with you as a citizen, inspired by those voices of fairness and vision, of grit and good humor and kindness that helped America travel so far. Voices that help us see ourselves not, first and foremost, as black or white, or Asian or Latino, not as gay or straight, immigrant or native born, not as Democrat or Republican, but as Americans first, bound by a common creed. Voices Dr. King believed would have the final word -- voices of unarmed truth and unconditional

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2 Ibid.

3 JLA, *the Essential JLA*, “Our Responsibility in Society” p 157

4 JLA, *On Being Human Religiously*, “Love of God”, p. 96

5 *ibid.*

6 King

love.<sup>7</sup>

Our society and our world are broken in many ways. There are many people and institutions that use their power to hurt and control others so that they can hold on to that power. We are immersed in systems of racism, and all kinds of isms. We still have not found a way to collectively live into love and compassion. How do we move forward? Where do we go from here? We need leaders and movements to push for change, to hold us accountable, to inspire people to move into their best selves and to expand human compassion and understanding. *And* at a fundamental level, we build a new world, we rebuild a community based in love, compassion and justice, in our smallest choices. We build a new way when we hold love in every relationship, from our family and friends, to strangers on the street, to our communities, and to those we will never meet. We do this when we consider the impact of our choices and lives on the widening circles of relationship to which we are connected. When we work to love each other, to see our connections in the web of life, and our power, when we work for justice in our community, we are building foundations of change and love that we may never see the fruits of in our lifetimes. We plant the vine and fig tree, but we *may* not sit under it. Love “is the giving of oneself to the power that holds the world together and that, when we are tearing it apart, persuades us to come to ourselves and start on new beginnings.”<sup>8</sup>

I believe that our calling as people of an open and loving tradition of compassion and justice, is to do this work. To build a new way. Dr. King visibly changed the world in his lifetime, and our lives are all touched by his in ways we can know and name and today we celebrate his life and vision. We also know that we all have and will change this world with our lives. We can never fully know the impact of our choices and our love on web of life, but we know that we are all connected. When we use our gifts in community, we can see change happening, we can see our impact more clearly. *Agape* love only exists in relationship. My prayer for all people is that we find ways to love more fully and openly and that as we live with compassion, that we are met with compassion. If we choose to live our lives holding each other in *agape*, in love, may we be held and supported when we need it, and share our strength with others. May we build a new way. King ended his call to action to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference with these words:

Let us realize that the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice. Let us realize that William Cullen Bryant is right: "Truth, crushed to earth, will rise again." .... Whatsoever a man soweth (*Yes*), that (*Yes*) shall he also reap." This is our hope for the future, and with this faith we will be able to sing in some not too distant tomorrow, with a cosmic past tense, "We have overcome! (*Yes*) We have overcome! Deep in my heart, I did believe (*Yes*) we would overcome." [*applause*]

May it be so.

Amen.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/01/12/remarks-president-barack-obama-%E2%80%93-prepared-delivery-state-union-address>

<sup>8</sup> <sup>1</sup> JLA, *On Being Human Religiously*, “Love of God”, p. 96