

“We Must Help Time”
January 15, 2017
Rev. Carol Allman-Morton
UUMSB

Reading: Excerpt from Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., 31 March 1968, “Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution”, Delivered at the National Cathedral, Washington, D.C., on 31 March 1968.

(http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/documentsentry/doc_remaining_aware_through_a_great_revolution.1.html)

The hour has come for everybody, for all institutions of the public sector and the private sector to work to get rid of racism. And now if we are to do it we must honestly admit certain things and get rid of certain myths that have constantly been disseminated all over our nation.

One is the myth of time. It is the notion that only time can solve the problem of racial injustice. And there are those who often sincerely say to the Negro and his allies in the white community, "Why don't you slow up? Stop pushing things so fast. Only time can solve the problem. And if you will just be nice and patient and continue to pray, in a hundred or two hundred years the problem will work itself out."

There is an answer to that myth. It is that time is neutral. It can be used wither constructively or destructively. And I am sorry to say this morning that I am absolutely convinced that the forces of ill will in our nation, the extreme rightists of our nation—the people on the wrong side—have used time much more effectively than the forces of goodwill. And it may well be that we will have to repent in this generation. Not merely for the vitriolic words and the violent actions of the bad people, but for the appalling silence and indifference of the good people who sit around and say, "Wait on time."

Somewhere we must come to see that human progress never rolls in on the wheels of inevitability. It comes through the tireless efforts and the persistent work of dedicated individuals who are willing to be co-workers with God. And without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the primitive forces of social stagnation. So we must help time and realize that the time is always ripe to do right.

Sermon:

I was in the woods yesterday, trying to get my mind around some of the stuff that is happening in our world right now. We are in a challenging, and in my experience, a very surreal time. We the people, our media, and our leaders are in a struggle to set the terms of what truth and reality are. I know this has always been true, but the current climate is more openly engaging in ‘up is down,’ ‘purple is yellow’ behavior than I have ever seen. It is going to be challenging and so important to check in with ourselves and those we trust regularly, to keep our bearings. We need to feed our spiritual centers so that we have a place to fall back for support, for guidance, to calibrate our compass, to rest. Whatever our political affiliations or

understandings, if we seek to live out our values, seek truth and justice, we are going to have to work hard to get our arms around them.

Seeking justice in the world is part of our Unitarian Universalist principles, and it is certainly true that Unitarian Universalists over time have been called to work for justice in the world. But why? Why is justice-seeking part of our faith tradition? We have no single sacred text or prophet that demands this of us, though there are many we honor who do. We have tradition, our experience, and our reason. Most fundamentally if we believe that life is sacred, or even *more* simply if we believe in the right of each person to exist, then as soon as we start applying our reason, we are immersed in work for justice. In part, justice work is about trying to get everyone to agree to a starting point like our first principle, that everyone has inherent worth and dignity. If we agree to those terms, then a whole bunch of questions follow. Do we treat all people in the United States with dignity? Do we treat all people as if they have inherent worth? Or do we treat some people and communities as if they are disposable, or not fully human? If this is true, what is our moral, ethical, and spiritual obligation to preserving the rights and safety of others? Laying this all on the line is part of what Dr. King did so well. He inspired people of all faiths and no faith to stand up for each other, and to take their personal beliefs into the public square. He led people to put their bodies on the line for each other, as he did himself.

The reading we heard from Kings' speech about time, was preached at the National Cathedral only days before his assassination. He headed to Memphis after and gave his famous mountaintop speech the night before his death. It seems he was thinking a lot about time, how much he had left, and expressing urgency to empower people to keep moving forward. In the last years of his life, King began to really work on what we call intersectionality, the ways that different aspects of our identities act together to inform our experience. King talked about how poverty, race, and war impact people in different ways based on their identities. For example, black men and poor white men were more likely to be drafted for Vietnam than wealthier white men, and social programs for the poorest Americans served far more white people than black people, and so there were new ways he sought to build coalitions to push for changes that would help *all* marginalized communities, and through these coalitions more effectively bring justice for the black community. This is the kind work that many activists today are trying to continue.

I think the hardest part of preparing for this service every year is that most of Dr. King's speeches can be read today, and the bulk of his words are as needed today as when he first spoke them. Consider these words to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in 1967:

[A]s we talk about "Where do we go from here?" [...] we must honestly face the fact that the movement must address itself to the question of restructuring the whole of American society. (Yes) 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. (Yes) 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. (Yes) But one day we must come to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring. (All right) 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?" (Yes) You begin to ask the question, "Who owns the iron ore?" (Yes) ...

...In other words, "Your whole structure (Yes) must be changed." [applause] A nation that will keep people in slavery for 244 years will "thingify" them and make them things. (Speak) And therefore, they will exploit them and poor people generally economically. (Yes) And a nation that will exploit economically will have to have foreign investments and everything else, and it will have to use its military might to protect them. All of these problems are tied together. (Yes) [applause]¹

So where are we today? As we celebrate the life of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., we find ourselves in a time when lives continue to be on the line. I won't go through the list of concerns that are weighing on my heart, but I will say that I am afraid, for myself, my family, and for all people. I think that more than any other moment in *my* lifetime, our society is weighing the question of whether we all have inherent worth and dignity, and basic responsibilities to each other in society, a social contract. I am also hopeful, because there are *hundreds of thousands of people*, taking to the streets, showing with their presence, that they believe that we *are* responsible to and for each other, that there are human rights and responsibilities to which we must attend. They are continuing to follow King's model of non-violent action. As a body of faith, we have the opportunity to stand literally, and theologically, with not only other Unitarian Universalists, but with people of other faiths and shared values, to put our spiritual and ethical ideals into practice.

In King's words again:

Somewhere we must come to see that human progress never rolls in on the wheels of inevitability. It comes through the tireless efforts and the persistent work of dedicated individuals who are willing to be co-workers with God. And without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the primitive forces of social stagnation. So we must help time and realize that the time is always ripe to do right.²

Part of the story of the United States is people putting their beliefs into practice through the political process, and through non-violent protest. We are not alone in the present or through history in seeking the space and protection to live out our values and beliefs, and seeking to protect the lives of marginalized people. In that long arc of history we have moved forward in making choices that point toward justice, and we also have had times of great injustice and setback. The path is not onward and upward forever, but littered with struggle and pain. Why? There are lots of reasons, we have talked about many before, fear of change, of others, of losing power and privilege, failures of compassion. There are those who look at a situation, and informed by their experience and beliefs come to different conclusions about who is deserving of resources, protection, of compassion and justice, about the inherent worth and dignity of each person. And so, the time is always right to work for justice, to share *our* understanding of what it means to be human, and what that understanding therefore calls us to do. The time is right for

1 http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/documentsentry/where_do_we_go_from_here_delivered_at_the_11th_annual_sclc_convention/

2 http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/documentsentry/doc_remaining_awake_through_a_great_revolution.1.html

standing up for who we are, our passions and humanity. The time is always right for acting without violence, but not without passion, and with the witness of the life of Dr. King a wind in the sails of coalitions of people standing together, to raise their voices, and grow in spirit as people.

Amen. So may it be.