

Fighting for Voting Rights as an Act of Unitarian Universalist Faith
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It was in the lifetimes of our parents and grandparents that white women were granted the right to vote in this country. It was in the lives of many people here today that Black Americans were given the right to vote, when Jim Crow statutes around the country that kept Black folks from being able to register to vote were abolished from being overt law. There are politicians and organizations that have worked since that day to find other ways to keep Americans of color from voting with everything from Gerrymandering, to onerous voter ID laws, to closing polling places, doing away with early voting and mail in options, and in the last year, just going for meanness with promising fines and arrest to those who offer assistance like food and water to folks waiting in line to vote. In his Mountaintop speech, Dr. King said:

Let us rise up tonight with a greater readiness. Let us stand with a greater determination. And let us move on in these powerful days, these days of challenge to make America what it ought to be. We have an opportunity to make America a better nation...¹

Foundational to Unitarianism, Universalism, and Unitarian Universalism, is the protection of religious freedom, the growth and use of reason and the democratic process to allow people and institutions to make choices about how they will gather, who will govern them and how, because before these ideas were common, religion was the state and the state was religion. We live in a time when the democratic process is in peril, and though, frankly we have never had a fully enfranchised country, right now we are at an inflection point where if we do not pay attention, stand up, and help others who are doing the work of protest, lobbying, knocking on doors, writing and working for justice in a million different ways, we may lose this fragile democracy in which we live. As we are also living in a time of health, climate, and economic crisis, there are those in our system of government who will capitalize on this moment to make it an opportunity to consolidate power and disenfranchise those who would stop them. It has been done it many times before, and then we work for years to untangle the injustices left behind. Here we are again and leaders of color in our country aren't just saying that this *is* such a moment, they are *shouting* for people to hear them. Because if we don't deal with this and protect the ability of people to vote, we are in big trouble. Anything else that we want to accomplish through the government, to build a more just world won't be possible for a very long time. Social programs, climate justice, we won't get anything done through the government, and while that is not the only avenue to making people's lives better, it is the one that touches all of us.

And so I propose to you that protecting voting rights is an act of Unitarian Universalist faith. Saying that because we believe in the importance of each person to worship, love who they love, live where they want to live, have equal access to education and health care, all of these things are the building blocks for making this a more just world. And that is why those who have power are not usually in support of giving others a voice in the process. It doesn't help them to hold on to that power. Part of our Jewish and Christian theological history is speaking truth to power and tearing down systems that oppress the most vulnerable.

¹MLK, Mountaintop Speech - April 3, 1968

Dr. King spoke to this so powerfully. The truth crushed down will rise again. We have to believe that. And we have to help it. We are the hands and hearts in the world that will do the work to make this a more just place. It's us. So, we are called. Each person has different skills, responsibilities, and capacity. Everybody doesn't need to head to Georgia, Texas, and Florida. But I know how many postcards you all sent in 2020, how many calls you made to help get people registered to vote, and you know what? It worked. Thousands of people were helped to register and show up to vote, in the middle of a pandemic. But we can't let up the pressure. We can't let our attention fade.

An invitation for all of us in every decision from what we consume, what we do with our time and resources, and whom we listen to, is to ask, how does this help the most vulnerable? How does this help to dismantle white supremacy culture? As a reminder, white supremacy culture is the institutional, political, and cultural system that holds white experience and lives as more valuable, meaningful, and normative than any others, and is in opposition to honoring and protecting the inherent worth and dignity of every person. White supremacy culture bestows unearned privilege to white folks that cannot be given away. White supremacy culture has its hooks in all of us. It is part of the foundations of our country, in our Constitution, in our systems and government, and we do have the power, with each choice we make, with each time we reflect on our responses, biases, and assumptions, to chip away at it. We can ask ourselves: How does this action or choice bring about a more just world, protect the vulnerable, protect democratic freedom? Because in the end, that is what we *can* do. No one person changes the course of history. In the case of Dr. King, he surely did influence it and we lift up and honor his legacy so deeply today. But he wasn't alone. He was a leader of a movement of millions of people, just like us, who believed in his vision of what was possible. We are a part of a religious tradition of people who believe that a different way of living on this earth, interacting with the web of life, with one another, with systems and government is possible. We have the opportunity to live into that in all of our choices, in all of our actions. And it is time to act. How long? Not long. How long?

Amen.

Readings:

Excerpts from Letter from Birmingham Jail, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., April 16, 1963

You may well ask: "Why direct action? Why sit ins, marches and so forth? Isn't negotiation a better path?" You are quite right in calling for negotiation. Indeed, this is the very purpose of direct action. Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks so to dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored. ...

... We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed. Frankly, I have yet to engage in a direct action campaign that was "well timed" in the view of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the word "Wait!" It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This "Wait" has almost always meant "Never." We must come to see, with one of our distinguished jurists, that "justice too long delayed is justice denied."

We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God given rights. ...

...I must make two honest confessions to you, my Christian and Jewish brothers. First, I must confess that over the past few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Council or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to "order" than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; ... who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a "more convenient season." Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection.

... we who engage in nonviolent direct action are not the creators of tension. We merely bring to the surface the hidden tension that is already alive. We bring it out in the open, where it can be seen and dealt with. Like a boil that can never be cured so long as it is covered up but must be opened with all its ugliness to the natural medicines of air and light, injustice must be exposed, with all the tension its exposure creates, to the light of human conscience and the air of national opinion before it can be cured.

“How Long, Not Long” - Rev. Dr. King, Montgomery, Alabama, March 25, 1965 (Excerpt)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TAYITODNvIM>

“I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” - Rev. Dr. King, April 3, 1968 - Conclusion
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aL4FOvIf7G8>