

MLK'S CHALLENGE TO UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISTS

by Rev. Kit Ketcham, Jan. 11, 2004

For an issue of the UU World magazine several months ago, my friend and colleague the Rev. Rosemary Bray McNatt wrote an article entitled "To Pray Without Apology: Why Martin Luther King Jr. Wasn't a Unitarian Universalist".

Now, it has long been the habit of UUs to enlist virtually every free-thinking or forward-looking human being in American history as an actual Unitarian or Universalist or a "would-a-been" Unitarian or Universalist "if only they'd known about us". Now that they're dead, they can't argue, but we've conscripted a long line of historical figures as members of our faith, either in actuality or in essence.

It's a potentially embarrassing habit we have, of declaring others' religious preferences without their permission, but Martin Luther King, much as we admire him, we have never been able to claim. My initial response to the title of Rosemary's article was to chuckle, thinking she was disparaging our longtime desire to enlist such admirable characters as brothers and sisters in the faith.

Reading the article, however, I discovered that Rosemary knew that Coretta and Martin Luther King, Jr., had indeed nearly become Unitarians in their early years. In her article, Rosemary says that Coretta Scott King, after telling her that she and Martin had once seriously considered Unitarianism, went on to say approximately this:

"We gave a lot of thought to becoming Unitarian at one time, but Martin and I realized we could never build a mass movement of black people if we were Unitarian."

Rosemary, who is African American herself, goes on: “It was a statement that pierced my heart and troubled my mind, then and now. I considered what our religious movement would be like if the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. had chosen differently, had cast his lot with our faith instead of returning to his roots as an African-American Christian.”

My high school history teacher, Mr. Al Starnes, drummed it into our heads in American History class, that it doesn’t work to second-guess history, that “what if” is a question that wastes our breath. History happened and that’s all there is to it. The best we can do is learn from it.

Of course, we have since learned that there are many things the history books don’t cover----African American history is one of them. But just suppose Martin Luther King and Coretta Scott King had joined a Unitarian church when they were living in Boston in the 50’s.

Let’s think about that for a moment, let our imaginations range with that idea. What do you think our religious movement would be like today had MLK Jr. and Coretta Scott King decided to become Unitarian?

(answers from congregation)

What might have attracted the Kings to our faith in those early years? Martin Luther King, Jr., was a brilliant scholar, with a Ph. D. and a string of academic accomplishments to his name. Many of our Unitarian Universalist brothers and sisters can say the same; we are a denomination known for our intellectual bent, our reliance on reason and rationality, our interest in going beyond orthodoxy and into the realms of freer thought.

We are known for our commitment to social justice; we as ministers and laypeople are actively involved in causes of peace and justice. Our principles and purposes call us to higher things.

Like us, Martin Luther King Jr. was a liberal thinker. From the very beginnings of his theological education, he was liberal in his outlook, moving beyond the simple “Jesus Saves” message of his childhood religious tradition and into the challenging world of ideas about life’s beginnings, evolution, and the beliefs of other world religions.

So have we. In fact, some of us have rejected our religious upbringing so thoroughly that we can scarcely define what we do believe, preferring to emphasize what we don’t.

On the surface, it looks as though Unitarian Universalism and the Kings might have been a good fit. Why didn’t it happen? Why couldn’t have Martin and Coretta King led their movement to empower black Americans from the ranks of our faith tradition?

The reasons are a little hard to face and they present a challenge to us today. For one thing, Coretta and Martin Luther King were African American, and our faith tradition, up until the 1970’s, was actively discouraging people of color who wished to become ministers.

Certainly his skills and charisma would have kept him from obscurity, but he would have found serving UUism a frustrating exercise in attaining civil rights as well. Imagine a UU congregation saying to an up and coming young African American minister, “sorry, our congregation doesn’t want a black minister; you wouldn’t fit in our community.” This happens, even now, though usually subtly and not overtly.

Would Dr. King fit here, in one of our Pacific Northwest district congregations? Would he be allowed to serve Whidbey Island? Or Vashon? We would do well to ask ourselves this question.

In addition, Dr. King also found that our optimism about human nature did not wash well in the face of his experiences in the civil rights movement.

In speaking about liberal theology, Martin Luther King Jr. made some comments that deserve our reflection. He said, "There IS one phase of liberalism that I hope to cherish always; its devotion to the search for truth, its refusal to abandon the best light of reason.... It was... the liberal doctrine of (human nature) that I began to question.

"The more I observed the tragedies of history, and (humankind's) shameful inclination to choose the low road, the more I came to see the depths and strength of sin...I came to feel that liberalism had been all too sentimental concerning human nature and that it leaned toward a false idealism.

"I also came to see that liberalism's superficial optimism concerning human nature caused it to overlook the fact that reason is darkened by sin...Liberalism failed to see that reason by itself is little more than an instrument to justify (humankind's) defensive ways of thinking. Reason, devoid of the purifying power of faith, can never free itself from distortion and rationalizations."

Dr. King's experiences in the civil rights movement brought him to this place in his thinking, that liberal theology was too generous when it came to defining human nature, that it was too optimistic in assuming that all would work out for the best, and that it was too blind in overlooking the evils to which human beings are susceptible.

In the face of the sustained hatred and embodied evil of the segregationist South, it was clear to him that the liberal notion of self-perfectibility of human beings was inadequate and even foolish, though Dr. King continued to believe that there is great potential for goodness in humanity and he continued to have faith in the possibilities of human nature.

But his experiences, combined with his incredible powers of reason, led him down a different path than you and I might have taken. Dr. King's power was grounded in a faith in his covenant with oppressed African Americans AND in a God of love who understood suffering, who stood with suffering peoples despite their mistakes and failures.

Our first principle, that we affirm and promote "the inherent worth and dignity of every person", while a cornerstone of our faith, can be wrongly used to excuse harmful behavior on the grounds that the person was misled by his/her upbringing or genetic makeup. We offer explanations and even blame others rather than the culprit. We let people get away with hurtful behavior, even in our congregations. Sometimes this is appropriate, but far too often we excuse evil rather than battle it.

In our struggle to emancipate ourselves from the bonds of old religious doctrine, we have sometimes gone too far and have pretended to ourselves that there is no such thing as evil. We dismiss the word “sin” as being too accusatory, too religious, too old-fashioned, forgetting that it is very useful to have a word that means “doing the wrong thing deliberately”.

In Dr. King’s view, human beings have inherent worth and dignity, but ultimately it is up to individuals to choose the high or the low road and that we humans too often choose the low.

In the life and death struggle of the civil rights movement, the liberal idea that “prejudiced parents and a post-bellum society were to blame” didn’t cut it for Dr. King and the other activists who put their lives on the line. It was still Bull Connor’s choice to turn on the water cannons and to unleash the dogs.

Dr. King could see quite well that these were not just good boys gone wrong. This was a bad system gone even worse. Physical slavery and its paternalistic attitudes has degenerated even further into psychic slavery and a reign of terror and subjugation as bad as or worse than physical slavery.

Then too, would very many black Americans have followed a leader in the 50’s and 60’s whose faith was so strictly intellectual, whose fellow congregants (most of us) had little in common with them, who did not know firsthand their struggle, who even perhaps patronized them or saw their simple faith as quaint and picturesque, the stuff of spirituals sung soulfully and not of “serious, educated” religion like ours.

For we UUs may enjoy the artistic contributions of the black faith community, and we may give lip service and even money to interfaith and ecumenical endeavors, but I would be hard-pressed to say that we really understand and revere the foundation from which that faith tradition springs.

And finally, what would have happened if Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., had stood up in this pulpit or in any other UU pulpit in this area and said to us as he did to his audience in Memphis, in this speech, delivered just hours before his assassination:

“God has commanded us to be concerned about the slums down here and his children who can’t eat three square meals a day. It’s alright to talk about the new Jerusalem, but one day, God’s preacher must talk about the new New York, the New Atlanta, the new Memphis...”

“We don’t need any bricks and bottles, we don’t need any Molotov cocktails, we just need to go around to these stores and to these massive industries in our country and say, ‘God sent us by here, to say to you that you’re not treating his children right...”

“Because I’ve been to the mountain top....Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I’m not concerned about that now. I just want to do God’s will. And He’s allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I’ve looked over. And I’ve seen the promised land. And I’m happy, tonight. I’m not worried about anything. I’m not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.”

God? Lord? No careful euphemisms in Dr. King's speech, no broadening of the term to be less offensive, more respectful of those who are bothered by God-talk. What if these powerful words had come from a Unitarian Universalist pulpit and had called you and me to action? What might have been our response?

We might well have grumbled during coffee hour, "gee, I wish he wouldn't use that God-talk" and we would have missed the whole message of finding joy in righteousness, peace in taking the high road, confidence in relying on a power beyond human power, which Dr. King called God.

For though I'd guess most of us do believe that there is power in the universe that is greater than human power, we don't like to call it God. We are bothered by that word, which seems too limited, too simple, too paternalistic. Yet here is the great man who led the civil rights movement, surely a movement of righteous love and justice if there ever was one, inspired by his belief in a God of love and justice.

He doesn't call it the Spirit of Life or the Ultimate Reality or Higher Power. He calls it God. He isn't scared of it. He isn't afraid that someone will take it wrong. He feels that this ultimate power in the universe, which he calls God, is in favor of justice and he expects that God's help in securing it for his people. And in using that word, he reaches the millions of people that we, in our fear of it, don't reach.

When human beings first learned to stand erect and began to wonder about the world around them, the powers of the universe were mysterious and indescribable. So they used metaphors: God is like the wind, or like a mother or a father. Over time, unfortunately, the male image prevailed, with the result that today the common mental image of God is “that old white guy in the sky”, which is the image UUs reject.

But Islamic mystics refer to the 99 names of God, suggesting that the concept is open and fluid. Only in the most narrow-minded religious traditions is the idea of God fixed and rigid.

Yet our resistance to this word and other religious words continues, and, unfortunately, it is yet another reason why Martin Luther King, Jr., would not have been successful as a Unitarian Universalist.

The Rev. Barbara Davenport wrote recently, “I feel that Unitarian Universalists can contribute valuable wisdom and meaning by being willing to use “God” language. For me, “God” might be like a finger that points to the sacred---both mundane and mystical beyond our narrow ego selves.

“Seems to me that the problem is not with the word but with its interpretation. I feel as Unitarian Universalists it is up to us to undertake a responsible search for the meaning of God, as befitting our principles. If we don’t define “God” for ourselves, someone else will surely do it for us. I would rather be an active participant in the debate than a bench warmer, sitting on the sidelines.”

So Martin Luther King, Jr., was not a Unitarian Universalist for these reasons: he was black and therefore different from most UUs; he believed that human nature was often sinful; and he used God-talk to convey his thoughts.

As we work to build diversity into our unity, I suggest that we consider the challenges that Dr. King offers us:

That we increase our efforts to eliminate racism and classism in our midst, that we grapple seriously with the concept of evil and come to terms with its reality, and that we get over our fear of religious language, so that we can talk with others about the great sacredness of life.

Then perhaps our next prophet in this troubled world will be one of us, a Unitarian Universalist.

Let's pause for a moment of silent reflection and prayer.

Our closing hymn is #169, We Shall Overcome.

BENEDICTION: Our worship service, our time of shaping worth together, is ended, but our service to the world begins again as we leave this place. Let us go in peace, remembering that within each of us is the heart and soul of a prophet, that we ourselves can and must advocate for love and justice in this world. May we not be afraid, may we be strong, and may we succeed in bringing peace to ourselves and to each other.

Amen, Shalom, Salaam, and Blessed Be.