

MLK Sunday: 50 years later – How Far Have We Come? January 18, 2015

Rev Pam Rumancik

Readings

Rev Dr Martin Luther King Jr.

excerpts from 1966 Ware lecture at UU General Assembly in Hollywood, Florida

Dave Lloyd: One thing that we usually remember about the story of Rip Van Winkle is that he slept twenty years. But there is another point in that story which is almost always completely overlooked: it is the sign on the inn of the little town on the Hudson from which Rip went up into the mountains for his long sleep. When he went up, the sign had a picture of King George III of England. When he came down, the sign had a picture of George Washington, the first president of the United States. When Rip Van Winkle looked up at the picture of George Washington he was amazed, he was completely lost. He knew not who he was. This incident reveals to us that the most striking thing about the story of Rip Van Winkle is not merely that he slept twenty years, but that he slept through a revolution. While he was peacefully snoring up in the mountains a revolution was taking place in the world, that would alter the face of human history. Yet Rip knew nothing about it; he was asleep. One of the great misfortunes of history is that all too many individuals and institutions find themselves in a great period of change and yet fail to achieve the new attitudes and outlooks that the new situation demands... An older order is passing away and a new order is coming into being.

Pam: The great question is, what do we do when we find ourselves in such a period? Certainly the church has a great responsibility because when the church is true to its nature, it stands as a moral guardian of the community and of society. It has always been the role of the church to broaden horizons, to challenge the status quo, and to question and break mores if necessary. I'm sure that we all agree that the church has a major role to play in this period of social change.

Dave Lloyd: There is nothing more dangerous than to build a society with a large segment of individuals within that society who feel that they have no stake in it, who feel that they have nothing to lose. These are the people who will riot, these are the people who will turn their ears from pleas for non-violence. For the health of our nation, these problems must be solved. In the areas of housing, schooling, and employment there is still a great deal that must be done. We've come a long, long way; we still have a long, long way to go... I've heard it said that the day of demonstrations is over; this is something that we hear a great deal. Well, I'm sorry that I can't agree with that. I wish that I could say the day of demonstrations is over, but as long as these problems are with us. The church must support this kind of demonstration. As the days unfold, I'm sure that we will need this more.

Message MLK Sunday: 50 years later – How Far Have We Come?

Rev Pam Rumancik

As Unitarian Universalists, this weekend honoring the life and work of the Rev Dr Martin Luther King Jr is a very big deal. It's not just a day the banks are closed, or our church office is closed, or the kids are off school. It's not just another Monday holiday when traffic is a little bit lighter.

At least it shouldn't be.

Tomorrow is a day to honor the person who fully embodies the spirit of the civil rights era. It's a time to honor a man who changed the world; by his actions, by his courage, by his being willing to say 'yes' when destiny called. It's a time to honor the courage of every person who marched or protested or spoke out or put themselves in harm's way in order to create real change in the lives of their fellow humans.

And this year, 50 years after the events in Selma, Alabama, it is even more important that we honor Dr King; that we tell the stories of hope; that we hold up and bear witness to courage and vision. Because this year we need the guiding wisdom of Dr King and his dream more than ever.

Dave and I started us off today by reading Dr King's own words – addressed to the Unitarian Universalist General Assembly in Hollywood, Florida on May 18th, 1966. Addressed during the historic Ware Lecture to Unitarian Universalists just like you and me. He spoke in the year following the tragic and triumphant events in Selma, following a year which saw the Voting Rights Act of 1965 become law.

Dr. King started his talk by telling the story of Rip Van Winkle – the story of a man who slept through a revolution. Dr King was a very perceptive and wise man, both visionary and politically acute. He understood our values and was a close friend to many in our fledgling association. We hold him close to our hearts because he was a friend of our chosen faith. His wife Coretta Scott King once said in an interview that they both loved attending UU churches when he was attending seminary, how they deeply respected the values we hold dear. Despite this, she said they made a conscious choice to remain within their Baptist heritage because they felt they could do more good grounded in that space.

As Dr King spoke to our folks that day in Florida I imagine that it was very much on his mind that two of the three people killed in Selma the previous year were Unitarian Universalists. For those of you who are younger or whose memories are fuzzy, the events in Selma were to change the hearts of white mainstream America by making visible a previously unimaginable hatred and oppression which was part of everyday experience for people of color in the south.

In his book, “The Selma Awakening” UU minister Mark Morrison-Reed writes:

The events of 1965 in that county seat in Alabama's Black Belt represented a pivotal moment in American history. For over three weeks, the unfolding drama held the world's attention. It was a cultural upheaval in which hope confronted intransigence. Protest was met with fury. Violence begot sacrifice and suffering. Blood was spilled, and the slayings of Jimmie Lee Jackson, James Reeb, and Viola Liuzzo triggered a transfiguration. This twentieth-century continuation of the American Revolution was a spiritual battle that brought the country closer to the freedom proclaimed by the Constitution and granted by the Emancipation Proclamation.

Dr King had gone to Selma to demonstrate non-violently for voting rights for African Americans. At that time the city of Selma was equally divided into black and white citizens, but while there were 12,000 registered white voters, there were less than 400 registered blacks. And it wasn't for lack of trying.

County registrars were free to devise whatever ‘tests’ they wanted to keep black people from registering. Among the most common were poll taxes – which meant a person had to pay a tax for every year they hadn't voted previously in order to register. Citizenship tests – requiring blacks to know arcane or ridiculously detailed facts which whites did not have to memorize. Vouchers – which meant that a registered voter had to vouch for the person. If there were no blacks registered to vote and whites wouldn't vouch for them there was no way to enter the process. And publishing the names and addresses of any black person who even attempted to register – so that their white fellow citizens could visit them and suitably punish them for their audacity. These were only a few of the more egregious practices.

So in March of 1965, after two years of community organizing work by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee SNCC training people in nonviolent action techniques, Dr King and the Southern Christian Leadership Council SCLC went down to lead a peaceful protest in support of black voter registration.

There was drama, including arrests and beatings, and the killing of an unarmed young black man named Jimmie Lee Jackson.

But the turning point came on March 9– remembered as Bloody Sunday - when a group of peaceful marchers crossed over the Edmund Pettis Bridge and were brutally attacked by the State Troopers and county police.

Now this had happened many, many times in the south. Bashing black skulls for daring to be uppity was commonplace - but this time the national press was on hand. In real time, the entire nation witnessed troopers in tear gas masks and riot gear brutally assaulting young and old, men and women, totally non-resistant people of every age. They saw them running away but being chased down on horseback with whips and chains and clubs and brutalized for having the nerve to stand up for their civil rights. A horrified nation heard the cheers and applause of whites who had gathered to witness the event – and watched them waving their confederate flags. It was a turning point in history and it changed how people saw the civil rights movement both in the north and in the south.

Karen and I went to see the film “Selma” in the theater. It is a beautiful film. A powerful film. A film which tells deep truths within the framework of story rather than as a documentary. Some story timelines have been altered and that it does not claim to represent actual events in real time. For one thing it doesn’t let on that Rev James Reeb, killed outside a restaurant, was a UU minister. It also doesn’t mention that the only woman killed, Viola Liuzzo, was also Unitarian Universalist. These details are important to us – but they certainly don’t move this powerful story. I think every person in America should see it – especially everyone under 30. *Selma* tells the story of people standing up, in the most horrendous circumstances you can imagine, for justice and for their right to be treated as human beings.

I knew the story. I had grown up with it, studied it in seminary and read Taylor Branch’s gigantic book “Parting the Waters: The King years” and Halberstam’s “The Children.” I knew what was coming and still I wept. I wept because it broke open a hardness of heart that I didn’t even know I had. This was an amazing film about an important moment in history and it managed to transcend being a black or a white movie. In one of the scenes when Dr King is talking with the president he says: “This is not a Negro problem. It is not a southern problem. This is an American problem.” The pain of the characters was my pain. It was my story and my country. I was able to own the whole of it in ways that I have not experienced before.

Of course there has been some criticism of the film; it has come from people who said that it didn’t do justice to President Johnson. They claimed that by portraying a complex LBJ at odds with Dr King, it diminished his legacy and the good he did.

But a recent USA Today article by Sherrilyn Ifill of the NAACP seems to nail the issue:

Any effort to hijack the attention the film richly deserves because of its portrayal of LBJ reflects everything that has been wrong with most civil rights films from *Mississippi Burning* to *The Help* – films that concern themselves principally with the heroism of white people in a movement that was created, driven and shaped by black people.

While it was a film from a black perspective, that perspective did not diminish the story but rather magnified and made it richer and deeper. I appreciated the nuances of all the human characters – all the sacrifices, all the visions, all of the suffering that was put together to change a terrible and broken system. But here we stand, 50 years after Selma, with a movie which tells America's story for all of us. Why, when art can bring us such dramatic, such transforming truth, are we still in such a hard place?

This is our larger question today. 50 years after Selma - what is ours yet to do?

I have to tell you, some of the hardest places to watch in the movie were the whites viciously attacking other human beings without remorse or seemingly a shred of common human decency. It was easy to make them "other" totally separate from our own sensibilities. Those people in the south are less human than we are.

But it made me really wonder. What was going on there? At my heart I am a true Universalist. I believe in the inherent goodness of every single person. While knowing that goodness can be warped by experience or fear or chemical imbalances, I truly believe we all *want* to be whole and good.

How could these people – white people who lived decent lives the rest of the time – who went to church and prayed to a God of love- how could they not see the disparity between who they said they were and what they did? One answer is that they were manipulated by the rich and powerful. They lived in abject misery and poverty themselves, but as long as the myth of white superiority was upheld they could imagine themselves better than someone else. Finding a 'less than' group that they could despise kept them from wondering why their own lot in life was not better. It's an easy bait and switch and it continues to this day. Where is the most vicious hate and violence? – In the poorest parts of the land.

There are psychological studies which have shown that people need to feel better than someone else. In a series of tests where people are asked which they would rather have - \$100,000 salary when everyone else also had \$100,000 salary or \$60,000 salary when everyone else made \$40,000, a majority consistently chose the lesser amount so they could be better off than their neighbors. It is some vestige of our evolutionary competitive nature; being the best insures survival – even when it is illogical and against our own best interests.

But there is another aspect of this puzzle which also rings true. We can become inured to some very horrific things by living with them every day. There is a story about working in the monkey house at the zoo. On the first day of the job, the stench of animal feces is almost unbearable. It assaults the senses and causes a person to recoil in horror. But after a few weeks working in the monkey house that same worker becomes inured. They can no longer even perceive the stench. It has become invisible - undetectable. Growing up in post-civil war south had to have the same effect. The killings, the lynchings, the systematic violence became just so much more white noise. What has always been is nothing to remark upon.

Dr King understood that he had to get those images before people who had not grown up inured to their horror. He had to hold up a mirror in which the country actually saw what it was doing – and was able to recoil from the injustice and hatred and find the will to change. When addressing the Unitarian Universalists in Florida that day, Dr King knew he had to wake them up. To help them see not only the horror that was being done in the southland, but the very real injustice which existed in the north as well. As Harper Lee wrote in "To Kill a Mockingbird" "People generally see what they look for, and hear what they listen for."

And Dr King's message is still on target with us 50 years after he first delivered it. Today, we live in our own vision of reality that is masked by being 'the way it's done' with all the excuses and apologists that explain away real and horrific inequalities in our justice system and society. Dr King warned us:

There is nothing more dangerous than to build a society with a large segment of individuals...who feel that they have no stake in it, who feel that they have nothing to lose. These are the people who will riot, these are the people who will turn their ears from pleas for non-violence.

We have that society to our own detriment. Our education system is broken, our justice system is broken. The places where people could find a step up out of poverty have been slowly eradicated and the gulf between the poor and the rich has become wider and more intransigent. By weakening the middle class, the powerful elite in the country ensure that people are too busy just making a living, to make any waves or challenge the status quo.

Who is there to stand up and demand that change? It's us – you and me. Again Dr King's prophetic words: "... all life is inter-related, and somehow we are all tied together" speak directly to us across time. It is the basis of our 7th principle – the interdependent web of which we are all a part. It is what calls us to break through our complacency, take off our rose colored glasses and learn what other human beings are living and experiencing. We need to be the change we have been waiting for; we need to be learning, to be opening, to having experiences outside our small bubbles of life. We need to be listening for the voices which tell of oppression; of incarceration rates beyond anything that would be tolerated in white America; of deaths of unarmed young men, shot down by police in desperate need of retraining and a new vision of what they are in the world.

And it will only change if we call for it. If we take up the chants and the demonstrations; if we repost #Blacklivesmatter. "Black lives matter" does not prioritize black lives over white. It doesn't say we don't value all lives. "Black lives matter" makes a statement of value and solidarity in a society where the dominant operating systems arguably demonstrate that black lives are less valuable than white. We fail to notice what has become commonplace, but looking at the statistics with fresh eyes reveals how unfair and unjust our laws actually are.

I have to admit – I got a little pushback with one of the first things I sent out regarding the Michael Brown verdict. People asking how we knew that it wouldn't be fair. And there is pushback on the "black lives matter" hashtag which UU's around the country are using to proclaim our values. That pushback comes from a comfortable space in which the police are on our side; from a place where we never get pulled over while doing the speed limit for driving while white, where we never get followed in a department store, just because. The reality of white America is not the same as the reality of black America. And it will not change until we become people who not only speak our values, but live them. Until we examine our preconceived notions – and are willing to break ourselves open in order to make the world better for every single human being.

In the "Selma Awakening" Morrison-Reed wrote that Selma was a test for Unitarian Universalists who "had long been champions of freedom in its broadest sense...Did Freedom merely mean freedom of belief and conscience? Or did it also include the civic, political and economic freedoms that educated middle-class, liberal religious constituency took for granted?"

That test is before us once again.

I know there are people in this congregation who have been fighting the good fight for decades. I know there are people who understand this work and who stand in solidarity with oppressed peoples everywhere. People who

may have been in King's audience in 1966. They can affirm - it is ours to do. It is ours to learn, to open ourselves to a reality that has been hidden for too long, but which simmers below the surface and is now threatening to boil over and envelop us all. Dr King's prescient words still speak to us across the decades: "... the church has a great responsibility because when the church is true to its nature, it stands as a moral guardian of the community and of society."

This is our challenge. To be awake. To not sleep through the revolution at hand – but to do the work of justice, in our homes, in our communities, and in the world.

50 years ago, the call went out for help for a beleaguered and oppressed people – and Unitarian Universalists answered that call. That call is sounding loud and clear again – let us join in responding with heart and hands and voices that sing out the hope that we shall all be free at last, free at last, thanking whatever vision of the Holy that we hold – that every last one of us will be free at last.

Amen and blessed be.