We Need You Martin, Now More Than Ever

I lost count of the number of Martin Luther King Birthday sermons I've delivered or services led with other speakers, but they go back to before the his birthday even became a national holiday, as we observe it tomorrow.

There may have been others that preceded, or came right after, a presidential inauguration; but none quite like the one that comes prior to an inauguration like the one that will take place this Friday. It's quite a confluence. For many of us the immediate after-effects of last November's presidential election have come and gone, and now we look to what that election could actually mean.

I could offer my speculation on what the upcoming American presidency might mean for our country; speaking for myself, I have a great deal of foreboding. Instead, however, I'd like to hold up some episodes from Dr. King's life that I find to be especially informative at this time in our country's history. I feel there are certain events in his life that offer some significant messages for us at this time in the life of our country. They are messages we need, now more than ever.

To begin then: One message he'd have for us would be "stay in the struggle, however much one may feel like turning away." The event I think of which evokes such a message may well have been one of the most painful and trying times in Dr. King's life and ministry. I refer to what happened at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama on September 15, 1963. Many of you know what I'm speaking of. On that Sunday morning as the congregation was gathering for worship, a powerful bomb that had been planted the night before by members of a local Ku Klux Klan chapter exploded and took the lives of four young girls. Their names were Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson, and Carol Denise McNair.

By now Dr. King had become a national, if not global, figure. While the minister of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama in the late 1950s he had gained national prominence as the leader of the successful Montgomery bus boycott. Shortly after that he re-located to his hometown of Atlanta, Georgia to found, and become the leader, of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. The SCLC became the lead organization in our nation's civil rights movement as it continued to gain momentum. Barely three weeks had gone by since Dr. King delivered his "I Have A Dream" speech to tens of thousands persons in front of the Lincoln Memorial before this act of terror in Birmingham took place.

Dr. King was asked to come to Birmingham—where he previously led protests against racial segregation and injustice—to speak at the Memorial Service for the four girls. He had become the titular head of the movement for racial justice in America by then, but he was also still a minister and a pastor. He was still Reverend King, and he was called upon in his capacity in that role.

I know it's more than a little audacious of me to try to get into Dr. King's head and heart as to what he was thinking and feeling at that terrible time; but I'll have a go at it nonetheless. He

went to Birmingham knowing he be called upon to offer comfort and counsel to the families of Addie and Cynthia and Carole and Denise—as well as to an angry and grief-stricken congregation, and African-American community in that city. I wonder if he wondered if it was all worth it—worth all of his efforts to speak truth to power in a country so infected with the disease of racism? Three weeks earlier he had stirred the souls of thousands, maybe even millions, with the soaring rhetoric of his dream for America. Now he was facing the horrible and ugly reality of the deadly fear-based hatred he and his compatriots still had to deal with.

Did he think of taking his life in some other direction at that point? After all, he had the academic credentials to join the faculty of any number of what were called "Negro Colleges" in those days. And I know there were any number of predominantly white, liberally oriented theological schools—like the one I attended around that time—who would have been delighted to have had a "Negro Professor" identified with their institution. Indeed, Dr. King would have had a lot to offer had he taken that route. I would have loved to have had him as one of my seminary professors. And who could have blamed him if he had? He had a wife and four kids—children whose ages were in the approximate age range of the four girls who had been killed.

Moving to academia would not, of course, have completely guaranteed his or their safety, but it would have at least gotten him, and them, off the front lines. Would anyone have faulted him, as a husband and a father, for wanting to have some greater level of protection for his family? I fail to see how.

But he stayed in the struggle, he stayed on the front lines. At the Memorial Service for the four girls, Rev. King said, "In spite of the darkness of the hour, we must not become bitter…Life is hard. At times as hard as crucible steel, but today you do not walk alone."

"We must not become bitter… you do not walk alone." If Dr. King could offer up such words and sentiments as these in the face of the horror he was facing at that time, then why should we retreat into despair and cynicism over the outcome of a Presidential election? Stay in the struggle, do not become bitter, you do not walk alone. That is the message from Martin Luther King's life at that time to our lives here and now.

I have one more addendum to matter before moving on. In a public park in Birmingham today there are statues erected of those four girls. They were unveiled in September of 2013, fifty years after their deaths. I know that there are any number of meanings and messages that can be derived from the presence of those statues. Among the many that can be found, I offer this one: Let those statues stand as a reminder of the price that is sometimes extracted when bigotry and hatred are allowed to go unaddressed and unchecked.

As we well know it was his decision to stay in the struggle, to remain on the front lines, that cost Dr. King his life less than five years after the Birmingham church bombing.

In the true spirit of staying on the front lines, Dr. King was in Memphis on behalf of striking sanitation workers who were attempting to simply obtain a living wage for themselves. Most of

them were African-American, but not all. This was an early attempt on Dr. King's part to link racial justice to economic justice. We'll never know for sure where he might have gone with that had his life continued.

IN what proved to be his final speech, here's some of what he said: "We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountain top. And I don't mind. 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 have seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight that we as a people will get to the Promised Land."

Dr. King was clearly in "preacher mode" in speaking these words. He was, one could say, channeling his "inner Moses." He was recalling an episode in the legend of the Exodus where Moses has led his people out of slavery but still hasn't gotten them to where they need to be, to "The Promised Land." Moses, so the story goes, is not permitted to get there with them. He can only view the goal of the journey from the top of a mountain.

By now, the spring of 1968, Dr. King and his compatriots had had some successes. The legal supports for what amounted to racial apartheid in some parts of the country had been dismantled. The Voting Rights Act of 1964 had been passed. The Selma to Montgomery march had, in significant measure, stirred the American conscience. But he also knew that actions provoke reactions, that progress fuels a backlash, that the advance of justice does not move in a steady ever-forward line. "We've got some difficult days ahead," he rightfully foresaw. The message, the urging, behind Dr. King invoking the imagery of Moses and the mountain top is this: Do not let the challenges and the set-backs of the moment obstruct your vision of where you want and need to go. I think that would be some of his counsel for us today.

A coupling with that counsel is also found in that final speech of his where he says "I may not get there with you." Very tragically he was right; he had less than 24 hours to live when he spoke those words. Whether or not Dr. King had a foreboding of his own death at that time is something we'll never know. But the subtext of his saying that he may not get to the Promised Land can also apply to us here and now. We will not see the full fruition our efforts any more than Dr. King did, however long any of us may live. This is what it means to take the long view of history, and to be people of the long view. It's about believing that your efforts to advance the "moral arc of the universe"—however small or even futile they may seem at any one time—are nonetheless worthy of your energy, worthy of the investment of a portion of your life. That, I feel, is what Dr. King would tell us now.

That metaphor of "the moral arc of the universe bending towards justice" was one Dr. King often invoked; and one you've heard me refer to as well at various times. It originated, as best can be determined, with our Unitarian ancestor, Rev. Theodore Parker, coming out of his involvement in the abolitionist movement. Reflecting what I just said, that moral arc may indeed bend towards justice but it does not move in a singular, continuously forward, direction. It moves in the direction that we, as agents of that moral arc, push it. And there will be push-back from time to time. Dr. King knew that. We must know that as well. But whatever push

back there is, that moral arc is still there. It has not disappeared. And it will not disappear so long as we continue to be its faithful agents.

Still another base to touch when it comes to invoking Dr. King's life and legacy for our time is some of what he said when he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in December of 1964. These are some of his words from his acceptance speech:

"I accept this award with an abiding faith in America and an audacious faith in the future of mankind. I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality."

"I accept this award with an abiding faith in America…" When you put those words within the context of the time and the circumstances under which Martin Luther King spoke them they are actually quite amazing. We're back to 1964 now. While a civil rights bill had been passed and signed by President Johnson by then which outlawed many of the more blatantly racist Jim Crow statutes in the primarily southern States, equal access to the vote had still not been secured—a struggle the persists to this day I might add. The gains that had been reached in the drive for racial justice and equality were being met by vicious and violent reaction—the Birmingham Church bombing being but one example. And behind the turmoil of those times was the evil legacy of human slavery in America—followed by another century of various kinds of American apartheid even after the institution of slavery had been abolished.

In the face of all that, Dr. King could still stand before a global audience and declare "I accept this award with an abiding faith in America." He believed that the higher ideals that helped give birth to this nation—ideals which he had cited in his "I Have a Dream" speech—would ultimately prove to be stronger than any and all attempts to subvert those ideals.

"I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality." Those were not just pretty words meant to embellish a speech. They are a call to vigilance and a call to action. Vigilance when any of the gains we've seen for social justice and human rights in more recent years threatened; and a call to, in our own UU language, to "stand on the side of love"—tough love when need be—in order that unconditional love will indeed "have the final word in reality." That will only be so if we make it so.

Once more: "I accept this award with an abiding faith in America." If Dr. King could speak and act on those words in the America that he was confronting at the time he spoke them, then can we do any less in our day?

One more base to touch now: Among the many touching and powerful scenes in the movie "Selma" there was one that I found especially moving. It came about as Dr. King—portrayed by the actor David Oyelowo—was alone in his home and experiencing one of his dark nights of the soul, as he surely must have had. He was wrestling with the self-doubt and self-questioning that any true and honest leader experiences from time to time, whatever the cause of movement he or she may be leading. And on top of that he was dealing with a vicious smear campaign being

directed towards him by then FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, whose hatred of Dr. King seemed to know no bounds.

In the middle of the night he picks up the telephone and spins the rotary dial to place call up to Chicago to the home of gospel singer Mahalia Jackson. He asks her if she would sing, over the phone to him, "Precious Lord, Take My Hand." Of course she did.

Dr. King knew that for all of his education—which included his PhD, for all his eloquence, for all his leadership skills, and for all the accolades that had come his way, he was still a vulnerable, finite human being who needed to look beyond himself for that which would ultimately sustain him, as he pursued the principles and the causes that drove his life. For all of his impressive personal resources, he still needed his faith. He needed to hear the words of the song we heard earlier in this service to hold him up as he continued on his way.

The content of your faith, or my faith, need not be the same as was Dr. King's. But bear in mind that as we meet the challenges, and respond to the calls to action, that surely will lie before us, that whatever our skills, abilities, and energies may be, there will be times when we will experience our human vulnerabilities and human limitations and perhaps our own times of self-doubt and wondering.

Be mindful, then, of what it is that ultimately sustains you at such times. What are the spiritual resources and groundings you call on as you and I stand on the side of love? Be aware as well that the presence of spiritual communities of love, and compassion, and justice—like the one gathered here—will be especially crucial in the days ahead. Look to this community for the support and inspiration you will need from it from this day forward—and support it well in order that it may offer that support and inspiration to others.

"Love will guide us; peace has tried us; hope inside us will lead the way…"

Let's sing that together.

Stephen Edington
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