

**United First Parish Church in Quincy
Sermon: “What Does It Take?” by Michelle A. Walsh
Martin Luther King, Jr. Sunday, 1/15/06**

Of all the writings of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. – and there are many! – only one was selected for inclusion in our hymnal – “A Network of Mutuality.” Think about those opening words: “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” This is radical language – worthy of being solely highlighted in our hymnal. With these words, King embodied the meaning of our seventh principle – the “interdependent web of existence of which we are a part.” His understanding was so deep he was compelled to risk and ultimately to give his very life on behalf of this understanding. What does it take to embody such an understanding and to feel compelled to risk action across deep divides?

“The foundation of such a method is love,” Dr. King writes. But what does that mean? Many of you know that for the past 15 years, I have directed an inner-city youth program on the weekends through the Unitarian Universalist Urban Ministry. A few years ago, I was walking to my car with a volunteer and friend, Judy, from this program. She noticed a bumper sticker on my car – one with a saying by the famous

Catholic social activist, Dorothy Day, “Love is the only solution.”

What’s your gut reaction to that statement? How many of you believe that?

Judy’s comment was: “You know, I don’t think I really believe that.” “Love,” to her, seemed like a superficial and oversimplified word for the hard and complex work of social justice. I understood exactly what she meant, but I disagreed that that was what authentic “love” means. Love is not superficial – love involves passionate devotion – it involves a merging of one’s self with some thing or some one outside of one’s self so that the interests of this Other becomes the Self.

We know such love only in degrees. If we’re lucky (and unfortunately, some of us are not), we begin to know this love as children with our parents in their love for us and seeming sacrifice for us. Again, if we’re lucky, when we’re older, we come to love our parents in this same self-sacrificial way and to care for them as they age, as I know many of you have done or are experiencing. While we experience the pain of short-term sacrifices, there is often a sense of larger purpose and meaning – that somehow are parents are us and we are our parents. When we connect to that sense of love, it becomes transcendent, powerful, and motivating through all challenges, all pain,

and all risks. Such a love, which may also be found through mentors and friends, becomes the basis for all our dreams and for the hope of transformation – ultimately not only personal transformation but also social transformation.

But what does it take to make that connection from personal love to social love? Last year, I had an opportunity to be a participant-observer with a group of Roxbury teenagers in an exercise called “Community Build.” I was not familiar with it, but my general rule-of-thumb for oppression awareness exercises is to go with the flow of my feelings and analyze later. We were split into four communities: chocolate, mint, strawberry and vanilla. Each group was sent to taped off areas on the floor which were next to each other and they were given an envelope filled with rules and some play money. We were told that each group had to follow the rules and build the best community they could with the resources they were given.

Now, I’m a really good working class kid at heart and I know how to follow the rules to get to the stated goal. These rules included that we could not set foot in anyone’s else’s community, we had to purchase building permits for what we wanted in our community, and we needed to get a police officer to escort one of us outside our community to the

purchase the building permit. I quickly set to work empowering the kids in my mint community to make purchase decisions with the very nice sum of money we seemed to have. I was aware that the chocolate community to our left was having a lot of fun and seemed to be able to buy a lot more things than us mints, and I was also vaguely aware that there was some discontent and complaints brewing in the strawberry and vanilla communities to my right, but I stayed pretty focused on the goal of getting our comfortable mint community set up. At one point, my community member Keith accidentally stepped into the chocolate community and almost got arrested, but the police officer let him go when I vouched for him.

Then suddenly, things began to get louder in the vanilla community – which when I looked at it appeared to be really crowded from having very little space and there was commotion over the police trying to reduce their space with more tape. I realized that some type of civil disobedience was taking place when I observed the adult member, Bruce, being physically carried off to jail by the police. From jail way over there, Bruce began to sing “We shall overcome!” Rowdiness increased in the vanilla community and one of their members, Janee, stepped into our mint community. Well, I wasn’t going to allow that at

all! So I very loudly and gamely began to call for the police to arrest her and she rather vigorously began to resist arrest. I was a little afraid that Janee or the police officer might get hurt, so I said to Janee: “Janee, calm down. It’s OK. You need to follow the rules. You need to go to jail.” Well, Janee looked at me with these very wide and idealistic eyes and said, “No! Bruce said we need to stick together!”

Wow! What was I saying to her?? I was telling her to go to jail rather than resist her oppression! In that moment of powerful connection – of revelation and conversion – I jumped the line into the vanilla community. And I don’t know who was more shocked – the vanilla community into which I jumped or my own mint community which I abandoned! Calls of “traitor,” “traitor” followed in my wake – and no one followed me over. Now I would love to report that I then inspired others to join me in nonviolent resistance to the utter poverty I found in the vanilla community. But no, instead, I yielded to the impulse to try to steal the mint’s store with Janee. And then after that, we were left with a humorous small riot with the police.

I share this experience because these types of oppression awareness exercises are designed to bring out universal tendencies. We create rigid social boundaries, sometimes intentionally and sometimes

unintentionally and quite unconsciously. It took Janee looking me directly in the eye and speaking with fierce idealism and outrage for her to be real to me and to get me to wake up and make a radical change – and even then the path to spiritual unity and transcendence was not automatic. I simply switched allegiances with my switch in communities – my passionate devotion, my “love,” was still personal and particular. I was unsuccessful in getting others from my mint community to join me – so I succumbed to the metaphorical urge to “steal the store” – not only that, I enlisted Janee’s idealism and outrage to get her to steal the store with me!

Now, this may have been a metaphorical game, but it represents real issues in making the transition from personal love and personal transformation to communal love and social transformation. In case you have not guessed, the vanilla community represented the invisible and visible poor, who had to make decisions between food or housing and had room only to stand in their community. The strawberry community was a poor working class community, just struggling to get by day to day. My mint community was a comfortable middle class community while the chocolate community was the ultra rich. The middle class community was situated by tape on the floor as a buffer

between the chocolate community on the one hand and the vanilla and strawberry communities on the other. It was the intrusion of the vanilla community into my mint community that forced me to look more directly at them, otherwise my community's attention was on itself and on our jealousy of the luxuries of the chocolate community.

A feminist process theologian, Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, writes: "To be centered...means that we inevitably see and value things from the perspective of our center in relation to the continued well-being of ourselves and those within the spiraling circles of interdependence closest to us...And yet at the root of being is the raw fact that in an interdependent world, the well-being of one depends in some sense on the well-being of all...we are always in danger of drawing our line of caring more narrowly than necessary, and more solidly than the spiraling circle of actual interdependence supports...To hold to a criterion of *universal* well-being challenges every border we close, and ever raises before us the reality that in fact our interdependence is far wider than we can consciously know."¹ A Unitarian Universalist writer, Richard Kellaway, called this universal human tendency our "circles of

¹ Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, The Fall to Violence: Original Sin in Relational Theology (New York: Continuum, 2003) 69-73.

self-encapsulation”² – sometimes these circles represent far too narrow experiences and we ignore opportunities to create more diversity in our lives and in our circles. More often than not, our circle is broken into from the outside rather than widened naturally by us – as we saw in our message for all ages this morning.

What does it take to make Dr. King’s dream of true equality for all people a living reality today? To embody Dr. King’s radical understanding of and action on behalf of our interdependence – to go beyond personal love and transformation to an inclusive transcendent communal love and social transformation? We must enlarge our moral imagination and act from what ethicist Sharon Welch describes as an “ethic of risk” rather than an “ethic of control.”

When I switched allegiance from my mint community to my new vanilla community, but couldn’t then easily enlist the aid of my former privileged community, I gave up and succumbed to a desire for revenge. I exhibited the failure of moral imagination that stems from an ethic of control, a desire for known results. Sharon Welch writes: “...if we cease resisting, we lose the ability to imagine a world that is any different than that of the present; we lose the ability to imagine

² 100 Meditations: Sections From Unitarian Universalist Meditation Manuals, collected by Kathleen Montgomery (Boston: Skinner House, 2000) 101-102.

strategies of resistance and ways of sustaining each other in the long struggle for justice. We lose the ability to care, to love life in all its forms. We cannot numb our pain at the degradation of life without numbing our joy at its abundance...With an ethic of risk, action begins where much middle-class thought stops. Action begins in the face of overwhelming loss and the recognition of the irreparable damage of structural evil...Within an ethic of risk, actions begin with the recognition that far too much has been lost and there are no clear means of restitution. The fundamental risk constitutive of this ethic is the decision to care and to act although there are no guarantees of success. Such action requires immense daring and enables deep joy. It is an ethos in sharp contrast to the ethos of cynicism that often accompanies a recognition of the depth and persistence of evil.”³

Let us find the giving up place in each of us and risk some small act of resistance this week on behalf of communal love and social transformation. Let us be challenged as Unitarian Universalists on this Martin Luther King, Jr. Sunday to join our passionate devotion, our foundation in love, to our commitment to reason and create a richly connected moral imagination that begins to embody Dr. King’s dream

³ Sharon D. Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*, revised edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000) 46, 67-68.

for our world. Let us dare to care and to risk action. May it be so.

Blessed be. Amen.