

**United First Parish Church In Quincy
Sermon for 01/18/09 by Rev. Michelle Walsh**

“Being True To The Dream and Self”

Our Call To Worship This Morning Is In The Words Of The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (I have not corrected the noninclusive male-oriented language of his time):

The dream is one of equality of opportunity, of privilege and property widely distributed; a dream of a land where men will not take necessities from the many to give luxuries to the few; a dream of a land where men do not argue that the color of a man’s skin determines the content of his character; a dream of a place where all our gifts and resources are held not for ourselves alone but as instruments of service for the rest of humanity; the dream of a country where every man will respect the dignity and worth of all human personality, and men will dare to live together as brothers...Whenever it is fulfilled, we will emerge from the bleak and desolate midnight of man’s inhumanity to man into the bright and glowing daybreak of freedom and justice for all of God’s children.¹

The first reading is by Dwight D. Eisenhower

Every gun that's made, every warship launched, every rocket fired, signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed. The world in arms is not spending alone. It is spending the sweat of laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children . . . This is not a way of life in any true sense. Under the cloud of threatening war, it is humanity hanging from an iron cross.

The second reading is by Kenneth Kraft

Nonviolence belongs to a continuum from the personal to the global and from the global to the personal. Nonviolence is not some exalted regimen that can be practiced only by a monk or a master; it also pertains to the way one interacts with a child, vacuums a carpet, or waits in line. Besides the more obvious forms of violence, whenever

¹ Quoted in *Search for the Beloved Community: The Thinking of Martin Luther King, Jr.* by Kenneth Smith and Ira Zepp.

we separate ourselves from a given situation (for example, through inattentiveness, negative judgments, or impatience), we “kill” something valuable. However subtle it may be, such violence actually leaves victims in its wake: people, things, one’s own composure, the moment itself.

Sermon: “Being True to the Dream and Self”

As Sheldon preached last week, we are living in amazing times when our first African American president will be inaugurated on the day after we celebrate Martin Luther King, Jr.’s birthday – and I do forgive Sheldon for succumbing to the irresistible urge most ministers would have to write their own MLK sermon this year. I, too, stand in awe before a Spiritual Mystery that is greater than myself in the many forces that have creatively and chemically combined to create this incredible moment. I find myself compelled to be part of a group witnessing to this prophetic event on Tuesday morning, and thus I will be joining with my fellow theological students at Boston University, the site of King’s own seminary studies, to watch the festivities unfold. I know that some of our own Buffalo Gals here at UFPC will be gathering together that morning also, though I don’t know if the same is true of the Black Sheep Boys.

Regardless, many of us recognize that we are standing if not clinging to a precipice right now, and we are clinging to the hope represented by this wind of change in our country. We are nothing if not a hopeful people as Unitarian Universalists, seeking to live out the prophetic dream of eradicating injustice everywhere, respecting the worth and dignity of each person, and protecting the interdependent web of existence of which we are a part. Characteristically being the prophethood of all believers, in James Luther Adams words, we will even call Obama to account in this historic moment for asking Rick Warren, of all people, to give the inaugural invocation, mounting a vigorous UU facebook campaign

in opposition. Warren is a very prominent evangelical preacher, famous for his social justice work with AIDS in Africa, as well as unfortunately for his vocal denunciation of the right of marriage equality. As a conciliatory gesture, Obama recently asked Bishop Gene Robinson, the first openly gay bishop of the Episcopal Church, to give a prayer at an inaugural event tonight at the Lincoln Memorial. This forced Rick Warren into the position of praising Obama for choosing to be a president for all of the American people – something which was probably good for his soul.

Prophethood, our social justice call, is so much at the very core of our being as a Unitarian Universalist people that in the most recent draft version of our new principles and purposes on the Commission on Appraisal website, we are once again calling ourselves to a higher standard of explicit inclusivity than any other religious denomination. Listen to the words of this new section on inclusivity:

Systems of power, privilege, and oppression have traditionally created barriers for groups with particular identities, ages, abilities, and histories. We pledge to do all we can to replace such barriers with ever-widening circles of solidarity and mutual respect. We strive to be an association of congregations that truly welcome all persons and commit to structuring congregational and associational life in ways that empower and enhance everyone's participation.

This is a very tall order to ourselves and is the first time putting into our institutional by-laws – not just General Assembly resolutions – that we are striving to structure ourselves fully as a multicultural and anti-oppression association of *congregations*. It is a subtle but significant grammatical point that the word “welcome” lacks an “s” because it signifies that the verb is modifying “congregations” not the “association.” I’ve mentioned

before, in battles over by-laws and legal language, one word can make a difference! Through this language, we are striving to be true to Martin Luther King, Jr.'s dream of a Beloved Community – this is language on which individuals and groups within our *congregations* can call us to be accountable so long as we are in covenant with the Unitarian Universalist Association. It will be interesting to see if there is any controversy about adding this platform to our by-laws now or if we have acculturated as a people to the desire for this dream.

I ask if we have acculturated to the desire for the dream first because the actual work of being true to the dream is extraordinarily difficult. If I had known what lay before me without an idealistic dream first when I initially stepped into urban ministry work, I do not know if I would have even started. There is a wisdom to the myth that revolutionary dreams are the province of the young – and Obama rode into office on a tidal wave of young adult enthusiasm that has not been seen in politics for many years. With age often comes weariness and at times cynicism or pragmatism or sheer compassion fatigue. I know that I'm a very different person now at age 47 than I was at age 29 launching into social work and urban ministry with all the innocent dreams and enthusiasms and physical energy characteristic of my age then.

Is innocence and idealism what we need, however? Do we need to be blindly enthusiastic to get ourselves over the tremendous hurdles we face? I have heard countless commentaries on the radio and television, as well as from some of my liberal friends of the 60's era, that lift Obama into the category of sainthood. I admit to discomfort with this glowing admiration because no one falls further than a saint when disappointments surface. I know that the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was no saint and neither was Gandhi – our greatest leaders are always also deeply fallible human beings in some respects, and they would probably be the first to tell us so.

So ‘where do we go from here?,’ to paraphrase the title of one of King’s books. Sheldon preached last week that we need a “transformation of social consciousness” and a “similar transformation of national consciousness.” Again, these are high expectations – but how do we get there? We pause this weekend to celebrate a grand achievement, but what we are facing in the work of the dream is enormous. Let me list out a few facts:

- From *Time* magazine² this week, the anti-poverty economist Jeffrey Sachs writes that Obama’s warning of ‘years of trillion-dollar deficits’ to bail out the economy could risk a collapse of our currency in the future. In comparison with Canada, Western Europe, and Japan, Sachs writes that the United States has the highest infant-mortality rates, the lowest life expectancy, the highest budget deficit as a share of our gross domestic product, and the lowest test scores in math and science for our 15 year olds.
- Internationally, Sachs wrote in a 2005 *Time* magazine article³ that 8 million people die around the world *each year* because they are too poor to live, which our newspapers could choose to focus on by writing that “20,000 people” die each day in extreme poverty.
- Closer to home, a Northeastern University study⁴ has shown that black teenagers are killing each other in rising numbers, even while national crime rates are down. In Boston, from 2006 to 2007, inclusive of the year that my goddaughter’s nephew Kenny was killed, there was a 78 percent increase in the death toll for black youth between the ages of 14 and 24. Despite Obama’s election, the black male continues

² January 19, 2009 edition.

³ March 14, 2005 edition.

⁴ Boston Banner, January 8, 2009.

to be an endangered species due to homicide or incarceration. This remains a focal point of my new urban ministry link to the Louis D. Brown Peace Institute in Dorchester.

- Finally, representatives from the Massachusetts Governor's office and the Senate Committee on Ways and Means gave a presentation at the January meeting of the Black Ministerial Alliance in Boston. They were there to talk about the current and projected economic crisis. While publicly the Governor has been preparing us for further cuts due to a \$1.1 billion budget shortfall this year, his office was preparing the black ministers for the fact that in Fiscal Year 2010, the state may be facing a deficit of \$3.5 to \$4 billion – yes, \$3.5 - \$4 billion dollars in projected need for cuts. Needless to say, those representatives did not look happy at all to be giving this news to these particular ministers who serve some of the most vulnerable in our society.

So, have I depressed you yet? Have I made you wish you had just stayed home in your warm comfortable bed with the covers over your head? If you are like some of the ministers who slowly began to drift out of the room that morning under the weight of this news, you may also feel like leaving the sanctuary right now. I want to suggest that *this is* our personal prophetic moment *right now* – how we cope with bad news – really, really, really bad news in the context of wanting to be a hopeful people and accomplish so much as Unitarian Universalists. This is where the prophetic moment *meets* the pastoral moment – how do we care for our selves and for each other in striving to remain true to our dreams? How do we take action and make decisions?

Whether we voted for it or not, we are reaping the consequences of decades of investment in empire, in the military-

industrial complex, as two men on widely different sides of political and life experiences both observed so many years ago – Dwight D. Eisenhower and Martin Luther King, Jr. Jeffrey Sachs points out in the *Time* article from this week that the reason those other countries are so far ahead of the United States is that they spent nearly the equivalent time and a higher tax rate investing in “less costly and more reliable health care, the elimination of hard-core poverty, solid educational achievements, and social services that ensure better care for children and more flexibility for mothers and the elderly.”

We cannot change the past, and even if we go under the covers of our warm beds, we’ll still be reaping the consequences of these actions and our American individualistic consumer culture. What we can do is pause during this moment of hope and celebration to reinforce our own plan for self-care in what lies ahead so that we can be most effective in our actions from here on out. Dr. King believed deeply that the *only* path to the beloved community is one of nonviolence, a nonviolence grounded in love – a deep and interdependent love of self and the other. We can only care effectively for others when we first know how to care for ourselves – how to be nonviolent with and compassionate toward ourselves. You know the best metaphor for this – even more apropos with the plane landing in the Hudson River the other day – is how the flight attendants always tell us to put the oxygen mask on ourselves first before we try to help others.

We are a people of high expectations – we do not need to give up our guiding dreams, but we do need to moderate our expectations of ourselves and of one another, and we need to be very clear about our priorities. If we remain in the same space of expectations when our internal and external resources are being depleted, we will invariably become irritable and angry or frustrated and depressed, even cynical and apathetic. Now more than ever we need deep spiritual practices to keep ourselves

grounded. There is a reason why the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. nominated Thich Nhat Hanh for a Nobel Peace Prize – when Nhat Hanh speaks of “Peace Is Every Step,” he is embodying King’s philosophy of nonviolence. As we heard in the reading by Kenneth Kraft this morning: “Nonviolence is not some exalted regimen that can be practiced only by a monk or a master; it also pertains to the way one interacts with a child, vacuums a carpet, or waits in line.” We need to tune in to what is happening to our bodies and practice peace in every step. We need to start with ourselves.

The more we practice nonviolent communication and behaviors toward ourselves and with others – this includes how we take care of our bodies, such as getting the rest that we need and eating healthy foods – the more centered we will be during the times of greater stress that are surely coming our way. But such practice is difficult to accomplish on our own. This is why we need community to sustain and guide us. Dr. King knew this because the rest of the title of his book *Where Do We Go From Here was Chaos or Community?* And while Buddhism is often misrepresented as a solitary practice, every good Buddhist practitioner knows that you need your sangha, your community group, to support your practice. Now I can say all of this, but unless you are practicing you won’t understand. I could never have sustained myself in urban ministry all of those years without a deep spiritual practice.

We can be very isolated in our individualism in America – or at least we tend to think primarily of how best to protect our nuclear family unit, especially during tough times. We lapse into us versus them thinking so readily as human beings. I suspect this is quite natural and a biological heritage from earlier evolutionary roots. Under stress, we prepare to fight or flee and we experience our capacities to care for others as limited under those conditions. This is something to be aware of but not limited by –

neuropsychiatrist Daniel Siegel calls it having “mindsight,” which parallels the Buddhist practice of mindfulness. We can embrace our feelings without being ruled by them – that is our unique heritage as human beings, having a set of frontal lobes that moderate the impact of our limbic and instinctual physiological systems.

But it takes practice, and shared practices, and that is what the world religious traditions have to offer to us. Each of you is thoroughly unique in which religious practices you will be drawn toward – it is a wonderful course of discovery when you choose to venture into it and this is what makes our Unitarian Universalist heritage so enriching. We understand both the common needs of our human being and the diversity of expressions of human being. But we also know we can be in relationship with each other, we can nurture and support each other together toward the goal of spiritual development. This is a profound role of the church community.

Once we are grounded, our roots enable us to take flight in deeper and more connected ways. Because we are grounded, we have a place to which to return and fear less that we will lose our way or be permanently disconnected. Our spiritual practices create a permanent home and our fellow practitioners a family. From this place, we can venture forth among our church community and into the world of suffering and injustice but with a sustaining sense of peace – not a peace that is never moved nor disrupted by anxiety or pain, but one that is sustained by a faith that comes from practice in community.

In doing so, we assume a *pastoral* role in our church community and also in the broader world. Ministry is often thought of as having three dimensions, the priestly, the prophetic, and the pastoral. It was the first Martin Luther from the Protestant Reformation who created a revolution by finding no essential

distinction between the priests and the laity. Through the act of baptism, Luther argued, we are each ordained and chosen as a child of God, we have direct access to God and thus we are each capable of creating liturgy or worship, of participating in the sacraments and of participating in the “priesthood of all believers.” James Luther Adams, a Unitarian social ethicist, then came along in the 20th century and coined the phrase “prophethood of all believers” from the radical laicism that is emphasized in the Protestant tradition – that we each have a right and responsibility to participate in interpreting the signs of our times through the lens of our faith in the struggle for historical social justice.

Now let me humbly suggest that we should close this Protestant circle of describing the full potential of lay ministry by coining the phrase “pastorhood of all believers” and by suggesting that this plays as *equally* an important role in creating Dr. King’s Dream of the Beloved Community as do the priestly and prophetic roles. Augustine in 400 AD described the pastor’s role in the following way: “Disturbers are to be rebuked, the low-spirited to be encouraged, the infirm to be supported, objectors confuted, the treacherous guarded against, the unskilled taught, the lazy aroused, the contentious restrained, the haughty repressed, litigants pacified, the poor relieved, the oppressed liberated, the good approved, the evil borne with, and all are to be loved.”⁵ Clearly in Augustine’s mind, “love” was a foundation to all of the above, including for the social justice work of liberating the oppressed – the pastoral and prophetic roles were linked – they were deeply intertwined. Perhaps you can each think of times in your various roles in the church, from serving on the board to teaching in religious education to participating in any of the other many committees of the church, when you have served in a pastoral role by lovingly engaging your fellow churchmates in any of the above capacities.

⁵ Found in Wikipedia under “pastor.”

So as we go forth in this New Year under the call to be true to the Dream of Dr. King's Beloved Community, celebrating the very real accomplishment represented by the election of our first African American president, while also facing more tremendous challenges than ever before, I ask each of you to examine and commit to the following (and I am making the same commitment to myself): (1) first and foremost, where are you failing your self in your self-care? Let peace begin first with you and your love and care for your self through in-depth spiritual practices; (2) secondly, how can you improve your pastoral presence in your family and in your church community – how can you better love and care for each other?; and (3) finally, how can you extend your pastoral prophetic presence in your larger community and the world to truly work toward building the Beloved Community, particularly for the most vulnerable in our society – all the while discerning that such extension must first be grounded in a sense of self that is loved and connected. A nonviolent self-care and self-love must come first. If we can ground ourselves first and know that we are not alone, that we each have a gift to offer the world and together these gifts are magnified beyond our imagination, then we may yet survive the crisis periods to come. May it be so. Blessed be. Amen.

Let us turn to our closing hymn, "I've Got Peace Like A River," #100 in the gray hymnal and we will sing all six verses.

Our mutual benediction is responsive reading #584 in your gray hymnal, the only reading by Martin Luther King, Jr. in our hymnal.