

Unitarian Church of Montpelier
Rev. Mara J. Dowdall
Sunday January 17, 2010

“Staying Awake”

We Unitarian Universalists don't have anything resembling a required liturgical calendar. We're not really big on Advent or Lent. We have the freedom to choose which holidays to observe, and how we will observe them.

And yet, in the midst of all of this freedom, we too need moorings and guideposts – designated days for delving into particular messages, sacred times to remember important events. Whether or not we call it that, I believe that we UU's have our own liturgical calendars of sorts to guide us through the year. We lift up and celebrate holy days; they are way stations on the spiritual journey.

And so it is with us this morning, this Sunday of Martin Luther King Jr. weekend that we arrive at a day of particular significance—not only in the calendar of federal holidays or school vacation days—but also in our spiritual calendar. This is a sacred day when we honor one human prophet, the movement he led, and the messages he preached.

This is a Sunday we know well – it comes around each January, but at the same time, each year brings with it its own circumstances. And so it was that last year, Martin Luther King Jr. Sunday arrived just a few days before Barack Obama's inauguration as the first African American president.

It seems that this year, we find ourselves again celebrating the birthday of Martin Luther King Jr. in a context that calls out for attention. But while last year, we observed this holiday on the eve of an exultant, historic occasion, this year it arrives in the wake of a disaster of historic proportions.

Haiti is on our hearts this morning.

As people of faith, we are called to respond to this tragedy. And we, along with our sisters and brothers everywhere, have already begun to respond – through our prayers and meditation practices, through our donations and relief funds.

But I believe that here on this Martin Luther King Sunday – four days after the tragedy in Haiti and in the midst of that nation's ongoing struggle and chaos – we are also called to two other tasks – reflection and rededication.

So in the time we have left this morning, I invite you to enter with me a process of reflection that, if we are lucky, will end with a rededication – a rededication to the principles for which Martin Luther King lived – and to the work of justice-making which continues even these 42 years after his death.

But that is getting ahead of ourselves. Let us begin at the beginning – with the first moment that you heard about what was happening in Haiti. Maybe you turned on NPR and heard it at the top of the hour. Maybe you opened up your newspaper or saw it on your friend’s Facebook status. Maybe you got a call from a loved one.

There is something about a natural disaster – a crisis of such huge proportions – that commands our attention, isn’t there? For a moment at least, we stop what we are doing, we listen.

A minute earlier, or an hour, or a week, we were probably not thinking about Haiti or the situation there. But now, our minds are focused, our eyes are riveted on the news footage, our ears are open to the stories trickling out – the anguished cries of a survivor we hear on the radio. We are paying attention.

The poet William Stafford writes:

*It is important that awake people be awake,
or a breaking line may discourage them back to sleep.
The signals we give – yes or no, or maybe –
Should be clear; the darkness around is deep.¹*

And so on Tuesday night or Wednesday morning, we became awake people for Haiti. We have become awake to our human bond to those who are suffering. And in the days that have followed, we have been awoken not only to the current disaster – but also the long and troubled history of the Haitian people, which has certainly worsened the effects of the earth quake.

We have been reminded – or learned for the first time – of the years of suffering the people of this nation – whose ancestors were former slaves that fought for freedom – endured and the ongoing effects, these years later, of slavery, colonialism, paternalism, instability and poverty.

¹ “A Ritual To Read to Each Other,” William Stafford. Reprinted with permission at *The Writer’s Almanac*. See: <http://writersalmanac.publicradio.org/index.php?date=2001/10/26>. I first heard this poem in a sermon preached by Rev Louise Green at All Souls Church in Washington D.C. in 2004.

There's something else, though, about a natural disaster that also feels important to name – especially here on the day we celebrate King's message. And it is this:

As much as human crises command our attention and bring into focus the suffering of others, they also have a way of eliding for the time-being the barriers of nation, race, and class that normally divide us.

Not always, but often, when there is a crisis, those of us on the outside are drawn closer to those who have been affected by virtue of our shared humanity. Our hands reach out; our hearts break open; our spirits ache in solidarity with our fellow humans who are suffering, who have lost.

In those moments, in the hushed dusk that follows the day of a disaster, we become mindful of the message that lied at the heart of Martin Luther King's teachings: that, for whatever our differences of skin color or background or ethnicity, we are all connected in our shared humanity.

As King wrote, "whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly."² We know this to be true, that "I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be."

When I think about that sensation – that feeling of deep human connectedness across lines of difference – I am reminded of what people would say after 9/11 to express their sympathy for and solidarity with the citizens of New York. "We are all New Yorkers" they would say.

And this past September, on the 8th anniversary of the attacks, President Obama said it again: "Every year on this day, we are all New Yorkers."³

We are all New Yorkers; this week, we are all Haitians. And don't we really mean to say: we are all human and share responsibility for one another?

The great twentieth century poet Gwendolyn Brooks conveys something akin to this in her poem honoring the late singer and activist Paul Robeson. Brooks describes what Robeson once sang:⁴

² My source for the King quotes is http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/m/martin_luther_king_jr.html.

³ http://www.nydailynews.com/opinions/2009/09/11/2009-09-11_obamas_message_on_911.html.

⁴ "Paul Robeson," Gwendolyn Brooks. I found this poem at http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Gwendolyn_Brooks. I became acquainted with it from Eboo Patel's essay on *This I Believe*, which draws on Brooks' quote: "We are each other's business" (See <http://thisibelieve.org/essay/33/>).

“That time, cool and clear,
Cutting across the hot grit of the day.
The major Voice . . .
Warning in music-words
Devout and large,
That we are each other’s harvest,
We are each other’s business,
We are each other’s magnitude and bond.”

We are each other’s business.

How fresh this is on our minds right now.

But what will happen next week? And a month from now? And next year? What will happen when the immediate crisis is over, when the headlines have turned to other matters, when the famous news anchors have returned to their studio desks?

It’s what happens, isn’t it? A crisis erupts and the world responds. We respond. We snap to attention, as if awoken from a deep sleep and reach out to others from a place of shared humanity.

But then, the immediacy fades – and for those of us whose lives are not directly affected, we are lulled back to sleep. Our initial burst of empathy wanes, and we have the privilege of returning to our comfortable perches.

Now let me be clear: I don’t point this out to guilt trip us, or make us feel like moral failures. Without getting too far into a debate about human nature, I will simply say that I think we humans have evolved to excel at short-term thinking; we are able to be our best selves when the moment calls for it.

But when the immediate need is out of our sight, and out of our minds, it is easy for us to fall back into familiar patterns. We may all be New Yorkers or Haitians for a day, but the rest of the year, what are we?

Here’s the thing. This wouldn’t be so problematic if the work we are called to as people of faith was only short-term work, if our work was only a kind of crisis response.

But the work of justice-making, the work of countering oppression, of combating inequality, of reaching out across lines of difference in acts of solidarity – the work that Dr. King calls us to – this is not short-term work.

It is long-range heavy-lifting that requires commitment, diligence. Justice comes about through unending chains of every-day acts; it is not sealed for good in one-time deals.

As Unitarian Universalists, we can be proud that our history includes courageous chapters on justice-making. Forty-five years ago this spring, hundreds of UU joined other people of faith in traveling to Selma to help register voters and to march with Dr. King. It was 1965, and it was a violent spring in the American South. An African-American man named Jimmy Lee Jackson was murdered – along with a white Unitarian minister named James Reeb and a white laywoman named Viola Liuzzo.⁵ These martyrs went before us, dying in their efforts to bring more love and justice into this world.

This is part of our history, but, of course, just because the chapter of the Civil Rights Movement closed, or because Barack Obama was elected, does not mean the justice-making chapters of the story are over. There is still much in the world that needs our attention: nations crippled by poverty, neighbors lacking health care or heating oil, fellow human beings whose lives are limited by marginalization, racism and other forms of oppression.

And let me say this: the need for more justice and greater equality is everywhere. It lives on continents far away and it lives in neighborhoods right here. It is alive in Burma and it is alive in Burlington.

If you're anything like me, the needs in our own community and in our larger world can seem overwhelming. They are great – and too large for any one person to tackle alone. It's hard to know where to begin. "What can I do?" we might ask.

And here, I return to the prophet we honor today. In his speeches and writings, Martin Luther King suggested that one of the most important things we can do for the cause of justice is simply to refuse to stay silent. We can start by naming that fact that injustice and oppression still live – and to name them when we see them.

And we can continue by reaching out from the place of our shared humanity, across lines of difference. We can connect with a person from whom we differ – and, as William Stafford suggests, try to learn about the kind of person they are. And we can tell them our story too.

⁵ See "The March of Time," *UU World*, May/June 2001: <http://www.uuworld.org/ideas/articles/2352.shtml>

There are many ways we can act, large and small. There's no one way.

Like Ginnie, we can join the Peace Corps. We can knit dolls for children. We can mentor teens in our schools. We can spend our February vacation on a service trip with Planting Hope. We can give money to Haitian relief efforts. We can participate in Vermont Interfaith Action. We can hold signs at the State House. We can go to meetings. We can write letters-to-the-editor.

In a few Sundays, on Valentine's Day, we will talk more about how we as individuals and a community can work for justice and how we can, in the words of a new UU grassroots campaign, "stand on the side of love."

For now, may it be enough that we rededicate ourselves to the message of Martin Luther King Jr. – and that we hear and heed his call, that we stay awake, that we remember we are all New Yorkers, we are all Haitians, we are all humans, and that we are and always will be each other's business.

My friends, may it be so for us. May reaching out to others from a place of shared humanity be a part of our lives. And may we recommit ourselves to this each year.

*For it is important that awake people be awake, or a breaking line may discourage us back to sleep; the signals we give should be clear: the darkness around us is deep.*⁶

May it be so, now and in the days to come. Amen.

⁶ See Stafford.