

Do You Have To Be Practical In Order to Be Just?

January 17, 2010
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Welcome, Centering, Kindling, Opening Words

We are here,
after a week of melting snow,
to worship, to join the stories of our lives
to the larger Story of our common life,
where we share our wholeness and brokenness,
our hopes, our dreams and our strength.

And so, **mindful that we share a common world, but approach that world in different ways, we begin our celebration together by kindling our promise of mutual honesty, attentiveness, and deep courtesy. May we become more proficient at gratitude and awareness, that we might more deeply embody the kind of justice and peace which embraces everyone on earth.**

Gathering Story, Announcements, Affirmation:

(C. Eric Lincoln)

Responsibility without power is slavery. Power without responsibility is tyranny.

Hymn #157 Step by Step the Longest March

can be won, can be won. Many stones can form an arch, singly, none, singly none. Yet by union, what we will, can be accomplished still; drops of water turn a mill, singly none, singly none.

Sequence

Many stones can form an arch.
Singly none. Singly none.
Yet when the earth shakes,
arches collapse, ceilings cave.
Neither singly nor together,
we cannot stop the earth from shaking.
Yet singly *and* together, we can,
even from this distance,
hold people who are shaking in fear
in our arms, with fresh solidarities made possible
by our technological age.
Drops of water turn a mill,
singly none, singly none.
Yet when drops of water form floods instead,
coast-lines drown, cities break.
The more comfortable may then offer their

pretty slogans about the meaning of life,
but others will struggle to just stay alive,
washing away all comfortable philosophies
with those drops of water called tears.
Oh Love, life is tough sometimes. And I know
I have no control over the shifts of earth and air,
fire and water.
And I have no control over my upbringing,
and none over the surprises of my life,
surprises both good or ill. I find myself saying
“Oh, how I want to be free!”
So come now, Love, nestle with me in this silence,
so that I might find, in the realization of how little I really control,
a spiritual freedom I’ve never quite known until now....

silence

Step by step the longest march can be won, can be won...the paths of our individual lives, I mean, where we are joined by companions early and late in our length of lives, companions who march by our side, those we love, those we admire, those who suffer with us when we suffer, those who challenge us and forgive us, and those whom we forgive. May we feel free to bring them into our time of worship by seeing their faces in our hearts, or saying their names quietly into the silence....

naming

Step by step, drop by drop, person by person, note by note, the music of life moves forward, as the spiritual grounding of our lives turns itself into song.

Readings

The First Reading is taken from a speech given by Caroline Severance to the Women’s Parliament of Los Angeles. She was 80 years old at the time, and finally retiring. Caroline Severance was the founder of the Unitarian Church of Los Angeles, an abolitionist, suffragist, and founder of kindergartens. She and her husband spent many years in northern Ohio, in Cleveland, and they raised their children there.

Dear Friends:— I count it a great privilege to be one of you. It is because of you and such as you— both men and women— who face your duties and responsibilities fearlessly, that we are justified in our high hopes. But there is still much to be done to make life worth living for the mass of our fellows.

I place justice before charity. And while we must, and do, recognize the need of charity under our present conditions, let us look for and labor for the time when industry will be so organized as to make sure that no man, woman or child, in our broad, bountiful land, shall be homeless and helpless; when each shall have the certainty

of work and of the just reward which insures all the needed opportunities for the home, for education, and for development. Surely this much is the birthright of every child of God and of every individual of a free people. Never will our land be a civilized country until this is brought about by those who believe that the Golden Rule is the only just basis for business and for political activities.

The Second Reading *consists of excerpts from a much longer article of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., written for Ebony Magazine, their May 4, 1966 issue.*

I am convinced that for practical as well as moral reasons, nonviolence offers the only road to freedom.

This is not time for romantic illusions about freedom and empty philosophical debate. What is needed is a strategy for change, a tactical program. So far, this has only been offered by the nonviolent movement.

Our record of achievement through nonviolent action is already remarkable. The dramatic social changes which have been made across the South are unmatched in the annals of history. Even more remarkable is the fact that this progress occurred with a minimum loss of life.

Not a single person has been killed in a nonviolent demonstration. The bombings of the 16th Street Baptist Church occurred several months after demonstrations stopped. Rev. James Reeb, Mrs. Viola Liuzzo and Jimmie Lee Jackson were all murdered at night following demonstrations. And fewer people have been killed in ten years of action across the South than were killed in three nights of rioting in Watts.

It is always amusing to me when a man says that he can't demonstrate with us because if someone hit him he would fight back. Here is a man whose children are being plagued by rats and roaches, whose wife is robbed daily at overpriced ghetto food stores, who himself is working for about two-thirds the pay of a white person doing a similar job and with similar skills, and in spite of all this daily suffering it takes someone spitting on him to make him want to fight. It is as ridiculous to raise the question of self-defense in relation to nonviolence as it is for a soldier on the battlefield to say he is not going to take any risks.

I must continue by (this) faith: violence, even in self-defense, creates more problems than it solves. Only a refusal to hate or kill can put an end to the chain of violence in the world and lead us toward a community where men (and women) can live together without fear. Our goal is to create a beloved community, and this will require a qualitative change in our souls as well as a quantitative change in our lives.

Our most powerful nonviolent weapon is, as would be expected, also our most demanding: that is organization. To produce change, people must be organized to work together in units of power. More and more, the civil rights movement will become engaged in the task of organizing people into permanent groups to protect their own interests and to produce change in their behalf. This is a tedious task which may take years, but the results are more permanent and meaningful.

There is no easy way to create a world where men and women can live together, where each has his or her own job and house, where all children receive as much education as their minds can absorb. But if such a world is created in our lifetime, it will be done in the United States by people of good will. It will be accomplished by persons who have the courage to put an end to suffering by willingly suffering themselves rather than inflict suffering upon others. It will be done by rejecting the racism, materialism and violence that has characterized Western civilization and especially by working toward a world of cooperation and peace.

Sermon

In our story earlier this morning, the scent of blooming roses was used by the author as a way of illustrating how extraordinary historical events...like one of the non-violent marches organized by Dr. King, Bayard Rustin and others...sweetly scent the very atmosphere of our lives. History is not something tucked away in the pages of books; it surrounds us in the very air we breathe.

For example, as some of you know, I live on Rich Street, downtown. And remarkable history scents the very air I breathe when I am home. For example, the great American artist, George Bellows, whose work I love, and whose influential canvasses are found in museums all around the world, including our own, was born just a block away from where my building now stands on Rich St. And just two blocks beyond that, toward High, you'll find one of those bronze historical plaques commemorating the first kindergarten in the USA. Louisa Frankenberg, a German immigrant, established the kindergarten here among the German-speaking population all the way back in 1838. She had studied with the inventor of the idea back in Germany, and when she moved here to Columbus to live with immigrating family members, she started a school where little children could sing, and dance and explore the world together, and begin to learn who they were through the experimentation we now call play.

Some historians deny that Louisa's school was a "real" kindergarten, whatever that means. But I beg to differ. When the great Unitarian Elizabeth Peabody founded the first English language kindergarten in America a few decades later, she did not hesitate to honor Louisa Frankenberg as a foremother by seeking her out, and spending time with her when she was an aged invalid.

Strange as it may seem, the organized education of children of whatever age was a brand new idea back then, and Unitarians, as you might imagine, championed it. Unitarians like Horace Mann championed the first public schools, and women like Elizabeth Peabody and Caroline Severance championed the education of much younger children, believing it's never too early to learn, to grow, to develop, to play, to start. Today, our own congregation features the *School for Young Children*, a modern, even more refined version of what Frankenberg, Peabody and Severance began.

After a long and remarkable life, Caroline Severance moved to Los Angeles, to be closer to her sons and grandchildren. Finding no Unitarian Church there, she established one, which still exists, and in which I have preached. Over time, she grew a powerful and legendary presence in the women's communities and clubs in Los Angeles, her years of establishing kindergartens, her work back East for the vote and for the abolition of slavery garnering her huge respect all

around. The speech you heard quoted today was delivered by Ms. Severance when she was 80 years old. In the middle section of the speech, she offers us an amazing tour-de-force visionary portrait of justice, which I must read to you again: *"I place justice before charity. And while we must, and do, recognize the need of charity under our present conditions, let us look for and labor for the time when industry will be so organized as to make sure that no man, woman or child, in our broad, bountiful land, shall be homeless and helpless; when each shall have the certainty of work and of the just reward which insures all the needed opportunities for the home, for education, and for development."*

This great vision of an inclusive nation, energized, as she said later in her speech, by the wisdom of the "Golden Rule," was not a conclusion she came to only later in life. Many decades earlier, in the 1840's, when she and her husband Theodoric left their particular church up in Ohio to found a congregation which eventually was served by Unitarian ministers, she explained: *"We could no longer sit conscientiously under a preacher, or in a fellowship, where the golden rule of Christianity was not recognized as applicable to all, whatever the color of their skin, or crinkle, or non-crinkle of their hair."*

More than a hundred years later, Martin Luther King Jr. shared a vision...he called it a dream... with 19th century people like Caroline Severance. Many of you will remember that he said something that, coincidentally I suppose, even echoed a phrase of Ms. Severance: "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by *the color of their skin*, but by the content of their character."

Having a dream of justice-for-all, like King or Severance does not, however, mean you have a sheet of instructions in your hand as to how you might fulfill that dream.

So Dr. King had to create one. Now Dr. King was inspired by the practices of Mahatma Gandhi in India. And Gandhi was himself inspired by the teachings of the Russian novelist and utopian, Tolstoi; and by Henry David Thoreau, who was raised in the Unitarian Church of Concord; and by the Universalist utopian pacifist, Adin Ballou. And all of these men came to the conclusion that if you beat your dream over someone's head...if you think your dream needs to be imposed by violence on one and all, then you will never, and I mean never, see your dream realized. Instead, each of these thinkers taught that non-violence was the only approach that had any chance of success.

In his May 4, 1966 essay for Ebony, King rightly is proud of his success. "Our record of achievement through nonviolent action is already remarkable. The dramatic social changes, which have been made across the South, are unmatched in the annals of history. Even more remarkable is the fact that this progress occurred with a minimum loss of life."

He does mention a few deaths...like the Unitarian minister from All Souls Church in D.C., James Reeb, and Viola Liuzzo who was active in the Universalist Church on Cass Ave. in Detroit, but he points out that they didn't die during his non-violent marches, but in cowardly attacks at night when they were isolated from the huge marching crowds.

But what interests me most is his use of the word "practical." Non-violent means are "practical,"

he says. And, he adds solemnly, “the ONLY road to freedom.”

King wrote many sermons (which is a very peculiar kind of writing) and books based on the philosophy and theology he learned in grad school. But the “essay” format in a popular magazine provided him with a chance to say things with a tone I had never found elsewhere in all of his written materials. In his Ebony essay, he does something that the teacher Jesus used to do, which is to take a criticism, and then to “burlesque” it. In other words, he tosses the critique back into the face of the critic with exaggerated flourish. Remember what he said? *“It is always amusing to me when a man says that he can't demonstrate with us because if someone hit him, he would fight back. Here is a man whose children are being plagued by rats and roaches, whose wife is robbed daily at overpriced ghetto food stores, who himself is working for about two-thirds the pay of a white person doing a similar job and with similar skills, and in spite of all this daily suffering it takes someone spitting on him to make him want to fight. It is as ridiculous to raise the question of self-defense in relation to nonviolence as it is for a soldier on the battlefield to say he is not going to take any risks.”*

What does it take, I hear him asking, to get disenfranchised people to demand their place at the table? What does it take to get people to be allies in this work, to find the place in them willing to fight non-violently for what is right?

Really? he asks. You have to be spit on? Someone has to call you a name? *Then* you want to make a fist and knock someone's block off?

But King reasserts that knocking people's blocks off accomplishes nothing. In fact, it makes things worse. *“I must continue by (this) faith,”* he insists. *“Violence, even in self-defense, creates more problems than it solves. Only a refusal to hate or kill can put an end to the chain of violence in the world.”*

It's a hard ideal for many. I understand. But look, I don't think for one minute that King *or anyone* comes to a place of non-violent action, or embraces the commitment to not hate, because they are superior people from birth, and are speaking from a holy righteousness that looks down on others as unenlightened fools and hypocrites. I assure you, anyone who has learned not to hate has hated first, and pried that hate from around their heart deliberately, finger by finger. And slowly. Anyone who chooses *not* to use violence, or even kill, when violence is used upon them, has experienced their own blood running hot and murderous first.

But then this, I have to believe, is why King insisted that non-violence is *practical*. Because it begins with where people are. It doesn't rely on authority, either personal or scriptural. It doesn't rely on shame, finger-pointing or blame, all of which are forms of violence. It does not begin from a place of achieved perfection. The non-violent protest is not about forcing others to change the law, cease their own hatred or reform their own heart because they simply have to. No, it's about presenting a dream, a vision clearly, saying: “We think this is right,” and then, patiently, and without hatred, working to help others find that dream for themselves, and see that vision from their own standpoint.

True, King expressed his belief in non-violence after some laws had already been changed in the '50s. And yes, laws will be perceived by some as a form of force. But King, I believe, would have said something like this (and you're right, this is the cheekiest thing I have ever done in a sermon!): *The law is what we agree to live by...the law itself stands against violence for the most part, and punishes violent law-breakers, so in some ways, it is not really parallel to the kind of force used by the people who want to use lynching as their method of maintaining control. So if some black students in the 1950s, by force of law, can now attend a school once reserved for whites alone in Little Rock Arkansas, then, yes, segregationists will feel that their values have been forced to the mat and will feel resentment. But I think that as long as the law protects everyone, instead of just the white crowd, the moral claims proposed by the later non-violent marches I led during the sixties would have worked even back in the fifties, were I ready to lead marches back then, and the same change in Little Rock could have been more quickly welcomed by almost everyone, without having to be enforced by the National Guard amid cries of "Lynch them!"*

And when I compare King's whole organizational style of justice-making with the kind of stuff that goes on a lot in my life today, I get frazzled. He said: *Our most powerful nonviolent weapon is, as would be expected, also our most demanding: that is organization. To produce change, people must be organized to work together in units of power. More and more, the civil rights movement will become engaged in the task of organizing people into permanent groups to protect their own interests and to produce change in their behalf. This is a tedious task which may take years, but the results are more permanent and meaningful.*

Today, I often get calls to show up for a protest of some sort or another "tomorrow." And it's very clear that there has been little preparation, or organization except the easy kind available today...a mass email invitation to show up, with the assumption that I know all of the realities involved just because I am self-labeled as "progressive." To work together in "units of power" takes a lot more organization than that. I know that our own Racial Diversity Task Force is working to be one of those more "permanent groups" King described, a group working for "results more permanent and meaningful," and that King's vision of non-violence gladdens their hearts. Furthermore, social justice work takes what King calls "a qualitative change in our souls..." ...that is, we have to examine our own role in the troubles of the world, and not assume that we are finished, righteously just once and for all, and can lecture the rest of the world on how to be more like us. Soul-work and justice-work, that is, humility and vision, overlap almost completely, I say.

King believed that non-violent and undeniably tedious organization leads to more permanent results. I agree. And I agree with him that non-violent social justice work is *practical*. Why? Because it acknowledges that, in the world of the spirit, we are all still in a kind of kindergarten, learning by experience and experiment more than by authority and book. We are learning by practice, and that is all that King's "practical" means...like his non-violent marchers, we learn about making Golden Rule dreams come true by practice. Social justice work, you see, is spiritual work...practice, practice, practice.

And we are practicing to live in history right now, not because something famous, like the founding of the first kindergarten, *happened* on our street once upon a time, but because we

ourselves *are making* history that will one day be read about by our children's children.

What, I wonder, will they read?

Offering

Drops of water turn a mill, singly none, singly none. Knowing this to be true, we set aside a portion of the service for those who prefer to contribute their pledges to the congregational common budget during the Sunday celebration, instead of electronically or by mail. Giving and receiving both are deeply spiritual activities, and with this one act, since this congregation is entirely self supporting, we both give and receive.

Prayer

Free to be, oh Love.

Free to be.

At least that.

But also, free from shame
that I am not someone else.

And, free to make mistakes. Lots of 'em.

Free to not think I am beyond forgiveness.

Free to say "I really don't know."

Free from wishing that struggle and random suffering would not be ordinary parts of life.

Free from the inner voice that shuts me up
when I need to speak up.

Free from the belief that impulse is more
authentic than planning.

Free from thinking I have all the answers.

Or that anyone else does, for that matter.

Free from feeling competitive with, or more righteous than, the next person.

Free from thinking that my freedom,
and not justice for all, is the goal.

Free to sing or not sing as I choose.

But free...at least that. Thanks. Amen.