

# **Resisting Being Co-Opted**

## **Martin Luther King Jr. Sunday**

January 15, 2012

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### **Greeting, Welcoming, Centering, Kindling, Opening:**

We are here  
*after winter cold has finally arrived,*  
freezing our breath, icing the waters...  
*to worship, to receive the gift of this moment*  
to thaw what has been frozen in our lives,  
*and let the icy rivers of spirit within warm,*  
and flow, like justice, in a mighty stream.

**And so, without guarantees, we lean into joy, and bend toward a just way of life, both for our own sakes, and for the sake of our children and all beings with whom we share the earth. We would engage our mission wholeheartedly, with courage, self-questioning, compassion, vulnerability and honesty.**

### **Sequence for the Day**

Rivers of it. Torrents of it, the prophet proclaimed.

Torrents of what?

I'm guessing he wasn't just longing to be soaked in the word justice, when he said that, justice, a two syllable loan from the Latin meaning equity.

I'm guessing he wasn't talking about an abstract feel-good word, nor that blindfolded woman holding the scales in her trembling hand.

I think he was talking about torrents of sisterhood and brotherhood and the freedom to be a somebody instead of a nobody.

I think he was talking about torrents of women and men and children, of many colors working side-by-side together on the same issues without whining "this takes too long," and "aren't we there yet?"

I think he was talking about torrents of gladly struggling people of all kinds sitting around a common table, sharing culture, sharing food, but not sharing assumptions about each other of any kind.

I think he was imagining torrents of neighborhoods and communities where children admire each other's faces without any needed build-up, or where differing ways of worship and differing ways of skepticism can all stay in the same room happily.

I imagine he was imagining being part of a community and never having to hear someone say aloud "I don't like those people," without noticing the blood dripping from the souls of those who hear.

Spirit of love, be the bright sun now that melts me too, for the frigid winds of a bullying culture have frozen me hard at times. Let me flow like waters, like a mighty stream, or even like this

silence that spills from the end of my final word....

*silence*

Let all hearts flow together into this moment of memory and care, where we name aloud, or name silently within, the beautiful names of those we love, those with whom we struggle, those who are far away, and those whom we remember with love....

*naming*

Let the music gather our spirit, restore our dreams and hopes of a world growing more just and fair each and every day, a justice signed by the harmonies of music.

***The First Reading*** comes from a book from the early seventies I just rediscovered on my shelves, *The Religious Experience of Revolutionaries* by Eugene Bianchi. In it, he explores the liberal religious development in the lives of Che Guevara, Daniel Berrigan, Malcolm X, Franz Fanon, Abbie Hoffman and yes, Martin Luther King.

The whole dynamic of Martin King's inner religious experience is directed toward the goal of freedom within human life. By freedom, King means the state of having options for self-determination, of being able to make self-initiated decisions for action, and the capacity to take responsibility for self and neighbor. He perceives freedom as the ability to deliberate, decide and respond. Freedom is the chosen fulfillment of our human nature. But since ours is a finite freedom, anything that unjustly deprives us of liberty is morally wrong, and an abuse of our nature. Racism therefore, is a form of slavery, for King, the paramount form of *un*-freedom.

***The Second Reading*** for this morning comes from a poem by Joy Harjo, of the native Mvskogie Nation on these shores. Some of you have the correct spelling as she offers it, with a v instead of a u. The Milky Way is a Mvskogee image for paradise.

In the flickering mirror of time,  
all events quiver in layers.  
Each tree, each trigger of grass,  
each small and large wave of water  
will reveal the raw story.  
We climb and keep climbing,  
our children wrapped in smallpox blankets  
to keep them warm.  
Spider shows us how to weave  
a sticky pattern  
from the muddy curses of our enemy  
to get us safely to the Milky Way.  
We had to leave our homes behind us,  
just as we were left behind by progress.  
We do not want your version of progress.  
There are other versions, says Spider

(who does not consider making  
webs to sell to the highest bidder  
but keeps weaving and thinking  
and including us in the story.)

## Sermon

Do you notice? Do you notice when out and about, when you're walking down the street, how many kinds of faces there are? It startles me every time. When I pause to think that faces are but two eyes, a nose, a mouth, some cheeks and a chin, I grow amazed beyond words. Not vary many elements there, but the variety of the faces those elements make constantly delights me. Wide faces, long faces, round faces, blue eyes, hazel and brown and green eyes, brown cheeks, pale foreheads, cleft chins, bushy eyebrows, plucked eyebrows, long lashes, short lashes, lips like almonds, or rose petals. So many types of faces. So many types of people.

When I was a child, the blond and redheaded faces down the street didn't look like anyone in my family. My family all had a *very* different look. I figured out what that "look" was when I visited Bologna, Italy, once, land of my ancestors. Everyone looked just like me, or members of my family, and that startled me down to my toes. I'm not sure if I liked it, or didn't like it. It was just unusual. And I suddenly understood what genetics meant for the first time: namely, that in this world of a million utterly distinct and different faces, I was part of a circle of people, a family we say, with faces that resembled each other.

But faces outside our family are usually all different, and somehow we have to figure out what that means. Here's how that happened to me. Once when I was almost five, I came indoors after playing in a mud-puddle created by a recent rain. My mother shrieked as soon as she saw me. "You take your clothes off right there, young man, right now, and you get into the shower immediately. You are **filthy**!" Then, a few seconds later, and a bit more amused, she chuckled and said: "You look like somebody rolled you in melted chocolate."

Now remember, children are much more concrete than adults. Stories like we heard this morning will engage smaller children in different ways than they will adults. So when I heard my mother, I heard her as a child.

So, later that week, my mother and I took the street-car downtown to the Penobscot Building in Detroit to see Dr. Summers for my eye check up. He dilated my eyes, which meant raw sunlight was irritating to me. To reward me for not complaining, my mother took me to the counter at Woolworth's to get a hot dog all slathered with relish, the only typically "American" food I liked as a kid. The gentle smiling woman who served us was African American. She served us the hot dog, but I sat there, folded my arms, and I wouldn't eat it. "Why?" my mother asked, incredulous. I whispered to my mother: "She's filthy, and now my hotdog will taste like chocolate."

You see, I had never seen a face like hers before, and I had to figure out what it meant with the only tools I had as an almost-five-year-old in 1954. My mother, however, was duly mortified, and pulled me off my stool and took me aside. "People are just people," she said to me. "They all have different colored faces, just like they have different eyes. Your sister has brown eyes and

you have hazel eyes, and you're still part of the family. Differences in color and size and shape don't mean anything. Everyone is part of the human family. Now you get back up on that stool young man, and eat your lunch."

I tell that rather embarrassing story because I want to make clear that when people notice different faces as children, they often, in their concrete fashion, separate individuals with the tools they have: the colors they are learning by name in kindergarten, the images from Dr. Seuss stories. That is *not* any kind of racism.

But nevertheless, racialization, the notion that people of different colors and cultures should be at odds, is planted in us very early, even by the most conscious parents in the world. Double-blind studies conducted recently confirm that assertion. In the USA, racialization has been part of the atmosphere for centuries, and although it has diminished, the atmosphere is still polluted, even in 2012. As some of you may have read, George Lucas, the touted film director, made a movie about the Tuskegee airmen, the first African American aviators in American history. Titled *Red Tails*, it has an all-black cast. Despite his vaunted reputation, no studio in Hollywood will agree to market the film, or show it in their theaters. Why? An all black cast, with no major white roles. I'm happy to say President Obama showed excellent leadership by screening the film in the White House this week.

The big studios seem to be saying: "Why support a film about people who are not like **us**, who don't have **our** faces?"

This sounds like classic social bullying to me. You know: *"You're not part of our group, the in-group. We hurt you. We expel you for being different from us. We are superior to you. You walk and talk funny to us, so you are less than us. We have all the options open to us; you have no options. And whatever we do to you to keep you in your place and humiliate you, it's all your own damn fault. You brought it on yourself."*

In the last few years, I have seen, heard and read *a lot* about bullying. Maybe you have too. I've seen public service announcements about it. I've seen editorials, books, and even movies about bullying. It almost seems like it's something that just popped up. Something that suddenly cropped up against tormented gay teenagers, or adolescent girls who are not part of the in-crowd because they read books on physics – or because they read at all.

Mind you, I'm glad people are catching on to it, but I assure you, it's been going on for a lot longer than a decade. I was bullied, certainly, back in the 50's. *Many* times – no make that constantly – for about a five year period in my early adolescence.

But most of the bullying that goes on, and has been going on in our country for hundreds of years, is between one in-group, and other groups. Ever since the Bacon Rebellion of 1676, our nation, as you know, has been racialized, so that so-called "whites" (a word that did not exist until after the Bacon Rebellion) have all the options, and people of other colors and cultures are co-opted, that is, their culture is neutralized and their worth is determined by how they assimilate, that is, dress, act, speak, sport, eat, and worship like the in-crowd. But with many fewer options.

The tremendous work of the civil rights era began to address some of the bullying tactics: voter suppression, lynching, and the systematic denial of post-war housing loans to African Americans who returned home to poverty after serving their country in totally segregated regiments, like the Tuskegee Airmen.

Native Americans were bullied too. And blamed for it. The Protestant settlers from Northern Europe are often touted as having come here for religious freedom, so they could worship as they wanted without persecution. Their children however, did not permit the Natives to celebrate as they wanted. They were consistently being likened to the biblical Amalekites, who were slaughtered without mercy for being the wrong kind of people at the wrong time. Some of the slaughter was done outright. Others, like Lord Amherst, actually planned to give smallpox-infested blankets to the natives, since he believed it was his duty, and these are his words in 1763 "to try Every ... method that can serve to Extirpate this Execrable Race." In case these rather antique words are unknown to you, *extirpate* means to wipe out, and *execrable* means "extremely inferior." We have no documentary evidence that he actually did give out the blankets, but his words of intention were recorded faithfully, and it's to this terrible sentence Joy Harjo refers when she talks about her kids "wrapped in smallpox blankets." Wrapped, that is, not in warm rectangles made of wool and germs, but in something far more contagious and deadly: consistent information from the bully world that they are inferior, worthless, shiftless, with parents who are drunk all day long, and practice a silly religion all dressed in feathers and stupid spider stories.

Your options are taken from you when you are bullied. You are independent, self-reliant, self-determined, and all of a sudden, you are lumped by bullies into a fantasy category called "race" – a biologically empty concept invented in 1775 by Immanuel Kant – and suddenly your confidence, your courage and even your will may well wither into nothing. You'll wonder if the word freedom can ever have any meaning for you.

Bianchi echoes what Joy Hargo wrote when he described Martin Luther King Jr.'s attitude toward freedom. Remember? He wrote:

*The whole dynamic of Martin King's inner religious experience is directed toward the goal of freedom within human life. By freedom, King means the state of having options for self-determination, of being able to make self-initiated decisions for action, and the capacity to take responsibility for self and neighbor.*

Having options for self-determination. Freedom means resisting being co-opted by bullies, and resisting being determined by the system rigged and re-rigged by the in-group over 300 years. Freedom means having the important option of taking responsibility for self and neighbor. I agree fully.

But then Bianchi interprets King's second idea: *since ours is a finite freedom, anything that unjustly deprives us of liberty is morally wrong, and an abuse of our nature. Racism therefore, is a form of slavery, for King, the paramount form of **un**-freedom.*

I like how Bianchi phrases that. The racialization of our nation means we're *all* enslaved, not the chattel slavery of the 18th and 19th centuries, but a true slavery of the spirit. A slavery of the

spirit where we are all unfree – the bullies, the bullied, and even those who don't get it, and think all of this talk of racialization is too much ado about nothing.

When the congregational leadership offers us various workshops or classes on this topic, like Paula Cole Jones coming this March, I'm proud. I'm proud because its part of our spiritual work to engage, to look at this, to grow more self-determined and less determined by others. And yes, even though that's always going to be happening in some way, as our story this morning made delightfully clear. The artist's mother loved his picture even though her face was distorted. All of us are lovable. It's no crime to be caught up in the system of racialization – all of us are. But our religious duty, it seems to me, is to resist racialization, resist systems that distort, resist the slavery of being determined by others. How? Through learning; by going deep within our own life stories, and uprooting much of what was planted there by the un-self-critical culture many of us grew up in. All of us, no matter what color or background, have some unshackling to do.

The outright racialization I talk about is known in this world primarily in the Americas, especially in the USA; and also in South Africa. My grandmother Carmelina, having been raised in Italy, was not subjected to this racialization, and was baffled when she came here, and watched white people demeaning black people. She never allowed herself to be assimilated into its unconscious practices and attitudes. But even she had work to do, similar to the work we are called to do. She had been raised, as a Northern Italian, to believe that Sicilians and Southern Italians were not worthy of spitting on. They were awful people. But then she made some friends, these brothers from Naples, on her immigration trip to these shores, and she realized she had been sold a bill of goods. My grandmother was able to say to the modern American world, eventually, with Joy Harjo, that "We don't want your version of progress. There is another version, where Spider (a Native American image of Creative Wisdom) *does not consider making webs to sell to the highest bidder, but keeps weaving and thinking and including us in the story.*

And that's exactly what my mother was trying to do too, at that Woolworth's. I had seen a face different from my own, and using inadequate tools, I had come to a foolish conclusion. My mother gave me a one minute workshop that changed my life for the better.

It's really amazing how different and delightful our faces all are. It's even more amazing when we allow ourselves, like Spider, to find the tools that help us to resist being co-opted, and instead, to include all the faces we encounter into the multicolored, multi- cultured Story of Humanity, the story of Spirit, the story of Freedom, Life and Love.

### **Offering**

*Kathleen, please compose an offering. Thanks.*

### **Closing Charge:**

Everything is Waiting for You, David Whyte  
(After Derek Mahon)

Your great mistake is to act the drama  
as if you were alone. As if life  
were a progressive and cunning crime

with no witness to the tiny hidden  
transgressions. To feel abandoned is to deny  
the intimacy of your surrounds. Surely,  
even you, at times, have felt the grand array;  
the swelling presence, and the chorus, crowding  
out your solo voice. You must note  
the way the soap dish enables you,  
or the window latch grants you freedom.  
Alertness is the hidden discipline of familiarity.  
The stairs are your mentor of things  
to come, the doors have always been there  
to frighten you and invite you,  
and the tiny speaker in the phone  
is your dream-ladder to divinity.

Put down the weight of your aloneness and ease into  
the conversation. The kettle is singing  
even as it pours you a drink, the cooking pots  
have left their arrogant aloofness and  
seen the good in you at last. All the birds  
and creatures of the world are unutterably  
themselves. Everything is waiting for you.