

Who Influences You?

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Rev. Dr. Mark Belletini

Gathering, Welcoming, Centering, Kindling, Opening:

We are here,
on the Martin Luther King holiday weekend,
to remember that each of us flow
through the same history that was his,
and to lift up his call to live our own days well,
dreaming great dreams, and, yes, totally alive.

Grounded in gratitude for the cosmos that is our home, claiming deepening wisdom as our authority, and daring to engage joy, burden, loss and insight in a deliberate community of many ways and ages, the flame summons us to *awaken*: to listen with our whole lives, to open, to serve.

Singing #1000 *verses one and two only.*

Ingathering

When the author Mark Twain, whose real name was Samuel Clemens, was getting older, he retired to a house at 21 Fifth Ave, New York City. He lived with his housekeeper and one of his daughters. His beloved wife had died a few months back, so he was very, very sad. When people knocked at his door...and they did... to meet him, or to get him to autograph their copy of his famous books *Tom Sawyer* or *Huckleberry Finn*, his housekeeper Katy would go to the door and shoo them all away.

Because he felt so unhappy, he never got dressed, always just wearing his bathrobe. He never left the house. His only bit of joy was his cat, named Bambino. Bambino was a beautiful black cat, and he loved to sit in Mark Twain's lap as he sat there. He would pet Bambino. Bambino would purr. And sometimes Mr. Twain would even smile a bit.

However one day, when it was spring, and Katy the housekeeper was airing out the house, Bambino saw a squirrel on a branch of tree just outside their second story window. Bambino jumped onto the sill, and then leaped magnificently over to the tree branch, and started to chase the squirrel down the tree and around the corner. Bambino disappeared.

Mark Twain was very upset. But what he did was to write a little note and publish it in the newspaper, the New York Times. \$5 reward if you find and return my black cat, Bambino. Back in 1904, when this story took place, that was actually quite a lot of money, more than \$100 in our year.

Well what happened next was amazing. Children came from all over and offered Mr. Twain their cats to borrow until Bambino was found. Some offered to *give* Mr. Twain their cats outright. He told them "No, I will wait for Bambino to come back. But thank you very much. You are so kind." But he started to smile when the doorbell rang from that time on.

After four days, Katy went outside to get the newspaper, and there was Bambino on the front sidewalk, licking his own fur, as cats like to do. Mark Twain was delighted, and held the cat high in the air, and promised the cat fresh salmon for supper.

People, especially children, still knocked at the door, this time to congratulate Mr. Twain at his good fortune in finding his cat. He smiled every time he opened the door.

And all of these visits began to make Mr. Twain happier. He got out of his bathrobe, and put on the white suit and vest he used to wear all the time. He moved out to his Connecticut house, started giving talks again, with Bambino always purring in his lap every night as he sat by the fireplace.

The influence of all the children knocking at his door, as well as Bambino coming home, made a sad person who was hiding in his house, into a happy person who went back out into the world and smiled.

Greeting

Affirming v. 3 of 1000

Communing

University students slide on the snow near the chapel at Otaneimi University, in Suomi, or as we say it, Finland. Old men whose parents emigrated from the Peloponissos peninsula in Eliada, or as we say it, Greece, play backgammon in the last open cafe in decaying Greektown, Detroit. Robot machines the size of busses use their long pincers to forge leaf-springs for new Iveco trucks in Torino, Italia. A 19-year-old studying nanotechnology at Princess Nora University, avidly reads an underground translation into Arabic of *Fifty Shades of Gray* in her dorm-room in ar-Riyad, Saudi Arabia. A Chilean astronomer, at the great observatory in LaSilla at the edge of the Atacama desert, confirms a *sixth* planet circling the star Tau Ceti, only 12 light years away. A thirty-year-old teacher in Mumbai, India feels grateful because she rented an apartment near Jacob Circle three years ago. The new Monorail-stop there will open in April, and she'll be able to cut her travel time to the school in half. An old man in Vladivostok, Russia, smiles because all 12 of his children and grandchildren have come to see him before he dies. A young boy in Timbutu, Mali, harvests floating-rice for his grandmother, who is recovering from a hysterectomy. The world is larger by far than this place and this time. We are part of that world, just as much as anyone else, our earth a planet no less astonishing than any circling Tau Ceti. Before the wonder of such immensity, blended so beautifully with total intimacy, an offering of silent wonder. *silence*

Local lives, local love, local concerns, local grief. All of us in this room are local, and our love, sorrow, and concerns for others rise in *this* room every week. We set a moment or two aside to name -either silently, or whispered, those who have blest us with their gifts, or engaged our struggles, or our tears, or our sighs. We name our own local worlds...

naming

Music is found around the world too, all kinds, even some we have never heard of. Great minds have studied how music affects us, but all we know for sure is that it does, reliably, beautifully, and right now...

Reading: *The First Reading comes from an observation by bell hooks, the pen name for Gloria Watkins, in her book Talking Back 1989*

This past semester, I taught a course on black women writers in which students were encouraged to think about the social context in which literature emerges, the impact of politics of domination – racism, sexism, class exploitation – on the writing. Students stated quite openly and honestly that reading the literature in the context of class discussion was making them feel pain. They complained that everything was changing for them, that they were seeing the world differently, and seeing things in that world that were painful to face. Never before had a group of students so openly talked about the way in which learning to see the world critically was causing pain. I did not belittle their pain or try to rationalize it. Initially, I was uncertain about how to respond, and just asked us all to think about it. Later, we discussed the way in which all their comments implied that to experience pain is bad, an indication that something is wrong. We talked about changing how we perceive pain, about our society's approach to pain, considering the possibility that this pain could be a constructive sign of growth. I shared with them my sense that the experience should not be viewed as static, that at another point the knowledge and new perspectives they had might lead to clarity and a greater sense of well-being.

Reading *The Second Reading is from the 1999 book, Coercion: Why We Listen to What They Say, by Douglas Rushkoff.*

They *say* human beings use only 10 percent of their brains. They *say* polyunsaturated fat is better for you than saturated fat. They *say* that tiny squiggles in a rock prove there once was life on Mars. They *say* our children's test scores are declining. They *say* Jesus was a direct descendant of King David. They *say* you can earn \$15,000 a week in your spare time. They *say* marijuana leads to LSD, and LSD can lead to suicide. They *say* the corner office is a position of power. They *say* the elderly should get flu shots this season. They *say* people can be hypnotized to do anything. They *say* people won't do anything under hypnosis that they won't do when conscious. They *say* Prozac alleviates depression. They *say* mutual funds are the best long-term investment. They *say* computers can predict the weather. They *say* you haven't met your deductible.

Who, exactly, are "they," and why do they say so much? More amazing, why do we listen to them?

We can each have our own “theys” – the bosses, experts, and authorities (both real and imaginary) who seem to dictate our lives, decide our fates, and create our futures. In the best of circumstances they can make us feel safe, the way parents do. They make our decisions for us. They do our thinking for us. We don’t have to worry about our next move – it has already been decided on our behalf, and in our best interests. Or so we hope.

The justifiably cynical among us have come to expect this sort of treatment from the professional people in our lives. When we walk into a shopping mall, we understand that we will be subjected to certain forms of influence. We recognize that retail sales are about the bottom line, and that to stay in business, shop owners depend upon our behaving in a predictable and somewhat malleable fashion.

Preaching

I really had no idea about Mark Twain's later years until I read the story about him and his cat Bambino. I knew about his novels, one of which is considered by many critics to be the other great American novel besides Hawthorne's *Moby Dick*. What amazed me however was his depression. After all, Twain was a humorist through and through. A brilliant wit. While in college, when I read some of his essays, like *Cooper's Literary Offenses*, I literally rolled around on the floor, unable to stop laughing, tears running down my red face. When he published his novel on Joan of Arc, he did so anonymously, since, he said, "people will *expect* me to make them laugh, and there is nothing funny about the Maid of Orleans. So best not to use my name."

But, sadly, he experienced a lot of death in a short time...one of his daughters, his beloved wife, a good friend; and so for a long time he just walked around in his bathrobe and stayed indoors, sad as can be.

I'm not the funniest guy in the world like Twain was, but, although I am usually pretty upbeat, I too have undergone bouts of depression in my life. Most of us have at some time or another. I am not talking about the kind of depression some people fight, which is more a part of their system. I am talking about situational and circumstantial depression.

I had a bout of it the day after New Years. Just couldn't get out of bed. The toll of grief for recent deaths, suppressed during the holidays, just kept me there; I wasn't afraid of it, knowing that it would probably pass eventually. But I really felt paralyzed. At the end of the day, a friend of mine called. He told me he was wrestling with loss of job issues, career goals, etc. Could I offer him some words to cheer him up?

We talked on the phone, but I finally said to him..."Why don't we go out for coffee and talk face-to-face? That seems better than the phone." So I went out with him to a coffee shop, and we closed that down, and then we went to his place and talked till close to two. Not just about jobs. But everything.

When I left, he was no longer depressed. And neither was I, although I had not told him I was.

We influenced each other, even though that is not what we were trying to do. We were just talking. But the influence was real. And effective, just as with Mr. Twain. All those children coming to his door to offer him their care. All those kind notes he received. And the next thing you know, he is dressed in his white suit and walking openly in the streets of New York, greeting people with a smile.

We probably don't know how much we influence each other by just being there. Just showing up. Just saying hello. Just shaking a hand. Just listening to a story. Even just taking a walk with someone quietly.

We impact each other daily in ways we probably are never even aware of.

But as Douglas Rushkoff points out, it's possible to influence each other in different ways as well. If you heard me say in a class on the New Testament here at church, "They *say* Jesus was a direct descendant of King David," you may be influenced to trust that because some of you know I taught New Testament for many years at one of our seminaries. But you would be fooling yourself. "They" is not an authority. Past experience does not make me an authority either, an authority that does not need to offer you evidence. None exists that I know of, so you're safe. I won't ever tell you that.

"In the best of circumstances," Ruskoff writes, "*they* can make us feel safe, the way parents do. They make our decisions for us. They do our thinking for us. We don't have to worry about our next move – it has already been decided on our behalf, and in our best interests. Or so we hope."

Right. Or so we hope. But I want more than hope. I want influence in my life based on evidence that treats my mind and heart as worthy of engagement. I want influences who respect me for who I am, not simply a consumer whom "they" consider, in Rushkoff's analysis "malleable and predictable." I do not want to bow down to what "they" say, or some book says, even if the cover of the book is stunning, the photo of the author attractive. I want truth to be my authority, not some authority to proclaim truth to me and expect me automatically to buy it, just because "they" think that I am someone who can be influenced to do, or buy anything.

In fact, I have begun to wonder, especially when I think of justice issues, if the influences that matter most are the ones that at first elicit a flinch from me, a bit of pain, and raise my resistance. I think of what bell hooks reported when she taught a class in literature and asked the students to look at context as well as text, history as well as the story itself. bell writes, "Students stated quite openly and honestly that reading the literature in the context of class discussion was making them feel pain. They complained that everything was changing for them, that they were seeing the world differently, and seeing things in that world that were painful to face. Never before had a group of students so openly talked about the way in which learning to see the world critically was causing pain. I did not belittle their pain or try to rationalize it."

No good teacher would either belittle or rationalize something like pain. And I find bell hooks to be a mighty fine teacher. Jolinda, Eric and I have taken workshops with her at Ohio State, and have always come away feeling engaged and respected in every possible way. Her way of

teaching influenced all three of us, I dare to say. In a good way. Not all influences on our lives, after all, are automatically suspect and discreditable.

Martin Luther King, just like us, did not arrive on the scene without being deeply influenced by others. He certainly lifted up Gandhi often, and Dr. Benjamin Mays, a beloved professor at Morehouse College. He also revered Henry David Thoreau's writings on Civil Disobedience, and said so often. But what you may not know is that he almost always carried a singular book in his back pocket, not by Gandhi or Thoreau, but a book by Rev. Dr. Howard Thurman, one of the truly great religious figures in the US during the last century. The book was called "Jesus and the Disinherited." And King returned to it over and over again. He chose *deliberately* to be influenced by Dr. Thurman. There was no sales pitch, no malleability. Yes, Dr. King did know Dr. Thurman very well...his father had been classmates with Thurman after all. But that's not why he revered Thurman. Thurman *embodied* the ideas in his book. He founded, long before the civil rights era, the Church of the Fellowship of All Peoples, back in 1944. It was the first multi-cultural and multi-racial congregation in the U.S.A. It's still going strong.

And, it was Dr. Thurman who introduced Dr. King to Gandhi's principles of non-violence. When Thurman himself met Gandhi in person, he asked Gandhi what message he would like for him bring back to the States. Gandhi said, "I wish I had made clearer my conviction that non-violence is the best way to establish justice around the world. Perhaps the black ministers in your country will be more successful in proclaiming this insight than I have been."

It wasn't many years afterward that Thurman let King know about Gandhi, and what he said. And look at what happened!

But lately I've come to suspect that King revered the book that Thurman wrote, not because he knew him, but rather because it made him feel pain at first, and raised his resistance. Thurman, after all, talked freely about the failures of the Christian churches he knew in dealing with the disinherited of this world...the racially segregated, the desperately poor, those without power or privilege. This was deeply painful to King, who, like Thurman, was a liberal Baptist minister who loved the church. The non-violence reflected in Thurman's book was also painful to King at first. The word itself almost always raises immediate resistance: "Yeah, but what about someone who is attacking your own mother? What then, huh?" And of course, the standard "Yeah, but what about Hitler?" etc.

Dr. King was not born with the idea of non-violence in his heart any more than Gandhi was. Nor was King bound to only one religious view of the world. Dr. King and Coretta actually attended Unitarian Universalist congregations back in Boston when he was going to school there. He thought that maybe strikingly liberal forms of religion might not exemplify Thurman's criticism of the churches. But back in those days, Unitarian Universalism was different.

The Kings found our congregations too blindly optimistic, always imagining that "things would just get better without a struggle." That's mostly changed now...the UUA Board itself, when King called religious groups down to Selma, adjourned in Boston, and flew down South in support of King's actions. One of our ministers, James Reeb, lost his life in Selma, or as King said, when he

gave his eulogy, "sacrificed his life." And since that time we have quit thinking that optimism is magic, and have rolled up our sleeves. And allowed ourselves, I think, to experience the pains of injustice among us and around us. And to let those pains influence us more than either optimism, or hope that things will just get better.

I think of bell hooks classroom. "Later, we discussed the way in which all their comments implied that to experience pain is bad, an indication that something is wrong. We talked about changing how we perceive pain, about our society's approach to pain, considering the possibility that this pain could be a constructive sign of growth. I shared with them my sense that the experience should not be viewed as static, that...the new perspectives they had might lead to clarity and a greater sense of well-being."

Can pain be positive. I now believe there are useful pains and useless pains. I learned that when I suffered something called a frozen shoulder and had to get physical therapy. The therapist, as she twisted my shoulder back, caused me a LOT more pain than my frozen shoulder was already causing me. That baffled me. When I questioned her, she explained to me why the one pain led to no good, and the other led to health eventually. I have no pain in my shoulder anymore, thanks to the pain she twisted out of my shoulder. Some pain can be a positive influence on our health... not just in our body, but in our spirit, our dreams and our visions for the just.

Spiritually, a useless pain is what I experience when an undeniably extraordinary man like Dr. King is abused like he has been this last week. The talking heads are going on and on...they *say* Dr. King would have been for giving guns to the slaves on the plantations. Or placed in schools. They *say* Dr. King would have been against Roe vs Wade. Actually, no one knows what Dr. King's view on abortion was, since he never said one word about it. Not one word. He was, however, the joyful recipient of the Margaret Sanger Award because he was so open about family planning and birth control, and spoke about it all the time. He was also totally Gandhian, so saying he would be for guns in schools, or God help us all, for believing that the slaves should have been given guns...one wonders by whom?... makes not only little sense, but is a vile insult to his memory, his life, and his positive, justice-grounded influence on American culture.

The pain of my depression that day after New Year's was not a bad pain, but a useful one. I had good reason to feel down. I didn't want to deny it. Think of it as tribute, if you will, equal to the love I felt for those I lost. But I didn't want that pain to define my life for all time. So I was glad that the pain of my depression then began to evaporate because a friend asked me to be there for him and his pain. I felt his pain, and went to see him. The pain of Mr. Twain's depression disappeared when people showed up without him even asking. They imagined the pain of his loss, and responded to it. The pains of injustice in this nation will disappear when people allow themselves to feel and be influenced by the pains of the disinherited. Then, after a time of acknowledging that pain, we too might get out bed, and show up to serve as allies in the establishment of a just society for all.

When we are mindful of who influences us, and choose those influences wisely, and deliberately, we too might learn to respect our own dreams of justice as much as we quote King's "I have dream" speech.

What kind of influence would we wield then?

Offering (*extempore, per Steve Abbott*)

Returning (*unison*)

Don't ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive, and then go do that. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.

Howard Thurman c. 1979

spoken in conversation to Gil Bailie

Singing #1028 Fire of Commitment

Blessing