

# *A Candle is a Careless Thing*

**Rev. David E. Bumbaugh**

**[The Unitarian Church in Summit](#)**

**January 18, 1998**

My friend, John Wood, once wrote of the candle, that it is a careless thing, always stretching up and reaching out, giving itself away, and in the giving, finding itself. Edna St. Vincent Millay conveyed a similar insight when she wrote:

My candle burns at both its ends,  
It will not last the night;  
But, oh, my foes and oh, my friends,  
It makes a lovely light!

These two poems come to my mind with force at this season of the year, when the time comes round to celebrate the birth of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. I find myself reflecting on his life, its impact on the nation and world and on my own life, and the image I see, over and over again, is the image of a candle, giving itself away and making a lovely light. This morning, mindful of the fact that the generations that knew Dr. King, that felt his impact personally are now part of the recessional of history, and in a modest effort to rescue this holiday from the commercial aura of countless "I have a dream" sales, I would like to spend our time together this morning reflecting on his career as I experienced it, and what it has meant to me over the decades.

I had graduated from seminary with a clear idea of the focus and shape my ministry would take. After all, I had already served Unitarian Universalist churches for seven years and I had some firmly established patterns. I believed that I was called to explore the moral, spiritual, ethical dimensions of our common life, to explicate the religious implications of the challenges and opportunities which confronted us as individuals and as a society, and to encourage women and men to carry their values into all aspects of their lives, living with integrity every moment. I spent my time reading and reflecting, and crafting sermons which shared the result of that effort with my congregation.

Inevitably, in those times, much of my reflection focused on the enormous social issues which confronted the nation--racism, war, poverty. I regarded it as my job to enlarge the sense of responsibility and compassion as women and men experienced deep and disturbing challenges and changes. But in no sense could I have been considered an activist. Indeed, one of my colleagues, only half kidding, suggested that I was running a spiritual filling station--rounding people up once a week, pumping them full of the holy gas and then, tires and fluid levels checked, sending them out to confront the world, while I stayed home and kept the restrooms clean.

Then came the day that Martin Luther King sent out his invitation to the clergy to come

to Selma, Alabama, to help with the drive for voting rights. Now, I knew about the invitation, but I did not for a moment believe he meant me. I had grown up in a community in which we had been carefully taught to avoid attracting attention to ourselves. We had been taught that even when the sign on the door said, "welcome" or "enter," it probably did not mean us. We had been schooled to find our place and stay there. And so it never occurred to me that an invitation to the clergy to come to Selma meant me, too. I did not go.

Then came the terrible news that James Reeb, one of our ministers who did respond to that call, had been clubbed to death in the streets of Selma. Another call went out--this time from the Unitarian Universalist Association, urging as many ministers as possible to go to Alabama for the last stages of the march from Selma to Montgomery. I read the call, but once more, I did not believe that it meant me. It never occurred to me that I was included in the call.

The next Sunday, as I about to enter the sanctuary, two members of my congregation stopped me and asked if I was going to Alabama. I must have looked very confused. I explained that we had a small child and another child on the way, and I really did not have the money to spend on a plane ticket, and.... They interrupted my ramblings to say, "We have the plane ticket; will you use it?" And suddenly I knew that all the sermons I had ever preached, and all the sermons I would ever preach would be hollow and empty unless I walked through the door they had just opened for me.

And so, I went to Alabama. I had never experienced anything like this--being part of a great tide of people flowing through the streets of that old city, marching from the outskirts, past the shacks and hovels of its African American citizens who greeted us with cheers and smiles, on into the heart of the city, to the very capital of the state, to hear Martin Luther King, Jr. electrify the crowd with his call for an end to the racist practices which condemned so many of our fellow citizens to lives of poverty, brutality and despair, to hear him ask in his inimitable way, "How long?" and promise, "Not long!" It was an exhausting and exhilarating day, made somber by the news that after the march Unitarian Universalists had suffered another martyrdom: Viola Liuzzo, one of our laywomen from Michigan, had been murdered while driving some young black men back to Selma.

Flying back to Illinois, musing over this incredible, overwhelming experience, I suddenly realized that my life, my ministry could never be the same again. I could not march for civil rights in Alabama, and then fail to be an active part of the same struggle in Illinois. And so, back in Chicago Heights, I found myself drawn out of my study and away from my books as I became a regular participant in the struggle for civil rights in my own town and in the communities around. I found it amusing that often it was I, the agnostic, bordering on atheist, who was called upon to lead prayers in public demonstrations. I found myself confronting the city government. I discovered that preaching could be dangerous, when the mayor took offense at one of my sermons and threatened me with a charge of criminal libel. And I discovered that my congregation came alive, not only in its support of me, (concerned that the community could recognize the clergy of other

churches because of their clerical collars, but might not recognize me, they gave me a sweatshirt with a great red flaming chalice printed on it) but also in its determination to engage in the struggle for justice and peace and equity.

Though young and new in ministry, I found myself chairing Unitarian Universalists for the Chicago Freedom Movement. That was what had brought me to that small group, being thanked by Martin Luther King, Jr. He soon left and we went on working with his lieutenants, Andrew Young and James Bevel and others. We schemed and we planned and dreamed together, that day and for many days to come. We watched the emergence of the incredible hatred which lay behind the official smiles in Chicago, as Dr. King was spat upon and stoned and reviled and his reputation besmirched. We watched as Dr. King's concerns and insights grew and deepened despite the setbacks. He began to teach us that racism in the United States and war in Vietnam were, at some deep level, related. He helped us see that racism and poverty were, at some deep level, were part of the same problem. He challenged us to enlarge the focus of our concerns, as he developed plans for a "Poor People's Campaign" which would bring thousands of the nation's impoverished citizens--white and black, urban and rural--to the nation's capital to confront the rich and the powerful.

No matter how difficult the situation, how intense the hatred he confronted, how subtle the powers ranged against him, he seemed always to convey a fundamental faith in the humanity of others, a conviction that, as he said, the moral arm of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice, a stubborn faith that no one could be forever beyond the reach of love. He strengthened us in our determination, and by his very presence he guarded us against the temptation to hate and despise those who blocked our dreams and derided our hopes.

And then came the terrible news that Dr. King had been murdered in Memphis, Tennessee, where he was supporting a strike by sanitation workers--garbage collectors. I remember being submerged in my private grief, when the telephone rang. A voice on the other end of the line asked me please to come to a special meeting in the African American community, and to come at once. I got into the car, and with tears dimming my vision, I drove across town. The leaders of the meeting hoped that this community gathering might prevent the rioting and bloodshed which was erupting elsewhere across the nation. When I entered the crowded hall, I realized there were only a handful of white faces to be seen, and I was the only white minister who had been asked to speak. Together we wept, for ourselves and for the nation and for the world. Together we reminded each other of the dream Dr. King had served, and how he sought to draw out of each of us our very best, and how he had sought to bridge the chasm between black and white, between rich and poor, and how he had sought to remind us of who we were and the values which had made us a people. And the city of Chicago Heights did not burn or erupt in violence that night. And once more, somewhere in my mind, I could hear his voice and I knew again that if ever God had spoken to my generation, it was through this man.

The years have passed, and I have grown older and I have watched what has happened to

the image of Martin Luther King, Jr. First, we made him a hero, and we softened his message so that it would not challenge us in any fundamental way. Gone is his concern about the morality of an economic system in which the rich get richer and the poor get poorer, in which "the righteous are sold for silver and the needy for a pair of shoes." Gone is his challenge to examine our cultural life in the light of enduring values, and in its place is a three-day holiday and an excuse for conspicuous consumption for those who can afford it.

And then, having made him a hero, we have proceeded to find his feet of clay. He smile and poke each other in the ribs and suggest that he was really a womanizer. We cluck our tongues and point out that he was less than meticulous in crediting his sources in writing his doctoral thesis and perhaps he was a plagiarist, suggesting that maybe he did not really deserve his degree after all. And then we subject his career to critical analysis and suggest that while he may have been somewhat effective in the South, he was no match for the sophisticated northern cities. And after a while, we have demythologized and anesthetized his legacy so that we need no longer feel or hear the challenge of his life and work.

I tell you, as one who was there, on the fringes of this history, that all the critiques may well be true. Martin Luther King, Jr. was, like all human beings, flawed and imperfect. He was a creature of his culture and his times and he was driven by complex needs and fears and hopes and often his reach exceeded his grasp. But despite all of this, or perhaps because of it, he remains one of the few true heroes to be produced by this country in this century. He was a man who rose above his limitations, who felt moving within him a conviction about the nature of humanity which he was driven to embody in his life and work. He taught me and an entire generation profound things about what it means to live a life of integrity and courage.

>From him I learned that the invitation to be engaged in the life of the world, in the issues of the day, in the challenges of the times is always addressed to me. From him I learned that to refuse that invitation is to pass up the opportunity for which I was born. From him I learned that personal limitations are no excuse for failing to engaging the world. From him I learned that we are not required to succeed, or even to be right; we are required to serve the truth as we understand it and to trust that within the larger process even our failures may somehow contribute to the triumph of justice and mercy. From him I learned that there is no final success which does not, in some way, encompass and include our adversaries and our opponents. From him I learned that there is no bright future which does not own and somehow redeem the failures of the past. From a distance, Martin Luther King, Jr. added a depth to my life and my profession which has enriched me beyond any telling.

And in the end, he gave me and others, one final gift: he taught us how to approach death. You may remember that on the night before his murder, he addressed a crowd in Memphis. He talked about how much he loved life and looked forward to a long life. But he also said that he was not afraid of death. He knew that he lived within a sacred process, that he was caught up in it and was carried along by it. He was a drum-major for

justice, a part of the parade, but not the entire enterprise and though he might never see the full consequences of his work--a world of peace and justice, of mercy and love--he never doubted that such a world would come, and that spending his life for such a dream lent his life meaning beyond anything he might intend. Life is to be used, not saved; life is to be lived in service to something greater than itself. And then one need not fear the ever-present danger of living that which is not life.

Perhaps it is this last message from Martin Luther King, Jr. which abides as I contemplate the world as it has been shaped since his death. In many ways the superficial changes he sought have been accomplished. As one who grew up in a rigidly segregated society, I witness to the fact that the world is now a different place and a better place because of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the struggle for civil rights. But I also know that the underlying, structural changes for which he lived and died, the fundamental values he challenged us to serve and advance have not been so completely realized. The gap between the rich and the poor grows with every passing day. The gap between the favored and the desperate has never been so wide. The dream of a compassionate society no longer guides public policy. Vengeance has replaced justice in our courts and mercy is defined as weakness. Ethnic identity has replaced the dream of a common humanity. And I am saddened beyond measure.

But in the midst of my sadness, I see him as he was that day in Chicago. I see his great, dark eyes, and I hear his voice thanking us for being part of the struggle, and I am reminded that we are not required to win, or to live to see the dream become reality. What we are required to do is to cherish the dream, to measure the world by its standard, to live our lives in service that which is greater than we are, and to trust the enfolding process to bring light and hope where we had no rational reason to expect them.

Martin Luther King, Jr. would have understood John Wood's message:

A candle is a careless thing, God wot. See how it is always stretching up and reaching out.

It gives its substance without murmur or complaint to the flame that is consuming it. It doesn't even seem to care into what corner the flame flings its light; whether the corner is clean or dirty, pretty or ugly, far or near, high or low, deserving or forgotten, useful or neglected. Apparently, too, it doesn't care to whom it sends its warmth; whether to the outer chill, a lonely heart, a child's delight, a bore or a lout.

A candle that tries to conserve its substance is poor company on a dark night. It was pleasant to look at in the day time. It was slender, smoothly appealing. But any candle that does not give itself away is a disappointment in the deepening shadows of a long evening. Some friends are like that. Good fun in days of play, poor company in the hours of dusk and trouble.

A candle must give itself away. In the giving, the spending, the spreading, the sending, it finds itself.