

A Revolution of Values

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I must confess to you that I have real problems with official celebrations like Black History Month in February, Women's History Month in March, Martin Luther King Day in January. Somewhere in my genetic make-up there must be a quirky gene, or somewhere in my developmental history a perverse experience which makes me want to defy the bidding of authority and do my own thing in my own good time. It has always seemed to me that one of the functions of religious leadership is to jar things out of their usual context, to present unnatural and unexpected juxtapositions in an effort to help us to see the extraordinary in the midst of the common and the mundane. And so, I am not often very comfortable joining the general celebrations and observances, and those of you who have been around this church for a while may have noticed that I tend to ignore some of those occasions which are part of our larger culture, of our secular liturgical year.

This year, I didn't have to decide what to do about Martin Luther King's birthday, since, as the preaching schedule worked out, that Sunday fell to Beverly. I was able to sit and listen to her sermon on "The Future of Non-Violence." In the course of her sermon, Beverly quoted Dr. King as saying,

For years I labored with the idea of reforming the existing institutions of society, a little change here, a little change there. Now I feel quite differently. I think you've got to have a reconstruction of the entire society, a revolution of values.

These were not new words. I had read them before, long years ago. But this time, for some reason I do not fully understand, they lodged in my mind and would not let me go. I found myself, at odd moments when my mind was in neutral--doing dishes, taking a shower, walking the dog--remembering those words and reflecting on the disappointment hidden behind them; wondering at the stubborn vision, the audacious dream which evoked them. From time to time I have found myself trying to put together a vision of what a reconstructed society might look like, what a revolution of values might entail. This morning, without any hope of being able to provide a clear or coherent answer to those questions, I would like to worry them aloud with you, for it may be that a revolution of values begins when enough of us are asking the right questions.

As some of you know, I grew up in a small city just south of the Mason-Dixon Line. Fifty years ago, that city, was as racially segregated as any community in this nation. The African-American citizens were concentrated in a few square blocks, centered upon the County Jail, and their ghetto could not have been more constrained had there been a wall around it. For most of the year the people of color were simply invisible. The schools

were strictly segregated. No one of color was permitted in the municipal swimming pool, nor were they allowed to use the city park system. (A separate, much smaller pool and park had been set aside for their use.) People of color were never seen on the buses and the trolley cars which comprised the public transportation system. Nor were they to be encountered in the central shopping area--either as clerks or as customers. The newspapers never reported any news from that segment of society--not engagements, or weddings or deaths. Unless your travels required that you venture through the ghetto area, you could live in that city without any sense that people of color also lived there.

There was only one time in the year when people of African-American descent ventured into public view. Once each year, in the summer, members of the African-American churches would gather in front of the Court House for an out-door religious service. And then, the white citizens of the town would come to watch, to be entertained by the gospel singing and the hand-clapping, and the shout-response style of preaching. They treated the event as a stage show, almost a minstrel show, and not as an expression of the spiritual yearning of a captive people. (Perhaps it is from that experience that I have derived my antipathy to Euro-American attempts to emulate the African-American religious idiom. Perhaps that is why I find white gospel choirs such an affront.)

In any case, that is the world I grew up in. And that is the world which Martin Luther King sought to reform a bit at a time--"a little change here, a little change there." And by all measurable standards, he and others like him were remarkably successful in that effort at reform. They forced open segregated schools and transportation systems; they forced open segregated restaurants and hotels; they toppled segregated housing patterns and employment practices; they destroyed all the legal, and many of the extra-legal mechanisms which had been developed over the centuries to keep people of color from exercising the franchise. Out from the ghettos they came, those invisible people, to become an inescapable if not always welcome part of public life. The slurs and the slights and the threats and the overt violence which had been the norm in this nation from its very inception were now unacceptable. And prejudice and discrimination was forced on to the defensive and driven underground.

But somehow, this piecemeal reformation was not enough for Martin Luther King. Somehow, in the midst of hard won victories, he began to be obsessed with a sense that something was wrong with his strategy and his goals. I have always believed that it was in Chicago, as he struggled to bring the freedom movement out of the rural south and into the urban north, that Dr. King found himself forced to reevaluate the forces with which he wrestled and to begin to reconfigure his message. It was in Chicago that I became engaged with his freedom movement. A newly minted minister, just out of seminary, serving a virtually all white suburban congregation, I found myself chair of the Unitarian Universalists for the Chicago Freedom Movement--our denomination's local contingent working with Dr. King.

There I learned first hand something of the harsh political realities of the urban world of the poor and the black; there I learned first hand something of the depth of hatred which seethed beneath the surface of the nation's second city; and there I witnessed at first hand

some of the consequences of leaders who exploited racial and ethnic hatreds and discontents for their own purposes.

Stoned and spat upon, Dr. King reported that he had never encountered in the south the level of hatred which hit him like a stone wall in Chicago and its suburbs. Nor, do I think, his previous experience had prepared him for the duplicity of political leaders who would welcome him to the city, invite him into their offices, arrange to appear with him on television and in the papers, and then work behind the scenes to defeat and destroy everything he sought to accomplish. Neither friends and allies, nor obvious and open antagonists, they ensnared him in a net of smooth words and duplicitious actions. Nor was he prepared for the divisions which existed within the African-American community, for the level of skepticism with which he was greeted by those whose welfare he sought most to advance.

It was in the midst of these frustrations that Martin Luther King began to dream about "a reconstruction of the entire society, a revolution of values." He began to realize that racism was not just a surface blemish. Rather, it was evidence of a cancer rooted deep in the soul of the nation. And it was with that recognition that Martin Luther King began to think radically about his mission and what was needed, not only to free his own people, but to save the nation.

We do not know how far this line of thinking might have carried him. In Memphis, Tennessee, an assassin's bullet ended his life, even as he groped toward a new vision of his non-violent revolution of values. He was, in many ways, a profoundly conservative man, rooted in a proud and respected Black middle class, and it is possible that in the end he might have drawn back from the radical imperative he had begun to embrace. At the very least, it is possible to glimpse some of what he meant by a "reconstruction of the entire society, a revolution of values" if we look at the places he was investing himself and risking himself toward the end of his life.

In January each year, when we celebrate Martin Luther King Day, we usually celebrate the Martin Luther King of the great Washington march and the "I have a Dream" speech. That was the Dr. King who, even as he demanded the American dream for his own people, yet affirmed the centrality of that dream for all of us, the Dr. King who called America to be true to itself, to its own best nature. We seldom think about the Dr. King who challenged the fundamental assumptions from which national policy proceeded, the Dr. King, for example, who risked everything--his political support, his standing in his own community and within the movement he led--to denounce the war in Vietnam. He declared that our national willingness to destroy that small southeast Asian people in order to save them was rooted in the same attitudes which produced the mindless violence and hatred which had been visited on Native Americans, and on African-Americans in this country. He saw in our curious ability to abstract, to distance ourselves from the humanity of others and to use others to further goals and ideals in which they had no portion a peculiar and fatal national flaw. He felt morally compelled call for an end to that war, even as he called for an end to oppression in this country, even though he was warned that it was neither politically wise or expedient.

Similarly, we do not often remember in January, the Martin Luther King of the Poor People's Campaign. In the midst of the Chicago Freedom Movement, he began to recognize that the ability of what we called "the power structure" to manipulate ethnic and class differences had made it virtually impossible to construct the kind of coalitions which would be necessary to confront the political realities of northern cities. He saw people who were victims of the social system played off against each other, venting their frustration and rage against each other while the powerful retained a secure hold on power. He began to dream of some means by which he might reach across the races and across the class divisions. He talked about the need to engage the laboring classes--not just the union leadership, but the rank and file workers. He urged us to think about the need to build structures of community among welfare recipients and residents of public housing. And he talked about the need to help people see that in northern cities, at least, racism walked hand in hand with classism. How, he wondered, could we bridge the gap between the poor and the middle class and help them see the community of interest they shared. How could we help those who benefited from the system to understand what their success had cost others and how dangerous this system of dog eat dog was in the long run. How could we help this nation understand that it must be judged not by how much wealth it creates and aggregates, but by how that wealth is used, and how its poorest and most vulnerable are treated.

At the end of his life, Martin Luther King was planning a vast "poor people's march" on the nation's capitol--an effort to force the nation to confront the growing disparity between the rich and the poor, the comfortable and the hopeless. It was not without reason that Dr. King went to Memphis to help that city's garbage workers in their strike. He was drawn there by the radical vision which was emerging from his struggle--the effort to provoke a "revolution of values" which would direct our national attention to the fundamental disparities and injustices which served to undermine the efforts to end racism. He no longer was willing to settle for a world in which, regardless of color, people with skills and talents and resources and drive might force their way into the mainstream of American life, leaving behind all those who, for what ever reason, could not find the first step onto the escalator. Rather, he dreamed of a society which valued each person, which rewarded essential work--like the collection of garbage--and which understood that the function of society is to care for those who are not able to care for themselves and protect those who are most vulnerable, and to nurture the human spirit.

It was a radical dream, and one which was drowned in the violence and cynicism and greed which have dominated the decades since his death. It may be, of course, that it was always an impossible dream. There are many voices which would assure us that human beings are, by nature, greedy, selfish, grasping creatures who could not live in, let alone create the kind of world Martin Luther King dreamed. It may be so. But I cannot help thinking that we have paid a terrible price for having surrendered that dream. Embracing a vision which is dominated by greed, by the drive to acquire and consume, which is driven by the morality of "the main chance," we have created a society which is a parody of the great dream, a world which does not call us to the best that is in us, but panders to the worst that we can envision.

In recent years much has been made of the "crisis of values" with which we seem to be confronted--the break down of the family, the loss of a central, commanding vision, the weakening of community, the growing violence. Politicians and preachers and columnists and others and others have pointed with alarm and sought the source of the national moral failure in the weakness of the individual character. We don't demand enough of our children; we aren't swift enough with punishment; we coddle criminals; we offer too much support for people who are inherently lazy; we don't demand enough of each other. There is a sense that if only we tried harder, we could pull ourselves out of the moral slough by our own boot strap. I think that Dr. King had begun to glimpse a larger truth here. Most of these disorders are rooted in a social order which is dedicated to acquiring and consuming, to concentrating wealth and to using and discarding people along the way. It was this insight which caused him to call for a revolution of values.

Some support for this insight came to me recently as I was reading a book entitled *THE GREAT WAVE*. The author, David Hackett Fisher, traces the economic history of the western world--with special emphasis on price fluctuations--from the fourteenth century through to 1995. The book is filled with enough graphs and charts, statistics and footnotes to make one's eyes cross. However, in a very readable prose, the author describes the trends which those charts and graphs and notes document and how they relate to the society as a whole. Over and over again it becomes clear that the kinds of social disorders which we have been confronting in recent decades recur throughout western history and are clearly and unmistakably related to the economic life of the community.

Century after century, as prices rise, as wealth begins to concentrate in the hands of a few, as the disparity between the rich and the poor grows, as the poor and the middle class become increasingly less secure and more threatened, other kinds of correlative behavior begin to appear. The government begins to lose all moral suasion as its powers are transferred to the service of money and those who have accumulated money. With this steady aggregation of wealth and power in the hands of the few and growing insecurity and instability among the many, comes an inexorable and predictable increase in crime of all kinds, a steady and predictable coarsening and brutalizing of society as it develops ever more repressive means to deal with crime and instability and thus protect the interests of the wealthy, a steady increase in the number of children born out of wedlock, a steady weakening of the family structure, an inevitable breakdown of community structures at all levels--until at last, some great catastrophe--plague, war, famine, financial collapse--forces a realignment of society.

As I read this remarkable and disturbing work, I found myself confronting visions of our contemporary society over and over again. The message seemed to be that, indeed, Adam Smith was right, there is an "invisible hand" at work in the lives of nations and economies which functions, over the long haul, to establish a rough justice. Unfortunately, this record seemed to suggest that the "invisible hand" of the economists was no more humane or caring than the impartial providence of "nature and nature's God." I found myself wondering what might make it possible to break out of this terrible

cycle of boom and bust, of suffering and despair. And as I read page after page, the words of Martin Luther King returned to me:

For years I labored with the idea of reforming the existing institutions of society, a little change here, a little change there. Now I feel quite differently. I think you've got to have a reconstruction of the entire society, a revolution of values.

The times in which we live may well be embedded in vast cycles over which we have no control. The problems we face may be beyond our competence. It may be that endurance is the only final virtue. But even if that grim evaluation prove true, the question returns--how do we best serve ourselves. I believe, with Martin Luther King, in the need for a revolution of values--a revolution which would call us to best that is in us rather than confirm the worst we suspect of ourselves. It is time to think radically about what a society might be like which honestly believed that the growth and development of the human spirit is a truer measure of a great society than is the wealth it generates and creates. It is time for us to consider what a society might be like which valued the sustainable over the consumable. It is time for us to imagine a society in which we are constantly reminded that the material resources with which we have surrounded ourselves, all those things which we have purchased with the fleeting hours of our lives have their meaning only in the enduring quality of the community we build and sustain together. It is time for us to dream of a society in which the fundamental question is not how can we protect ourselves from each other, but how can we see ourselves in each other and especially in those who are least like us.

There may be no way out of the terrible dilemma we find ourselves in except by endurance. But if there is a way out, of there is a chance to step out of the cycles of pain and suffering, of tender hope and repeated disappointment which we have inherited and in which we now seem caught, that way will become clear only if we have the courage to question fundamental assumptions and embrace a revolution of values.