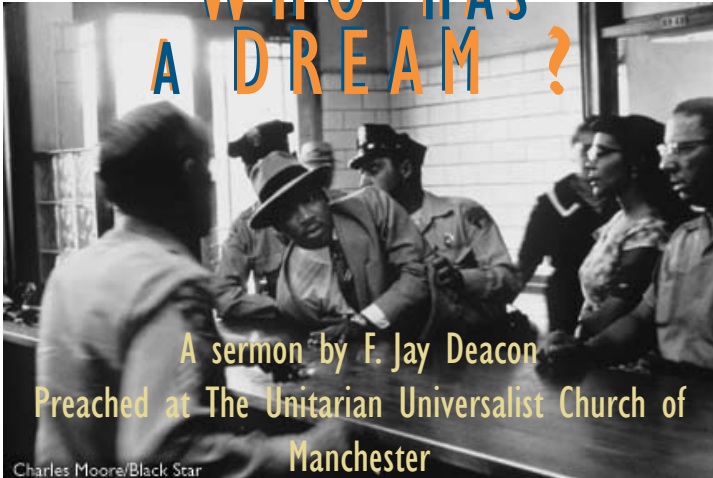


WHO HAS A DREAM?



January 16, 2011

Yesterday would have been the 82nd birthday of Martin Luther King. We who remember him might find the thought of an 82-year-old Dr. King incomprehensible. Last we saw him, he was 39.

Five years ago (Jan. 2006) a Unitarian Universalist named Taylor Branch published the third and final volume in *America in the King Years*, — this last volume called *At Canaan's Edge*. It begins with the scene at the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma in 1965 and ends with his death at Memphis in 1968. We learn that those last years were very difficult indeed. So consider the enormity of what he was trying to do, his dream.

His central teaching of nonviolence and love confronting power was a highly evolved vision, and it wasn't an easy thing to live. It's the great achievement of his life that he taught it to so many thousands of people, who *did* understand it and risk it and live it in the face of teargas and police batons and police dogs and verbal abuse.



But some couldn't grasp it and live it. Toward the end, parts of the movement were abandoning it, with

THE READINGS

On the 15th of March 1965, Martin Luther King delivered the eulogy for the Unitarian Universalist minister James Reeb, who was clubbed to death on the eve of the march from Selma, Alabama to the capitol, Montgomery, to demand the right to vote for black Americans. The funeral was conducted at Brown Chapel A.M.E. in Selma. Here is part of what King said. He said it of Jim Reeb; we could say it of King himself.

He began with lines from Shakespeare:

And if he should die,

Take his body, and cut it into little stars.

He will make the face of heaven so fine

That all the world will be in love with night.

These beautiful words from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* so eloquently describe the radiant life of James Reeb. He entered the stage of history just 38 years ago, and in the brief years that he was privileged to act on this mortal stage, he played his part exceedingly well. James Reeb was martyred in the faith that all men are brothers. His death was a result of a sensitive religious spirit. His crime was that he dared to live his faith; he placed himself alongside the disinherited black brethren of his community.

The world is aroused over the murder of James Reeb. For he symbolizes the forces of good will in our nation. He demonstrated the conscience of the nation. He was an attorney for the defense of the innocent in the court of world opinion. He was a witness to the truth that men of different races and classes might live, eat, and work together as brothers.

Naturally, we are compelled to ask the question, *Who* killed James Reeb? The answer is simple and rather limited, when we think of the *who*. He was murdered by a few sick, demented, and misguided men. There is another haunting, poignant, desperate question we are forced to ask this afternoon, that I asked a few days ago as we funeralized James Jackson. It is the question, *What* killed James Reeb? When we move from the who to the what, the blame is wide and the responsibility grows.

James Reeb was murdered by the indifference of every minister of the gospel who has remained silent behind the safe security of stained glass

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disastrous consequences.

Those final four years of his life were full of anguish and tears. All along the way his movement made its way by making mistakes and by risking. He was resented, blamed, accused by his own movement. The decisions faced daily required a moral calculus few are ever willing to attempt. Take that march from Selma to Montgomery that began at the Pettus Bridge where the State Police stood on orders from the Governor arrayed to stop them: only last-minute decisions were possible because the political powers of Washington and Montgomery clashed and heaved and shifted hourly.

Moreover, the movement itself was split. The spiritual challenge for us all, always, is to live beyond ego — that's really the meaning of enlightenment. And in this movement, a lot of egos were involved. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference, King's outfit, was behind the march from Selma to Montgomery. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee was against it, though SNCC's president, John Lewis, supported it and got a concussion when he was beaten by the police. A Unitarian Universalist minister who came down from Boston, Jim Reeb, had his head smashed with a club by five white Selma businessmen and died there. So did Viola Luizzo and Jimmy Lee Jackson.

Religions and churches were split asunder. Our own Unitarian Universalist Association stood squarely with King and sent the largest of all the religious delegations from outside Alabama. But when it came to really making a witness, taking a stand in the face of the burning questions of our time, that go right to the deepest imperatives of our faith — that was no easier than it is now.

King's last months were shadowed by despair and depression. He himself stumbled. He revealed himself as flawed and fallible. But that he stumbled isn't important now, except for this: — we stumble too, and if we are on that path, struggling, stumbling, having our egos ground down, getting up again somehow purified in that fire and leaving those egos in that dust

windows. He was murdered by the irrelevancy of a church that will stand amid social evil and serve as a taillight rather than a headlight, an echo rather than a voice. . . . Yes, he was even murdered by the cowardice of every Negro who tacitly accepts the evil system of segregation, who stands on the sidelines in the midst of a mighty struggle for justice.

In spite of the darkness of this hour, we must not despair. We must not become bitter nor must we harbor the desire to retaliate with violence; we must not lose faith in our white brothers who happen to be misguided.

At times, life is hard, as hard as crucible steel.

One day the history of this great period of social change will be written in all of its completeness. On that bright day our nation will recognize its real heroes. They will be thousands of dedicated men and women with a noble sense of purpose that enables them to face fury and hostile mobs with the agonizing loneliness that characterizes the life of the pioneers.

Out of the wombs of a frail world, new systems of justice and equality are being born. . . . Here and there an individual or group dares to love and rises to the majestic heights of moral maturity.

Therefore I am not yet discouraged about the future. Granted, the easygoing optimism of yesteryear is impossible. Granted, that those who pioneered in the struggle for peace and freedom will still face uncomfortable jail terms and painful threats of death; they will still be battered by the storms of persecution, leading them to the nagging feeling that they can no longer bear such a heavy burden; the temptation of wanting to retreat to a more quiet and serene life. Granted, that we face a world crisis, which leaves us standing so often amid the surging murmur of life's restless seas. But every crisis has both its dangers and its opportunities, its valleys of salvation or doom in a dark, confused world.

I say, in conclusion, that the greatest tribute that we can pay to James Reeb this afternoon is to continue the work he so nobly started but could not finish. . . . We must work right here, where "every valley shall be exalted, every mountain and hill shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places straight."

behind us — then we are being enlightened, we are undergoing that human transformation that is surely at work in this critical moment of history, we are venturing toward the future we dream — and we can leave this world differently than we found it.



The days call to us in their own peculiar ways — they call to us, in our own peculiar selfhood, each of us with our own opportunities and burdens.

In that struggle the central players felt themselves torn between the moral choice and overwhelming political forces. Some compromised themselves. But others — a crucial few others — laid hold of moral and spiritual energies in themselves — thought hard and gazed long and hard at the facts and the truth behind and beyond the facts — and human history achieved a vital turn.



In the early Spring of 1968, Dr. King was conducting a breakneck series of antipoverty rallies across northern New Jersey's grim cities — Patterson, Jersey City, Newark. Meanwhile he was conducting a very dicey campaign on behalf of the city sanitation workers in Memphis. J. Edgar Hoover's FBI dirty tricks were in full force. Now King was being criticized for his newly outspoken opposition to the Vietnam War. And the sanitation workers' strike in Memphis wasn't going well.

The principle of nonviolence: it's a demanding spiritual discipline and it just wasn't sticking in Memphis, where rioting and looting had broken out. Contributions were drying up. Martin Luther King, we learn, was deeply depressed.

In 1968 I lived in the tawdry city of Union City, a block or so from Jersey City in Hudson County, New Jersey. I was a fundamentalist Christian and a right-wing Republican. And Martin Luther King came to town. Who, we knew, was a Communist agitator.

My conversion came on March 27. I heard enough of his speech on the evening news. I was ready for King's truth and I was never the same again. King delivered his speech and flew on to Memphis.

Three days later, a man who had escaped from a penitentiary a year before walked into the Aeromarine Supply Company store in Birmingham and bought a Remington rifle and a box of bullets. It's still that easy, however demented you may be.

On the fourth of April, after a crucial speech to the striking sanitation workers, Dr King stood on the balcony outside Room 306 at the Lorraine Motel, telling a saxophone player who was to perform at that night's mass meeting to please be sure to play his favorite hymn, "Precious Lord, Take My Hand":

*lead me on, let me stand,
I am tired, I am weak, I am worn.*

Edmund Pettus Bridge, Selma, 1965



As Taylor Branch describes it, time on that balcony “had turned lethal, which left hanging the last words fixed on a gospel song of refuge. King stood still for once, and his sojourn on earth went blank.” [766]

*through the storm, through the night,
lead me on to the light
Take my hand, precious Lord, lead me home.*



Before a week had passed I was home in Union City watching his funeral, broadcast from Atlanta. I started attending a black church in Brooklyn, got involved in the civil rights movement, and got fired by the evangelical religious organization in New York I’d worked for, because, they said, now *I* was a Communist Sympathizer.

All my life I had learned what my home town, and my family, and my church, had to teach. The social order I saw was as it should be. Martin Luther King was a Communist agitator, come to upset the God-ordained order of society.



These are the moments when the mists roll away, when a sudden rise in the road reveals a range of mountains that have been there all along. My brief TV-news encounter with Dr. King was one of those moments.

Poor, innocent kid. I had just been graduated from a fundamentalist college in Missouri, which had, until four years before I went there, admitted black Africans converted in the “Mission Field”, but excluded African *Americans*. It was okay if you were from Nigeria or Nairobi but not if you were from Newark or New York.

And here I am, in Jersey City, and I’m watching the evening news, and there comes the sound-bite, a little longer than they are now, Martin Luther King, speaking at Newark. And I had one of those moments. I felt the leverage of his truth.



A few years after that I was pastor of a little congregation in Hartford, Connecticut, a congregation of gay and lesbian people. And the

hate campaign led by Anita Bryant in Florida was at its fever pitch. I spent a lot of hours on those talk-shows arguing with Bible-quoting bigots, had my car torched, and listened in shock to the ugly public utterances of the Archdiocese of Hartford. And one day, at the end of a service, after some new outrage in Florida, the congregation burst into an angry chant, and in the chant, I heard voices of — hate.

Bitter hatred. My heart sank. I knew we were missing something.

I turned to Dr. King, whose life-story turned me to Mohandus K. Gandhi, and his talk of non-violent soul-force, and the transformative power of love coupled with heroic vision and self-sacrifice.

My life and work were changed.



Think about his achievement. It was first a triumph of spirituality, an act of spiritual brilliance and creativity. He began with a prophetic vision of one world and one humanity, and he learned to turn human energies toward that goal, learned the transforming power present in the hearts and souls of human beings. Learned to harness for good the energy that is present and intrinsic in any crisis.

If you want to know how great his achievement was, you need only consider his contemporary, Malcolm X. Now Malcolm X is best remembered for his racial invective, because his own suffering had turned to hate that held him in the same cramped, bleak mentality of those white racists who had terrorized his childhood. He declared that because of the genetically determined iniquity of all whites, in any race war it would be imperative to slay even their children. *He particularly deplored King’s principle of nonviolence.*

But beginning in 1963, Malcolm X underwent a transformation. On a pilgrimage to Mecca he had a revelation: the plane was crammed with, these are his words, “white, black, brown, red, and yellow people, blue eyes and blond hair, and my kinky red hair — all together, brothers. The whole atmosphere was

of warmth and friendliness. And he said that in all his life, his words again, it was “the first time I had ever stood before the Creator of All and felt like a complete human being.”

Malcolm X’s message changed. He separated himself from Elijah Muhammed and his Nation of Islam and lived from then on out under their declaration that he must die. A time of explosive and chaotic growth began for him, he was re-creating himself and his vision, but he never could get it together. For him it was too late.

Malcolm had operated within a flat, bitter rage at things as they are, while Martin Luther King was animated by an evolutionary vision of how things might be and must be. You could say that King is criticized for expecting too much of people, that his vision of human possibility remains a mystery to a cynical society. *And* you could say that Malcolm’s earlier vision reduced humankind’s nature to the basest, most minimal terms of anger and retribution.

They both understood the rage that stirs prophetic voices to speak. But one spoke from a vision of one world made whole. The other could not find in his rage the strength to transcend the ugliness and the evil.

Martin Luther King looked at the body of a nation and dreamed of what it would look like with no underclass, no locked-out, disenfranchised, pariahs or powerless.

Dare we fantasize about what we would do now, if he came again to our public square, to challenge our leaders; if he tried to question our values, and our bank accounts, and our priorities?

I hope you remember this about Martin Luther King. He held our political leaders to the fire. The Civil Rights Act happened because King and his movement kept President Johnson and his administration to the promise of civil rights and dignity for all. He never become an uncritical cheerleader for Johnson, or Kennedy. He pressed relentlessly for voting rights, for that civil rights act, for an end to the Vietnam War.

We have to make ourselves heard now, too.

Political leaders will disappoint us. They will. They compromise and make deals and listen to a lot of advice, some of it less than inspired. Our job is different. It’s to hold up the dream, to hold uncompromisingly to the values we cherish and stand for, as Dr. King did.

A great friend of Emerson and Theodore Parker, Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts, my personal political hero, heard constantly from Emerson and especially Parker, who held him to those high values, and he fought heroically for a real and just reconstruction after the Civil War, for equal rights and opportunity for black Americans, only to see his own radical new Republican Party become just a rampart of the status quo, only to see the Reconstruction reversed.



In her space-novel *Shikasta*, Doris Lessing has a figure named Lynda Coldridge, who is crazy, except at the end you find out that she isn’t crazy, that actually it was everyone else who was crazy —

And she says we have senses adjusted to a very small range of sight or hearing, like machines set to accept only, like, 5 percent of what’s out there; and she says this about the human capacity to See (*See* with a capital S) and Hear (with a capital H) and Know (capital K). She says:

Some people are born to receive not 5 percent but perhaps 6 percent. Or 7 percent. Or even more. But if you are a 5 percent person and suddenly a shock opens you to 6, then you are “mad.” I am sure I was born a 6 percent person, not mad at all. But they made me mad because I told what I knew. If I had kept my mouth shut I would have lived a peaceful life.

—Lynda Coldridge speaking in Doris Lessing, *Shikasta*, p. 186. She didn’t live a peaceful life, nor did Dr. King or Rev. Reeb. Sometimes, we don’t either.



It’s a New Year, and we might reflect about the mystery of *time*. People have thought about *time* in at least two very different ways. There’s the circular way of thinking about time, where

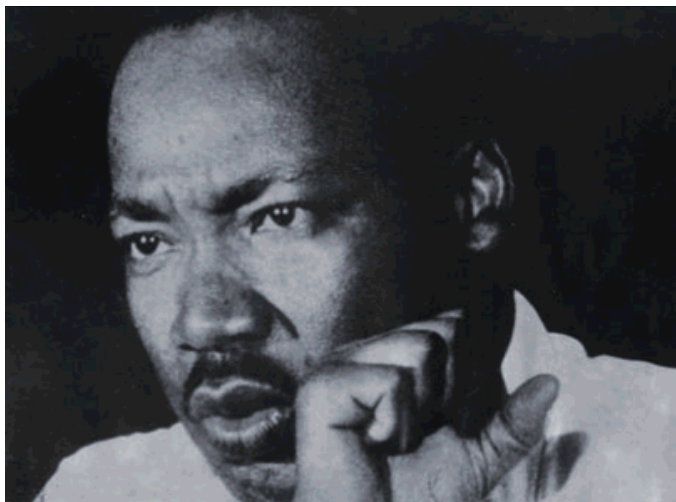
whatever is — just *is* and you can bet it just goes round and round pretty much the same, pretty much forever. No point trying to change it. People read from their holy books and find reasons to lock human consciousness into some primitive state, still do it today, find a fear or a prejudice long outmoded and cling on to it as if these divisions between people, these prejudices and fears, were part of the natural order ordained by God.

But the other way of understanding time is evolutionary. It's not circular: it's more like a spiral. It moves forward through breakthroughs into a higher consciousness, to a new time when a finer element emerges in the universe story. If time were only circular and static, we couldn't hope for a world governed by higher motivations, clearer-sighted vision.

It takes a deeply spiritual orientation to get what is going on
what world is dying
what world is coming to into being
what lives of ours are dying and what lives are coming into being.



Ken Wilber describes our spiritual challenge in a striking image: it's as though we're driving a locomotive and at the same time laying down railroad tracks, where others will travel. That's what it's like to be an authentic self, or an authentic congregation. We are making our way and we are making ourselves and we're making the world. There will be a lot of perils along the way and we'll make a trainload



of mistakes. We can learn from them if we're humble. We are laying tracks beyond ego to a new humanity, radiant with the light of a new consciousness, on this spiritual trip — and *that* is a brand new track.

That journey is the purpose of our lives. It is the sole measure of our success or failure.



So my question is today, Who has a dream? who can See and Hear and Know beyond the surface of what the economic and ecological and cultural and spiritual realities we know today?

I say we have a dream, even if in our fear and discouragement we have buried it so deeply within our hearts that we cannot at the moment find it. But I say the dream is potent enough to engage our creativity and our courage to find ways to make it real in this world, in this reactionary time, in ways that are effective.

So comes Dr. King into our consciousness speaking embarrassing words: courage, vision, love, liberation, peace. Freedom and justice. Still he pierces through the walls, plants courage in our hearts, opens vision, releases love, declares peace. He reminds us that “intelligence” was not meant to be another name for confessions extracted by torture. He calls us to sing and dream and build, to create a new reality, a new nation, and new world.

Is it too late for us? Too late to gather with others to fulfill his dream, to teach the children his dream, to wean them from the terrible notion that they become men or women by hating and killing? Too late to conspire together in communities of vision, and hope? Can we still dance with imagination into his dreaming, open beyond its new possibilities for humans who will dare to imagine them and to live them out?

It's late . . . but not . . . *too late*.

Let now sing that last hymn a tired Dr. King requested that day, and then rise up, and carry forward the work he so nobly started but could not finish. It's in our hands now.