

“Have We a Dream, Too?”
JANUARY 15, 2017

Today we honor Martin Luther King, Jr. Many Americans—especially those born after Dr. King’s assassination 49 years ago, see him only in the oversimplified terms of race. This is unfortunate. Becoming an icon tends to remove a person’s scars and imperfections when, in fact, it’s the scars and imperfections out of which human authenticity and memorable public lives emerge.

Moreover, reducing the Martin Luther King story to one of race alone ignores the deeper issues he struggled with and spoke to: what it means to be civilized; how one confronts evil without creating more evil, division, and enmity; the industrial-military complex; class; and the proper role of religion in politics. In an era of political violence, fake news, vitriol-fueled attack ads and highly orchestrated spin control, we are wise to remember what King told the Freedom Riders in 1960: “*Our ultimate end must be the creation of the beloved community.*”

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Martin King’s public life and public ministry began in September 1954 when he was called to the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery. In short order, Rosa Parks was jailed for refusing to give up her bus seat to a white person. The 25-year old King was elected chair of a group calling for a boycott of public transit, a boycott that ended up lasting 382 days. The situation became so tense that Reverend King’s house was bombed. King was vilified and arrested, and yet throughout he practiced and extolled non-violence. In the end, the U.S. Supreme Court outlawed racial segregation on all public transport. In 1964, as a result of these efforts, Martin Luther King became the youngest person to win the Nobel Peace Prize.

By that time, however, Dr. King was focusing on *economic justice* issues. Then, in 1967, he began speaking out *against* the Viet Nam war—and within a year he was dead. At the time of his murder, Martin Luther King was perhaps the most dangerous man in America: the one public figure, much revered, who could potentially unify in his person and through the power of his moral authority the civil rights, labor, and antiwar movements. It was not to be. He did not leave us unified. What he did leave us with, however, was a dream. He never entered the Promised Land, but he saw it and he wrote elegantly about what it looked like; and the name of that land *he* called “beloved community.”

I’ve entitled today’s sermon “Have We a Dream, Too?” I have a dream. And as the person asked by you to lead your congregation for a short time, I want to share that dream with you this morning; a dream strongly influenced by Martin Luther King, and by our Unitarian Universalist tradition.

I’ve been impressed, since returning to California seven and a half years ago, at the many UUs I have met who speak of their congregation as a *Beloved Community*. One

California UU I was talking to—a humanist and an agnostic, told me that *Beloved Community* was her concept of the “sacred” or “holy.” She recognized that she was talking about an *ideal*: something congregations strive to attain: *a transcendent symbol* that has evocative power to rally our spirits and energies to the cause of justice, celebration, healing, education, uplift, and support. Beloved Community includes humanists and theists, as well as others of different theological persuasions. (Pagan, Transcendentalist, Saul Alinsky-type community activism... Medeavilists? Syndical-anarchists?) Beloved Community is sort of our *highest common denominator*, and hence an apt symbol for UUs *and for people* everywhere; one that can inspire *hope*, and the *courage* to reach out and to change.

Beloved Community. It is curious that in his writings Dr. King, coming from the Baptist tradition, did not use the traditional Christian language “Kingdom of God,” “Kingdom of Heaven,” or “Mystical Body of Christ.” Instead he wrote of “Beloved Community.” The thing is: King was more of a humanist than many realize. Of the men who most influenced his thinking, one was Mahatma Gandhi—a devout Hindu; “Christ furnished the spirit...,” wrote King, “while Gandhi furnished the method.” Another seminal influence on King was the humanist Erich Fromm, whose book *The Art of Loving* was the source of today’s Opening Words. Fromm provided the *intellectual* framework for King’s *spiritual* recognition of love as a divine force uniting all life.

Healthy congregational life is about more than meeting our personal spiritual and emotional needs. Though that will undoubtedly follow, it *cannot* be the church’s *raison d’etre*. It’s not that achieving one’s personal goals is not worthwhile, it’s just that it will never galvanize the kind of passion and commitment that *transforms* lives, and through those lives, communities, and even nations. And that’s my dream: *transformation*. “The primary purpose of the church,” writes Unitarian Universalist consultant Michael Duvall, “is to create a community of compassion...calling members to lead lives of dedication and commitment—lives not just of success, but also of service and, when called upon, sacrifice.”

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Beloved Community is not pseudo-community, where we make nice, try to please everybody, and avoid anything dealing with anything “touchy.” Being all things to all people is a favorite Unitarian Universalist trap—one that doesn’t work. A better strategy: figure out what you do well and strive to do it even better.

Okay; what does PUC do well? Several things, it seems to me:

- *good worship services*;
- *good religious education*. Historically, you have been and continue to be...
- a *socially active* church.
- a *generous* congregation, and financially responsible. Where individual members, in so far as I can tell, are now *accepting* the baton passed on to them by noble predecessors (some recently deceased and others who’ve moved away) with an intention to remain here in Rancho Palos Verdes and to thrive.

Four wonderful traditions.

Worship and music go together. They are the heart of what we do as a community: celebrate life, and all that gives life meaning. Joys & Sorrows, outreach projects, nurturing the growth of children, inspiring ideas and values—all these we celebrate *without* dogma and *with* the informal Southern California ambience that drew so many of us here to begin with. All this is good, but in my dream, under the direction of your soon-to-be-called Minister, it gets even better: more celebrative, more generous, and with more young people. But most of all, *more outreach*.

After all, this is Martin Luther King weekend and Beloved Community as King understood and practiced it puts a high priority on working for justice: another way this congregation has a pretty good record. When it comes to direct services, education, and advocacy, you have done a lot—particularly in support for the homeless and the un- and under-employed. Allow me to list some of the many ways many of you are deeply and skillfully involved.

Direct services: volunteer and financial support of:

- Toberman House, helping provide dinner, and other kinds of practical support to people nearby—nearby where I live, anyway—and are in need in and around San Pedro.
- Emergency Relief Efforts through the Harbor Interfaith and the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee. Efforts, over the decades, in support of
 - Refugees – from Southeast Asia, from Central America, and...?
 - After Katrina, PUC collected significant funds to repair and rebuild; some members even went the New Orleans and pitched in physically.
 - After local activist Robert Eggers spoke here, members volunteered at LA Kitchen, where locally sourced, cosmetically imperfect fruits and vegetables are used
 - to help newly released prisoners and emancipated foster children that get on with their lives through culinary arts training... and the prospect of gainful (potentially very creative) employment.
- Education:
 - PUC's commitment to the Green Sanctuary Program has informed Carolyn and Ray Waters' sustained leadership offering presentations, short films, and important discussions on ecological and environmental issues.
- Advocacy: petitions for important causes,
 - Working on “No on 8” efforts in 2008 supporting freedom to marry whomever one loves,
 - letter-writing campaigns,
 - visiting legislators' offices

- Witness: attending rallies, marches, and demonstrations:
 - against Imperial wars from Vietnam to Iraq...twice!
 - In support of LGBT rights and Pride, and also
 - Immigration reform. PUCers are witnessing this week, indeed
 - We heard only moments ago about a contingent of members who will be joining the Woman's March happening all across the country six days from now (January 14) by joining thousands in downtown Los Angeles.

From its beginning 60 years ago, PUC has been connected to Harbor Interfaith Services in San Pedro; many of you have contributed money and muscle to help empower nearby homeless and working poor people achieve greater self-sufficiency. By providing support including shelter, transitional housing, food, job placement, childcare, education, and life-skills training Harbor Interfaith engages in each of the four types of social justice I've noted: Direct Services, Education, Advocacy, and Witness.

- There's one other kind, a fifth type of social justice, one particularly poignant on a day honoring Dr. Martin Luther King: *i.e.*, actions in support of
- Systemic Change: Projects of this kind tend to be the most radical;
 - like efforts here in the 1960s in support of integration, fair housing and equal opportunity.
 - And PUC actions in the 1980s calling into question and challenging our government's policy in Central American; policies which led to the violence that sent so many refugees on the road to safety.

All the social action projects PUC is involved in currently are good and important ministries of this church. They're all good. They're all important. But you can do more. Direct services, education, witness, and advocacy could be augmented with *collective work for needed systemic change*. Perhaps joining together to sponsor or help sponsor a deserving refugee family, actively supporting for Black Lives Matter with equal support for Blue Lives Matter → with the idea of finding a good way to help that virtually everyone can get behind.

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Some perceive a tension between social action and inner reflection—as though we had to choose *either* one *or* the other. But it's *not* an either/or situation; it's *both/and*. Worship and social action go *together*. Dana McLean Greeley was the first president of the newly merged Unitarians and Universalists when, in early March 1963, he received a telegram from Martin Luther King asking him to come to Selma, Alabama. Dr. Greeley then proceeded to call many other ministers across the UUA, enjoining them to join him and Dr. King at the Edmund Pettus Bridge. Close to a quarter of our number did, including

Ernie Pipes from Santa Monica. Dana McLean Greeley gets high marks as an activist, but he was more than an activist only; he believed that worship and social action informed each other. Fueled each other. Made each other stronger. “I want a church,” he wrote, “that knows what worship means, on the one hand, and what social action means, on the other hand, and that is tied together by bonds of love in such a fashion that the worship is truly communal and that the social action can be contained and non-divisive.”

Beloved Community *is* non-divisive and properly contained. It welcomes us in all our humanness, and brokenness and struggle; helps us acknowledge our humanness and brokenness *and* helps us re-collect our wholeness as part of something bigger: love, soul-force (Gandhi’s *Satyagraha*), God, the community of life—however you conceive it. It does not matter what you *call* it, the spirit that’s at the heart of Beloved Community is the same Spirit that’s at the heart of life: *the force that through the green stem drives the flower* (to use Dylan Thomas’ poetic phrase). Worship helps us get in touch with that force. Social Action helps us serve it. The two go hand and hand.

The times are difficult; we have growing inequality; we have climate change; political impasse and vitriol; terrorism; an untested and, by many untrusted, businessman about to assume high office; war profiteering across the globe—not to mention gangs and dope and pop culture vulgarity. But we have *hope*, too. And we have *imagination*. And the models of good, creative, loving people—like Martin Luther King, like Ray and Carolyn Waters—and many other PUC members over the years—to remind us how much we can do when we put differences aside and join our hearts and heads in a shared and noble task.

Perhaps we cannot all be Martin Luther Kings, but we *can* all get in touch with the energy that inspired him: love. We *can* all be dreamers—as Dr. King encouraged *and* as many of the heroic justice advocates among us here at Pacific Unitarian Church are likewise encouraging us to be—we *can* all be dreamers for love and justice. We can all endeavor to do even better the things we’re doing well; and to keep working at nurturing Beloved Community among us, and beyond, across our town, our region, our country, our whole world. So may it be. Amen. Namaste. Shalom.

