

## **“Honoring Martin Luther King, Jr.”**

A Sermon Delivered at the First Parish in Wayland, Mass.

On January 16, 2005

By the Rev. Ken Sawyer

This is, of course, the Sunday in the extended holiday weekend for Martin Luther King Day tomorrow. And so we are singing hymns like “Precious Lord, Take My Hand,” as unusual as the theology may be from our usual fare, and “We Shall Overcome” -- hymns from the heritage of black America that King’s memory invokes. I want to think today about the memory we have of King, and how it relates to King himself.

I have been reading a book that several of you recommended to me, Bill Bryson’s *A Short History of Nearly Everything*. Bryson begins at the beginning, the beginning of time itself, and of space, the so-called Big Bang. Scientists are learning more and more about what happened in those first moments of time as they are able to look farther into the universe. Just this week there was further confirmation and embellishment of what is becoming an agreed-upon account of the universe’s history right back to virtually the start.

This may seem an odd way of beginning a sermon about Martin Luther King, Jr., who is known for many things – as a Nobel Peace Prize recipient, for example – but as an astronomer, not so much. But I am fascinated by how holidays evolve, and people’s perceptions of the people and events that the holidays honor, people and events much more recent than fourteen billion years ago, but sometimes harder to describe with precision. Humans may be more mysterious than the immensity of space.

Take the perceptions of Martin Luther King, for example, a man who died in my own lifetime and in most of yours – we have a national holiday for him, a way of honoring his contributions to our country, a day to remember his life and his teachings.

This is pretty amazing, when you stop to think about it, and if you can remember back to how King was widely regarded when he was alive. Back then he was vilified as an agitator and a trouble-maker for leading the movement for civil rights, as a traitor for his fierce opposition to war in general and the war in Viet Nam in particular, as a communist for his criticisms of materialism, and as a fool or coward by those in the civil rights movement who rejected the nonviolence he preached.

Geov Parrish notes, “In an era where a federal holiday has served to both commemorate and sanitize the history of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., White America has forgotten just how radical and controversial a figure he was in his time. Many ... charges -- domestic terrorist, commie dupe, publicity hound -- were leveled against King during the 14 long-but-so-short years of his national prominence.” FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover said King was “an instrument in the hands of subversive forces that seeking to undermine our nation”

Which is not how he will be remembered tomorrow. Of course, for most of our fellow Americans, and some of us as well, he won’t be remembered at all. A holiday is a holiday, thanks for Monday off.

We just got by a Christmas season when many evangelicals and other conservative Christians attempted to return Christ to Christmas, where actually, historically, in Anglo-American tradition, he doesn't much belong, strange to say. Until Charles Dickens and other 19<sup>th</sup>-century religious liberals transformed it into a domestic holiday with lots of pagan trappings, it was a time of revelry and misbehavior – except in Puritan New England, where it wasn't celebrated at all.

But that's the way it is with holidays and heroes, people shape them to the times, vary them place to place. No doubt some of you heard the interview on public radio this week with the author of a new translation of Don Quixote, the most popular novel of all time. He said that there are different Don Quixotes in different eras, different areas.

Just so, we have a different Martin Luther King, Jr., than we had when the man still lived. That may be the way it always is. We honor Washington, but not the memory of his deist beliefs. If you go to the Jefferson Memorial in Washington, there carved on the wall are his words, "I have sworn upon the altar of god, eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man." Do an online search and you can find those words cited over and over. But you have to persist before they are put in their original context. They are from a letter to Dr. Benjamin Rush, medical pioneer and religious liberal, written in 1800.

Jefferson notes that "the clergy [have] a very favorite hope of obtaining an establishment of a particular form of Christianity thro' the U. S.; and as every sect believes its own form the true one, every one perhaps hoped for his own, but especially the Episcopalians & Congregationalists. The returning good sense of our country threatens abortion to their hopes, & they believe that any portion of power confided to me, will be exerted in opposition to their schemes. And they believe rightly; for I have sworn upon the altar of god, eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man." Many of you enjoyed the recent award-winning biography of John Adams, which managed not to mention his being a Unitarian.

We create our heroes as time goes along, and sometimes retrospectively. I mean we make them up, blend the facts with what we want to be true, craft our memories to our liking. And so we have a Martin Luther King, Jr., to honor, a person of color who was so important to the civil rights movement, now almost universally seen as a great good thing; a gentle soul who preached a message of love and racial harmony.

But he was more than that, and while he lived, he made that plain. His critique of our society went broader and deeper than the attempt to undo the disgrace of racial discrimination. He understood himself to be a revolutionary, part of a national and global advance toward freedom, peace, and justice.

Racism was only one of the three "giant triplets" that had to be overcome. "I am convinced that if we are to get on the right side of the world revolution, we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin the shift from a 'thing-oriented' society to a 'person-oriented' society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, materialism and militarism are incapable of being conquered."

This is not to belittle in the least his brave and successful leadership of the struggle for civil rights. But it is to remember the rest of King's mission and message,

as King himself would have wanted. When he was challenged by those who thought his anti-war stand compromised his effectiveness on civil rights, he said, “When I hear such questions, I have been greatly saddened, for they mean that the inquirers have never really known me, my commitment or my calling. Indeed, that question suggests that they do not know the world in which I live.”

And yet that world, that commitment, that calling will not be much heard of when King’s memory is cited in public remarks these days. Colman McCarthy wrote, “After [more than] three decades of being sentimentalized into an historic relic mummified by the formaldehyde of nostalgia, King has been marginalized in ways that were never possible when he was around to defend himself. Near the end of his life he summed up his mission: ‘Our only hope today lies in our ability to capture the revolutionary spirit and go out into a sometimes hostile world declaring eternal hostility to poverty, racism and militarism.’”

On another occasion, McCarthy wrote, “Since King’s death in 1968, his memory has been monopolized by those who see him only as a civil rights leader. Every January, around the time of the King holiday, many of the news media replay the I Have a Dream oration.... Even those who secretly do not share Brother King’s dream, and are silent about racial equality most of the time, suddenly exercise their vocal chords by singing We Shall Overcome. Undeniably, King, as Sen. Edward Kennedy said in a 1983 floor debate on creating a national holiday for the slain leader, worked tirelessly to remove the stain of discrimination from our nation.

“But King the integrationist is the tame, safe and sanitized King whom America feels comfortable with, except for fringe white supremacists and Confederate-flag wavers, who overtly favor racism.... Pushed aside — dumped, really — is the troublemaking King whose commitment to nonviolence and pacifism meant that he was much more than a civil rights leader....

“King, a fiercely uncompromising critic of American militarism and the war in Vietnam, said in New York on April 4, 1967 — a year before his assassination — that ‘the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today [is] my own government.’

“Any memorial to the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. that doesn’t forcefully remind us of his strong opposition to war ought to be in Disneyland.”

A bunch of years have passed since that April day in New York when King addressed the Riverside Church. Times have changed, the country is more conservative, the sense of an impending revolution has ebbed. King’s dream in his most famous speech, a dream of racial harmony, has come quite a ways, especially in much of the South, and so we honor him. We put his picture on one of our stamps. We have a holiday in his memory, like we do for Jesus, for Lincoln and Washington, like some states do for Columbus or St. Patrick. I bet every major city has a thoroughfare with his name.

We honor him for all that was accomplished by the civil rights movement, and for his leadership in it. Tomorrow some may cite, too, his commitment to nonviolence, in the spirit of Thoreau and Gandhi. It is what we do with our heroes, create them as we want. And I think that that is not only natural, but okay, even good, even if every hero is misrepresented in the process — at least we keep their names alive, at least we acknowledge something fine about them, affirming values that we want to hold dear,

at least it raises the chance that on occasion more about them might be recalled, even ones that might be disturbing to many.

For instance, it gives me a chance to remember more of those words from the Riverside sermon. Bear in mind that he was about the first national figure to come out against the war, and he could be sure the reaction would be hostile, from much of the press and even other civil rights leaders, as it was. Still he said:

“Somehow this madness must cease. I speak as a child of God and brother to the suffering poor of Vietnam and the poor of America who are paying the double price of smashed hopes at home and death and corruption in Vietnam. I speak as a citizen of the world, for the world as it stands aghast at the path we have taken. I speak as an American to the leaders of my own nation. The great initiative in this war is ours. The initiative to stop must be ours....

“The world now demands a maturity of America that we may not be able to achieve. It demands that we admit that we have been wrong from the beginning of our adventure in Vietnam, that we have been detrimental to the life of her people....

“America, the richest and most powerful nation in the world, can well lead the way in [a] revolution of values. There is nothing, except a tragic death wish, to prevent us from re-ordering our priorities, so that the pursuit of peace will take precedence over the pursuit of war. There is nothing to keep us from molding a recalcitrant status quo until we have fashioned it into a brotherhood....

“Now let us begin. Now let us re-dedicate ourselves to the long and bitter but beautiful struggle for a new world.”

When King finished, the three thousand people there gave him a standing ovation.

I suspect that the Unitarian Universalist General Assembly did so as well in 1966, meeting in Hollywood, Florida, when King was the speaker at one of the major events every year at GA, the Ware Lecture. In closing I offer the ending of that address, because any portrayal of King’s message would be incomplete if it did not contain words of hope. Along with his bravery in identifying and confronting injustice, oppression, and militarism, along with his belief in love and nonviolence, there was the conviction that persistence in the cause of right would lead to success. He said:

“Let me say in conclusion that I have not despaired of the future. I believe firmly that we can solve this problem. I know that there are still difficult days ahead. And they are days of glorious opportunity. Our goal for America is freedom.

“Abused and scorned though we may be, our destiny is tied up with America's. Before the Pilgrim fathers landed at Plymouth, we were here. Before Jefferson etched across the pages of history the ... Declaration of Independence, we were here. Before the beautiful words of the Star Spangled Banner were written, we were here. For more than two centuries our forbearers labored here without wages. They made cotton king. They built the homes of their masters in the midst of the most oppressive and humiliating conditions.

“And yet out of a bottomless vitality they continued to grow and develop. If the inexpressible cruelties of slavery couldn't stop us, the opposition that we now face will surely fail. We're going to win our freedom because both the sacred heritage of our nation and the eternal will of the almighty God are embodied in our echoing demands.

“And we can sing We Shall Overcome, because somehow we know the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice [a line originally spoken by the radical nineteenth-century Unitarian minister Theodore Parker]. We shall overcome because Carlyle is right – ‘no lie can live forever.’ We shall overcome because William Cullen Bryant is right – ‘truth crushed, will rise again.’ We shall overcome because James Russell Lowell is right: ‘Truth forever on the scaffold/Wrong forever on the throne/Yet that scaffold sways the future/ And behind the dim unknown/Standeth God within the shadow/Keeping watch above his own.’

“With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. We will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood, and speed up that day when all of God's children all over our nation and the world will be able to walk the earth as brothers and sisters, and then we can sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual – ‘Free at last, free at last, thank God almighty we are free at last.’ Thank you.”

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