

The Courage To Take a Stand
Living our Values as a Spiritual Discipline
A Sermon by Robert L. Morriss

January 16, 2005

Let me start by saying how delighted I am to be able to share a sermon with you on this Martin Luther King Jr. Sunday here in Laramie. The religious witness of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. made a big difference in my life and I am glad to have an opportunity to share some of that with you.

From my perspective, Dr. King was and is one of the true theological heroes of our time. If I tell you a little about myself you may understand why I have this perspective. I grew up in a legally racially segregated part of the country. In the town of Salisbury, Maryland, where I spent most of my school years, so called whites and people of color had very little contact outside of work situations. We could not go to school together and we could not eat in a restaurant together. We could work together. During the three summers from the time I was 15 until my eighteenth birthday, a time when my summer jobs were in agriculture, most of the people with whom I worked were African American. But when I turned 18 and could get a job regulated by interstate commerce with a mandated minimum wage, I had less daily contact with people of color. The Pepsi plant where I worked did not openly discriminate, but as I think back on it, the African Americans tended to work in the plant or on the yard, while almost all of us who went on the road to deliver the product were white.

I'll have to admit, that during the late 50s and early 60s these were facts of life to which most whites who lived below the Mason Dixon Line paid little attention. It was the law and it was a system backed up by the moral teachings of the churches we attended. For those of you unfamiliar with the moral rationale, it ran something like this. God must have created separate races of people or there wouldn't be separate races. To blend the races through inter-racial marriage would be an affront to God's plans for humankind. If people of different races mixed socially, they would inevitably fall in love and be tempted to break both the "divine" and civil prohibitions against intermarriage. Therefore, segregation into separate and ostensibly equal facilities was doing everyone a favor by reducing the temptations to engage in those "immoral and illegal" behaviors that were sure to arise when people fell in love across racial lines. (It's appalling to me that I once accepted this rationale, but when it is all you have known and is taught to you by the people you love and trust to offer you guidance, it is not as difficult to understand as one might think.)

And then came the civil rights movement, inspired in part by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., a movement that brought into our awareness the gross injustices suffered by people of color under the system of legally enforced segregation. I will always be thankful that when freedom riders came to Salisbury, they came in the spirit of that nonviolent confrontation that was designed to awaken the conscience and moral discernment of those who upheld the system of racial segregation. Their aim was not that we would be defeated in a way that would leave us bitter and resentful, but that we would be transformed in a way that would leave us ready to work for a more just society.

In Salisbury, at least, the confrontation of the freedom riders worked. The response of Salisbury's civic and religious leaders to the first sit-in at Woolworth's lunch counter was to form a bi-racial commission that developed a plan to integrate everything from our restaurants to our school system. I would not want to intimate that this was either easy or instantaneous. It wasn't. It took courage to reexamine the morality of social structures that had formed the foundation of how the different races related to one another in that community. Many people were angry that their way of life was being challenged, and they regarded as a traitor to the town anyone who even talked about anything other than resistance. But the majority of us were grateful that there were leaders present who were willing to undertake such a challenging task. The end result was that the town of Salisbury was able to move from a system of legally enforced segregation to a policy of integration without violence, and with a minimum of disturbing incidents.

It was quite different in the neighboring city of Cambridge, Maryland. The response of the civic leaders of Cambridge, just thirty miles away from Salisbury, was more confrontational. While there may well have been people of good will working quietly behind the scenes, the public was greeted with an attitude which seemed to say "There's no way someone from outside is going to come in here and make us change our way of life."

The situation in Cambridge was difficult when it began, and it just got worse, so that as racial tensions grew in other parts of the country they tended to amplify the dissension already present in the town. Finally, at a particularly tense point, a significant portion of the town was torched during the "burn baby burn" period of inter-racial confrontation.

I witnessed the results of a good deal of this first hand. Cambridge was one of the places I delivered Pepsi that summer, so I was in and out of stores all over Cambridge on a weekly basis. The tension I experienced was not dissimilar to that which I would experience a couple of years later when I spent a summer working for greater racial justice in Jackson, Mississippi. One thing I can tell you is that with regard to the atmosphere surrounding racial issues, the difference between Cambridge and Salisbury was remarkable. This was so much the case that latter that summer *Life Magazine* did a national spread entitled "A Tale of Two Cities" contrasting the differences in the way the two towns had responded to the issue of integration.

The difference, everyone seemed to agree, was in the way the leadership of the two towns responded when their best was called for. In both towns the initial sit-ins at the town's lunch counters had been peaceful protests designed to love us into behaving in more just ways. In one situation, the town's leaders got the message and began working to make the transformation to a more just behavior pattern in a way designed to minimize fear, and to encourage trust and cooperation. In the neighboring town, fear and anger begat fear and anger among people of both races. This grew until it precipitated a level of violence that was eventually regretted by everyone involved as together they bore the costs of cleaning up the mess that hatred always seems to generate.

Having lived through this period, I can assure you that it affected me in the very core of my being. As one of those who had been about as wrong headed as people get on the subject of segregation and integration, I personally came to know what it is like to be transformed by someone's acting on their belief that there is enough goodness and intelligence in me to enable me to see the error of my ways. I am deeply appreciative of the courage it took for those initial freedom riders to be willing to endure the taunts, the epithets, the spitting, and even the physical beatings they would eventually experience in order to bring people like me to my senses. I am also appreciative of the courage of the civic leaders in Salisbury who responded to confrontation with compassion and understanding rather than with anger and resistance. I recognize that it not only took courage, but that it must have taken tremendous internal discipline for those individuals to experience all the offensive things that were said and done to them by those who opposed integration - and somehow, to be able to respond in a manner that invited healing.

For me, the belief that one can bring about significant social change through religiously inspired, nonviolent, confrontation is not just an interesting theory I've read about in a book. It is a facet of that truth which resonates at the deepest center of my understanding of how one brings about change.

For confrontation to be effective in producing the kind of community I want to live in, it must be centered in what I would describe as a spiritual discipline. It is my experience that at the core of personal and social transformation is a spiritual discipline that involves a belief in the inherent worth and dignity of every person combined with a commitment to act accordingly. It is as simple as Jesus' insight that if we are to bring about a commonwealth of good here on this earth we must love one another. And that means loving not just our friends and those with whom we agree, but loving those who would make themselves our enemies.

While it is simple enough to say that we should love everyone, it requires great discipline to accomplish it. Part of the task is accomplished by distinguishing between liking someone and loving them. As Martin Luther King Jr. once said, "It is pretty

difficult to like some people. Like is sentimental and it is pretty difficult to like someone bombing your home; it is pretty difficult to like somebody threatening your children; it is difficult to like congressmen who spend all their time trying to defeat civil rights. But Jesus says love them, and love is greater than like.”

Love is not only greater than like, it is a very different process. This type of love involves not responding on the basis of one’s emotional reaction to a person’s current behavior. Instead, it is based on an intentional response to the person’s capacity to act as a fellow citizen of that blessed community we are intending to build, a community in which each person’s dignity and worth are respected and in which we all enjoy the same access to just and equitable treatment under the law.

Now I know that it might be easy to think about all this as relating more to the past than to today, but that is unfortunately not the case. Denying same sex couples the right to enter into civil marriage contracts that guarantee them all the rights and responsibilities available to heterosexual couples is today’s civil rights issue. And unfortunately, it is an injustice that is perpetuated with all of the arguments about legal precedence, Biblical order, and appeals to upholding morality that were once given in support of segregation. And yet it is an injustice that cries out for correction with the same force that eliminating segregation once had. Actually, I almost preached solely on that issue today – a sermon called “An Open Letter to Wyoming Legislators” but I decided against it. Those members of the LGBT community and those legislators who have talked to me about it, say this is not the right time in Wyoming for that particular proposal. Still, I brought along a few copies of that sermon for anyone who would like it as background.

I have noted that personally acting on public issues is not always easy for Unitarian Universalists. While it is true that on a denominational level Unitarians and Universalists have had a prophetic witness on race relations and on GLBT issues of which we can be proud, on a personal level many of us are more reticent to put ourselves out there for a cause to which we are called by our faith tradition. Few of us actually like confronting others whose often-passionate views conflict with our own. Even the word confrontation makes some of us uneasy. Yet how do we stand up to the forces of injustice without confronting positions that deny equal treatment to people whom we know and love? I think the key lies in the way we go about the confrontation.

I think I learned several important things growing up in Salisbury. One is that when we are dealing with issues of basic injustice and patterns of behavior that assume that the ongoing injustice is an acceptable part of the fabric of life, some sort of intervention ... some confrontation... is necessary.

The courts can provide an impetus for change by pointing out that discriminatory patterns are unjust, and prophetic voices within our religious institutions can call us to action, but implementing changes requires the actions of people of good will ... people whose religious integrity requires that they act on what they know. For me, that means acting on marriage equality issues in the larger society of which we are a part and doing it soon.

The leadership shown by people who become aware of issues of injustice and have the courage to act on what they know is what has made the difference throughout history. It took courageous leadership to end slavery and to win women the right to vote. It took courageous leadership to bring about an end to legal discrimination on the basis of race. And it will take courageous leadership to bring about an end to the ongoing legal discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation that is still so much a part of the fabric of our current society, particularly the right to enter into a civil marriage contract with all the rights and responsibilities available to heterosexual couples who make a similar commitment.

As someone whose own way of thinking was transformed by the courage of others, I want to encourage you to become one of those courageous leaders to whom others will eventually be grateful. If we act in a way that invites transformation based on a respect for the inherent worth and dignity of all people, history would suggest that we will eventually be successful. The path may not be easy, but it is definitely worth the effort.

So Be It