

“From Post-Election to Pre-Revolution of Values”: The Higher Ideals of Non-Violent Direct Action

First Unitarian Society of Ithaca
Sunday, January 29, 2017

A Story for All Ages:

“I Can Do It Too” by Karen Baicker.¹
Read by Nicole Eversley Bradwell.

Reading:

Selection from “**Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution**”²
Delivered at the National Cathedral, Washington, D.C., on March 31, 1968.
Read by Sean Eversley Bradwell.

“Now it is true that the geographical oneness of this age has come into being to a large extent through modern [~~mans~~] scientific ingenuity. Modern [~~man through his~~] scientific genius has been able to dwarf distance and place time- in chains ... All of this tells us that our world is a neighborhood.”

*“Through our scientific and technological genius, we have made of this world a neighborhood- and yet, we have not had the ethical commitment to make of it a [~~brotherhood~~] **familyhood**. But somehow, and in some way, we have got to do this. We must all learn to live together as [~~brothers~~] **family** or we will all perish together as fools. We are tied together in the single garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality. And whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. For some strange reason ... I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. And you can never be what you ought to be, until I am what I ought to be.”**

*I have been paying particular attention to the use of pronouns and gendered language. The English language does not have race-referencing pronouns, or economic-referencing pronouns, the same way we engage in gender-referencing pronouns. In this talk, I have exercised editorial license in altering quotes from Dr. King. Dr. King was an avid practitioner of using masculine pronouns. I have also been working with students regarding, “The Language of They / These / Them”. My current writing preference is to write using plural pronouns “us”, “we”, “our” in nearly all situations. This is not always easy nor does it guaranty the best sentences. I also realize there are ongoing and important conversations about pronouns usage. Recently, someone expressed to me a concern regarding the grammatical incorrectness of my pronoun usage choices. My quick response was to reply racial slurs are, in fact, grammatically correct – i.e. the word *nigger* is grammatically correct. However, we would be wise to not use grammar as an active reason to support oppression.

¹ Baicker, K. (2010). *I Can Do It To*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books.

² King, M.L. (1968). “Staying Awake Through a Great Revolution” found in King, M. L., & Washington, J. M. (1991). *A Testament of Hope: the essential writings and speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* San Francisco: HarperCollins.

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Sean Eversley Bradwell, PhD
Director of Programs and Outreach

Before I begin, I would like to take this time to offer a proper thank you to Jens Wennberg, Mark Pederson, and Rev. Jane Thickstun. Thank you for the invitation to offer a few words here today – and thank you for your assistance and organization.

I would also like to acknowledge my family and friends in the audience. Thank you to the Ashton-Gonzalez family. Thank you to the Malcolm family. And thank you to my “in-laws” or more appropriately, “in-loves”, Rit and Jeri Gallucci. I remain inspired by your actions.

Lastly, I would like to acknowledge this space. Nearly two full decades ago, on **June 28, 1997**, I had the joy of being married in this church, in this very sanctuary. As a former Born-Again Christian; recovering Catholic; and current self-practitioner of ‘I’m-not-really-religious-I’m-more-spiritual-type-person’, I have tried to resist the idea of soul mates ... but with age comes wisdom or forgetfulness or something like that. I now realize that the soul knows its own path and follows its own truth. The soul is not about reason or rationality but rather realness and reality. In this life and any future ones, I am exponentially strengthened by our union and the lives we have built together. Thank you, Nicole.

Let us begin ...

Convergence. Synergy. Melding. Blending. Intertwined. Intersectional. I need a complex version of freedom struggling. I need a nuanced style – one that confuses and confounds the issues and the senses. I need complication. I need *the real*.

What I have come to appreciate most about Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is an ability to never lose sight of *the real*. As his career reached the highest of global heights – International Freedom Festivities, White House visits, Nobel Peace Prize Celebrations, etc. – King went in the opposite direction. King went local. He moved into a Chicago

Neighborhood. He spent time on street corners and in corner stores. He spent time living in a housing project that ultimately resulted in a campaign for Poor People. Dr. King attempted to be as grassroots as his name and his acclaim would allow.

I often realize that I – and many of my contemporaries – have a tendency to refer to Dr. King as a moderate. He is safely packaged. When we do so, we are, in fact, demonstrating a blindly ignorant understanding of the importance of detail and history.

We may soon be entering an era when speaking out – moderately or otherwise – will be moderated through gag orders, executive orders, or Presidential decrees. In Dr. King’s day, speaking out - moderately or otherwise - was grounds for death. Breaking the silence, no matter the moderation in tone, was not matched by moderation of deed. Whistles could kill. Invented whistles - alternative whistles - could get one lynched.

Dr. King experienced more than his share of violence. He was stabbed at a book signing. He was hit in the head with rocks while marching. He was beat with batons while being arrested. His house was bombed. So yes, stabbed, assaulted, shoved, hit, spat upon, beaten, bombed, and ultimately shot³ ... all for speaking *moderately* against racism, poverty and warfare.

I start here for two reasons. First, I start here to reinforce the concept that the details of history matter. In fact, *facts* matter. We should do our best to be informed - and allow this to then inform our thinking and actions. Understanding the depths of violence experienced by Dr. King, helps us to understand the commitment to nonviolence. It is through the beatings, the lynchings, the assaultings, the fire-hosings, the bombings, the dog-bitings, the killings ... it is through these acts and in the face of these violent experiences, that Dr. King deepens a commitment to respond with the inverse ... to respond with love.

Second, I start here to proclaim there is nothing moderate about love. Love is a radical act. Love is obsessive. Love occupies a space beyond the fanatical. Love is the opposite of moderation. Yet, we have the audacity to call Dr. King a moderate? A moderate?!? The details of history tell us there is nothing *moderate* about concerted efforts to employ and operationalize “love” as a positive advantage for justice.

³ For additional information, see the (current) definitive series on Dr. King written by Taylor Branch:
Branch, T. (1988). *Parting the Waters: America in the King years, 1954-1963*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
Branch, T. (1998). *Pillar of Fire: America in the King years, 1963-65*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
Branch, T. (2006). *At Canaan's Edge: America in the King years, 1965-68*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Beyond moderation, there are more important questions of interrogation that warrant our attention. Was Dr. King an assimilationist? Affirmative. A sexist? Yes. Dr. King was certainly flawed and appears to embody heterosexism. Remember, this is a complicated freedom - similar to the openly expressed anti-black racism of Mahatma Gandhi⁴ or Elizabeth Cadi Stanton⁵ - both committed activists for justice. There are times when we have to be willing to depart with our heroes. MLK was struck down while only 39 years young, one can only hope that personal growth also has a long moral arc that bent towards justice. In a just world, reconciliation must always be on the table.

But growth and reconciliation are easier said than done. Personally, I need constant reminders about the radical nature of love ... about acts of love.⁶ We often put love and hate as antithetical concepts - in our quick fashioning, these concepts are seemingly incongruent. Yet, I am reminded of a quote I shared earlier this month at the Greater Ithaca Activities Center (GIAC) - Annual Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Breakfast. The quote, from the late great Eli Wiesel, states, "the opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference."⁷ The way to neutralize love is to be disinterested, unconcerned, and detached. The truth of this irony can be found in the fact that hate often means engagement. Paradoxically, hateful engagement - while often deadly - also brings opportunity.

The emotion of hate is so strong that it drives us to act in ways we wouldn't normally act. But I am here to ponder with you today ... if love is stronger - what actions are we to undertake that we would not normally do? What do radical actions of love look like? Where are our radical acts of compassion? Allyship?

Last weekend, Nicole and I were able to attend the Women's March in DC. It was a powerful display of democracy and action. At first, I was somewhat confused by the seeming lack of consistency in the messaging - a mis-reading of the supposed non-cohesive nature of the packaging. But soon, I began to connect the themes. The more I reflected on the signage that dominated the landscape, the more I began to consider what could happen if we were actualizing *intersectionality*.⁸ To be sure, there was no shortage of issues, petitions, causes, or movements to join.

⁴ Desai, A., & Vahed, G. H. (2015). *The South African Gandhi: stretcher-bearer of empire*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

⁵ Free, L. E. (2015). *Suffrage Reconstructed: gender, race, and voting rights in the Civil War era*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

⁶ King, M. Luther. (1963). *Strength to Love*. New York: Harper & Row.

⁷ Sanoff, A. P. (1986, October 27). "One Must Not Forget: Interview with Eli Wiesel." U.S. News & World Report, p. 68.

⁸ African American Policy Forum. (2013) "A Primer on Intersectionality." Retrieved from:

<http://www.aapf.org/2013/2013/01/intersectionality-primer>

- Women’s Rights as Human Rights
- Stopping Rape Culture
- Reproduction Rights
- LGBTQ Rights
- Women’s Empowerment
- Equal Pay
- Women’s Body Rights
- Life is Water
- Climate and Environmental Protection
- “Si Se Puede”
- Immigration Rights
- Anti-Wall Activists
- Anti-Muslim Registry
- Black Lives Matter
 - Did I see Ithaca signs in DC?
- End White Supremacy
- Pro Health Care
 - My students recommend we use the term, “life care.”
- Anti-Russia – Putin - Puppet - Geopolitics
- Need for Free Press – Media Journalism
 - Facts Matter
- Challenges to Masculinity & Patriarchy
 - “Men of quality are not threatened by gender equality.”

And this is just a sampling of the signs / tee shirts and posters. While there was great diversity and creativity throughout the signage, nearly all of the signs shared a singular quality ... at the end of their respective paths, the goal was to stop devaluing life. This weekend, we witnessed millions of people, all over the globe, using their feet and their voices, to work against structural justifications of violence. This may be the actualization of an intersectional movement.

This is also why I believe we need to strengthen our social change networks and become much more intentional about how we do the *real* work. How do we match physical and symbolic violence with acts of love and *nonviolence*? So please let me leave you with this.

In the “A Letter From Birmingham City Jail”⁹, Dr. King outlines his method for non-violent social change. Dr. King captured four steps of *nonviolent direct action*. Since the details matter, it is important to note that Dr. King captures these steps while in jail, after being arrested on Good Friday, pressed against the cold metal of a jail cell, confined to

⁹ King, M. L. (1963 / 1994). *Letter from Birmingham City Jail*. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco.

solitary confinement, and worried about the increasing acts of violence - particularly as more and more children participated in civil disobedience. In March of 1963, Dr. King was on the cusp of a radical revolution of values.

Post-election of 2016, there is clearly a need for a radical revolution of values. This is beyond partisan politics. This is about the political process and what the most recent election reflected about us as a people. *We* are in times when *we* need to work to create the world *we* hope to leave our children. So, as I close here this morning, I believe it is helpful to revisit some thinking on the steps of nonviolent social change. I hope it inspires us to create a world that is much more just and far less *indifferent*.

According to Dr. King, there are four essential steps to any non-violent direct action and they are listed as follows:

1. INFORMATION GATHERING:

- Gathering of facts. “You must investigate and gather all vital information from all sides of the argument or issue so as to increase your understanding of the problem.”

2. PERSONAL COMMITMENT:

- “Eliminate hidden motives and prepare yourself to accept suffering [CONSEQUENCES], if necessary, in your work for justice”. Self-purification. Self-reflection.

3. DISCUSSION / NEGOTIATION:

- “Using grace, humor and intelligence, confront the other party with a list of injustices and a plan for addressing and resolving these injustices.” Be human. We have to talk to one another. Period.

4. DIRECT ACTION:

- “These actions impose a ‘creative tension’ into the conflict, supplying moral pressure on your opponent to work with you in resolving the injustice.”

It is important to know that the first incarnation of the steps for non-violent action included only four (4) steps. Through the work of the King Center for Nonviolence, these steps have been expanded to six (6). The King Center has divided the “gathering of facts” into two sections ... one section dedicated to the education of self and another step dedicated to the education of others (opposition?). *A radical revolution of values is not based on the unknown. It is based on the understood.*

Lastly, The King Center has also added a final but critically important step of reconciliation.¹⁰

6. **RECONCILIATION:**

- “Nonviolence is directed against evil systems, forces, oppressive policies, unjust acts, but not against persons. ... Each act of reconciliation is one step closer to the ‘Beloved Community’.”

I recognize reconciliation is not always possible. And truth be told, I want to leave open the room for some things ... for some things ... to be irreconcilable. But reconciliation is not just the last step, it is *the* path. It is the goal. It is the means and the ends. According to Dr. King, the beloved community is only fulfilled by the promise of reconciliation.¹¹ If we are not ready, this is okay. There is plenty of work to do. Start with the original four steps and work your way through all six. But reconciliation should be omnipresent.

In the end, the message for today is, “Get active!” “Get involved!” If and when you are unsure about how or where to start, use the steps outlined by the King Center. Get informed. Inform others. Self-reflect. Talk with others. Act. March. Protest. Procott and Boycott. Reconcile.

Let the steps be a guide. If we are to undergo a radical revolution of values ... silence will not be the path. My spouse says, “Silence means 100% agreement.” Absolutely, there are times to break the silence.¹² And to this end, we will need to discuss. We will need to debate. We will need to dialogue. We will need to reconcile. We will need to distribute the microphone. So let me take me seat.

Thank you.



¹⁰ The King Center for Nonviolent Social Change. (2014). Six Steps of Nonviolent Social Change. Retrieved from: <http://www.thekingcenter.org/king-philosophy#sub3>

¹¹ King, M. L., King, C. S., & V. Harding. (2010). *Where Do We Go from Here: chaos or community?*. Boston: Beacon Press.

¹² King, M. L. (1967). “A Time to Break the Silence.” found in King, M. L., & Washington, J. M. (1991). *A Testament of Hope: the essential writings and speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* San Francisco: HarperCollins.