

**Love and Power:
Anti-Racism in the UUA and the Theology of Dr. King**

Reverend Elizabeth Stevens
January 16, 2005

*Power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic.
Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice. Justice at its best is love
correcting everything that stands against love.*

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

In his 1967 book, Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community,

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote: "Negroes hold only one key to the double lock
Of peaceful change.

The other is in the hands of the white community." (p. 22)

And then later, "A leading voice in the chorus of social transition belongs

To the white liberal, whether he speak through the government,
The church,

The voluntary welfare agencies or the civil rights movement." (p. 88)

And again, "Among the forces of white liberalism the church has a special obligation.

It is the voice of moral and spiritual authority on earth." (p. 96)

That would be us, folks.

So the question I ask this morning

On the day before the national holiday honoring Dr. King's life
And remembering his death a year after Where Do We Go From Here was published,
Is simply this:

In the years since Dr. King's death,

Have we as a movement satisfied our obligation,
Raised our voices,
And turned that key of social change?

In 1967, the peaceful non-violence and bridge-building work
Of Martin Luther King

Was taking place alongside the Black Power movement.

These two different camps in the Black community

Were vying for power.

One camp believed that full racial equality

Could only be achieved through cooperation with liberal whites

And so actively reached out to include white allies

In the movement.

And in the other camp people just as passionately believed

That blacks needed to come together,

And that white liberals were inherently racist,

And their involvement in the civil rights movement

Could never be anything more than patronizing and paternalistic.

Dr. King describes arguments among the leadership

As to whether or not to even allow

White people to march and protest alongside blacks.

Where Do We Go From Here was, in part,

King's answer to those arguments,

And while clearly he meant to help defuse the tension,

He also was unambiguous.

He called both Blacks and Whites to continue

To build bridges,

To work together,

To move toward understanding and compassion

And true equality in the context of relationship.

Martin Luther King believed whole heartedly that "What effects one, effects us all..."

and what's more, he believed that in the modern age,

all people would come to experience our connection to one another,

unable to deny any longer that

"All life is inter-related, and somehow we are all tied together.

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.”
(Ware lecture, 1966, by Dr. Martin Luther King.)

And yet his voice was not the only voice,
 And the voices that called for Black Power,
For Black Unity,
 Were powerful and eloquent, too.
How could the white man understand the pain,
 The horror
Of slavery and oppression?

How could black folks be expected to forgive
 Their oppressors?

In the face of the terrible injustices perpetrated on people of color
 During the first three hundred year our nation existed
Need to be addressed,
 The wounds healed,
Forgiveness asked for and granted,
 Before an authentic relationship could be built?

These tensions in the civil rights movement
 Were reflected in our religious movement, as well.

We can point to many UU ministers and lay people who
 Were extremely active in the civil rights movement...
Most notably at a march in Selma organized
 By the UUA board
After the death of James Reeb, a white UU minister, in 1965.

Some credit the march in Selma and the national outrage
 At the murder of Reeb and of Viola Liuzzo...another white UU...
With turning the tide and leading congress to finally pass civil rights legislation.

But as the Black Power movement gained momentum,
 Black Unitarian Universalists began to point out

That was only one part of the picture.

In 1968, Heyward Henry, the chair of the newly formed Black Unitarian Universalist Caucus,

Said "We Unitarian Universalists like to keep saying,

'but we went to Selma with you...why are you blacks rejecting us?'

In Selma, a black man named Jimmy Jackson was killed

And at that time you could count the number of Unitarians in Selma

On your fingers.

A few weeks later, a white man was killed, and all Unitarians ran to Selma.

Racism, that's what it was."

If Malcolm X was the symbol of the Black Power movement,

A movement that preached separatism over cooperation,

The Black Unitarian Universalist Caucus

Represented black separatism in our denomination.

They pointed not to our denomination's commitment to equal rights,

But to the lack of blacks in our congregations

And in the professional ministry.

The Black UU Caucus was born in 1967,

At an Emergency Conference called by Rev. Homer Jack,

The director of the UUA Department of Social Responsibility,

On Unitarian Universalist Response

To the "Black Rebellion," also known as the 1967 race riots.

135 participants, including 37 African Americans,

Gathered at the Biltmore hotel in New York.

Almost immediately upon arriving,

30 of the 37 African Americans withdrew from the larger group

And named themselves the Black UU Caucus.

During the Conference, the BUUC drew up a list of "non-negotiable" demands.

The core demand was that the board establish a Black Affairs Council,

Appointed by the BUUC,

To be funded at \$250,000 a year for four years.

When the conference reconvened, it accepted the black caucus demands,

Though a few participants left in protest.

Then things really got ugly.

The UUA Department of Social Responsibility was bombarded
By angry letters and calls criticizing
The Black Caucus as being not merely separatist but racist.

Rev. Jack sent a letter to all UU congregation appealing for forbearance,
But it was too late.

The UUA Board responded to the Biltmore conference by voting to reorganize
The Commission on Religion and Race, adding "substantial participation
Of non-whites,"
But refused to authorize either the formation of the Black Affairs Council
Or the money the caucus had asked for.

A group of white supporters of the BUUC organized a group called FULLBAC,
And lobbied for full support of the BAC platform.
As a result, in 1968 at the General Assembly in Cleveland,
Delegates voted 836 to 326 to accept the Black Affairs Council into affiliate status
And to fund it from the Association budget at \$250,000 a year for four years.

They also refused to recognize or fund the alternate organization
That came together after the Biltmore conference...
The Black and White Alternative,
Also known as BAWA.

Next year, at the 1969 General Assembly,
The tide began to turn.
The agenda included a proposal to allocate the second quarter million to BAC
But also to award \$50,000 to BAWA.

The BAC insisted that funding both groups would be contradictory...
And announced that it would refuse funding if BAWA got even a penny.
Voices were raised and microphones held hostage.
After a procedural vote went against the BAC,

Almost all of the two to three hundred black delegates who were there got up and walked out.

The Rev. Jack Mendelsohn, the author of "Being Liberal in an Iliberal Age,"
Which some of you will be reading and studying
In the Adult RE Class,
That Jack Mendelsohn called for a boycott of the Assembly.

And about half the delegates left with him
And went to Arlington Street Church.

The tension between BAC and BAWA has never truly been resolved.

BAC lost its funding,
Largely because the association was nearing bankruptcy at the time.

Attempts for healing and even an infusion of cash from the UU Society at Shelter Rock

Failed to completely heal the wounds,
And eventually not only BAC but FULLBAC and BAWA ceased to function.

The conflict between the separatists of the Black UU Caucus

And the integrationists of the Black and White Alternative
Left many UU's bruised.

Many Black UU's left the denomination never to return.

And those who stayed, especially those in positions of ministerial leadership,

Struggled mightily.

Blacks who stayed in our congregations

Had to make peace with being in the minority.

Black ministers had trouble getting hired.

Through it all was a sense of failure,

A sense that we as a denomination were not walking the walk...

That our lack of racial and cultural diversity

Grew out of our own inability to face both our history

And our own racism in the present.

A sense that we must be falling short of living our faith

In the inherent worth and dignity of all people.

A Racial and Cultural Diversity Task Force

Was formed in 1992,

And after four years, presented a report entitled,
“Journey Toward Wholeness.”

Then, in 1997, the General Assembly passed a resolution
“toward an anti-racist Unitarian Universalist Association”

And the Journey Toward Wholeness began.

This congregation has been integral in advocating for human rights
Here in Kitsap County.

You’ve also completed Jubilee I,

The initial anti-racism workshop recommended by the UUA.

Later this spring,

The anti-racism committee

Will offer two “refresher” workshops...

One on white privilege

And the other on Cultural Competency...

With the hope of leading up to a Jubilee II workshop

Next year.

But as you can see from Kelsey’s account,

The tension between the separatists

And the integrationists

Still exists, and hampers our ability to realize our potential

As a truly anti-racist, multi-cultural denomination...

Meanwhile our reputation as “God’s frozen people”

Our reluctance to move, to laugh,

To express great emotion and passion,

Our resistance to the language of deep and abiding faith,

Hampers our ability to create meaningful worship experiences

For people who come out of the heart-pounding,

Blood coursing,

Bible-thumping

And Amen-hollering tradition of African American Christianity.

Anthony Y. Stringer, a founding member of the intentionally diverse

And now defunct Thurman Hamer Ellington Church

In Decatur, GA, writes:

What lifts us up is an individual matter. For some it is the smell of incense or a melodic chant. For others it is the refined harmony of classical music or the intuited truths of Emerson. For one, transcendence may lie in spoken prayer, for another in quiet meditation. Unitarian Universalist churches are known for housing multiple theological perspectives, even when every member is white. Add cultural diversity to the mix, and the burgeoning of perspectives reaches exponential numbers.

Worship is, by its very nature,

An inexact art form.

Anything we do together,

Any ritual or liturgy we adopt,

Anything I say to you from this pulpit,

Is going to work for some of you and not for others.

There's a reason that Sunday morning is still

The most segregated hour in America.

And we UU's are still committed to changing that...

This congregation is still committed to changing that.

Surely, intention counts for something.

But there are these obstacles,

And to ask the question

That Dr. King asks in his book,

"Where do we go from here?"

And my own question, how do we turn the key,

Raise our voices,

Use our power to effect change

And make real our dreams of universal equality?

Here, as in so many other areas,

I think our key is in living in the tension

Rather than in one particular set of answers.

Yes, it can be healing and wonderful to be together with people

Who's experience parallels our own...

And it is healing and wonderful to be together with people

Who's experience is entirely different.
In every person I've ever met in my entire life,
I've been able to find at least one small point of connection,
Of commonality,
In the sea of unavoidable differences.
We are all completely different,
And we are all, underneath those differences,
Connected.

Martin Luther King was not a one-issue man.
He preached not just for racial equality,
But for a living wage,
For equitable distribution of the world's food assets,
For peace in Vietnam,
For women's rights,
And for religious tolerance.

The quote at the top of your order of service,
My favorite MLK quote,
Reads as follows:

Power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic.
Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice. Justice at its best is love
correcting everything that stands against love.

At the intersection of power and love is a question of scarcity and abundance,
Of giving and receiving.

If there is a limited amount of power,
Then for one group to gain power,
Another must give some up.
And that is true.

Yet there is another, deeper, truth...
Ultimately, the only power any of us has
Is over our own choices and lives.
That power cannot be given or taken or even accepted.

It must be claimed.

Those who claim the power to determine what kind of place this is,

 This congregation,

This denomination,

 This world,

Must accept that they are only one among many,

 And that no one voice is any more important

Or any less important

 Than any other.

And those who have been denied the power to determine their own destiny

 Must rise to the occasion

And claim their place at the table.

 The table is as big as it needs to be...

The table is this whole damn world...

 And we may think that our little piece of it

Is ours alone,

 But our illusion of separateness is just that...an illusion.

And the way to dispelling that illusion is through love, offered freely,

 Without strings or expectations.

We love because it's the right thing to do,

 Not because of the admirable qualities in the person we're loving,

Nor because we need or want them to love us back,

 But simply because everybody and everything is lovable.

And if our loving and our sharing of power

 Leads us to places that feel unfamiliar,

Scary, even awkward,

 We welcome that as an opportunity to learn and grow

And expand our awareness in ever wider circles,

 To accept that we don't have to think alike,

Or believe alike,

 Or look alike,

To love alike.

Again, I offer you the heart of Dr. King's message to us,
To Unitarian Universalists, back in 1966.
It still rings true today.

"All life is inter-related, and somehow we are all tied together.
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."
(Ware lecture, 1966, by Dr. Martin Luther King.)

So, Kelsey, it's not so much that you're a racist,
Or that I'm a racist,
So much as that we are both shaped by a racist society,
And the more we can own that,
Understand it,
And then stand up in solidarity against it,
The closer we will come to achieving the dream of freedom,
Of equality,
Of peace and justice for all.

There's no road map,
Because it's never been done before,
So we just keep trying...
Learning through trial and error
And slowly, moment by moment,
Creating the world we want to live in.

I send you into the world with a final passage from Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Declaration of Independence from the War in Vietnam."

Let us begin. Let us re-dedicate ourselves to the long and bitter, but beautiful, struggle for a new world. Shall we say the odds are too great? Shall we tell them the struggle is too hard? Will our message be that the forces of American life militate against their arrival as fully human, and we send our deepest regrets? Or will there be another message, of longing, of hope, of solidarity

with their yearnings, of commitment to their cause, whatever the cost? The choice is ours, and though we might prefer it otherwise, we must choose in this crucial moment of human history.

May we choose love.

May we choose the power of connection.

May we choose courage in the face of fear.

May we choose well.

So be it, and so may it be.