

The Vision of Dr. King

“I have a dream...”

For those of us who consider ourselves progressives, these words still send a chill up our spine every time we hear them, even now, some fifty-five years after the event at which they were first spoken. I know that one of our own members, Kent Robertson, was at that event, the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. Kent has described the event to us on several occasions, and it sounds like it was one of the high points of his life. Not yet having been born in 1963, I’ll admit to being a bit envious. For Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech has come to stand as one of the most compelling articulations of the progressive vision of the future ever uttered. Let us take a few minutes this morning to consider why this has proved to be so.

First, of course, there was Dr. King’s personal charisma and oratorical brilliance. A southern Baptist minister raised in the tradition of the black church, with its rhythmic, expressive, emotional style of preaching, the driving cadences of “I Have A Dream” came to Dr. King naturally. “I HAVE A DREAM.” In fact, when Dr. King entered into this signature portion of his speech, he was departing from his prepared remarks. The written speech was masterful, but it may have been coming across as a little flat, for singer Mahalia Jackson suddenly yelled out from the back of the stage, “Tell them about the dream, Martin!” And so he did, grabbing the theme and improvising upon it like John Coltrane might have, the notes rising ever higher, building to an emotional crescendo. Whereas a jazz musician, however, has riffs and musical phrases to draw upon, Reverend King had the whole rich storehouse of biblical imagery at his fingertips, allowing him to speak of “justice rolling down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream,” and handing him such images as the day when “every valley shall be exalted, and every hill and mountain shall be made low.” Indeed, if you’ve ever taken a creative writing class, the teacher will have drummed into your head, “Show, don’t tell,” and Dr. King took this mantra to heart. He did not just

stand there in front of three hundred thousand people and soberly argue, “We should treat all people equally.” Rather, he shared a *vision*. He painted a picture for the crowd, something they could *see*. In portraying the unacceptable present, he spoke of “Alabama — with its vicious racists, with its Governor having his lips dripping with the words of interposition and nullification.” But then went on to lay out the vision of a possible future, when, “One day right there in Alabama, little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.”

Brilliant as this oratory and imagery were, however, there have been other great speakers before, who have given other great speeches. What was it about this speech, this speaker, that still grips us today? Or to put the question more pointedly, why is it that, fifty-five years after a march for *black* rights and opportunity, a group of relatively affluent, mostly white people here in the mostly white community of Loveland, Colorado still get chills up our spines whenever we hear this speech? The answer, I believe, is that—beyond all of the vivid imagery, beyond the driving cadences—we can see *ourselves* in Dr. King’s vision. Dr. King explicitly, intentionally included *us* in his dream. When he dreamed of the time when his four little children would “live in a nation where they [would] not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character,” and when then painted a picture of those little black boys and black girls joining hands with the little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers, we are there in the dream; we are those little white children. We have perhaps since grown up, but we still play a vital role in the story Dr. King tells of our nation’s future.

He did not have to give us this role in his dream. As all of you no doubt know, there were deep divisions within the civil rights movement between those who felt the movement should be a struggle for black power exclusively, and those who insisted on advocating for universal equality. More militant leaders like Stokely Carmichael and Malcolm X argued that the oppression of blacks in America was so systematic, so entrenched that it was naive for blacks to think they simply needed to ask politely, then

the slate would be wiped clean and everyone would be treated as equals. With the white community still doing everything it could to defend its privilege, the black community needed to start looking out for itself—taking, not asking; fighting, not discussing, using violence if necessary. Dr. King acknowledged this view and the crushing realities that motivated it, but ultimately, he rejected this approach—not just the violence, but also the exclusivism. For he realized that, no matter how justified black America might be in focusing only on its rights, its interests, its dignity, you can never fully realize any of these things if you merely concern yourself with your own group, your own tribe. For when you fight only for yourself, you just set the stage for perpetual conflict with other groups, all of whom will, of course, want their own rights, their own interests, their own dignity to be prioritized. On such a battleground, our very humanity becomes a zero-sum game in which the gains of one group can come only at the expense of others. It is only if you insist on the notion of universal rights, universal interests, universal dignity that you can put forward the realistic vision of a future—a distant future perhaps, but a realistic vision nonetheless—in which the rights, interests, and dignity of your own group are unchallenged, since you are not challenging the rights, interests, and dignity of others. As Dr. King liked to formulate it, “No one is free unless we are all free.” And thus he offered up to us a vision of the future in which black America finally *is* free, and yet it was a vision that makes many of us in the white community swell with inspiration and admiration, rather than briding with defensiveness or aggression, since we have been granted an irreplaceable role in this vision.

So what does Dr. King’s vision say to us today? What imperatives does it still present us with? Over the fifty-five years since the speech, our society has clearly taken many important strides towards making Dr. King’s dream a reality. It is just as clear, however, that we have not yet fully arrived. Speaking in 1963, Dr. King noted that many of his listeners had been “staggered by the winds of police brutality,” and the Black Lives Matter movement has reminded us that patterns of violence directed against people of color are still deeply entrenched within many police departments today. Nor, given the long shadows

cast by slavery, Jim Crow, and segregation, is this the only issue of black and white our nation continues to struggle with. We still need to confront these issues insistently. As the same time, however, we can work to broaden Dr. King's imagery to explicitly include even more people within the dream. Given the context of his speech, Dr. King naturally spoke only of black children and white children playing together, yet we can expand this vision to include children who are brown, yellow, red, or any other color you might imagine. Similarly, we can revisit the phrase Dr. King borrowed from the Declaration of Independence, that, "All men are created equal," and affirm that this phrase really does refer, not just to all men, but to all people, and that women really do have an equal place in the dream. Finally, while such topics as accessibility, sexual orientation, and gender identity could hardly have been on Dr. King's mind as he addressed the crowd in Washington, we can keep working to ensure that ever more groups which have traditionally been excluded or marginalized by our society are brought within the fold of those who are fully accepted and respected by mainstream America.

This particular approach to carrying forward Dr. King's vision is something we can do, and in fact, as Unitarian Universalists, it is something we do rather well. You could even say it is *what* we do—working to draw those who have traditionally been *excluded* within the sphere of those who are *included*. Today, however, I want to suggest that we do one more thing. I want to suggest that we reserve a bit of empathy and regard for one particular group that actually *has* long been included within our country's mainstream, but which is nevertheless suffering some real dislocation and anxiety. The group I am referring to, for want of a better term, is the white working class. This is the group that rose to national prominence by famously switching allegiances in the last presidential election. The entire working class used to lean left, given traditional liberal support for labor unions over big business. But for at least a generation, the white portion of this group has quietly been moving towards various, more populist forms of conservatism, first with the Religious Right and the Tea Party movement, then finally with the Trump campaign. I would like to consider for a moment, not the political question of how the left might

win back this voting bloc, but rather the moral question of what has led the white working class to be so wary of progressivism, to the point of sometimes voting against its own economic interests in order to defeat progressive policies and politicians.

The fundamental reason for this, I would argue, is that many working class whites, and especially the men among them, no longer see themselves as having a place within the vision of the future that progressives project. Their parents and grandparents lived under a sort of implicit social contract: Get a high school degree, show up for work at the mill every day, and the work may be hard, but it will earn you a comfortable middle class lifestyle. You will be able to remain, moreover, in the same community for your whole life, attending the same church, thereby promoting strong family ties, as well strong community ties among the more or less homogenous population. For many years now, however, mill after mill has been closing, largely due to advances in automation, but also because of increased globalism and the resulting trade with low-wage countries. As a result, many young people have been moving away from America's smaller towns and cities, while groups from all different ethnic backgrounds have moved in to fill the void, claiming some of the few low-skill jobs that remain, while leaving many communities less homogenous than before.

These changes to the American economy and American demographics have left an entire class of people feeling a genuine sense of economic and even existential angst. And when they have looked to the progressive leaders who once might have championed their cause for a bit of support, they have mostly been told they need to check their white privilege, or their male privilege, or their straight privilege, and by the way, they should stop saying "Merry Christmas" in public. They have been told, in other words, that the primary focus of public policy needs to be increasing equality, which sounds to them like promoting the interests of everyone who does not belong to the group of straight, white, Christian males—everyone, in other words, but them. No longer seeing themselves represented within the

progressive vision of a better future, these people have found themselves drawn to another vision, the sentimental vision of a mythical past, back when things were different: Back when the social contract their parents and grandparents signed was still honored, back when family and community still mattered, back when we did not have all of the problems we have now, back when America was great...

I am willing to presume that many, or even most, of the people buying into this alternate vision are not overtly racist, or sexist, or homophobic, or religious zealots. They just see a way of life they once enjoyed as being threatened. And whatever the precise causes of their declines in fortune, this period of challenge and dislocation *has* coincided with a rise in the fortunes of many formerly disadvantaged groups, due in no small part to the work progressives have done to extend the vision of Dr. King to more and more people. Sometimes, moreover, this progressive work has been accompanied by rhetoric suggesting that straight, white, Christian males are the problem, not part of the solution, or in any case, that this group has *had* its moment in the sun, so it needs to step aside and let other groups take their turn. And so, feeling threatened and isolated, many members of this group have retreated back towards a more comfortable vision in which they are once again in control of their own destiny.

So what can we do about this? How can we help the white working class to see itself as being included in Dr. King's dream—to see itself as playing an vital role in this vision rather than being scapegoated by it, as being the group that must lose out in order for others to gain? I don't exactly know. Or in any case, I don't have a full answer to this question. Clearly, as progressives, we cannot compromise on our core values and allow various forms of institutionalized discrimination to persist just in order to secure a few more votes. Nor can we remain silent in the face of rhetoric that *is* overtly racist, or sexist, or homophobic, or islamophobic, or which otherwise attempts to use division as a means of consolidating political power. But, at very minimum, we *can* refrain from engaging in divisive, disparaging rhetoric of our own.

In interview after interview, one thing members of the Religious Right, the Tea Party, and the Trump coalition have all complained about is being looked down upon by mainstream American culture—by the media, by Hollywood, by college professors, and certainly by progressive politicians. Hillary Clinton’s “basket of deplorables” comment was once instance of this, but perhaps an even more graphic example came a few years back when Meryl Streep was accepting yet another Academy Award. Launching into her speech, she looked down her nose at the camera and stressed how important it is that Hollywood congratulate itself on its artistic achievements, since NASCAR and the NFL are *not art*. OK, well, who cares? I would question whether certain Meryl Streep movies are more art or entertainment, and I’m not even French, but again, who cares? The fact is that a large portion of our population enjoys NASCAR, and Toby Keith, and Duck Dynasty, and megachurches, and souped up F-150’s with gun racks in the back. This stuff may not be to our taste, but who cares? If we truly want to realize Dr. King’s dream, we need to learn how to view ourselves as walking hand in hand, not just with the disabled Muslim lesbian from Eritrea—something we are very good at—but also with white former millworker from Topeka who has a Jesus fish and an NRA sticker on the back of his pickup. Granted, he may not want to hold *your* hand. Nevertheless, we can be certain that he is not going to see himself as having a respected, valued place in the progressive vision of the future if we progressives don’t start doing so first. So, yes, we need to keep proclaiming that black lives matter. Yes, we need to keep standing on the side of love. Yes, we need to keep saying, “Me, too.” But as we do so, let us model Dr. King’s *radical* inclusivity by intentionally and insistently viewing rural and small town America and its cultural preferences not, first and foremost as a threat to our nation’s rich diversity, but rather as a valuable contribution to it.

May it be so.