

In Over Our Heads

The commemoration of Martin Luther King's birthday is tomorrow, as well as the inauguration of Donald Trump. Such a stark juxtaposition of opposites cannot be ignored. I will contrast the two forces that they represent and then suggest a way to frame our search to be effectively participatory in a "conversation" about America's future.

First, I will review what we know about King's approach. King was a new graduate with his doctorate from Boston University School of Theology in 1955. He went to Montgomery, AL as a young minister new in town—well-spoken and energetic—with little to lose if his leadership of the 1955 Montgomery Bus boycott fizzled. The consensus of clergy I've spoken with is that other Montgomery clergy didn't want the risk, so they agreed: "Let's throw the new guy in at the deep end." King was like the littlest penguin, the one that is tossed into unknown waters to see if there are predators, before the flock goes in. But he was not entirely unprepared.

Reportedly, King knew the theory of nonviolence well, if not its practical application. He read deeply in Gandhian nonviolence literature while he was at Crozer Theological Seminary in Chester, PA, and was friends with Howard Thurman dean of Boston University's School of Theology, who had visited Gandhi in India and written extensively on nonviolence (Ricks, pg. 17). Two decades later, I studied for a Master's of Social Change at the Martin Luther King, Jr. School for Social Change at Crozer Seminary, and took a class from King's professor of social ethics. That professor, having been arrested 22 times on school property during protests, was under a permanent injunction never to demonstrate on school property again.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. traced his development from religious fundamentalism to something more comprehensive in 1960: He said, ". . . there is one phase of liberalism that I hope to cherish always: its devotion to the search for truth, its insistence on an open and analytical mind, its refusal to abandon the best light of reason." (Arthur and Lila Weinberg, Instead of Violence, pgs. 69-70)

From there, it is a sure connection to Gandhian nonviolence, which Gandhi had called Satyagraha and “can be loosely translated as “the tenacious power of the soul” or more simply, as “clinging to the truth.” . . .much more confrontational than passive resistance: It meant trying to find superior skills in resisting.” (Ricks, Waging a Good War, pgs. 28-9) Gandhi believed that “God equals Truth, i.e., that which really exists, and one must cleave only to God, or Truth.” (Crawford, Civil Disobedience, pg. 181) If “the search for truth” sounds familiar, it could be King’s close relationship with Unitarian Universalism.

King was one of us in thought, if not explicit identification. His doctoral thesis was written on the conceptual comparison of God in the thought of Paul Tillich (a liberal, influential existential theologian of his era) and Henry Nelson Weiman (who started out as a Presbyterian theologian but joined a Unitarian church). I think and have been told that King knew that we were too small and too White for him to be strategically influential in the South as a Unitarian, so he stayed with the American Baptist denomination. When he asked the Unitarian Universalist Association leadership for support in the Selma campaign, 500 UU’s went there to march with him, including the UUA Board of Trustees. Two UUs, a minister and a layperson, were killed during the Selma campaign. UUs were more involved in that campaign of nonviolent resistance than other religious bodies.

Gandhi also believed in “Universal love, because one must love and serve every man equally, placing the general welfare (involving many) before one’s own or one’s family’s welfare (involving few). “All men are the same self in different form. If the same, then equally important . . .their needs are equally important.” (Crawford, Civil Disobedience, pg. 181-2) The Love in nonviolence is central to the power of social change struggles, because it leverages morality for change. Social change that is broadly seen as “right” and fair carries more strength into the political arena than one seen as merely self-interested. The moral high ground is Love professed even for one’s enemies; Love expressed toward others undercuts demonization directed toward those who push for social equality.

Now, I don’t have to belabor the point that King’s nonviolent commitment to Love and Truth stands in sharp contrast to president-elect Trump’s misogyny,

lying, racism, demeaning rhetoric, rampant threatening and vengeance against those deemed personally disloyal. So, I won't belabor the point, except to note how Trump's resentful rhetoric has been seasoned and focused by a cohort of charismatic Christian zealots:

Tens of millions of believers—about 40 percent of American Christians, including Catholics . . . are embracing an alluring, charismatic movement that has little use for religious pluralism, individual rights, or constitutional democracy. It is mystical, emotional, and . . . wildly utopian. It is transnational, multiracial, and unapologetically political. (Stephanie McCrummen, "Army of God," The Atlantic, February 2025, pg.42.)

For all his promise of eventual importance, the twenty-six-year-old King in 1955 Montgomery was not the "Saint" Martin Luther King, Jr. he would become. He was in over his head and knew it. He had flaws and would make mistakes, like many saints. He had to pay attention to some advisors and ignore others, because he was just one player in a vast movement, subject to various influences. Focusing on only King during the civil rights struggle ignores some of the essential factors in **the process of protest for equality** that fueled King's civil rights success. Whereas elevating King to great prominence was useful in generating great press, volunteers, and cash, it was the **process** that made social change success possible.

That process of working for equality was formulated and led by James Lawson (a very central advisor), a process stimulated by the over-reaction by oppressors, and educated at The Highlander Folk School. Highlander was where you went to learn skills of building a movement with theory that you could rely upon. Highlander, established in Monteagle, Tennessee in 1932, "was one of the few places in the South where integrated meetings could take place, and served as a site of leadership training for southern civil rights activities.

James Lawson was a Black American who had served eleven months in prison for refusing to cooperate with draft board laws and moved to India to study Gandhi's nonviolent resistance. Lawson was recruited by King during his speaking engagement at Oberlin college, and Lawson became central to the civil rights struggle. He became a valued King advisor who trained students through instruction and role-plays, some of which were indeed violent—such as kicking

chairs out from under people and throwing coffee on them. He trained them with strict adherence to self-restraint so they would not react emotionally to provocation. Lawson formulated his progression of 1) First identify and research a problem to locate the truth, 2) Educate concerned people on the research, 3) Negotiate with the opposition to inform them of your position, and 4) Demonstrations coupled with withdrawal from colluding with an oppressive system. Thus, research, education, negotiating, and demonstrating; each step builds on the previous step. The civil rights struggle was one of disciplined, planful, participatory examination of how changes need to be made and devising responses to oppression. The movement was always changing in response to adverse events and new tactics were needed to counteract racist authorities. While Montgomery buses were being boycotted, for example, Black people still had to go to work, so a volunteer system of carpools was created.

And then the Montgomery city government over-reacted, handing the protest movement both great challenges and new opportunities to demonstrate moral superiority. King was arrested and imprisoned in Montgomery for driving 30 miles per hour in a 25 miles per hour zone, his house was bombed, the city illegally indicted a hundred people but only King was convicted, etc. James Lawson observed that the many threats addressed toward King “made him profoundly aware of how dangerous the struggle was and also how he had to have the spiritual and moral fortitude to work through it and live through it.” In other words, the city’s over-reaction hardened people’s resolve, King among them. The over-reaction of racist authorities in Montgomery stimulated vastly increased donations to the struggle, from \$10K a month to \$60K the next month, which funded the purchase of a fleet of station wagons for carpooling. When I was illegally arrested on three counts during an anti-draft board demonstration, even that minor event hardened my resolve.

King was essentially adopted by the civil rights movement that had been nurtured for many years at the Highlander Folk School and local social action committees. Rosa Parks attended a 1955 workshop at Highlander four months before refusing to give up her bus seat, an act that ignited the Montgomery bus boycott.” (“Highlander Folk School,” “the King Encyclopedia,” The Martin Luther

King, Jr. Research and Education Institute” page 1) Parks did not just impulsively refuse to give up her seat. She got training, she was selected by local community organizers as the most appropriate from several candidates, her refusal was planned, and support staff were ready to swing into action once she was arrested.

The Montgomery protest process was furthered on January 10, 1957, just weeks after the bus boycott succeeded when King started the Southern Christian Leadership Council by calling a meeting of activists. Several years of relative quiet followed. “James Lawson began a program of low-profile, yet intense training” (Ricks, pg.40). I see Lawson’s and Highlander’s work as absolutely essential. King was traveling around giving speeches, but a base of committed volunteers who could trust each other had to be established for substantial progress to be made, starting about three years later. These volunteers were trained using the careful and disciplined four-step process Lawson laid out to protest for equality.

Progress is a key word here. All over America, there are many clergy telling their congregants it is time for action. Some of them are singing “God Bless America,” because tomorrow’s inauguration is the answer to their Christian triumphalist prayers. Some of those who oppose this viewpoint are saying we have to demonstrate now, never letting up. This is only a guess, but I think UU clergy are today probably urging immediate action for diversity, equity, and inclusion. I am not one of them. I agree with the sentiment but not the immediate implementation. It is too soon.

Some of my reluctance is tactical. The Rev. John Buehrens, UUA president between 1993 and 2001, told me last year—with dismay in his voice—that Unitarian Universalism expanded in the 1960’s but when the civil rights and Vietnam protests dropped off, they left. They joined politically and left the same way, he thought (personal communication). My theory is that many congregations became somewhat distracted from increasing spiritual depth by the glittering promise of social effectiveness.

We are in over our heads in confronting a changed religious and social context. We need to practice love in the most fulsome, most spiritually effective ways among ourselves. We need to practice including people who may show up

and are a little “different” before we challenge society in general. We are a religious congregation of spiritual seekers for love—now the central concept in our new, just-adopted statement of belief. We need to focus on what we are about that strengthens that love and the free and responsible search for truth and meaning. Therefore, I recommend that everyone read Marshall Rosenberg’s Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Compassion. Rosenberg will walk you through how to listen nonjudgmentally, speak nonjudgmentally from knowing your feelings, and ask clearly for what you want. You can practice nonviolent communication in any dialogue. Again, I recommend that everyone read Marshall Rosenberg’s Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Compassion. I ordered a dozen copies to give out here. Once we get into our new space, we can have workshops on applying his theory.

Further, our niche market is crowded. We need to expand the kinds of people we attract and how we treat them. They will not look like us as we are now and will not respond as we do. We will need to listen carefully to who they are and what they need and tell them nonjudgmentally who we are and what we need. We need to be a welcoming congregation in deed as well as word. People will come to us because they are hurting and need something that gives them hope. People will come to us because they want to raise their children in a better world. I am not saying we are inadequate or wrong-minded. There is far too much of that kind of rhetoric going around. I am saying that we can be more compassionate, more hopeful when we truly reach out to understand each other and develop that reaching out fully. We are faced with new circumstances and new events, and so we are in over our heads but we have a way to swim out.

King had two favorite Bible quotes. One of them was Psalm 118, which includes a repetitive refrain such as these:

When in my distress I called to the Lord,
His answer was to set me free,
The Lord is on my side, I have no fear,
What can man do to me? (Ps. 118:5-6)

And another was Galatians 3:28-29:

There is no such thing as Judean and Greek, slave and freeman, male and female, for you are all one person in Christ Jesus.

“When Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke to the American Psychological Association in 1967, he asked: why should we be adjusted to a world of bigotry and violence and inequality? I think we should focus on creative maladjustment. We should absolutely reject a status quo that is unjust, but we should be creative in knowing that something better is possible and that a lot of people want that better outcome . . .many, many people around us want things to improve. And in that there is power in the collective will. There is great power to produce change. (Jamil Zaki, “Navigating Uncertainty,” last paragraph, TED Radio Hour from NPR, 1/10/25)