

King 2023

I have wrestled with the legacies of Mahatma Mohandas Gandhi and The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. for many years. I was active in the anti- Vietnam war movement. Before entering preparation for the ministry, I attended the Martin Luther King, Jr., School for Social Change at Crozer Seminary, the Baptist seminary where King got his first theological degree. There, I studied the mechanisms for social change, how to research an area for the likelihood of social change, and how to conduct myself in the face of harassment. One of my teachers had instructed King in social ethics and had been arrested twenty-three times while trying to integrate the local public schools.

I worked with the Philadelphia Housing Council, an African American agency which had forced the corrupt Philadelphia government to give it a voice about services in public housing projects. I was as safe and effective as any person could be because--with hair reaching my shoulder blades and boot cut jeans--I was clearly neither a bill collector nor the police. I went door-to-door with leaflets, explaining what the Council was about and urging people to come to a meeting and form a local council to review contracts for, say, elevator maintenance or buildings and grounds cleaning in the housing project. This was hard, dangerous work. Several times, mid-day, I heard gunshots. Sometimes, the Council had to send an African American man with me to get me into and out of a project because otherwise I was not safe from angrily territorial youths. Sometimes there were skirmishes with the police just outside the borders of the project. A few people were indifferent or avoidant of my approach, but many others spoke with me and were personable, eager to participate, and intelligent. They taught me many things about being African American in Philadelphia, often gave me lunch, and wished me well.

Demonstrating at the local Selective Service office, a policeman arrived and said he had to tell me three times to leave, or I would be arrested. He told me to leave once, I turned to go, but he grabbed my arm and charged me with resisting arrest. When the Rev. Daniel Berrigan and others raided a nearby FBI office, I learned that the FBI had an informant within the seminary, and I had earned an FBI file for attending graduate school.

These experiences provide a backdrop for the material I present today. Coincidentally, the MLK school and Crozer Seminary ran out of money during a sharp recession, and I received a fellowship to study for the UU ministry in the same week.

First, I will review the theory of nonviolent social action. Second, I will discuss the spectrum of social change activism. Finally, I will discuss where we might fit ourselves into a social change framework.

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 was a short path 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. When he asked UU headquarters for support in the Selma campaign, 500 UU’s went there to march with him, including the Board of Trustees.

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. 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.

As the civil rights campaigns wore on, King expanded his concerns from racial justice and voting rights to allied issues—peace in Vietnam and anti-poverty programs. In this era, climate change, health care, and income inequality could all benefit from committed nonviolent champions.

Although I would prefer to call this Satyagraha or truth-force--to emphasize its essential spiritual dimension--nonviolent tactics for social change have always played off of the dark shadow of violence. The British in India preferred to negotiate with Gandhi over talks with the several armed groups fighting English forces. Prime Minister Winston Churchill openly disliked Gandhi but invited him to England to talk about Indian independence in order to free the exhausted English forces from a colonial war. The civil rights movement gained its power from its contrast with the Black Panthers and others carrying guns. Even in our present day, Omar Wasow (political scientist at Pomona College) said that “[Black Lives Matter] and its allies need to do a better job of framing their arguments and so capturing the narrative. One of the lessons of the 1960s . . .was that the use of violence alienated public opinion, whether it was employed by white police or Black rioters. [Wasow explained] ‘Activists picked places like Birmingham and Selma because there were these police chiefs with a hair trigger for

violence who would engage in brutal repression in front of the cameras. That would shock the conscience of those otherwise indifferent or even hostile actors outside the South. It changed public opinion.” (Ricks, Good War, pp.333-4)

Nonviolent methods starkly present the contrast of how some people are treated unfairly with how the constitution and the laws say they should be treated. Nonviolence demonstrates the legal and social unacceptability of this unequal treatment. “‘We are here this evening for serious business,’ King said [to a large audience three days into the Montgomery bus boycott]. ‘We are here in a general sense because first and foremost we are American citizens.’ With that he established the central claim of the Movement, the demand to be treated as equal members of American society.” (Ricks, Waging a Good War, pg. 16)

There has always been a backlash for every attempted advance toward justice. There were White riots and assassinations reacting to every sit-in, march, or triumph but that violence was visible to a national audience because the bright light of nonviolent protest (being attacked violently) was beamed to every American TV set. TV brought attention to the bombings, lynching, and intimidation that was daily life in many parts of the United States. That is still true. January 6, 2021 was broadcast on numerous media channels as the obvious racist opposition by a birther president Trump and his resentful White followers to greater voting equality.

Your reactions to this may vary between envy of those in the past civil rights movements who got a chance to stand up for what is right, anxiety about publicly demonstrating your commitments to justice and risking emotional or physical assault, pride in your neighbors or Unitarian Universalism for being part of the good struggle, and grief for those killed or maimed by violent suppression. Such internal conflict can exhaust us.

The basis for nonviolent social change is built in mundane, daily organizing, training of a cadre of committed volunteers and professionals, and preparation. Thought must be put into how to make the next move, what will galvanize a horde of people in a wide swath of the country, and discussions must involve people of all kinds to refine a strategy for change.

As is typical of UU congregations, individuals within our congregations attend demonstrations, protest, write letters, give to food pantries, contribute to the ACLU and Planned Parenthood, etc. and support social service projects on their individual merits. There is always more that needs doing than we can do.

A problem with this style of individualistic social change efforts is that our congregation as a whole is not thereby engaged and publicized. This style does not have the power we potentially could express if we were to organize together. How can

we motivate potential visitors to find out more about us? Sometimes, we carry our yellow banner at a demonstration, but a more coordinated effort on even a small scale would be more useful to the whole congregation.

. Do not be distracted by spectacular events like marches and demonstrations from the underlying mechanisms of social change. We may not see a lot going on at any one time, but very important work can go on in discussing change and how to do it. For example, the roots of the Black Lives Matter approach go back to “the Highlander Folk School, the embattled outpost in rural Tennessee that was so crucial in the lives of Movement stalwarts such as Septima Clark, Rosa Parks, and Andrew Young, and also touched the lives of others such as James Bevel and John Lewis.” (Good War, pg.333)

We are so inclusive that organizing around ethnic, religious, sexual, or racial disparities is not possible. We can be helpful allies, but we don't have the identity uniformity that would keep ethnic, religious, or racial social change motivation high. We could, however, engage in social change around climate change, health care, or income inequality, which intersect with ethnic, sexual, and racial disparities. Climate change, health care, or income inequality would give us local opportunities for social change efforts.

We could commit ourselves and focus on a mission IF: 1) we wished to be an organized center for the many ways of thinking about social change, we could do that. If 2) we wanted to be a training center for vigils, demonstrations, rallies, and marches, including how to act before, during and after change actions, we have the experience for that and we may someday have the space. If 3) we at FUSW wished to instruct people in the necessary spiritual and emotional disciplines during, say, a march and how to isolate and defuse provocateurs, we could do that. If 4) we wanted to gather here to construct the support structures for demonstrators who need food, water, baby sitters, transportation, signs, etc.—everything that goes into logistics—we could do that. If 5) we wanted to give the space, social support, interface with the police, and religious cover story for people planning social change, we could do that. We could commit ourselves and focus on that mission. We would have to carefully consider possible consequences, but we could do that. All of these are important possibilities for constructing a durable social change foundation.

I billed this sermon as “Peace by way of Truth and Love” because peace is not a state of placid quietude. Peace is Justice in action. Peace is moving toward what we and the world need. Our focus on searching for truth, with an attitude of love, would set us apart as unique, attractive, and effective. Our focus on the truth with Love would be newsworthy. Our focus on truth with love would be so rewarding internally that motivation could continue. So be it.