

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie
 Arlington Street Church
 19 January, 2020 ~ Dr. King Sunday

Dr. King's Divine Discontent

On May 18th, 1966, in Hollywood, Florida, Rev. Dr. Dana McLean Greeley, then President of the Unitarian Universalist Association, former senior minister here at Arlington Street, and my mentor, introduced the evening's speaker to the General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association. The occasion was the annual Ware Lecture; the speaker was Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. His sermon was entitled *Don't Sleep Through the Revolution*.

I want to share with you this morning a little of Dr. Greeley's introduction and of Dr. King's opening remarks, so we may know our history: the part that Unitarian Universalism and Arlington Street played in the Civil Rights Movement. And then, while encouraging you to read the piece in its entirety, I'll skip ahead to Dr. King's directives to the church. Ringing across half a century, he exhorts us to divine discontent.

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Dr. Greeley said of Dr. King, in part, "... The god of history is with him. Preacher, reformer, citizen, man of peace, lover of justice, in any history he will be appraised as one of the truly great men of this century. We offer him not only our respect, but our love and our loyal support. It is a great privilege to give you Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

And Dr. King responded, in part, "There are those wonderful moments in life when you speak before a group that is so near and dear to you that you don't feel as if you have to engage in the art of persuasion. You don't feel as if you are in the midst of strangers. You know that you are with friends. And I can assure you that I feel that way tonight.

"In a real sense, my own personal encounter with Unitarian Universalists began when I was a student at Boston University, back in the early '50s. I can remember on several occasions I visited Arlington Street Church, where your distinguished Dr. Greeley pastored at that time. And I can remember beyond that, in the early years of my ministry — indeed, beyond that in the early years of the

bus boycotts in Montgomery, Alabama — three of your ministers visited and encouraged me in that very trying and often difficult period....”

Dr. King goes on to invoke the memory of Arlington Street’s Rev. James Reeb, murdered by white segregationists in Selma in 1965; and to thank Unitarian Universalists for our help in supporting the movement to end slums in Chicago. He concludes, “So you can see that, in many ways and for a long time now, we have worked together in a very meaningful way. I want to express my personal appreciation for your support; it has been of inestimable value in the continuance of our humble efforts.”

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Dr. King then goes to the heart of his message, saying, “There can be no gain-saying of the fact that a social revolution is taking place in our world today.... Victor Hugo said ... there is nothing more powerful in all the world than an idea whose time has come.... We are in the midst of revolutionary times....

“The great question,” he continues, “is, what do we do when we find ourselves in such a period? Certainly the church has a great responsibility, ... because when the church is true to its nature, it stands as a moral guardian to the community and of society. It [is] the role of the church to broaden horizons, to challenge the status quo, ... and to question and break mores....”

He directs the church to three actions:

“First, ... we are challenged to instill ... a world perspective.... Now, more and more, we are challenged to make this world one.... Through our scientific genius, we have made of this world a neighborhood, and now through our moral and ethical commitment we must make of it a brotherhood. We must all learn to live together as brothers or we will all perish together as fools. This is a fact of life....

“All life is inter-related, and somehow we are all tied together.... I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you never can be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be.... This realization is absolutely necessary if we are to remain awake all over this nation and all over the world in this revolution.

“Secondly, it is necessary for the church to reaffirm over and over again the essential immorality of racial segregation.... Segregation ... is not merely sociologically untenable; not merely politically unsound; not merely economically

unwise; it is morally wrong and sinful.... So over and over again, we must make it clear that ... we are through with this unjust system now, henceforth, and forevermore.

“[And we must] refute the idea that there are superior and inferior races. It is out of this notion that the whole doctrine of white supremacy evolves. It is necessary for the church to take a stand through its channels of education to direct the popular mind at this point.

“[Thirdly,] ... if the church is to remain awake through this social revolution, it is necessary for [us] to engage in strong action programs to [eliminate] the last vestiges of segregation and discrimination.

“[To do that,] it is necessary to get rid of one or two myths....One is the notion that legislation cannot do anything to bring about the desired changes that we need in human relations. This argument says that [you have] to change the heart in order to solve the problem; that you can't change the heart through legislation. There's some truth in this. Certainly if we are ultimately to solve the problems that we face, [we] must rise to the majestic heights of being obedient to the unenforceable....

“Having said that, I must go on to give the other side.... It may be true that the law cannot change the heart, but it can restrain the heartless. It may be true that the law cannot make a man love me, but it can restrain him from lynching me.... So while the law may not change the hearts of men, it does change the habits of men.... It is necessary for the church to support strong, meaningful civil rights legislation....

“... A second myth that we must deal with is ... the myth of exaggerated progress.... We've come a long, long way; we still have a long, long way to go, and action programs are necessary. I've heard it said that the day of demonstrations is over.... Well, I'm sorry that I can't agree with that. I wish I could say the day of demonstrations is over, but as long as these problems are with us, it will be necessary to demonstrate in order to call attention to them. I'm not saying that a demonstration is going to solve ... the problems that we face.... But ... at least the demonstration creates a kind of constructive crisis that causes a community to see the problem and causes [it] to begin moving toward [action].”

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Toward the end of the Ware Lecture, Dr. King says, “I talk a great deal about the need for a kind of divine discontent.... I must say to you this evening, my

friends, there are some things in our nation and in our world to which I'm proud to be maladjusted. And I call upon you to be maladjusted, and all people of good will to be maladjusted ... until the good society is realized. I never intend to adjust myself to segregation and discrimination. I never intend to become adjusted to religious bigotry. I never intend to adjust myself to economic conditions that will take necessities from the many to give luxuries to the few, and leave millions of people perishing on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of prosperity. I must honestly say, however much criticism it brings, that I never intend to adjust myself to the madness of militarism, and to the self-defeating effects of physical violence....

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Less than two years after that historic evening in the life of our faith tradition, Dr. King was murdered, leaving us to fulfill his dream.

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Dr. King directed us

to embrace the interrelatedness
of the whole world;
to decry the sin of racism;
and to be activists.

If the church is to remain awake
through this social revolution, he said,
we are called to *divine discontent*.

What does divine discontent look like in your life?
What does it ask of this beloved spiritual community?
What does it mean not to settle?

Divine discontent calls us
to restlessness,
to long for a better world,
to dream,
to envision,
and to act.

Divine discontent calls us
to something higher,
something deeper,
something holy.

Beloved spiritual companions, Dr. King never despaired of the future. He believed, wholeheartedly, that racism could be rooted-out; ignorance and estrangement could be transformed; and we could live together in peace and prosperity.

These are the closing words of *Don't Sleep Through the Revolution*:

“I know there are still difficult days ahead.
And they are days of glorious opportunity....

With this faith,
we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair
a stone of hope.

We will be able to transform the ... world.

[We] will be able to ... sing
in the words of the old ... spiritual,
‘Free at last, free at last,
Thank G*d almighty, we are free at last.’”¹

¹ Please read Dr. King's Ware Lecture in its entirety at uua.org/ga/past/1966/ware