

*Dreaming Our Faith*

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**We all have dreams.**

**Dreams for how we wish the world to be.**

**Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. preached about his dreams**

**in his famous speech August 28, 1963 in front of millions**

**at the Lincoln Memorial, in Washington, D.C.**

**His was an eloquent speech given for Civil Rights,**

**advocating for justice for all people.**

**His was a speech for non-violent action.**

**His speech was one of hope for all, preached through his Baptist minister's lens:**

*Let us not wallow in the valley of despair, I say to you today, my friends.*

*And so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.*

*I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal."*

*I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.*

*I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.*

*I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.*

*I have a dream today!<sup>1</sup>*

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1 <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkihavedream.htm>

Our choir sang beautifully this morning some of the words  
from Rev. King's *I Have A Dream* speech.

A number of you , like me, remember this speech  
when it was first given, and we remember those days of great turmoil in our nation.

Today, while Rev. King's dream is far from fulfilled,  
his dreaming and preaching and leading did take all of us further down the road  
towards an ideal place where the lion and lamb lie down with one another,  
and where the Realm of Heaven becomes Heaven on Earth.

His was a vision of a completely integrated society or a beloved community,  
*a liberated humanity, and a quest for a new world order in which people  
of all races, colors, and creeds would sing, pray, and live together.*<sup>2</sup>

Like Rev. King I, and I imagine most of you, have been dreaming of such a hope  
for our planet, for all of humanity, for all living beings, in truth.

And, I continue to hold onto such hope, as I hope you do,  
in the midst of other evidence that could lead us to despair.

For we, too, live in a time of deep tribulation.

Let us remember what Rev. King preached:

*Let us not wallow in despair.*

He turned to his beloved community, his Baptist roots,  
to the teachings of Jesus, to the non-violent teachings of Mohandas K. Gandhi,  
as well as his profound faith in his Christian God,  
to find a way through the trials and afflictions of his lifetime.

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2 Lewis Baldwin. *Thou, Dear God*. Kindle edition. 114-116.

**What is it as Unitarian Universalists that we can hold onto from our faith stances that will guide us in the social arena, in the calls to social action and advocacy in our lives?**

**Like Rev. King, we as Unitarian Universalists, have soaring expectations for how we dream our world to become, while living day in, day out, with realities that are deeply imperfect. We yearn for all citizens to be treated equally, and know that they are not.**

**Dr. Melissa Harris Lacewell, in her opening remarks at the Ware Lecture at our General Assembly in 2008 illustrated quickly with the following remarks the gap between our ideal world and the world we live in today: Imagine, she said, “a Supreme Court bench of justices where every justice is a gay, black woman.”**

**Just imagine that possibility, and how far, we are, in reality from creating such a possibility.**

**I believe that by looking more closely at the preaching and prayers of Dr. King, we UUs can learn a great deal about how to move into the social arena, to create positive social changes we desire for a better world.**

**Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. preached many eloquent sermons.**

**In terms of social action, social concern, a dominant theme of his was concern for “the neighbor” and “other selves.”<sup>3</sup>**

**He often stated that the first law of life is not “self-preservation” but “other preservation”<sup>4</sup>**

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<sup>3</sup> Lewis. Kindle. 107.

<sup>4</sup> Lewis. Kindle 108-111

In a sermon entitled *The Three Dimensions of A Complete Life*<sup>5</sup>

Rev. King preached about three levels of our lives that are necessary for each of us to have a “complete” life.

While on the surface his message appears simplistic, it is really profoundly mystical, and can instruct us today as UUs in search of how to best do our social action, as well as live our lives well. He spoke of the need for balance, for completeness among three factors.

The first is *an inward concern for one's own welfare*.

I believe we would all agree with Rev. King that a healthy, rational sense of self is a necessary foundation for a complete life. Such a sense of self would include knowing and loving and respecting one's self.

*A lot of people, he preached, don't love themselves.*<sup>6</sup>

As Rev. King said, *such people go through life with deep and haunting emotional conflicts*<sup>7</sup>.

Before we can love others, we have to love ourselves first of all.

Loving one's self means *accepting who you are - and not trying to be someone else*.<sup>8</sup>

Rev. King was speaking to the sense of shame that a number of blacks felt at that time for being black and oppressed, and wanting to be someone other than who they were.

His words of *not trying to be someone else* however, can apply to each of us, here, right now.

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5 Martin Luther King, Jr. *A Knock At Midnight. The Three Dimensions of A Complete Life*. Kindle 1509-11.

6 Martin Luther King, Jr. Kindle. 1568-71

7 Ibid. 1571-74.

8 Ibid 1571-74

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Have you accepted who you are, really,  
or do you long to be someone else -  
someone younger, someone older, someone with more money,  
someone who is more successful than you, for example.

Part of accepting who we are is discovering what we do well-work-wise,  
and becoming content to do such work the very best we are able.

Rev. King calls us to *see the dignity of all labor*.<sup>9</sup>

Buddhists call this *right livelihood*.

Rev. King recites the following verse<sup>10</sup> to help us all accept our places in life:

If you can't be a pine on the top of a hill,  
Be a scrub in the valley – but be  
The best little scrub on the side of the hill,  
Be a bush if you can't be a tree.  
If you can't be a highway, just be a trail,  
If you can't be the sun, be a star;  
It isn't by size that you win or fail-  
Be the best of whatever you are.

Thus, the first factor of a complete life for Rev. King  
is to love and accept yourself completely.

The second is then, to turn to help one's neighbor.

Who are our neighbors?

Rev. King uses Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan  
to teach us about our neighbors.

On the road to Jericho from Jerusalem, a man fell among thieves,  
and was beaten, robbed, and left to die.

Three men passed by, and only one stopped to help.

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9 Ibid. 1596-99.

10 Ibid. 1609-13.

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**Why didn't the first two, a priest and a Levite, stop to help?**

**Rev. King preached that they were too concerned for their own safety,  
as the road between Jericho and Jerusalem was dangerous.**

**Only the Samaritan, a good man,  
a person of a different race from the victim,  
and who actually was despised by the local people, because of his nationality,  
had no concern for his own safety.**

**He stopped to help the helpless, injured man.**

**The first two men may have been thinking,**

**“If I stop, what will happen to me?”<sup>11</sup>**

**(How often do we, today, think similar thoughts when it comes to helping others?)**

**The Samaritan, however, most likely thought**

***“What will happen to this man if I do not stop to help him?”<sup>12</sup>***

**What will happen to our world today, if we, as a people of faith, do not stop and help-**

**-those caught in the immigration mess;**

**-those unable to see the realities of climate change, and those living now with such devastating realities;**

**-those oppressed because of their gender, their sexual orientation, their religious beliefs.**

**-those suffering from hunger and cold and want and mental anguish, as well?**

**We need, like the good Samaritan, to be willing to take a risk**

**for humanity and for the planet and all that we value as a people of faith.**

**We need to understand our interdependency upon others, every day,**

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11 Ibid. Kindle. 1653.

12 Ibid. 1655-58.

as well as the Oneness of Creation that connects each of us to the other.

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What will happen to humanity today if we do not help others?

The words of Matthew come to mind:

*I was hungry and ye fed me not.  
I was sick and ye visited me not.  
I was naked and ye clothed me not.  
I was in prison and you weren't concerned about me.*

It's overwhelming at times, as the need is so very great.

I was chatting with Bev Wedda the other night in the parking lot,  
where so many of our good conversations take place, here at First Parish, Northborough,  
and she was sharing about her recent trip to Haiti with Sara Shields  
to help medically those in need.

She spoke of the overwhelming sense of devastation.

And yet, she and Sara went, and helped.

And we, too, can best do whatever it is that we can do.

Let me affirm for a moment that we do a great deal  
as a Beloved Congregation to help our neighbors.

We give half of our offertory or more than half away most weeks.

We work in the Community Meals program,  
we bring food and money to the food bank,  
we have a Giving Fair each December, we have a Minister's Fund  
where I, as your minister, can give money to those in need.

We visit the sick, and those who have lost loved ones to death.

And, yet of course, each of us, always and forever,  
can do more to help our neighbors.

7.

To do so, will help us have a more complete life.

The third factor of the complete life, according to Dr. King,  
is that of living one's faith.

While he was railing against those who profess to be Christian  
and do not live a Christian life,

I thought, what does it mean if we say we are UU,  
and do not live as a UU?

What does it mean to live as a UU?

Let me suggest that at least a part of living our UU faith is that  
we, as Unitarian Universalists, really accept our faith heritage,  
and are we proud that we are UUs .

We do not hide our faith under a bushel,  
so that our lights don't shine very far.

Can we accept that our voices are needed in a conservative country  
and, like the blacks in Martin Luther King's world,  
while we too may be persecuted for our liberal views,  
we need to be proud of our rich, liberal heritage,  
and stand where we stand as a people of faith today.

What are we called to do today as a people of faith?

We can discover this, and I want to suggest that  
what would be the strongest voice coming from us  
would be one, where we speak in one voice, as a beloved community of faith.

**This is what Rev. King did within his African American Baptist faith tradition.**

**8.**

**I am not denying our history of individual UUs striking out to right a wrong in our society.**

**No. I am instead advocating for a dream I have always had- that we unite as a people of faith, and make stronger stands against what needs to change for the better in our world today.**

**We have, today, a wonderful Social Action Committee, under the very capable leadership of Laura Wagner.**

**This committee is growing and trying to figure out how to best serve all of us as a beloved community in terms of what issues or actions we want to see happen today.**

**Our Social Action Committee has grown from a struggling group to a group of people dedicated to helping the rest of us get on board with the social needs of our time.**

**Rev. Richard Gilbert who wrote *The Prophetic Imperative* and dedicated his life to Unitarian Universalist social action, believes that first and foremost as UUs we need to have our *social action grounded in and emerge from a carefully thought out and well articulated theology.*<sup>13</sup>**

**While Rev. King would ground his social action in his profound connection with his God,**

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13 Richard Gilbert. *The Prophetic Imperative*. 164-165

Rev. Gilbert suggests for us as UUs that we ground our social actions

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in a theology he describes as *reverence for life*.

He says:

*Reverence for life, I believe, provides the ethical basis for social action. This motif can appeal broadly to the Unitarian Universalist community and mandates individuals and communities to serve life and seek to expand its quality. The ethical base is informed by the insight that love is the expression of reverence for life in personal relations, justice in social relations, and trusteeship in our relationships with the non-human natural world. The creation of the Beloved Community of Love and Justice (was) is suggested as the covenantal basis for liberal religion.<sup>14</sup>*

Rev. Gilbert believes, as I do, that the church

*has real power and potential power in the social order.<sup>15</sup>*

Social Action is not just the concern of a few within a congregation,

but needs to be *the overflowing concern of the church for the world*

*of which it is a part.<sup>16</sup>*

Clearly, Rev. King understood this during his lifetime.

As UUs, our faith tradition has swung between some great periods

historically of tremendous social involvement,

and periods of quietude and inward reflection.

I want to implore you that this is not the time for inward reflection.

This is a time of tremendous change-

- look at the Middle East with the Arab spring;
- look at the climate changes upon us;
- look at the economic injustices we are all feeling.
- Look at the grid-lock of our political leaders

This is a time for all of us to work for social justice.

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14 Ibid. 165.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

**I am advocating here that we discover together  
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what is the theology of our time that will hold us  
together as a beloved community as we work for social justice.**

**If we do not find such a common basis for our social action/justice work,  
we risk not being able to be as powerful as we might,  
in dealing with the issues of our time.**

**In summary then, Rev. King offers us as UUs  
a road map to wholeness as human beings.**

**First, we love and accept ourselves.**

**Secondly, we love our neighbors as ourselves.**

**And thirdly, we infuse our lives with a UU faith  
that calls each of us to live within our faith  
drawing strength and energy from the values  
we hold so dear, such as Love and Justice.**

**Thus, I am dreaming our faith.**

**May you dream along with me,  
so that we can create a common understanding among ourselves,  
as a beloved community,  
and we can then act upon our dreams, turning them into reality.**

**We will benefit. And so will the wider world around us.**

**Peace and love to you.**

**11.**