

... Each of us must keep faith in the future. Let us not despair. Let us realize that as we struggle for justice and freedom, we have cosmic companionship. This is the long faith of the Hebraic-Christian tradition: that God is not some Aristotelian "unmoved mover" who merely contemplates upon Himself. He is not merely a self-knowing God, but an other-loving God forever working through history for the establishment of His kingdom.

—The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

From the "Give Us the Ballot Address" delivered at the Prayer Pilgrimage For Freedom, May 17, 1957

The Theology of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Our Own

Welcome

Rev. Clare Petersberger

The Covenant

(Read in unison)

L. Griswold Williams

**LOVE IS THE DOCTRINE OF THIS CHURCH,
THE QUEST OF TRUTH IS ITS SACRAMENT,
AND SERVICE IS ITS PRAYER.**

**TO DWELL TOGETHER IN PEACE,
TO SEEK KNOWLEDGE IN FREEDOM,
TO SERVE HUMAN NEED,
TO THE END THAT ALL SOULS SHALL
GROW INTO HARMONY WITH THE DIVINE—
THUS DO WE COVENANT WITH EACH OTHER
AND WITH GOD.**

Opening Words

from Mysticism and Social Action: Lawrence Lectures and Discussions with Dr. Howard Thurman

By Richard Boeke; forward by Luther Smith, Jr.

The Reverend Dr. Howard Thurman was 30 years older than Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and was also raised in the Black Baptist tradition. In 1935, Thurman traveled to India where he met Mahatma Gandhi, who taught the principles of non-violent resistance and how they might be applied by African Americans to the struggle for civil rights and freedom in the United States. Gandhi told Thurman, "it may be through the Negroes that the unadulterated message of nonviolence will be delivered to the world."

The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. often quoted Gandhi's conversation with The Reverend Dr. Howard Thurman during his own work for civil rights. In 1958, King was physically attacked at a book signing. The Reverend Dr. Howard Thurman came to visit him in the hospital. He advised King to take two weeks "away from the immediate pressure of the movement" to "rest his body and mind with healing detachment." Afterwards, King wrote to Thurman, "I am following your advice on the question."

The Reverend Dr. Howard Thurman became more of a mystic through his adult life. He wrote of how, due to the vicissitudes of the social situation in which he was forced to live as a black man in a segregated American society, it was vital for him to find within himself an inner peace. In his series of lectures on Mysticism and Social Action he wrote: "As a boy, in Florida, I walked along the beach of the Atlantic Ocean in the quiet stillness that can only be completely felt, when the murmur of the ocean is stilled and the tide moves stealthily along the shore. I hold my breath against the night, and watch the stars etch their brightness on the darkened canopy of the heavens. I had the sense that all things—the sand, the sea, the stars, the night, and I—were one lung through which all of life was breathing. Not only was I aware of a vast rhythm enveloping all, but I was part of that rhythm, and the rhythm was a part of me.

Many years later . . . I recognized the experience as being in itself religious, even . . . as being mystical. As one of the characters in the story of the African farm replied when he was asked, "Do you ever pray?" . . . "No, I never do. But I'll tell you where I could pray: If there were a wall of rock on the edge of the world, and one rock stretched out far, far into space, and I stood alone on that rock, alone, with stars above me and stars below me, I would not say anything, but the feeling would be prayer."

Chalice Lighting

Adapted from The Rev. Dr. Howard Thurman

(Read responsively)

We light our chalice for our faith to open unto us all that is needed to keep before us the moments of our high resolve.

**THAT IN GOOD TIMES OR IN TEMPESTS,
WE MAY NOT FORGET THAT
TO WHICH OUR LIVES ARE COMMITTED.**

So open unto us—

COURAGE FOR OUR FEAR.

Open unto us—

HOPE FOR OUR DESPAIR

Open unto us—

PEACE FOR OUR TURMOIL.

Open unto us—

JOY FOR OUR SORROW.

Open unto us—

STRENGTH FOR OUR WEAKNESS.

Open unto us—

WISDOM FOR OUR CONFUSION.

Open unto us—

FORGIVENESS FOR OUR WRONGDOINGS.

Open unto us—

TENDERNESS FOR OUR TOUGHNESS.

Open unto us—

LOVE FOR OUR HATES.

Open unto us—

LIGHT FOR OUR DARKNESS.

As we are so opened

**MAY WE BE MADE EVER MORE FULLY ALIVE
AND THEREFORE KEEP FRESH BEFORE US
THE MOMENTS OF OUR HIGH RESOLVE.**

In this circle of care, we make space for the complexity of life, the myriad experiences that bless and break our hearts. Someone who wrote about experiences that bless and break our hearts was Mary Oliver, who died this week.

She wrote:

“There is only one question:
how to love this world.”

We come to be reminded of this question and of our answers. Today we bring concern for those affected by the longest government shutdown in American history which is every American citizen—we, the people of the United States. Fortunately, the UUA does have some funds for furloughed workers. Please speak to me if this resource would be helpful.

Prelude

“If I Can Help Somebody”

Alma Androzzo

Tracy Hall, voice and piano

Story

God Wants Fairness from *Hide-And-Seek with God*

Mary Ann Moore

Delivered by Joyce Duncan

The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was a minister who talked about God—and especially about how God wants fairness for all people. Our story, by Mary Ann Moore, is about how God wants fairness.

“When God created the world and the people, God saw to it that there was plenty of land and plenty of water and plenty of good things to eat. God saw to it that there were enough good things in the world for everyone. God said, “The world I have created is . . .”

How does the ancient story in the Hebrew Bible go? “The world I have created is good. The people I have created are made in my likeness. I have blessed them and given them all they need for a good life.’ And the people were kind to each other and treated each other fairly. They were glad about the wonderful things in the world, and they offered gifts to God. They sang and made music and danced. And God was happy.”

[The story continues by describing how, as time passed, people became less content as they saw differences in what one another had. They became competitive and judgmental, declaring some things good, others bad. The unhappiness of the people saddened God, who noticed that they began to behave badly toward one another, lying, cheating, stealing, and fighting.

It was then that God summoned Moses, a man known to be fair, and God told Moses that Moses was to take God’s laws to the people. And so Moses did, explaining that God told them not to steal, lie, hurt one another, or wish for things that belong to others. And for a time, the people were attentive to these laws, but they lapsed back into their old, unfair ways, yet trying to placate God with musical offerings.

Again God called on a prophet, the shepherd Amos, to explain to the people that God did not want to be honored with music and song, but rather, that people treat one another fairly. And to remember the messages from God, people wrote down the words of Moses and Amos, which we now read in the Hebrew Bible.]

Someone who read and spoke the words of Amos just over 50 years ago was The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He reminded people to be fair and to care for each other. Because when we are, according to the stories in the Hebrew Bible, God is very, very happy.

Hymn

#281 “O God, Our Help in Ages Past”
Luke Williams, trumpet (2nd service)

Prayer

The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
From *“Thou, Dear God”: Prayers That Open Hearts and Spirits, The Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr.*,
Edited by Lewis V. Baldwin (Beacon Press, 2014)

O God, we thank you for the lives of great saints and prophets in the past, who have revealed to us that we can stand up amid the problems and difficulties and trials of life and not give in.

We thank you for our fore-parents, who've given us something in the midst of the darkness of exploitation and oppression to keep going.

Grant that we will go on with the proper faith and the proper determination of will, so that we will be able to make a creative contribution to this world.

Amen.

Musical Interlude

“Precious Lord”

Thomas A. Dorsey

Tracy Hall, voice

Stewardship Testimonial

Marti Mackenzie

[Text not available.]

Offertory

“Lord, I Don’t Feel No-Ways Tired”

Traditional Spiritual/Phillip McIntyre, arr.

Tracy Hall, voice; Alta Haywood, piano

Sermon

The Theology Of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Our Own

Rev. Clare L. Petersberger

The organization Black Lives of Unitarian Universalism asked white ministers *not* to preach about Martin Luther King, Jr. today. They requested that we heed Kim Hampton’s blog. She wrote, “Don’t preach about Martin Luther King, Jr. Instead of preaching *about* King, preach about the things King would have preached about . . .”

Her idea was to not get stuck in the past, but to focus on ameliorating injustice in the present and for the future. Her advice for the hard-headed who were going to preach on King anyway—and she knew there were hard-headed colleagues—was to “understand that King understood that there is both personal sin and collective/systemic sin. If you are not comfortable saying the word ‘sin’, do *not* use King. King believed in sin.”

Kim Hampton’s advice led me to reflect more about King’s theology—and its relationship to his work for justice. It’s relevant to challenges facing us individually and collectively today. Martin Luther King Jr.’s father was a Baptist preacher. But the Southern Baptists of today probably would not recognize The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s theology. For in a seminary paper on the divinity of Jesus in 1949, King wrote that “To say that the Christ, whose example of living we are bid to follow, is divine in an ontological sense is actually harmful and detrimental . . .”

For King, Jesus was divine because Jesus committed his life to loving God and doing justice. And who, or what, was this God? King believed in the God described in our Time for All Ages who wants fairness for *all* people—a God who wants moral progress so much that God seeks prophets to proclaim that message.

At Boston University, King was introduced to a theology known as personalism. It was not about a supernatural God sitting on a throne controlling humans like puppets. This was a personal God who commands us to love even those who don’t love us back, because we are each created in the image of God and are the image of God. This gives every human being inviolable dignity that can neither be given nor taken away by other human beings.

As an African American living under segregation, King knew all too well that a *sense* of dignity *can* be assaulted by other human beings. This is why King cultivated a spiritual life through silence, meditation, and prayer. For him, the practice of love of God strengthened his love for others, because we are all created in the image of God. Ultimately, as King wrote in his “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” “We are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”

In a Unitarian Universalist Sunday School class on the Bible in 1973, I learned about the Hebrew prophets and how the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. drew upon them in his work against racism, poverty, and war in the 1950’s and 1960’s. In 1973, I do not remember hearing the word “God” spoken in adult worship. Nor do I remember Biblical readings as part of adult worship—except on Christmas Eve. I knew adults who had gone to march with Dr. King in Selma. But they did not share his progressive Christian theology. In fact, many of the Unitarian Universalist adults that I knew in 1973 rejected the Christianity with which they had been raised.

This did not mean that all the Unitarian Universalists that I knew in 1973 had rejected the word “God.” In teacher-training sessions, we talked about different images of God that had been important to us at different times in our lives. But at the center of our worship life were the ideas of religious freedom, of the importance of the tool of reason, and of tolerance for those with different ideas.

In one worship service, I do remember the story of JB, by Archibald MacLeish, being shared. It was a contemporary telling of the story of Job. Its message was that when faced with loss, tragedy, and unfairness we humans must “blow on the coal of our heart and see by and by.” In other words, there’s nothing but us chickens to liberate ourselves from the oppressions we create.

Such atheistic Humanism devoid of God has positive attributes. It lifts up our human ability to think and reason, to make decisions, to take responsibility, to be accountable, and to work together to solve our problems. But there is also a cost.

At the UUA General Assembly in 2017, delegates learned that the rejection of any mention of God in the majority of our Unitarian Universalist congregations in the late 1960’s had a cost. Dr. Mtangulizi Sanyika spoke. He had been the chair of the Black Unitarian Universalist Caucus and lobbied for the Black Affairs Council to receive one million dollars from the Unitarian Universalist Association in 1967. The Board of Trustees of the UUA discovered, shortly after making this promise, that it could not fulfill this promise. As a result, we lost up to 1,500 Black Unitarian Universalists.

I had always thought the controversy resulted from leaders in our association not funding efforts to organize Black Unitarian Universalists. But Dr. Mtangulizi Sanyika offered a different perspective two years ago. Let’s see what he said at minute 15 in the video. (<http://smallscreen.uua.org/videos/ga2017-303-dr-sanyika-presentation>) [Text from minutes 15-17 follow] “When we were within this denomination, we initiated a dialogue on something called Black Humanism . . . When we left in 1969, that was not a walk out. It was an exodus. It was an exodus because we no longer felt we had a home. We no longer felt the love and care. We no longer felt that Black Humanism was on the agenda to be discussed . . . We’ve always said human agency is at the center of transformation, but you can’t do it without divine reconciliation. We said we can be theist and non-theist—I know some of you want to argue that point . . . I don’t mind talking about it, because we were no longer talking about kindergarten theology with no spookistic white guy sittin’ up in no sky . . . We were criticizing the church, across the board. Not just UUism . . . there can be no Humanism without

discussing Black Humanism. It can't be. Why? Because we are a part of the human family who has contributed to the discourse on what it means to be human. So we invite that conversation with everybody who claims to have some form of Humanism in their background. But you must remember you have a history of Christian Humanism in your background too. So, don't throw the baby out with the bath water and say there is nothing but humanity, because once you do that you reinforce White Supremacy without even knowing you're doing it. So, the conversation about Black Humanism is really a conversation about salvation. But it's about the salvation of all humanity . . . Just like Black Lives Matter, Black Humanism matters. But so does all humanity, so does all other Humanism that seeks justice and transformation and peace."

Wow! Dr. Sanyika was saying that the exodus of black people from our denomination was about theology. Not all black people were theists. But some were. And so when they discovered a spiritually allergic reaction to any God-talk; when they discovered feelings of anger to any God-talk; when they discovered being judged as unenlightened for using the word "God" because it could only mean "a spookistic guy sitting up in the sky;" they left us. And we lost their wisdom, their life experience, and their leadership.

We have spent many years learning and talking about white supremacy in terms of privileges white people have and take for granted—such as driving without fear of being stopped, or walking through a department store without fear of being followed, or walking to a convenience store without fear of being gunned down. But I haven't heard us talk about white supremacy in terms of theology. How do you feel when you hear Dr. Sanyika use these words to describe Black Humanism: "We've always said human agency is at the center of transformation, but you can't do it without divine reconciliation." Does it make you feel angry? Or nervous? Or argumentative? Or curious?

When I hear the phrase "divine reconciliation" I'm taken to the image of Dr. Howard Thurman standing on a rock—stars above and stars below—and feeling prayerful, not to mention awe and wonder. I'm taken to feelings of trust that even when our rational minds don't see a way forward through heartbreak, pain, suffering, and injustice, we will be opened and a way will be found. I'm taken to everyone being made in the image of God and therefore, the ideal of loving ourselves and others even those who hate us. Humanity needs, more than ever, to be reminded of this in 2019.

And for those who have been wounded by the word "God," and who can't even begin to imagine what the words "divine reconciliation" might mean, The Reverend Josh Pawalek offers this question: "What realities larger than (you) are carrying (you)—what communities, what ground, what land, what ancestors, what beauty, what spirit, what visions of the future carry you?"

Because the truth is, none of us is completely and totally self-reliant. We are each and all carried by ancestors and communities and hopes and dreams for the future of this planet. I don't hear Dr. Sanyika insisting that everyone begin using the word "God" or adopt Black Humanism as their theology. I hear Dr. Sanyika asking us to make room in our sanctuaries and in our minds and hearts for people whose theology is different from our own. If we are serious about becoming a multi-cultural congregation, we are going to need to make room for different theologies and rituals and practices that recharge our spirits, so that we may, as individuals, and as a congregation, go back out into the world and work to make it more fair and more just.

The vision that carries me comes from this congregation just last week. As our new members shared what brought them to our congregation, different theological perspectives were shared. And at one point, someone who was a self-identified theist put her hand on the shoulder of a self-identified Humanist who does not use

theistic language. That, my friends, is my idea of, if not divine reconciliation, at least the future of Unitarian Universalism. Whatever our theology, or our philosophy, let us help one another to recharge our spiritual batteries so that we can go back out as activists to bring about, if not the Kingdom of God, greater human wholeness and justice.

Hymn

#1045 “There Is a Balm in Gilead”

Closing Words

From *A Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Litany for the Poor People’s Campaign*

Rev. Dr. Katharine R. Henderson, President of Auburn Seminary

We close with part of a prayer by the President of Auburn Seminary, The Reverend Katharine R. Henderson which she delivered at the launch of the 2018 Poor People’s Campaign continuing to draw on the unfinished work of The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s Poor People’s Campaign calling for a revolution of values.

“Divine One, Infinite Love, known to us by many names . . . just as you inspired Dr. King to not let sorrow have the last word, so move us forward.

Move us forward to recognize your face in the human faces of all who struggle for dignity and liberation in this moment.

Move us forward to challenge injustice, to resist and repair, to march and to vote, to disrupt and to wake up.

Move us forward to stand for just legislation and structures that support the many and not just the few.

Move us forward to experience fierce joy—dance and laughter, the wild and the holy—that no one can take from us.

Move us forward to create the future story of America where difference is celebrated, abundance is shared and people are hopeful, working together for a future better than today.

Move us forward as beloved community “caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, bound in a single garment of destiny.”

GO NOW IN PEACE.