

## MARTIN LUTHER KING SUNDAY: *WHAT WOULD MARTIN DO?*

Jan. 15, 2006 — **Barbara W. ten Hove**, co-minister, Paint Branch UU Church, Adelphi, MD

---

### OPENING WORDS

Today is the birthday of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. For many years, Paint Branch has had a tradition of honoring Dr. King on his birthday. Like many in our nation, we recognize the important role he played in the life of our country and our world. In preparation for this service, I went on the website of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Center in Atlanta, GA. On it, these words written about him by his wife Coretta Scott King, remind us of the purpose of this day:

*On this day we commemorate Dr. King's great dream of a vibrant, multiracial nation united in justice, peace and reconciliation; a nation that has a place at the table for children of every race and room at the inn for every needy child. We are called on this holiday, not merely to honor, but to celebrate the values of equality, tolerance and interracial sister and brotherhood he so compellingly expressed in his great dream for America.*

*The King Holiday celebrates Dr. King's global vision of the world house, a world whose people and nations had triumphed over poverty, racism, war and violence. The holiday celebrates his vision of ecumenical solidarity, his insistence that all faiths had something meaningful to contribute to building the beloved community.*

I was quite taken by these words. Martin Luther King, Jr. had an extraordinary vision, known to many of us through his most famous speech, the sermon "I Have a Dream."

But King was much more than a dreamer. He was a concrete thinker, who helped to organize non-violent protests in such a way that people found they could make justice come alive.

I've been thinking a lot about how our world would be different if King were still alive. If King had lived, he would turn 77 today. It's hard to imagine what the world would be like if King had not been shot down in Memphis almost 40 years ago. We have become accustomed, I think, to see Dr. King as an icon, a hero, almost a God or Christ-like figure. While it is understandable that we do this, as he was, by all standards, an extraordinary human being, he was human. And it is his humanity that I want to honor today.

This service is not simply designed to honor King, though I hope it will achieve that effect. Today I also want to ask the question: What would Martin do if he were alive today? Using his words and some of my own, I will imagine a world with King's vibrant presence still among us.

Perhaps a song can serve as an invitation for his spirit to join us here today. This song is almost always a part of the Paint Branch Martin Luther King celebration. Known as the black national anthem, it was written by the wonderful poet James Weldon Johnson with music by his brother Rosamund. [Hymn#149: Lift Every Voice and Sing]

---

**SERMON: *WHAT WOULD MARTIN DO?***

Barbara ten Hove

What if it didn't happen? What if, on a warm spring day in Memphis, where Martin Luther King Jr. had gone to organize sanitation workers, he hadn't stepped out on that balcony for some air? What if the gun of his attacker had jammed? What if King had been hit in the leg or the arm and had only been injured? What if King had lived to help our nation through what would be some of the most painful and challenging years we have ever faced?

I can't help but feel wistful, imagining such a scenario. King, when he died in 1968, was extraordinarily famous, with tremendous political and yes, moral clout. He was the kind of person almost everyone listened to, even if they disagreed with him. I can't help but think his presence among us, even if his clout diminished over time, would have always been a healing and hopeful one. It makes me sad to think how much we lost when he was taken from us.

But he was and the world has gone on. So much has happened since that April day in 1968. But in many ways, very little has changed. And I think if King were still with us, he'd have important things to say about the state our world is in.

So today, I have chosen to imagine that Dr. King *is* here among us, ready to offer his wisdom on issues important to us all. Over the past week, I have been reading again the words King wrote during his lifetime, and have sought to imagine what those words might mean for us today. I am aware that King's ideas and opinions would likely have changed over time had he lived. But for today's purposes, I am assuming that the ideas he espoused during his lifetime would still be true for him today.

In order to bring his spirit among us, I have asked Michael Leger, worship associate, to stand in for King and speak his words to us today. Trust me, he knows these are big shoes to fill!

I will ask Dr. King, given voice by Michael [here indented in italics], to offer us his advice on a few of the pressing social issues of our day. To do this, I have taken words King wrote before he died. I have updated them slightly in ways I think King might have, had he lived. For example, using the word humanity instead of mankind. And I have made a very few substantive changes, such as substituting the word Iraq, for Vietnam. But in most ways, the words are King's.

All quotes are found in the excellent anthology, edited by James M. Washington:  
*A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.*

So welcome, Dr. King, to our pulpit. I would like to ask you to comment on various concerns that many of us here today have about our world in 2006. I'll begin with politics.

One thing that concerns many of us is the incredible partisanship between the political parties. Instead of working together to make laws that benefit the most people in our nation, many politicians seem to be more interested in money than in people. Do you have any suggestions about the kind of leaders our nation needs?

*It is so important to “develop intelligent, courageous and dedicated leadership. This is one of the pressing needs of the hour. In this period of transition and growing social change, there is a dire need for leaders who are calm yet positive, leaders who avoid extremes... The urgency of the hour calls for leaders of wise judgment and sound integrity—leaders not in love with money, but in love with justice; leaders not in love with publicity, but in love with humanity; leaders who can subject their particular egos to the greatness of the cause.”*

[from “Facing the Challenge of a New Age,” 1956, *ibid*, p. 143]

When you were working for civil rights in the 1960's, one of the great causes you took on was racism. Many in America think that racism was eradicated in the later years of the last century. But the aftermath from Hurricane Katrina on the Gulf coast was just one stark example that race is still an issue in our nation. Do you have any words of wisdom on how we might address this critical problem?

*Let me begin by saying that “no American can afford to be apathetic about the problems of racial justice. It is a problem that meets every(one) at (their) front door.*

[from “The Rising Tide of Racial Consciousness,” 1960, *ibid*, pp. 147-8]

*“It is an unhappy truth that racism is a way of life for the vast majority of white Americans, spoken and unspoken, acknowledged and denied, sometimes subtle and sometimes not so subtle—the disease of racism permeates and poisons a whole body politic. We must come to see that the roots of racism are very deep in our country and there must be something positive and massive in order to get rid of all of the effects of racism and the tragedies or racial injustice.”*

[from “Remaining Awake through a Great Revolution,” 1968, *ibid*, p. 271]

What can we do to best address the racism that still plagues our nation?

*White Americans need to understand that “in the past, many joined our movement with a kind of messianic faith that they were going to save (African-Americans) and solve all their problems quickly. They tended, in some instances, to be rather aggressive and insensitive to the opinion and abilities of the black people with whom they were working. In many cases, they simply did not know how to work in a supporting, secondary role. Inevitably, a feeling of white paternalism and black inferiority was exaggerated. The (African-Americans) who rebelled against white liberals were trying to assert their own equality and cast off the mantle of paternalism.”*

*Some have called me an Uncle Tom. But “when I speak of integration I don’t mean a romantic mixing of colors, I mean a real sharing of power and responsibility. New methods must be found. One of these will be a more equitable sharing of political power between African-Americans and whites. We will eventually achieve this, but it is going to be much more difficult for us than for any other minority. After all, no other minority has been so constantly, brutally and deliberately exploited. Because of this very exploitation, African-Americans bring a special and moral contribution to American life—a contribution without which America could not survive.”*

[from “A Testament of Hope,” 1968, *ibid*, pp. 316-7]

*“If western civilization does not now respond constructively to the challenge to banish racism, some future historian will have to say that a great civilization died because it lacked the soul and commitment to make justice a reality for all [people].”*

[from “Where Do We Go from Here?” 1967, *ibid*, p. 623]

Speaking of making justice a reality, in the 1960s, there was hope that poverty could be eradicated. Today, there are still far too many poor people in America, many of them African-American. How might we address this important issue?

*“Up to recently, we have proceeded from a premise that poverty is a consequence of multiple evils: lack of education; poor housing and fragile family relationships. The logic of this approach suggested that each of these causes be attacked one by one. Hence a housing program to transform living conditions, improved educational facilities to furnish tools for better job opportunities, and family counseling to create better personal adjustments, were designed. In combination these measures were intended to remove the causes of poverty.*

*“While none of these remedies is itself unsound, all have a fatal disadvantage. The programs have never proceeded on a coordinated basis. Each seeks to solve poverty by*

*first solving something else. I am now convinced that the simplest approach will prove to be the most effective—the solution to poverty is to abolish it directly by (creating) a guaranteed income.”* [Ibid, pp. 614-5]

A guaranteed income sounds like something a communist or socialist country would do. You were called a communist in the past. What do you say to your critics who still call you so?

*“Truth is found neither in traditional capitalism nor in classical communism. Each represents a partial truth. Capitalism fails to see the truth in collectivism. Communism fails to see the truth in individualism. Capitalism fails to recognize that life is social. Communism fails to recognize that life is personal.*

*“The good and just society is neither the thesis of capitalism nor the antithesis of communism, but a socially conscious democracy which reconciles the truths of individualism and collectivism.”* [Ibid, p. 630]

I'd like to change the topic to another “ism”—militarism—since it is so much on my mind. To date the war we are waging in Iraq has cost the lives of over 2000 American soldiers and tens of thousands of Iraqi civilians. First, can you tell us how you feel about this?

*“As I ponder the madness of (Iraq) and search within myself for ways to understand and respond with compassion, my mind goes constantly to the people of that (land). I speak now not of (those fighting) on each side, nor of the (leadership) but simply of the people who have been living under the curse of war (and oppression) for decades. I think of them too because it is clear to me that there will be no meaningful solution until some attempt is made to know them and hear their broken cries. They must see Americans as strange liberators.”* [from “A Time to Break Silence,” 1967, ibid, pp. 234-5]

Yes, I think they must. But what about our soldiers in Iraq?

*“I am deeply concerned about our troops. For it occurs to me that we are submitting them to a war that is not simply the brutalizing process that goes on in any war. We are adding cynicism to the process of death, for they must know after a short period there that none of the things we claim to be fighting for are really involved.”* [Ibid, p. 238]

Are there things in particular we in the church should do?

*“We in the churches have a continuing task while we urge our government to disengage itself from a disgraceful commitment. We must continue to raise our voices if our nation*

*persists in its perverse ways. We must be prepared to match actions with words by seeking out every creative means of protest possible.”* [Ibid, p. 239]

To end the war, you mean?

*Yes. “Somehow this madness must cease. We must stop now. I speak as a child of God and brother to the suffering poor of (Iraq). I speak for those whose land is being laid waste, whose homes are being destroyed, whose culture is being subverted. I speak for the poor of America who are paying the double price of smashed hope at home and death and corruption in (Iraq).*

*“I speak as a citizen of the world, (a) world (that is) aghast at the path we have taken. I speak as an American to the leaders of my nation. The great initiative of this war is ours. The initiative to stop it must be ours.”* [Ibid, p. 238]

You speak as a “citizen of the world.” One of the biggest issues in our world today is globalization. Can you tell us what you feel are the challenges of globalization?

*“First, we are challenged to rise above the narrow confines of our individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity. The new world is a world of geographical togetherness. This means that no individual or nation can live alone. We must all learn to live together, or we will be forced to die together.”*

[from “Facing the Challenge of a New Age,” 1956, *ibid*, p. 138]

There is so much violence around the world, much of it fomented in the name of nation and religion. Is it realistic to think that non-violence can work in places like the Middle East?

*I believe... “that non-violence is the answer to the crucial and political moral question of our time—the need for (people) to overcome oppression and violence without resorting to violence and oppression.*

*“Civilization and violence are antithetical concepts. (Non-violence is) a powerful moral force, which makes for social transformation. Sooner or later, all the people of the world will have to discover a way to live together in peace... (Humanity) must evolve for all human conflict a method which rejects revenge, aggression and retaliation. The foundation of such a method is love.”*

[“Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech,” 1964, *ibid*, pp. 224-5]

Can you tell us what you mean by love?

*“In speaking of love, (I) am not referring to some sentimental or affectionate emotion. Love in this connection means understanding, redemptive good will. It is love expressed in the Greek word agape. Agape is an overflowing love, which is purely spontaneous, unmotivated, groundless and creative. It is the love of God operating in the human heart. It begins by loving others for their sakes. Agape makes no distinction between friends and enemy: it is directed toward both. Agape is not a weak, passive love. It is love in action. Agape is love seeking to preserve and create community. In the final analysis, agape means a recognition of the fact that all life is interrelated.”*

[from “*An Experiment in Love*,” 1958, *ibid*, pp. 19-20]

Our Unitarian Universalist faith teaches us this important truth. Thank you for reminding us of its significance. Do you have any final words for us, as religious people and as Americans?

*“I must confess, my friends, that the road ahead will not always be smooth. There will be rocky places of frustration and meandering points of bewilderment. There will be inevitable setbacks here and there. There will be those moments when the buoyancy of hope will be transformed into the fatigue of despair. Our dreams will sometimes be shattered and our ethereal hopes blasted. Difficult and painful as it is, we must walk on in the days ahead with an audacious faith in the future.”*

[from “*Where to We go from Here?*” 1967, *ibid*]

*“With this faith we will be able to sing in some not too distance tomorrow with a cosmic past tense, ‘We have overcome, we have overcome, deep in my heart, I did believe, we would overcome.’”*

[*Ibid*. p. 252]

Thank you, Dr. King, for your wise words. You gave our nation so much when you were alive. I hope we never forget your legacy and think often of what you would do as we navigate the treacherous waters of our day.

Martin Luther King, Jr. died nearly forty years ago. And yet his spirit never died but lives still among us. To honor his memory, I invite us to join together in a few moments of silence. Michael and I will bring us out of the silence with words by UU minister Toni Vincent and music from the African-American tradition. Please join with us now in quiet remembering...

---

**READING: *For Martin Luther King, Jr.***

by Toni Vincent [#732 in SLT hymnal]

Great Spirit of light and of darkness; we gather once again to remember our fallen friend, and to nourish ourselves from the fountain of reflections.

Open our hearts to the anguish of our pain, to the tired taste of swallowed tears, to our unrealized vision.

In this place we bring our scattered lives together, groping for meaning and looking for truth. Be with us as we continue our search for understanding of the mystery of the temporal.

Stay with us as we wander through our memories, seeking pathways to the future.

Move with us as we unravel the implied imperatives of hopes unfulfilled.

Justice makes tireless demands and we grow weary.

As we touch one another in common cause, and the great Spirit in our midst, let us find the way and the courage to realize the dream which still lives within us.

[Music, sung:] We'll walk hand in hand, we'll walk hand in hand, we'll walk hand in hand some day. Deep in my heart, I do believe, we'll walk hand in hand some day.

[Sung:] We shall all be free, we shall all be free, we shall all be free someday.

[Spoken:] Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.

[Sung:] We shall live in peace, we shall live in peace, we shall live in peace someday.

[Spoken:] We must narrow the gaping chasm between our proclamations of peace and our lowly deeds which precipitate and perpetuate war.

[Spoken:] To end poverty, to extirpate prejudice, to free a tormented conscience, to make a tomorrow of justice, fair play and creativity—all these are worthy of the American ideal. We can. We shall overcome. Amen.

---

**CLOSING WORDS**

On this day of memory and hope, we have lifted our voices in song, and story, remembering the great spirit of Martin Luther King, Jr.

May his words and his life continue to inspire us to work for justice and peace.

May his dream of a world free of prejudice and war someday become a reality.

And may we re-commit ourselves to overcome our own failings, and work to create another “luminous moral chapter in American history.”

Please join with us in singing our closing prayer set to music, #123, “Spirit of Life.”

• • •