

## SPEAKING TRUTH TO POWER

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Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Northern Westchester – January 20, 2007

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I have watched the news coverage of the primary election season these past few weeks with an almost masochistic determination to pay attention to what's going on, that I might be a more informed voter in the primary and general elections. Because of this, I was occasionally riveted, at times perplexed, and often revolted by the recent fight between supporters of Senators Clinton and Obama about the political legacy of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

In case you missed it, allow me to recap the argument briefly. Lest I inject my own cynicism about the whole affair into my recounting of it, I'll quote an article from the Associated Press, which summarized it thusly:

"Clinton, trying to make a point about presidential leadership, said it took President Lyndon Johnson to pass civil right[s] legislation envisioned by Martin Luther King Jr. Obama said the remark suggested to some that Clinton was diminishing King's historic role." (Associated Press, "Analysis: New Tone in Democratic Race," 1/19/08, as found on [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com))

And in the politically-charged atmosphere that surrounds this year's presidential campaign, things quickly got out of hand. So much so that it became quite the distraction from debates over the real issues that are facing our nation like, for example, what institutional inequalities still remain in our society forty-four years after passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. There are many—and precious time that could have been spent discussing them went instead to this topic.

Especially since a careful student of history knows that both sides had a piece of the truth. Dr. King, whose birthday we celebrate this weekend, knew that his role was to speak truth to power. His role was as a moral voice to force change in our society. And President Johnson knew that no amount of presidential leadership could help him push through controversial legislation without the enormous public voice of the civil rights movement of the day.

As Dr. King said, "Our nettlesome task is to discover how to organize our strength into compelling power so that government cannot elude our demands. We must develop, from strength, a situation in which the government finds it wise and prudent to collaborate with us. It would be the height of naïveté to wait passively until the administration had somehow been infused with such blessings of good will that it implored us for our programs." (C. S. King, ed., *The Words of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, p.43)

When he signed the Civil Rights Act into Law, President Johnson remarked that "those who founded our country knew that freedom would be secure only if each generation fought to renew and enlarge its meaning" and that "our generation of Americans has been called on to continue the unending search for justice within our own borders."

The president also noted that the Act “has received the thoughtful support of tens of thousands of civic and religious leaders in all parts of this Nation. And it is supported by the great majority of the American people”  
(Lyndon B. Johnson, “Remarks On Signing the Civil Rights Bill,” 7/2/64, as found at [http://www.millercenter.virginia.edu/scripps/digitalarchive/speeches/spe\\_1964\\_0702\\_johnson](http://www.millercenter.virginia.edu/scripps/digitalarchive/speeches/spe_1964_0702_johnson))

Both King and Johnson knew that they needed each other to move our nation forward.

But I’m not here today merely to offer commentary on the Presidential campaign.

The reason I’m interested in the relationship between Dr. King and President Johnson is that I’m interested in exploring the role of religion in government.

It should not be lost on those of us who are theologically-liberal (whatever our social views) that Martin Luther King was a minister, and his faith was a central part of his call to justice work. It should also not be lost, however, that Dr. King was not satisfied pointing out social problems—he saw his faith as calling him to work within the political systems of his time to create revolutionary change.

And so, as we celebrate his life, his work and his ministry, let us also understand that he did not refrain from entering the messy world of politics and government in order to achieve equality. His work was not confined to trying to change people’s minds—it also concerned itself with changing our laws.

He wrote: “Through education we seek to change attitudes; through legislation and court orders we seek to regulate behavior. Through education we seek to change internal feelings...through legislation and court orders we seek to control the external effects of those feelings. Through education, we seek to break down the spiritual barriers to integration; through legislation and court orders we seek to break down the physical barriers to integration. One method is not a substitute for the other, but a meaningful and necessary supplement. Anyone who starts out with the conviction that the road to racial justice is only one lane wide will inevitably create a traffic jam and make the journey infinitely longer.” (King, p. 40)

Dr. King’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” from which Carol earlier read excerpts, was a letter to white liberal ministers, ministers who were uncomfortable with King’s direct tactics, who implored him not to engage in civil disobedience—even of the non-violent sort.

Dr. King’s response to those ministers was direct and bears repeating today. Appealing to the best of the Christian Gospel as well as the Hebrew Prophets, King made it very clear that those who would keep religion out of the realm of the day-to-day suffering of people were dooming their religions to irrelevancy.

Dr. King’s understanding of the relationship between religions conviction and political power is very much in keeping with African-American religious, political and cultural traditions in this country.

Princeton political science professor Melissa Harris-Lacewell, in examining the historical relationships between African-American communities and the United States government, concludes that “black assessments of the presidents are rooted in a unique black religiosity that emphasizes the prophetic tradition of the Old Testament and the liberation elements of the New Testament. This form of Christian thought,” she continues, “constructs God’s relationship to black people communally and contains an explicit critique of inequality and oppression. Presidents are judged, in part, by their willingness to fulfill the role of prophet for social justice.” (Melissa Harris-Lacewell, “Seeking a Prophet,” in Gaston Espinoza, ed, *Religion and the American Presidency*, forthcoming from Columbia University Press)

Dr. King's understanding of religion and God, like that of many others, including Sojourner Truth, whose story we heard earlier, was of a compelling force that called him to speak truth to power. Political power. Political power that needed to be shaped by the prophetic teachings of religions that call people to increase love and justice in this world.

The white ministers of Birmingham, Alabama disagreed with Dr. King in 1963. Their understanding of religion was not filtered through hundreds of years of slavery, resistance, racism and struggle. Their understanding of religion was as, in the words of Dr. King, "arch-defender of the status quo." Their withdrawal from the political arena served only as tacit approval of the racist policies of the day. As white people, it was their privilege to do so; it was their privilege to remove themselves from the struggles of a people whose experience was different from theirs. Dr. King implored them to renounce that privilege.

If we seek to create a faith—and a nation—in which the white experience is not held up as the normative one, we must create a faith—and a nation—in which Dr. King's religious heritage informs our tradition today.

In my experience, many people who fall on the liberal side of theology—and most people who fall on the liberal side of politics—have come to believe that any role for religious organizations in creating political change is wrong. Many times, I have heard people invoke the notion of the "wall of separation between church and state" to defend this position, sometimes erroneously believing that this phrase is a part of our nation's constitution.

Allow me to set the historical record straight on this point.

The First Amendment to the United States Constitution begins by stating that, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof...." (Constitution of the United States of America)

The United States Constitution was amended to include this wording in order to guarantee freedom of religion from governmental interference, and not the freedom of government from the influence of religion.

The "wall of separation" is a term from Thomas Jefferson, our theological relative to be sure, who, in an 1802 letter to the Danbury Baptist Association used the phrase in order to convince the Baptists of Connecticut that their freedom religious expression was not at the whim of the state.

This was not Jefferson's only writing on the subject.

Virginia's ground-breaking Act for Religious Freedom, authored by Thomas Jefferson in 1777 and passed by the Virginia legislature in 1786, states that "all men shall be free to profess, and by argument to maintain, their opinions in matters of religion, and that the same shall in no wise diminish, enlarge or affect their civil capacities." (Commonwealth of Virginia Code 1919, § 34; 1985, c. 73.)

Jefferson firmly believed that all people had the right to their own religious beliefs—and that people of all religious beliefs should be allowed the fullest participation in the workings of government.

So many of us who believe in the separation of church and state take the notion deeply to heart, not really understanding that what Jefferson was after was not a non-religious state, but a state where religious freedom prevailed.

So I suggest that the approach informed by a thorough understanding of American history—and the approach informed by a multiracial understanding of the role of religion—is not to marginalize ourselves further by clinging to misguided principles. Rather, it is to claim our religious voice in the public arena.

Our religious voice that calls us to stand on the side of love, no matter the sexes or genders of the people involved.

Our religious voice that calls us to fight for justice for those whose rights are denied.

Our religious voice that says, in clear theological language, that we believe that there is not just one right way to look at the world, that claims, in the words of sixteenth century Transylvanian Unitarian Ferenc David, that “we need not think alike to love alike.”

Our religious voice that claims the possibility of an undivided human family, in which barriers that separate and marginalize have been torn down and relegated to the scrap heaps of history.

Our religious voice needs to be added to the public religious voice in the United States. To do anything else is to squander the religious freedom that we have been given.

To do anything else is to cede the voice of public religion to those without the inhibitions or squeamishness that we religious liberals seem to cling to.

Which brings me back to the race to be the next President of the United States.

I’ve been paying attention to the Republican race as much as the Democratic one, and the role of religion in politics is decidedly different on their side of the aisle.

Take the Rev. Mike Huckabee, former Arkansas governor and Southern Baptist minister, for example.

“Mr. Huckabee has not always been so graceful.” writes the *New York Times*, “Speaking to a not-particularly religious crowd near Detroit on Monday, before the Michigan primary, he slipped into an argument to amend the Constitution to ban abortion and same-sex marriage, ‘so it’s in God’s standards, rather than try to change God’s standards.’” (David D. Kirkpatrick and Michael Powell, “Between Pulpit and Podium, Huckabee Straddles Fine Line,” *New York Times*, 1/19/08 at [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com))

Governor Huckabee, whatever you think of his politics or his religious beliefs, whether or not you think it’s smart (not to mention graceful) to say these things as a contender for our nation’s highest office, is not afraid to say that he believes that the workings of our government should be informed by his religion.

In doing this, he stands with a well-organized and vocal group of socially- and theologically-conservative Christians, people who believe that not only do they have the one right answer but also that they are compelled to change the laws of our nation to reflect that answer.

Unlike the religious convictions of Dr. King, however, the modern-day religious right believes that their God is calling them to *restrict* liberties, to define *more* people as “other,” to narrow the definition of love.

Rather than trying to use the power of organized religious groups to break down the barriers of our society, the religious voice in today's American politics overwhelmingly is one calling for the erection of more barriers.

If religious liberals in our nation continue to insist that our faith not be sullied by contact with the political, if we cling to a meaningless moral high ground in the name of the "separation of church and state," if we see our social justice work as the work only of education and not also the work of legislation, we are, in effect, letting the religious right define what it means to be religious in our country today.

We are letting people who believe that the United States Constitution must reflect a specific, conservative, and literal interpretation of the Christian Scriptures claim to speak for American religion. And all the education in the world won't be enough to counter what will be seen as a monolithic voice against justice and equality for all people.

This is a dangerous road to go down.

And lest you think I'm exaggerating, I've actually heard conservative people claim that the voices of religion are unanimous on controversial issues of our day.

Here is one example: A few years ago, I heard former Education Secretary William Bennett say in a television interview that he was opposed to equal marriage rights for same-sex couples because "every religion" was opposed to same-sex marriage. "Every religion." Those were the exact words he used.

The host of the show couldn't argue anything different. It is clear that Bennett's argument is easily countered by presenting to the public those religions that support equal marriage rights—just one religion that does so would render Bennett's "every religion" assertion a falsehood. Is there such a religion? Of course there is.

If Unitarian Universalists and our religious allies on that issue—allies that include the United Church of Christ, Reform Jewish groups, the Metropolitan Community Church and a growing list of others—could effectively make our presence known in the public arena, his argument would fall apart completely.

So, as we celebrate the legacy of Dr. King, let us remember his work as a whole—his spiritual leadership, his political strategy, his dedication to education and legislation, to changing minds as well as laws.

And in the coming months, let us understand that our voice in our society needs to be heard as much in committee meetings of our state's legislature as in discussion groups, as much in Congress as on National Public Radio, as much in presidential debates as in annual meeting debates.

Let us understand that progress doesn't happen in a vacuum, but through give and take, and practical organizing.

Let us remember that a moral voice shouted in the woods is heard by the trees, but the voice of faith used to inspire those with power to make change can bring about the dream that Dr. King gave his life for.