

THE FIERCE URGENCY OF NOW

Sermon by Audette Fulbright
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All Souls Church, New York City

Fifty years ago this week, the United States reeled as the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was shot and killed in Memphis, TN. Recognized largely for his civil rights leadership, in April of '68, Dr. King was working on the Poor People's Campaign, and had gone to Memphis to bring attention and support to the sanitation workers' strike. A vocal opponent of the war in Vietnam, it was his efforts bringing together workers across racial differences and his voice opposing the military industrial complex that had brought the most frenzied governmental attention to him, and was the work that encompassed his death. Indeed, it is impossible to listen to his last speech, the fateful "Mountaintop Speech," and not have the sense that King had reason to believe that his work would also bring his death. One thing you may not know is that our own Rev. David Robb was working at that time for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and spent the night of King's death on the phone, helping to plan the memorial service that would take place the next day in Memphis. This history is personal.

I don't know about you, but I find it particularly hard to contemplate Dr. King's life and death at this moment in time. It feels as if what small progress that has been made is being rolled back, and, listening to King's speeches, he could have said them just yesterday. The truth then, as now, is that there are those who hoard both power and wealth, and who are willing to tolerate any abuse of other human beings or the rules of law to have and keep more. We are living in a time of open corruption and scandal in the government, an era in which the EIU has downgraded the United States to "flawed democracy," where we sit in 21st place among the nations. Meanwhile, our economy stumbles as there is talk of war - trade and nuclear. People feel vulnerable.

Timothy Snyder, a professor of history at Yale and author of *On Tyranny* and the recently released *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe and America*, wants us to understand a fundamental issue in all of this: that ideas matter. Snyder argues that we in the US have been under the sway of the idea of the politics of inevitability - the idea that we are swept up in a fortunate progressive arc of history; that things will, even if there are hiccups along the way, continue to improve - that the world will continue to become "safer, freer, and progressive."

Putin, under the sway of the Russian Christian fascist philosopher Ivan Ilyin, adheres to a different idea: the politics of eternity. Despite the name, the politics of eternity is a broken politic; having no future, it must rely on turning the people's mind to an idealized past which was stolen and must be reclaimed, and then distracting them with a Great Enemy while also keeping them busy and overwhelmed with mistrust in institutions and information. Under those circumstances, the population can be controlled, the wealth of the nation stolen, and power hoarded by a very small coterie of people, specifically men.

Does that sound familiar in any way? ¹

¹ From *The Road to Unfreedom* by Timothy Snyder. Random House, New York, 2018. Also: "Post-Truth is pre-Fascism: a Holocaust Historian on the Trump Era," by Sean Illig <https://www.vox.com/conversations/2017/3/9/14838088/donald-trump-fascism-europe-history-totalitarianism-post-truth>

Ideas matter. Democracy is an idea, maintained by structures that endure while the idea endures. In a study released just Thursday, 35% of the people surveyed would give up their voting rights for life for a 10% pay raise. Let me say that again: in this study, 35% of the respondents said they would give up their voting rights for life for a 10% pay raise.²

Ideas matter. MLK's dream was the idea that we could choose to build a world where human beings judged one another by the content of their character, where no civil right was determined based on the false narrative of skin color. Feminism is the idea that human beings are equal regardless of their gender identity.

Ideas matter. What Snyder calls the "politics of inevitability" has a lot to recommend it - it encourages us to believe that progress is possible, it can inspire us to build greater equality between humans, in our systems of governance, in ideas of how to build an economy. The problem with it is that it is not, in any respect, actually inevitable. It calls into question that great Unitarian idea, first articulated by Theodore Parker but quoted memorably by Dr. King, that "the moral arc of history may be long...but it bends toward justice." Approached as a spiritual notion, perhaps. Perhaps. Approached as a moral imperative within the fierce urgency of now, it is no universal truth. History is what we make of it, and if we do not place our hands on that arc and bend it toward the best we know and can do, it may bend back toward genocide, economies of devastation, and away from the rule of law.

I spent Friday and Saturday downtown at Middle Collegiate Church at the Revolutionary Love conference. Every year, this conference brings together the most amazing justice workers, religious lights, and moral teachers. Among the many presenters this year were Valerie Kaur and Sally Kohn, Van Jones, Rev. Traci Blackmon, Linda Sarsour, Ruby Sales, Parker Palmer and the Rev. Dr. William Barber, who has relaunched the Poor People's Campaign. The theme was building out from what Dr. King said would destroy not just America, but Western society: racism, economic injustice, and militarism. To that, they added a fourth - sexism. Racism. Sexism. Economic Injustice. Militarism. We gathered to learn, to listen to stories about how these things damage what we love, and to discover together new ways to dismantle the old broken systems so we can build the world we dream about. You see, Middle Collegiate knows that ideas matter. But as religious people together - and Unitarian Universalists were the single largest cohort at the conference! - we need to understand something else, as well, that these ferocious, urgent days also require moral courage. Moral courage is a quality that arises in those who take seriously their ethical, spiritual health. Moral courage is a quality that takes time to develop. It requires study and reflection, the ability to understand oneself deeply, and know what one stands for, and who one stands with. It is the result of a process of spiritual maturation, a gift that comes from taking time to deepen.

Modern Unitarian Universalists are known by several fruits: we are activists, caring deeply about the world around us, moved by injustice. We are known for showing up on picket lines and in Pride parades, in marches and in service to others. We're also known by our strong tendency to be opinionated and strong-minded, with habits of overthinking and not a little arrogance. And we tend to prefer politics to spiritual practice: ask ten Unitarian Universalists their thoughts about a spiritual topic, you'll get nine answers having something to do with the current state of politics.

² "A Third of Americans Would Forfeit Their Voting Rights for a 10% Pay Raise," by Jennifer Calfas, Money Magazine <http://time.com/money/5229718/lendedu-survey-lose-voting-rights-pay-raise/>

At the conference this weekend, Rev. Traci Blackmon talked about how too many religious people separate their spiritual lives from “everything else,” and made the case that everything is part of our spiritual lives. This really isn’t the problem for Unitarian Universalists. Our problem is more that we don’t take our spiritual lives seriously in the first place, so we don’t even get to the part where we separate it from some other part of our lives. And moral courage, and revolutionary love, and shaping the moral arc of the universe all require us to be deep people, able to stand in our truth and move from a center of gravity within ourselves that helps us know “this is the right thing to do, these are the people I stand with, and this is what I will give my life to love.” We need to get serious about becoming steadfast moral agents, with meaningful spiritual lives.

You and I and we together as a people of faith, gathering here at All Souls, need to grow deep together. The fierce urgency of now asks us find ways to be strong, and wise, and compassionate. This time in history requires people of moral courage, who know that ideas matter, and who can offer revolutionary love. We have to be able to persist, because there is so much work to do. When I think about a creative, revolutionary love response to the challenges of the day, I think about how, after the Pulse nightclub shooting, the members of the hate group Westboro Baptist showed up to protest at the funerals of those killed. And local UUs in Orlando showed up, too - wearing angel costumes with huge wings that expanded up and beyond each person, and then together, these angels simply stood in front of the Westboro group, blocking them from the mourners view. They didn’t need to engage; they didn’t need to argue, or insult. They just brought some creative, expansive, revolutionary love to their presence, and protected those who needed protecting in that moment.³

Similarly, when members of a radical anti-abortion group infiltrated a worship service at the First Unitarian Universalist Church in New Orleans, and began to disrupt the service, the Rev. Deanne Vandiver simply asked the congregation to rise and begin singing. The congregation sang hymns of love and hope until the protestors gave up and allowed themselves to be led out.

To respond to the challenges of our day, we need the moral courage that comes from seriously engaging spiritual practice, and developing our wisdom in meaningful reflection with people who share our values. As Unitarian Universalists, what binds us is not that we all believe alike. We hold it as principle that each of us must engage in a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. What binds us is a covenant of love, the work of coming to understand how we should engage with one another and the world. To develop moral courage together, and then find ways to respond to the fierce urgency of now.

Fifty years out from his death, Dr. King’s concerns about racism, poverty, and militarism continue to stand as charges to us. As Dr. Barber leads us in a new Poor People’s Campaign, as women rise and say #TimesUp, and as people of moral courage are needed to stand against the drums of war and the abuses of the state, let us remember that ideas matter, progress is not inevitable, and that if we grow deep together, we can face the fierce urgency of now, and bend the arc of history back toward justice. May it be so.

Amen, ashe, blessed be.

³ “With Angel Wings, UUs Respond to Westboro at General Assembly,” by Kenny Wiley, *UU World*. <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/uuaga16-westboro-counterprotest>

