

Confronting the Dream©

Sunday, January 19, 2025 | Rev. Kathleen C. Rolenz | All Souls Church Unitarian, NYC

The year was 1962; and the winter, like this one, was bitterly cold. A deep freeze had enveloped most of the eastern part of the country, extending all the way down to the small town of Albany, Georgia. Earlier that summer, over a thousand black Albany residents stood packed shoulder to shoulder in the pews of the Shiloh Baptist church. Gathered to support the ongoing civil rights movement in Albany, they joined their voices to protest the deeply ingrained culture of racism and segregation in Albany. “It looks like the movement is going to break wide open down here,” one reporter stated. The Rev’s Martin Luther King, Jr. and Ralph Abernathy spoke to the feverish crowd, eliciting roars of support from those assembled. Offers to march on city hall the following day rose up from the congregation. “The sound of music, the fervor in all that packed crowd of people in the church were like nothing I had ever known,”¹ wrote the reporter.

Yet scarcely six months later, that reporter returned to Shiloh Baptist, only to find a very different environment. The scene he encountered was nothing like the one he had left. Scarcely thirty people were gathered in the church this time, listening to an elderly woman coaxing them to launch yet another march on City Hall. Despite the fervor and intensity of the summer mass meetings, protest in Albany had slowed to a mere trickle. One writer noted that King ran out of willing marchers before the sheriff ran out of jail space to hold them! Albany, Georgia had marked the first mass movement targeted at desegregating a single community in the south, and now it looked like it was a failure. It was a disheartening time in the life of the Civil Rights Movement as the strategies were in doubt, the cold weather dampened enthusiasm to turn out and organizers were discouraged.

When we come to this annual weekend celebrating the leadership of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, and the achievements of the Civil Rights movement we generally hear the stories of triumph and success. We need those stories to be sure. Yet Dr. King was, above all, a preacher and a pastor. He knew he needed to offer prophetic sermons, but he also knew he had to address the uncertainty and doubts of the organizers and allies. So in that cold winter of 1962 he drafted a sermon he preached in various versions that year and the next a sermon entitled “Shattered Dreams.”

“What happens when we confront our Shattered Dreams?” King asked us. As you heard in our reading today, he cited at least three responses; one is to turn our frustration into bitterness and resentment; the second is to withdraw completely and to intellectualize our feelings into a kind of comfortably numb apathy; and finally – to be resigned, to succumb to a kind of fatalism,

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https://digitalcommons.providence.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1001&context=student_scholarship#:~:text=Thesis%20argues%20that%20the,that%20required%20vast%20public%20dedication. Albany movement and the limits of non-violent protest.

summed up by the phrase “well, it is what it is.” Does any of this resonate with you and the circumstances that face us today? It does with me. After many candidates I favored in November’s election did not win, I vacillated among all three of these emotions – plus going through some of the classic stages of grief when you suffer a loss; shock, denial, anger and depression. I expect that tomorrow, I – and perhaps some of you – will be bringing similar feelings to the Presidential Inauguration. It is no small irony to me that the new President will be inaugurated on the same day the nation is called to reflect on the inherent dignity and worthiness of all people, and to affirm values such as diversity, equity, and inclusion for all citizens; when the incoming administration has vowed to dismantle all DEI programs within the Federal Government.

Before I go on, I want to pause for a moment here. I’ve been with you now for just over a week and I’ve been listening carefully to what you tell me. One voice I’ve heard from different parts of the congregation – and from diverse people within it, tells me this - “There is no place in this church for politics....I need to leave that behind when I come through the doors of this sanctuary.” I want you to know that I hear those voices and respect them. This congregation can and should include a wide diversity of religious, spiritual, theological and political beliefs. I expect that this congregation – not unlike other UU congregations – includes among its members Democrats and Republicans; Independents and Libertarians. I want to say very clearly that I have no interest in preaching partisan party politics. I do however, expect to speak to the values upon which Unitarian Universalism has been built and sustained over hundreds of years. The truth of the matter is that when we walk out of the doors of this sanctuary; the world is still out there waiting for us. As much as we would like to avoid politics – they have a profound affect not only on the cost of groceries but on other concerns which our congregation’s values compel us to care about: whether or not our trans siblings can get life affirming health care; whether or not the gains which have been made for people of color since the Civil Rights movement are being dramatically eroded; whether environmental protections will be reversed and whether or not immigrants and refugees who have contributed to our nation’s health and vitality will be returned to a world where they are stalked by poverty, fear or death. These issues are real – and they will become only more urgent during the next four years. No preacher worth her salt should ignore them.

As my colleague the Rev. Dr. Jacquie Lewis from across town at Middle Collegiate Church frequently says, these are “hot mess times.” Dr. King lived in hot mess times as well. He certainly knew discouragement and spoke to confronting that discouragement in the excerpt you heard from the “Shattered Dreams” sermon. It has been said – that the best sermons are the ones we preach to ourselves; so Dr, King was also preaching to himself and what he needed to hear at that time. And he listened to himself. He did not lose heart. In fact, the disappointments of Albany GA provided valuable lessons for the organizing that would come shortly thereafter in Brimingham AL, and in preparation for the March on Washington a year later.

Three years after that, Dr. King was in a very different situation. He was a Nobel Prize winner, with recognition and respect at home and abroad. He was preaching a different message to different audiences in his sermons – sermons that were admonitions to his listeners and a call for change. One of them was preached on May 18, 1966, as part of the Ware Lecture at the annual Unitarian Universalist Association General Assembly in Hollywood, Florida. His title: that day was “Don’t Sleep Through the Revolution.”

King said: “The idea whose time has come today is the idea of freedom and human dignity, and so all over the world we see something of freedom explosion, and this reveals to us that we are in the midst of revolutionary times. An older order is passing away and a new order is coming into being. The great question is, what do we do when we find ourselves in such a period? Certainly the church has a great responsibility because when the church is true to its nature, it stands as a *moral guardian of the community and of society*. It has always been the role of the church to broaden horizons, to challenge the status quo, and to question and break mores if necessary. I'm sure that we all agree that the church has a major role to play in this period of social change. I would like to suggest some of the things that the church must continually do in order to remain awake through this revolution.”

He went on to list three points: “First, we are challenged to instill within the people of our congregations a world perspective. Secondly, it is necessary for the church to reaffirm over and over again the essential immorality of racial segregation. Thirdly, the next thing that the church must do to remain awake through this revolution is to move out into the arena of social action. It is not enough for the church to work in the ideological realm, and to clear up misguided ideas. To remain awake through this social revolution, the church must engage in strong action programs to get rid of the last vestiges of segregation and discrimination.

What then, does King’s admonition mean for the church – for our church – in the hot mess times we face today. We will always feel that familiar tension between the calling we feel to engage with spiritual life and practices – to seek that centering and peace which will rise above the messiness of politics ; and the calling to be a social justice warrior, with an urgent mission that allows no time for spiritual contemplation. Our faith teaches us that this is a false binary – that our commitment to social justice must always be grounded in spiritual practice; for it is those spiritual practices which keep us from despair and that sustain our resilient commitment. Our spiritual life in this congregation must be intertwined with our personal commitment to act in ways that make the world more just – more hopeful – more fair and more peaceful, not for ourselves alone, but for all people. This is what I believe King meant to truly be “awake” to our what a spiritual life involves and how it requires us to be responsive to the world’s needs.

“Awake” is a powerful word in the world’s religions and most notably directly and dynamically connected to the practices of Buddhism. When Buddha was asked: “What are you? Are you a God?” “No” the Buddha replied. “Are you a reincarnation of a God?” “No.” “Well, what are you?” and Buddha simply replied “I am awake.” The point of spiritual practice is to be

awake – to be fully present for each and every moment; to see truth of the real world clearly; to hold all the contradictions of life in your heart and mind without judgment. So to stay awake through the revolution of justice, equity and compassion that has been ongoing have seen since the days of the Civil Right movement is a good thing, right? It’s what we as religious and spiritual people strive for through spiritual practice.

Unfortunately, we live in an era in which words can be kidnapped and redefined for partisan political purposes. And so the idea of being awake has morphed into a partisan meme – thrown like a bomb by the left and the right – “awake” has become “woke.” What was African-American cultural vernacular has become associated with a litmus test of positions on a few issues. Most of us are aware of Florida Governor Ron DeSantis “war on woke” in his state which helped get him elected and re-elected. The latest iteration of the kidnapping of the word “woke” by the right can be found in [Project 2025: A Presidential Transition Project](#). The word “woke” is used, by my count, at least twenty times, referencing policies, practices and culture. Broadly, “woke” has been defined by conservatives as “the belief there are systemic injustices in American society and the need to address them.” Their response is to say: “We will never ever surrender to the woke agenda.” They have successfully re-framed the original meaning of “staying woke” as described by that flaming radical NYTimes columnist David Brooks this way: “to be woke is to be radically aware and justifiably paranoid. It is to be cognizant of the rot pervading the power structures.”

As we remember Dr. King today we must also acknowledge the ways he was awake to the larger implications of his struggle for civil rights for African Americans. He expanded his understandings and his advocacy to the linked oppressions of economic inequality sustaining a permanent underclass, fueled by the excesses of capitalism and militarism. King’s sermons today would almost certainly be dismissed by many as part of the “woke agenda.”

Let me say that certainly there are times when doctrinal wokeness can be used as an intellectual or political cudgel, setting a standard of institutional purity and perfection which none of us can live into. Progressives are not immune to that form of purity culture in our own desire to practice justice and equity. That is the wokeness that both liberals and conservatives understandably, rebel against. But I would argue that the basic premise of being awake that the Buddha described includes an ever-deepening awareness of linked oppressions, and must include the ways that the culture of white supremacy has sustained those oppressions over centuries. This awareness calls us to work worthy of our faith.

So my shattered dream is not that my candidate did not win the presidency; my shattered dream is that America, and white America in particular will simply go back to sleep – like Rip Van Winkle – forgetting the hard fought gains of the Civil Rights and Black Lives Matter Movements; denying the rights of the LGBTQAI community; believing that men should have the final say over what happens with a pregnant person’s body; rejecting the science of climate change and how it demands that our personal lives change. America will not become great by sleeping through the revolution – these are the shattered dreams I had before the election which I

must confront and renew in order to resist the tyranny of denial and complacency.

So as we wake up tomorrow and all that the day ahead holds, let us be awake – and prepared to act on the values which we cherish. Let us sustain hope and courage in the face of disappointment. At the end of King's Ware lecture, he returns to the familiar, soaring rhetoric later made famous in his "I Have a Dream" speech. Speaking to a room full of Unitarian Universalists much like this one, and quoting our own Theodore Parker, he told us....

“ we can sing We Shall Overcome, because somehow we know the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice. We shall overcome because Carlyle is right—"no lie can live forever." With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope.”

So friends, on the eve of Martin Luther King Jr. Holiday; on the cusp of this new administration, I implore you – don't fall into complacency, apathy or despair. Resist the urge to become the very thing we despise. Stay alert! Stay Awake! And the next time someone throws out wokeness and it's meant to deride your desire to bring truth to power; – say yes, I'm woke! I'm awake! And I want you to be awake too! Wake up political pundits! Wake up politicians! Wake up and Rise Up – and Will you Rise Up Now with me as willing able to close this service today by singing James Weldon Johnson's powerful hymn that has become known as the African American National Anthem - "Lift Every Voice and Sing.”