

A More Beautiful and Terrible History

a sermon by Rev. Khleber Van Zandt at the UU Fellowship, San Miguel de Allende, July 15th, 2018

Maybe you've been to the National Mall of the United States in Washington DC and visited the memorial to the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. By coincidence I went there with a group of church leaders the day before it was to be dedicated back in 2011.

The entire Mall can be an emotional place for gringos like myself, lots of outsized monuments to moments in our national history. For Dr. King to be there near Washington and Jefferson and Lincoln and the war heroes of our numerous overseas conflicts - well, it just seems right to a lot of us.

The day I was there, I was struck by the abundance of quotes from the good Rev. Dr. carved into the landscaping walls comprising the entry to the memorial, not least of which was his "the arc of the universe bends towards justice," which I remember King borrowed from Theodore Parker, the Boston-based firebrand Unitarian minister and abolitionist of the mid-19th century. But I also saw, etched into the side of the rock from which Dr. King's image emerges, this strange quote: "I Was a Drum Major for Justice, Peace, and Righteousness." Oddly self-referential, I thought, this paraphrase of words from one of King's last sermons but taken completely out of context. I thought it was clear in that sermon that he was being dismissive of those who crave public recognition when he said, "If you want to say that I was a drum major, say that I was a drum major for justice. Say that I was a drum major for peace. I was a drum major for righteousness. And all of the other shallow things will not matter."

Ironic, then, that this quote would end up written in stone on that National Mall. But here's the thing: the story doesn't end there.

After a flood of complaints, that errant quote was removed a couple of years later. Which gets me to thinking: if quotes that have been etched in stone can somehow be changed, maybe we should do the same with some of our myths.

More mythology. In 2013, a life-sized statue was unveiled in Statuary Hall in the Capitol building in Washington DC depicting Rosa Parks; it is a bronze casting of her seated and waiting to be arrested after refusing to give up her seat on a Montgomery, Alabama, bus to a white man.

The way I first heard the story of that moment of hers in our national saga was that Ms. Parks was returning from work that day and was simply too tired to get up and - as dictated by local statute and tradition - move to the back of the bus and so she was arrested. All I've read since then tells me that this was a gloss of the actual facts and so was mythmaking at work.

When her statue was dedicated, the mythmaking continued in full force. President Obama said in his remarks that day: "This morning, we celebrate a seamstress, slight of stature but mighty in courage... In a single moment, with the simplest of gestures, she helped change America and change the world... And today, she takes her rightful place among those who shaped this nation's course."

Nice. Remaining seated was a simple gesture, but there are two things about it that are too often missed.

First she didn't remain seated because she was physically tired from her seamstress work. Mrs. Parks' niece, Urana McCauley, sitting in that same unveiling ceremony with President Obama, said, "I know what my aunt went through. And it was beyond just being physically tired. She was tired of the injustice."

In fact, Parks' refusal to give up her seat was part of a larger strategy that she had worked hard on and trained for. It wasn't a momentary whim, but a courageous and planned act of putting herself on the line for a larger vision. To say she was impulsive in her behavior is to obscure the fact that after her leadership in the bus boycott, she was fired from her job and had to move her family - first to Virginia and then to Michigan - in search of jobs for herself and her husband.

Secondly, yes, she acted courageously. But she did not act alone. She joined the NAACP in 1943 and began organizing and working alongside untold numbers of others in the social justice and criminal justice arenas. Ms. Parks *was* instrumental, no doubt, in changing our society for the better, just as the Rev. Dr. King was. But to say that things change because of the courage and strength and perseverance and persistence of one or two or several people is to minimize and ignore the great work of so many others.

Of course we need heroes, like Allende and Hidalgo and Aldama. But things don't generally change because of one or two people. They change because we come together to do the hard work of organizing and educating and following through on our commitments to our neighbors.

It is not so often the 'I' that is critical in such huge cultural shifts, but the 'we.'

Now hold up a moment, because it is that 'we' I just used that can also be problematic. Sometimes, you and I have to admit, 'we' had nothing to do with it; it's more properly 'they' when we're celebrating work done and things changed and justice accomplished.

As an example of this, in her book *A More Beautiful and Terrible History: the Uses and Misuses of Civil Rights History*, author and educator Jeanne Theoharis mentions President Ronald Reagan's initial strong opposition to the creation of a national holiday in memory of Dr. King. Then, when pressure for it became irresistible, she says, he shifted gears and simply co-opted the idea into his own ideological framework. As he signed the King holiday into law, he asserted that "we can take pride in the knowledge that we Americans recognized a grave injustice and took action to correct it." Again, two problems: first, as if King's aspirations had already been attained and nothing more need be done - you've got to be kidding. And then second, 'we Americans'? Don't you mean 'those other Americans'? As if people like Mr. Reagan had anything to do with building up systems of justice in the world rather than dismantling as much as they could.

Lest you think this too partisan, Theoharis also writes about the troublingly similar sunniness in President Obama's rhetoric, for instance during the 2007 campaign when he declared at the historic Brown Chapel in Selma, Ala., that the earlier generation of civil rights activists "took us 90 percent of the way there." Did he really think we were 90% of the way to the Promised Land, 'cause from this 2018 vantage point, we sure seem to have a long, long way to go yet.

Be that as it may, there is no dearth of Democrats or Republicans or conservatives or progressives or PRI or PRD or MORENA ready to climb on board the freedom train - rhetorically, at least. Even those actively working to thwart voting rights and civil rights and criminal justice legislation call on the tropes of the civil rights movement. This form of gringo American triumphalism says that we *shall* overcome, that yes, there are things in our society and culture that need to be corrected and, gosh, we all agree on them, don't we. We all loved Dr. King and the ideals he stood for and we all appreciated that sweet little lady, Rosa Parks, who kept her seat to shed light on grave injustice in the Southern U.S..

Well, no, not really. We didn't all love Dr. King when he was alive. He received death threats regularly; his house was bombed with his family inside; that liberal bastion, the FBI, ran an extensive file on him. Even his friends wondered at some of his positions; when he came out

against the war in Vietnam, many gave up on him; the youngsters in the movement had long since quit believing his theories on nonviolence. A 1966 Gallup poll found that 72% of white people in the U.S. had an unfavorable opinion of Dr. King. Now that he's been gone 50 years, of course, it's hard to find anyone of any persuasion who'll speak against him. In fact, everybody wants to use his words to make themselves sound better.

And another thing: it *was* bad in the American South. That's indisputable. But we too often ignore that it was bad in the American North and East and West as well.

While the Watts area of Los Angeles burned in 1965, Gov. Edmund Brown said, "California is a state where there is no racial discrimination." And then it was one William O'Connor, head of the Boston School Committee (Boston's in the Northeast), who said during the busing crisis (oops, I mean 'the battle to save neighborhood schools'), "We have no inferior education in our schools. What we've been getting is an inferior type of student." Meaning, of course - well, you know what that means.

It wasn't just bad in terms of a little attitude; there were examples of overt racism all over.

While Southern white segregationists placed "whites only" signs on water fountains and restrooms and businesses, white public officials in the North used legislation restricting public spaces to local residents and selective enforcement of laws against loitering to enforce racial segregation.

In the South, white officials painted color lines in the sand of public beaches to exclude people of color. In the so-called racially liberal Northeast, towns devised procedures for determining who could access beaches and what they could bring and do once inside, and then proceeded to enforce them on black and brown people only.

But that was 50 years ago. Things have changed, you say.

Okay. Just two months ago in Philadelphia, a white Starbucks manager called police on two African American men after one asked to use the restroom before he purchased anything. Two weeks later, in Oakland, California, a white woman called police to report a black family grilling food in a public park for a picnic. In both these cases, the 'perps' were accused of violating rules still on the books governing conduct in commercial and public spaces. In the first case, for loitering; in the second, for using a charcoal grill outside of designated areas.

As Andrew Kahrl wrote recently in the failing NYTimes, "Most white Americans prefer to consign such naked acts of discrimination to a shameful past that we have supposedly overcome. But in light of these recent incidents, it would be more accurate to call the forms of Jim Crow that prevailed in the Northeast in the early- to mid-20th century the cutting edge in technologies of exclusion, a sign of things that were to come. It will take more than sensitivity-training sessions and the public shaming of racist, hypervigilant white women to dismantle today's system of segregation."

A couple of side-notes from the news this week:

First, I read that Emmitt Till's murder case is being reopened 63 years after that 14-yr-old boy from Chicago was lynched in Mississippi in 1955 for engaging in some sort of interaction with a white woman. Two of his killers were tried before an all-white-male jury and found not guilty before admitting that they'd been involved; they've both since died, but the woman is still alive. Why reopen the case after all these years? Because mythology is not enough in these cases - we need to know the facts as best they can be known so we can come together as a people and work against anything like it happening again.

Second, I saw mention this week again of studies done over the last few years showing the correlation of skin color to economic mobility here in Mexico. I'd heard about Mexico's supposedly-post-racial society, wherein Mexicans are a lovely rainbow of colors (which they are), owing to their broad ancestry coming from a number of pre-Hispanic peoples, from Europeans including Spanish and German, and from folks of the African diaspora who were mostly brought here as slaves hundreds of years ago.

The studies affirm, though, that the closer your skin is to white, the closer you are to the top of the economic ladder in Mexico and the easier it is for you to climb on up higher.

Before I go too far, though, I should remember that I've been in Mexico for approximately ten days now so I shouldn't make-believe I know anything about racial or any other issues here in your beautiful country. So many of you have been here far longer than I, especially any of you who grew up here.

But then the problem with that is that growing up in a society, or spending a long time there, can mean you become so embedded and enmeshed in it that you begin to take the myths you've heard as gospel and you quit examining them with an open mind.

It's so much more comfortable to accept the status quo and go blithely along with whatever happens to support your particular layers of privilege. And that's what all of us have to fight against.

So. If you think it's over, it isn't. If you think we've reached the Promised Land, you're mistaken. If you think Civil Rights was back then and not now or out there and not in here, I invite you to think again. It's time we heard the history of Civil Rights, not as quaint old stories about a long ago past, but as a call to action in a difficult present.

Jeanne Theoharis says it is one of the misuses of civil rights history to say to those folks out on the front lines now - say, the leaders of the Black Lives Matter movement or our own UU sistren and brethren in Black Lives of UU - to say to those people pushing for change right now, "You need to act more like Dr. King. That's the way to get people to follow you: act nice, don't disrupt, know your place. You'll win way more friends with sugar than with vinegar."

But those things were not true in King's time, and they are not true today.

If Martin King and Rosa Parks have been mythologized beyond recognition, others have stepped into the breach. A few of the current generation of strong trailblazers:

Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi of Black Lives Matter;

Tarana Burke of MeToo;

Chad Griffin of the Human Rights Campaign;

Nihad Awad of the Council on American-Islamic Relations;

Benjamin Crump, attorney for minorities who have experienced police brutality;

Michelle Alexander, criminal justice and prison reform advocate;

Malala Yousafzai, activist for the education of women and girls;

Bryan Stevenson of the Equal Justice Initiative.

That's ten, but there are hundreds and thousands out there who have picked up the torch and are - as our last hymn will say, "marching on to Freedom Land." Here's the thing: all those new marches may not do it to *our* specifications. Our job at this point is not to tell them how to do it, but to remember real Civil Rights history in all its complexity and confusion and inconvenience and discomfort, and then back up today's leaders.

The myth about the old days is that it was a glorious time, that America was moving toward something great all as one, as America always does. The myth about today is that we are already there now so we can quit.

The reality is that it was a hard time, we were divided then as we are now, and that America is still rife with entrenched systems of oppression and injustice that need our attention and our commitment and our courage to change.

We mustn't let anybody turn us around.

So may it be.