

Opening Words

Between the head and the heart is the voice, and our voice reflects our choices: the way we reconcile what we think and what we feel, what we know and what we desire. Our voice reaches the world through the manner in which we live – sound is unnecessary, we show others who we are by the way we go through life, and touch everyone we meet with who we are in that moment.¹

¹ Shreve Stockton, 10/13/2007 (www.vespavabond.com). Used with author's permission.

Voices and Choices

On April 4, 1967, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., addressed a meeting of Clergy and Laity Concerned at Riverside Church in New York City, delivering a speech titled, "Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence." In April 1967 I was not yet five years old, but I can remember watching the evening news with my father that year, trying to work out that "troops" meant individual soldiers and asking him repeatedly why we would want to kill other people on purpose. He would clear his throat (a stalling technique to which I had grown savvy), and I would take a deep breath (a more-questions-to-come technique to which he had grown equally savvy), then he would decide it was past my bedtime. My question was never answered. Yet such questions, unanswered, have a way of persisting.

Almost 40 years later I had occasion to read the words delivered by King at Riverside on April 4, 1967, exactly one year before his death. The five years preceding his Riverside address had been busy ones for King: in 1963 he was jailed in Birmingham and he delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech in Washington, D.C.; in 1964 he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize; he witnessed both the signing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, both resulting in great part from his commitment to and leadership in the Civil Rights Movement; in 1966 he moved into a Chicago slum tenement to draw attention to continuing discrimination in housing and employment; and by April 1967 King had focused his nonviolent protest philosophy against the socioeconomic injustices that hurt *all* Americans, black and white, rich and poor.

Although King was widely questioned and criticized for speaking out against the war in Vietnam, he was compelled to do so because he considered the war abroad a war against the poorest people at home, and he did so because, in his own words, "...my conscience leaves me no other choice."² *My conscience leaves me no other choice.*

With keen intellect, King offered those gathered at Riverside a clear critique of the historical and political decisions that initiated the Vietnam War and led to a commitment of American troops in Vietnam. Through his personal choices and sacrifices, he had demonstrated how to actively engage one's life in the work of social justice, notwithstanding the long odds or the dangerous struggles inherent to challenging the status quo. His Nobel Peace Prize provided him the credibility to lecture about the ineffectiveness of violent protest against imagined/created enemies.

But it was not his intellect, his lived experience, or his credibility that moved him to speak to those gathered at Riverside. It was his *conscience* that moved him to voice his concerns: "A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death."³

When I heard a news analyst say recently that we have had to learn to "ration our moral outrage" during the Bush administration, I wondered what King's response might have been. He

² Martin Luther King, Jr., "A Time to Break Silence," in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, edited by James M. Washington (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1986), 231.

³ *Ibid.*, 241.

understood the internal conflict between patriotism and dissent, just as he understood the dangers of apathy and conformity. A year before he broke silence and spoke for the voiceless at Riverside Church in 1967, King urged Unitarian Universalists gathered at the 1966 General Assembly in Hollywood, Florida to "remain awake during a great revolution."⁴

In his 1966 Ware Lecture "Don't Sleep Through the Revolution" King said, "There are those wonderful moments in life when you speak before a group that is so near and dear to you that you don't feel like you have to engage in the art of persuasion." Unitarian Universalists should be proud to have been on the receiving end of such kind and warm words from Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He recognized our legacy and our potential, and he called to us through our social-justice heritage and through our Unitarian Universalist Principles to be awake during the revolution of socioeconomic justice and peacemaking in America.

As the status quo he opposed relied on fear, King relied on our collective and individual UU commitments to social justice. King said, "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...[and] we are challenged to instill within the people of our congregations a world perspective."⁵ But why are these activities the responsibility of the church, and why did King consider Unitarian Universalists to be kindred spirits in the work of social justice?

Certainly our principles call us to the work of social justice, especially the first, second, fifth, sixth, and seventh principles. Within our theological diversity are deeply held values that compel us to passionate and active engagement with our world.⁶ In its 2005 report, the UUA Commission on Appraisal wrote that "UUs are summoned to become *theologically informed prophetic servants*."⁷

In our theologically diverse movement, what does it mean to become a theologically informed prophetic servant? We need not worry that the answer is elusive. After all, this work is in our theological DNA.

UU theologian and scholar James Luther Adams goes to the heart of the matter by reminding us that "the decisive element in social action is the element of power," a power expressed both as "God's law and love" and through the "exercise of human freedom."⁸ From within that divine love and exercise of human freedom (otherwise known as choice) come the calls for action, the calls to engage in the *responsibilities* of being human, or, as Adams frames it, "*responsibilities to the possibilities of being*."⁹

⁴ Martin Luther King, Jr., "Don't Sleep Through the Revolution," Ware Lecture, May 18, 1966, Hollywood, Florida (http://www.uua.org/news/2005/050115_ware66.html).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ UUA Commission on Appraisal Report, May 2005, *Engaging our Theological Diversity*, 111.

⁷ Ibid, 115.

⁸ James Luther Adams, "Theological Bases of Social Action," in *The Essential James Luther Adams: Selected Essays and Addresses*, edited by George Kimmich Beach (Boston: Skinner House Books, 1998), 195 & 206.

⁹ Ibid, 195.

Adams described the prophets of the Hebrew Bible as "*political theologians*" and noted that their prophetism "laid a burden of [*active*] *responsibility* upon all people."¹⁰ Moving from the Hebrew Bible to the New Testament, Adams described Jesus not as a political theologian, but as a *relational theologian* who emphasized "the divine yearning and initiative for fellowship between God and the person, and between persons."¹¹ For Jesus, love and justice were to be found in our relationships with God and with each other; community was key.

Shifting from our Judeo-Christian theological heritage to our Humanist heritage, we are reminded by minister and scholar William R. Murray that the individual freedom and self-determination inherent to religious humanism ask us to carry great responsibility "for what we say and do."¹² *Voices and choices*. Murray further reminds us that our humanity can flourish only in a true democracy, one in which all voices – poor and wealthy – will be heard. In a true democracy, choices toward human dignity and fulfillment are available to *all* Americans, not merely the privileged few.

There is no doubt that we are a theologically diverse religious movement. In such times as these it is essential for us to remember that we are politically diverse, as well. Just as we understand the strengths of our theological diversity so must we understand the strengths of our political diversity. Our theological and political diversities uniquely position us to be a strong, clear voice of reason and faith in the ongoing national conversation of justice and peace. When Unitarian Universalists model that we need not think alike to love alike,¹³ we raise the tenor of the national and global conversation of justice and peace.

The theological and political diversity we enjoy as Unitarian Universalists calls us into active engagement and to faithful responsibility to use our voices and our choices in the work of social justice and peacemaking.

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At Riverside, King named war as "an enemy of the poor,"¹⁴ both domestically and internationally, and he asked those gathered to understand that the "conditions of poverty, insecurity, and injustice" serve as "the fertile soil in which the seed of communism grows and develops."¹⁵ Acknowledging the difficulties of dismantling poverty, insecurity, and injustice, King asked the Clergy and Laity Concerned at Riverside, "Shall we say the odds are too great? Shall we tell them the struggle is too hard?"¹⁶ Such questions, unanswered, have a way of persisting.

Forty years later, one might observe that a national fear of communism has been replaced by a national fear of terrorism. Now, as then, fear is a most effective method of control. It is a formidable weapon, deftly wielded by those who profit most from the status quo, desperately

¹⁰ Ibid, 206-210.

¹¹ Ibid, 218.

¹² William R. Murray, *Reason and Reverence* (Boston, Skinner House Books, 2007), 140.

¹³ *Singing the Living Tradition #566*, Unitarian Universalist Association, Boston (1993).

¹⁴ King (1986), 233.

¹⁵ Ibid, 241.

¹⁶ Ibid, 243.

reliant upon and invested in a common enemy from without, distracting us from the deeper possibilities that lie within.

Forty years later, exchange the war in Iraq for the war in Vietnam and consider the socioeconomic status of those in the Gulf Coast most hurt by Hurricane Katrina; consider the state of health care, education, affordable housing, and civil liberties in our nation; and hear King's words again: "A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death."¹⁷

President George W. Bush declared war on Iraq in March 2003. In the five years since that declaration, the U.S. military has spent more than \$463 billion on the war,¹⁸ with billions more in the pipeline. Can you imagine what King could have done with the same \$463 billion during the five years between Birmingham and Riverside? Can you imagine what conscientious leaders could have done in the Gulf Coast with even half of that \$463 billion?

Frankly, this number is so large as to be meaningless to most Americans. Think of it in a different way: that same \$463 billion could have provided well over 4 million affordable housing units, over 8 million elementary school teachers, over 61 million Head Start places, or health care for over 277 million children.¹⁹

Further, in ironic testament to King's prophetic voice and as post-Katrina relief efforts in the Gulf Coast continue against all odds, the poorest people of the world's wealthiest nation struggle to complete a recovery effort subjugated to the same disparities of race and class that called to King's conscience over 40 years ago.

Affordable housing in New Orleans is nonexistent; rents have increased by as much as 200 percent; and only one of seven general hospitals in New Orleans is operating at pre-storm levels. Over 4,000 experienced teachers have been laid off from the New Orleans public school system while over 300 students have been placed on waiting lists because there is no room for them in schools. Cases of mental health problems and post-traumatic stress are rising, as are suicide rates, but funding for mental-health services continues to be reduced.

The poorest of the poor continue to pay the highest price. Louisiana taxpayers will be asked to fund \$1.2 billion and taxpayers in Mississippi will be asked to pay over \$600 million for proposed Iraq war spending in 2008. Again, these are funds that could have made immediate and lasting difference to post-Katrina recovery efforts and education, health care, and housing for those in dire need in the Gulf Coast Region and throughout the United States.

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¹⁷ Ibid, 241.

¹⁸ WAR AT ANY PRICE? The Total Economic Costs of the War Beyond the Federal Budget – A Report by the Joint Economic Committee, Majority Staff Chairman, Sen. Charles E. Schumer, Rep. Carolyn B. Maloney – November 2007.

¹⁹ Exact and current figures referenced within these paragraphs can be found in "The Situation: Trading Justice for War" (www.uusc.org/justicesunday).

The numbers are numbing, the odds are long, the struggle is hard, and the stories are heartbreaking. But the stories are also hopeful and inspiring, reminding us that our voices and our choices do indeed matter.

Visit the UUSC website and read about New Orleans resident Viola Washington, who used an abandoned truck to help rescue over 100 people in New Orleans before leaving her beloved neighborhood for sanctuary in a different city. She returned to New Orleans months later to find everything gone. "There was work to be done," she said, "but where do you start when everything's gone? Then I thought, 'Well, I have myself.'"²⁰ With support from the UUA-UUSC Gulf Coast Relief Fund, Viola continues to locate temporary housing and aid for poor families returning to New Orleans.

Go to the UUSC website and read about Biloxi resident Sharon Henshaw, who owned a beauty salon for 21 years and had never spoken in public pre-Katrina, but now serves as executive director of Coastal Women for Change, one of UUSC's many local program partners in the UUA-UUSC Gulf Coast Relief Program.²¹

Talk to your many UU friends and colleagues about the time they spent in Mississippi and Louisiana volunteering in the UUA-UUSC Gulf Coast Relief Program. Listen to their stories about rebuilding homes and hope as they worked with Gulf Coast residents and UUSC program partners to make a difference. They returned from the Gulf Coast as changed people, understanding in a renewed way what it means to put our faith into action.

During a trip to New Orleans in September 2007, Mary Fontenot, of All Churches Together (ACT), another UUSC program partner, told me, "You Unitarian Universalists – you all just didn't talk about what needed to happen here – you asked us, those of us who live here, what we needed, and then you came down here and started working with us to help us make it happen. I am a Baptist, and I know that we may not believe the same things...but you all are doing what matters." *We need not think alike to love alike.*

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In the history, theology, facts, and figures considered today, certain questions persist: Why do we kill other people? Why do we take care of some while neglecting others? When faced with the overwhelming needs of this nation and of the world, are the odds too great? Is the struggle just too hard? Have we rationed our moral outrage to the point of apathy? Are we still a democracy? Whom do we hold accountable? Do our voices and choices really make a difference? Have we become, as King feared at Riverside, "mesmerized by uncertainty"?²² Is the spiritual death of our nation eminent? *What can we do?*

The complexity of life in a global neighborhood of 6.5 billion people means that some of our persistent and enduring questions have no easy, certain, or final answers. There is no way to explain to a five-year-old person (or any person) *why* humans intentionally kill or neglect other

²⁰ UUSC Stories of Hope, Guest at Your Table 2007-2008 (<http://www.uusc.org/ia/gayt>)

²¹ "Two Years After Katrina, Government Still Lags" (http://www.uusc.org/katrina/2years_govtlags)

²² King (1986), 231.

humans (and other life on this planet). There is no common standard of measurement for managing odds and enduring struggle; we each bring a different capacity for responsiveness, based on myriad factors. However, we know that our capacity to endure tough odds and constant struggle is increased when we are supported in community, and we also know that our capacity to effect change increases when we are grounded in community.

In 1967 King told those gathered at Riverside Church that "every [person] of human convictions must decide on the protest that best suits his [or her] convictions, but we must all protest."²³ The same words hold true today. James Luther Adams wrote that "right attitudes are never sufficient alone. They must find *embodiment* in social institutions."²⁴ UU theologian and scholar Thandeka reminds us that in our Unitarian Universalist faith tradition, "we are always agents in our own salvation," and she calls on us to "use our *collective power* as a religious movement to help each of us heal our crippled ability to relate with the full integrity of our humanity."²⁵

Consider the words *embodiment*, *active agency*, and *collective power*. Do you hear their resonance in our opening words: "Between the head and the heart is the voice, and our voice reflects our choices...Our [voices reach] the world through the manner in which we live..."

As people of a theologically and politically diverse faith, it is our highest calling to hold each other up through the work of justice and peacemaking.

We need not fear unanswerable questions. We have covenanted to accompany one another in a search for truth and meaning, and questioning is a sacrament to us.

We need not surrender to apathy or be mesmerized by uncertainty. We are active agents in our own salvation, and we have roots in the rich wisdom resources that ground us and wings in the deeply held theological values that guide us.

We need not resist the responsibilities or forfeit the dignities of human freedom; we need not fear that the odds are too great or the struggles too hard. We each have ourselves; we have each other; and we have a social-justice legacy that is in our bones. We know or can learn how to do this work. We need only choose to do it.

We need not ration our outrage; we need not settle for being less than we are; and we need not suffer a spiritual death. Individually and collectively, we have the power of our voices and the responsibility for our choices.

Between the head and the heart lies the voice. Between the past and the future lies choice.

There are UUSC resources available to help us make informed and effective choices as we actively embody the values of our faith tradition, individually and collectively responding to our calls to social justice and peacemaking. *Choose to Educate, to Act, and to Speak Out!*²⁶

²³ King (1986), 240.

²⁴ Adams, 214.

²⁵ Thandeka, "Why Anti-Racism Will Fail" (www.meadville.edu/journal/1999).

²⁶ Justice Sunday 2008 – Simple Steps to Justice (www.uusc.org/justicesunday).

Every day we can choose to *educate* ourselves and others about military spending. We can learn what it truly costs – in blood and treasure, both for us and Iraqis – to continue the war in Iraq. We can *act* by supporting UUSC's human-rights work for peacemaking and justice and by volunteering in the UUA-UUSC Gulf Coast Relief Program. We can *speak out* by writing letters and making phone calls to our elected leaders and to the candidates; visit www.uusc.org/justicesunday for a helpful list of questions to ask.

In 1967 King expressed the hope that love would have the last word.²⁷ Over 40 years later and in the din of war, the conversation of socioeconomic justice and peacemaking continues. Inspired by our relationships with the divine and by our relationships with one another, may we find courage for the work ahead. Strengthened by our diversity, may our voices ring clear and true in this ongoing conversation. Through our voices and our choices, by word and by deed, may we educate, act, and speak out so that love may indeed have the last word.

Blessed be. Amen.

²⁷ King (1986), 243.