

## THE HIGH COST OF DREAMING

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UFWC

*Reading: Genesis 37: 5-25*

"Now Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers they only hated him the more." as stated in Genesis chapter 37 verse 5. The prophet, the visionary, the dreamer, has never been the darling of society, has often lost friends and family, and has repeatedly been the target of the assassin. This has been a pattern throughout every aspect of society. In its art, in its religion, in its politics. The dreamer, the innovator is cast aside like a leper often to become a popular and pivotal figure to succeeding generations. Joseph had fantastic dreams and interpreted the dreams of others. His brothers saw him coming from a distance. "Here comes this dreamer. Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; then we shall say that a wild beast has devoured him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams."

Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Jeremiah all had dreams of a better society, a place where attention would be paid to God and the laws of God. Jesus and Paul were dismayed by the evils of society and wanted to bring about the new covenant and lead the people toward paths of righteousness. Their dreams and visions stretched far beyond the world that was in front of them.

The pilgrims that left Europe for the new world truly wanted to find and create a new society free from the restrictions placed on them by the governments and the church in the old world. Many who came were escaping persecution and some fled for their lives. The revolutionary war served to free us from the rule of the English monarchy, a war fought in order to bring freedom and self-determination. Self-determination, of course only applied to the white refugees of European descent who had come to make a new home for themselves on land occupied by others. A Declaration of Independence and Constitution were drafted and adopted to insure freedom and equality for all and another war was fought because freedom and equality for **all** had come to mean freedom and equality for **some**. Lincoln was a prophet and a dreamer. His dream consisted of a united country without slavery. His dreams brought him enemies and a bullet ended his life.

Mohandas Gandhi was another dreamer. Educated in the very civilized United Kingdom, he returned to India to find a country brutally under the thumb of that same British Empire. His dream of a free India came after great struggle and massive civil disobedience only to give way to a further struggle between Hindus and Muslims. Peace was not to come without partition. This prophet, dreamer, and peacemaker was also cut down by an assassin's bullet.

On January 15, 1929, Martin Luther King Jr. was born. Tomorrow, many will have a day off from school or business as usual to celebrate what would have been his 79th birthday. On April 4th we will remember the day 40 years ago when he was shot to death while standing on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis Tennessee.

Martin Luther King Jr. had been given gifts and burdens. He worked with both. The Nobel Peace Prize awarded him in 1964 presented him with further burdens and expectations to be lived up to. His work then had branched out beyond civil rights to the issues of poverty and peace in Vietnam.

These dreams and views brought him even more enemies. Some of the new enemies had been his allies in the struggle for racial equality.

For any of us that lived through that era, the word "dream" almost cannot be said or heard without bringing to mind the image of King telling his dreams to the nation. As he stood in front of the Lincoln Memorial a sea of humanity listened to him swelling with hope and pride.

"So today I say to you, my friends, that even though we must face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed— we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal."

He goes on to say :

"I have a dream my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character."

Those are the words most often quoted when Martin Luther King Jr.'s name is mentioned. Many of us dutifully recall them from the pulpit on the Sunday of the weekend commemorating his birth. Almost five years ago, before the war on Iraq began, from pulpits across the country the words of King that were quoted were the words from the address he gave to those assembled in the Riverside Church in NY City on April 4, 1967, exactly one year to the day before he was killed. It was a gathering of "Clergy and Laymen Concerned about Vietnam." In the end, it was these words and this issue that really got him in the most trouble. As this disastrous war continues, those same words are rendered startlingly true each time they are recalled. And I have to say personally that I am deeply deeply disheartened that I need to repeat these words year after year because the situation in Iraq and Afghanistan is not changing.

The Johnson administration had inherited the civil rights problems that were very much present in the 1950's and 60's and Johnson boldly signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 saying ". . .those who are equal before God shall now also be equal in the polling booths, in the classrooms, in the factories, and in hotels, restaurants, movie theaters, and other places that provide service to the public."<sup>1</sup> Johnson knew it was the right thing to do and the right time in which to do it. But Vietnam was another issue. In April of 1964 the American death toll in the war was just 220 (counted from 1961<sup>2</sup>). King had been a thorn in Johnson's side regarding civil rights, but when it came to King's public stance on Vietnam, he was more than just a thorn. The speech that King made that April was well before the war had escalated and yet King knew it was wrong for many reasons which were stated in that address.

"Since I am a preacher by trade, I suppose it is not surprising that I have seven major

<sup>1</sup> Branch, Taylor, **Pillar of Fire**, (NY: Touchstone Press, 1999) p. 388

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p. 307

reasons for bringing Vietnam into the field of my moral vision. There is at the outset a very obvious and almost facile connection between the war in Vietnam and the struggle I, and others, have been waging in America. A few years ago there was a shining moment in that struggle. It seemed as if there was a real promise of hope for the poor — both black and white — through the poverty program. There were experiments, hopes, new beginnings. Then came the buildup in Vietnam and I watched the program broken and eviscerated as if it were some idle political plaything of a society gone mad on war, and I knew that America would never invest the necessary funds or energies in rehabilitation of its poor so long as adventures like Vietnam continued to draw men and skills and money like some demonic destructive suction tube. So I was increasingly compelled to see the war as an enemy of the poor and to attack it as such.

Perhaps the more tragic recognition of reality took place when it became clear to me that the war was doing far more than devastating the hopes of the poor at home. It was sending their sons and their brothers and their husbands to fight and to die in extraordinarily high proportions relative to the rest of the population. We were taking the black young men who had been crippled by our society and sending them eight thousand miles away to guarantee liberties in Southeast Asia which they had not found in southwest Georgia and East Harlem. So we have been repeatedly faced with the cruel irony of watching Negro and white boys on TV screens as they kill and die together for a nation that has been unable to seat them together in the same schools. So we watch them in brutal solidarity burning the huts of a poor village, but we realize that they would never live on the same block in Detroit. I could not be silent in the face of such cruel manipulation of the poor."<sup>3</sup>

Seeing our country now through the lens of a post-Katrina filter, the economic injustice he spoke about is only magnified. Here was the great peacemaker following to the letter the tenet of comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable. This man's dream was of peace AND JUSTICE, not just peace. This kind of peace carries a heavy price tag. Justice always has and always will carry with it a heavy price tag. One of the dominant themes of James Luther Adams, our own Unitarian Universalist prophet and ethicist—which I have briefly mentioned before— is that of "costing responsibility." If we are always concerned with what the neighbors think, or of not saying something that will hurt business, or what will be popular and gain more points in the polls, we are not bearing the cost of our ethical responsibilities. As King so eloquently stated:

" On some positions, cowardice asks the question is it safe, expediency asks the question is it politic, vanity asks the question is it popular, conscience asks the question is it right. And there comes a time when we must take a position that is neither safe nor politic nor

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<sup>3</sup> from his speech "Beyond Vietnam" at the Riverside Church the text of which was retrieved from the internet:

[http://www.stanford.edu/group/King/publications/speeches/Beyond\\_Vietnam.pdf](http://www.stanford.edu/group/King/publications/speeches/Beyond_Vietnam.pdf)

popular, but we must take it because conscience tells us it is right."<sup>4</sup>

Many years ago, (in the mid-80's) I had the privilege of serving as one of the adult advisors on the steering committee of the Mass Bay District Young Religious Unitarian Universalists, the YRUU. The committee planned weekend conferences attended by youths in the district just as they do here. The topic of "Dreams" was chosen by the youth to be the theme of the weekend conference. The schedule included worship services, workshops, talent shows community meals and not much sleep.

At the Friday night worship service, there was a segment where cards and pencils were distributed to everyone. The youths were told to write down their own ending to the statement, "My greatest dream is...." the cards were collected in a basket and then redistributed randomly so that everyone got someone else's card. We then read the dreams one by one. I cannot express the combination of pride and dismay that I felt when about 70-80% of the dreams were of peace, and at that time we were not at war. I was inordinately proud that this group of 70 teenagers were so conscious of society and their part in it that they would focus their greatest dream on peace. The dismay that I felt was aimed at the society as it exists for being such a fear-filled place that the dreams of teenagers can't be focused on the joys of youth. I would like to think that the dreamers and prophets of this and succeeding generations will be more easily accepted by society, but it doesn't seem to be working out that way.

Being a prophet, being a dreamer is a lonely way of life. No one really wants to make the changes that are necessary to make this a better world. Change is hard and painful. Doing the right and just thing always costs more than keeping up the status quo. So what do we do? History shows us that we shoot the messenger. "Here comes this dreamer. Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; then we shall say that a wild beast has devoured him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams."

"Now that he is safely dead, let us praise him, build monuments to his glory, sing hosannas to his name. Dead men make such convenient heroes. They cannot rise to challenge the images we would fashion from their lives. Besides, it is easier to build monuments than to make a better world."<sup>5</sup>

The cynic in me pulls me right into those words said by the late Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee about Martin Luther King. I appreciate them all the more now as we face the challenges he tried to warn us of more than 40 years ago. In the mean time, when I hear and read the words of King and Gandhi and Adams I am reminded and strengthened in my own resolve to do what my conscience tells me is right knowing that there is a cost and knowing that I must be willing to bear it. As our thoughts turn to Martin Luther King Jr. on the anniversary of his birth, it is time to think. Am I

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<sup>4</sup> From the Letter from the Birmingham Jail

<http://www.stanford.edu/group/King/frequentdocs/birmingham.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> transcribed from a PBS special, "Martin Luther King: The Dream and the Drum" 1985

contributing to the dream or the nightmare? Let us all remember that in the end, King's dreams are our dreams and is up to each of us to continue to make those dreams become reality whatever the cost. The cost of peace can never be so high as to keep us from dreaming and working for it. In King's words from the April 1964 speech:

"A true revolution of values will lay hands on the world order and say of war: "This way of settling differences is not just." This business of burning human beings with napalm, of filling our nation's homes with orphans and widows, of injecting poisonous drugs of hate into veins of people normally humane, of sending men home from dark and bloody battlefields physically handicapped and psychologically deranged, cannot be reconciled with wisdom, justice and love. A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death.

America, previously thought of as the richest and most powerful nation in the world, could still lead the way in this revolution of values if it had the will to do so. We must do everything within our power to reorder our priorities, so that the pursuit of peace will take precedence over the pursuit of war. We must steadfastly work to re-mold a recalcitrant status quo with bruised hands if need be, until we have fashioned it into a better world. Our work is needed now more than ever in my lifetime.

Our only hope today lies in our ability to recapture the revolutionary spirit and go out into a sometimes hostile world declaring eternal hostility to poverty, racism, and militarism and fear. With this powerful commitment we shall boldly challenge the status quo and unjust mores and thereby speed the day when "every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight and the rough places plain."