

**The Gift of Emptiness:
Let Justice Roll Down Like Water
Sunday, January 15, 2017**

August 28, 1963, Martin Luther King Jr. stood on the steps of the Lincoln memorial, looking out over the quarter million people standing in the National Mall in Washington, DC. The speech he delivered lasted 17 minutes. He was in the midst of delivering that speech when Mahalia Jackson called out, “tell us about the dream!” That dream galvanized a generation into deeper commitment and firmer resolve.

And here we are again, with the gains made toward that dream in dreadful jeopardy. Just as we are celebrating some landmark victories, a Black president; the first Muslim woman elected to congress; marriage equality in all 50 states; all, all, all of these under attack, and much more. In the words of the African American spiritual the choir sang this morning, God is troubling the water, children. We have little choice but to wade back in.

If we are to respond to today’s challenges in meaningful and effective ways, one possible blueprint is how Martin Luther King, Jr., faced the challenges of his day. It is easy to forget that this brave leader, who inspired people all over the world, went through his own times of uncertainty, wondering if indeed all the suffering, all the beatings, all the killing, all the exclusion and prejudice and hate and bigotry, all the perversion of justice, would ever come to an end.

Just four months earlier, Dr. King was in Birmingham, Alabama. Black people in Birmingham occupied public spaces with marches and sit-ins, openly violating laws that they considered unjust. King’s intent was to provoke mass arrests and “create a situation so crisis-packed that it will inevitably open the door to negotiation” When the original campaign failed to generate enough attention in the media, some of the other organizers recruited children and young adults to join the protests.

It was at this point that the Birmingham police department used high-pressure water jets and police dogs against protesters, old and young alike. Footage of the police response was broadcast on national television news and dominated the nation’s attention, shocking many white Americans and consolidating black Americans behind the movement. King was arrested and jailed early in the campaign—his 13th arrest out of 29.

While in the Birmingham jail, Dr. King wrote his famous “Letter from Birmingham Jail.” It was in response to the many people, mostly white but even some people of color, who decried the civil disobedience. There was a call to use the democratic system to cause change. “Have patience,” these people said. “Don’t rock the boat; and certainly, don’t break the law! It makes you look bad.”

Martin Luther King wrestled with these objections. Rather than doubling down on and blindly defending the tactics that he and the movement he supported, he opened his mind and his heart, and seriously considered these criticisms, wrestled with them, and let them clarify the principles he found in his heart of hearts.

In the letter that came out of that wrestling, Dr. King said, "In any nonviolent campaign there are four basic steps." First, he said, "collection of the facts to determine whether injustices exist" second, negotiation; third, self purification; and fourth, direct action. We have gone through all these steps in Birmingham," he said.

Step one: he lays out the facts. "There can be no gainsaying the fact that racial injustice engulfs this community. Birmingham is probably the most thoroughly segregated city in the United States. Its ugly record of brutality is widely known. Negroes have experienced grossly unjust treatment in the courts. There have been more unsolved bombings of Negro homes and churches in Birmingham than in any other city in the nation. These are the hard, brutal facts of the case."

Step two: negotiation. " On the basis of these conditions, Negro leaders sought to negotiate with the city fathers. But the latter consistently refused to engage in good faith negotiation.

"Then, last September, came the opportunity to talk with leaders of Birmingham's economic community. In the course of the negotiations, certain promises were made by the merchants-- for example, to remove the stores' humiliating racial signs. On the basis of these promises, the Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth and the leaders of the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights agreed to a moratorium on all demonstrations. As the weeks and months went by, we realized that we were the victims of a broken promise. A few signs, briefly removed, returned; the others remained. As in so many past experiences, our hopes had been blasted, and the shadow of deep disappointment settled upon us."

At this point, King says, "We had no alternative except to prepare for direct action, whereby we would present our very bodies as a means of laying our case before the conscience of the local and the national community. Mindful of the difficulties involved, we decided to undertake a process of self purification. We began a series of workshops on nonviolence, and we repeatedly asked ourselves: "Are you able to accept blows without retaliating?" "Are you able to endure the ordeal of jail?"

This is the point that almost gets forgotten in this progression: self-purification, that point at which it all gets very, very real. That point where people realize: I could really suffer. I could get injured. I could end up in jail, with no guarantee of being treated decently. I could even actually lose my life."

It is at times like this when a person can feel so empty, so weak and worn. Haven't we been doing this for years – some of you have been doing this for more than 50 years! Lord, I am tired! Precious Lord, take my hand, lead me on, let me stand, I am tired, I am weak, I am worn.....

It is easy to understand why this hymn, "Precious Lord, Take My Hand," was a favorite of Martin Luther King. He was just a human, just like us.

It is easy to look back and say, wow, Martin Luther King gave his life for justice and freedom. Unitarian minister James Reeb gave his life. They are heroes. They are different. Their dedication to the cause let them face danger and the possibility of death without looking back...

No. Seeing what had happened to others, what had always happened to those who confront systems of segregation and injustice, Martin Luther King and the other leaders of the Civil Rights movement sat people down and asked them to get real. To let go of any thoughts of glory, to let go of assumptions of safety, to let go of blustering bravery and look reality in the eye: are you, alone and in the face of hate and vengefulness, able to accept blows without retaliating? Do you know what people go through when being arrested and held in jail by those who have hate and fear in their hearts? Let go of all pretense; get empty of all illusions. Look reality in the face and determine: are you able to endure the ordeal of jail?

I was not there in Arizona for the 2012 UU General Assembly, but I know some of you were. Similar workshops were given there for those who joined in the protests against the treatment of Latinex and other immigrants. Are you ready to look this in the face? If not, no shame. Let me repeat that. If you are not ready, there is no shame. Look inside your heart, to what is there without the trappings of wishful thinking or pride, and if you are not ready, own it. Not everyone must be ready for this challenge, right now.

This is a long-term proposition, freedom and justice. Each of us was made for a time like this, and each has our own part to play. It is not necessary to compare your actions against those of others. Feeling less than worthy, feeling worth-less, is part of the stuff we must let go of, in order to empty ourselves sufficiently for the swift waters of justice flowing down to find their path, to become a living stream of life to those who have been oppressed.

What if we let go of our obsession with worthiness; what if we release ourselves into the idea that if we want to be filled – filled with courage, conviction, and calm non-violence in the face of threats – what if we let go of needing to find our meaning, and let our own meaning find us? What if?

Dr. King continues, in his letter, discussing the step after self-purification: “You may well ask: “Why direct action? Why sit ins, marches and so forth? Isn't negotiation a better path?” You are quite right in calling for negotiation. Indeed, this is the very purpose of direct action. Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks so to dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored.”

Dr. King further explained, “My citing the creation of tension as part of the work of the nonviolent resister may sound rather shocking. But I must confess that I am not afraid of the word “tension.” I have earnestly opposed violent tension, but there is a type of constructive, nonviolent tension which is necessary for growth. Just as Socrates felt that it was necessary to create a tension in the mind so that individuals could rise from the bondage of myths and half truths to the unfettered realm of creative analysis and objective appraisal, so must we see the need for nonviolent gadflies to create the kind of tension in society that will help men rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism to the majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood. The purpose of our direct action program is to create a situation so crisis packed that it will inevitably open the door to negotiation.

“My friends,” he went on, “ I must say to you that we have not made a single gain in civil rights without determined legal and nonviolent pressure. Lamentably, it is an historical fact that

privileged groups seldom give up their privileges voluntarily. Individuals may see the moral light and voluntarily give up their unjust posture; but, as Reinhold Niebuhr has reminded us, groups tend to be more immoral than individuals. We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed."

"Oppressed people cannot remain oppressed forever. The yearning for freedom eventually manifests itself. So I have not said to my people: "Get rid of your discontent." Rather, I have tried to say that this normal and healthy discontent can be channeled into the creative outlet of nonviolent direct action.

And now this approach is being termed extremist. But though I was initially disappointed at being categorized as an extremist, as I continued to think about the matter I gradually gained a measure of satisfaction from the label. Was not Jesus an extremist for love: "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you."

Was not Amos an extremist for justice: "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream." Was not Paul an extremist for the Christian gospel: "I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus." Was not Martin Luther an extremist: "Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise, so help me God." And John Bunyan: "I will stay in jail to the end of my days before I make a butchery of my conscience." And Abraham Lincoln: "This nation cannot survive half slave and half free." And Thomas Jefferson: "We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal . . ."

Precious Lord, Spirit of Life, Spark of decency, Dream of Democracy, Earth Mother, however we conceive of that which is good and sustaining in the Universe, whatever we may choose to name it, take our hand, lead us into that better day.

May we let go ever more fully of what does not ring true, may we find in its place just what we need for the days ahead. May our emptiness be that of tracing a path for justice to roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream.