

## Are We There Yet?

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On April 3, 1968, Dr. Martin Luther King delivered a message at the Mason Temple (Church of God in Christ) in Memphis, Tennessee to support that city's striking sanitation workers. He said, in part:

“Something is happening in Memphis; something is happening in our world. And you know, if I were standing at the beginning of time, with the possibility of taking a kind of general and panoramic view of the whole of human history up to now, and the Almighty said to me, "Martin Luther King, which age would you like to live in?" Strangely enough, I would turn to the Almighty, and say, "If you allow me to live just a few years in the second half of the 20th century, I will be happy."

Now that's a strange statement to make, because the world is all messed up. The nation is sick. Trouble is in the land; confusion all around. But I know, somehow, that only when it is dark enough can you see the stars. Something is happening in our world. The masses of people are rising up. And wherever they are assembled today, the cry is always the same: "We want to be free."

And that's all this whole thing is about. We aren't engaged in any negative protest and in any negative arguments with anybody. We are saying that we are determined to be men. We are determined to be people. We are saying that we are God's children. And (as) God's children, we don't have to live like we are forced to live.

Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. [I have been to the mountaintop] and I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land!"

Many believe that we finally reached that “promised land” with the results of the election in November, 2008. Forty years after those prophetic words, they see Dr. King’s vision fulfilled, if not wholly, at least partially, with the election of Barack Obama to the presidency. Some people think that Obama’s ascendancy to the highest office in the land marks the end of racial struggle in the United States; that we have now entered a period in our history which we can label “post racial.”

As hopeful as any of us may yearn to be following the historic selection of a black man for the presidency, I don't think we're there yet. That single election on that single day did not resolve years of painful history and decades of entrenched social, economic, educational, and political inequality.

Black men and women who were unemployed on January 20<sup>th</sup> remained so on January 22<sup>nd</sup>. The election did not end the disproportionate representation of black people in our prison populations. It did not change high school drop out rates, nor did it change the

face of poverty in this nation, where approximately 10% of white people live in poverty, compared to 25% of blacks and 22% of Hispanics. An auspicious inauguration, filled with hopes for the future and visions of the fulfillment of a dream, did much to lift the spirits of this nation, but it did not change the day-to-day reality of life for many people of color in our society. Despite the confident assertions of pundits and such, we are not, as a nation, there yet. As much as we may wish the dream was fulfilled, we have more to do.

It's been about 150 years since the days of the Civil War, when the issue of slavery was decided in the war between the states, and the Negroes were emancipated. They are years marked by hard-won changes in the relationships and opportunities between blacks and whites in this nation. Each generation has taken steps forward, some of them small and faltering, toward equal opportunity, equal treatment, equal rights. And yet, many of the wounds of slavery and the Civil War have never been addressed, we've never created the place and space for the work we need to do to create the opportunity to heal and move our nation to the place where our dream of liberty and justice for all is realized.

President Lincoln, leader of this nation in the Civil war and one of Barack Obama's political heroes, was opposed to slavery on theologic as well as economic, political, and social grounds, but even he was not convinced that the races could, or should, live together as equals. Fred Kaplan, in **Lincoln: The Biography of a Writer** states: "Lincoln did not believe that the interests of emancipated blacks and white Americans could be reconciled, and he saw no reason why the difficult but better solution was not separation. He had no cause, he felt, to believe that emancipated slaves and white Americans could live together harmoniously. Race prejudice and historical wounds would make black-white relations distressing. That was not to deny the humanness of the enslaved(, ...but i)ntegration was unimaginable.

I think that uncertainty, that lack of a vision of equality, has helped create the racial struggle and strife so much a part of this nation's racial history. We still live in a culture where blackness and whiteness are still measured by a drop of blood. It is interesting that Obama is referred to as a "black" president – and it is an identity he fully embraces – when he is the product of interracial marriage. He is as much a white president as a black president, except in a culture that defines racial identity by appearance, association, and a historical search of bloodlines.

Despite the reality of mixed heritages and cultures, we continue to divide ourselves along racial lines, a system of hierarchy and privilege that defines who gets and who does not. Our nation is populated by people of many cultures and colors, yet we shy away from talking about differences, we avoid confronting issues about race, as if not talking about race is equivalent to making progress on race issues.

We do not live in a post-racial America yet. Witness the murder of a young black man by BART police in Oakland. Witness the debate over race-conscious affirmative action. Witness the impacts of the unemployment on minority populations.

And, for every liberal viewpoint, there is another on the right who laments the decline of individual rights and specifically, the rise of a political correctness around race that they see as diminishing the rights of white citizens.

We have hope. The very presence of Barack Obama on the political scene has opened America's conversation on race, once again. His history and heritage have brought to light not only racial issues in the white community, but challenged the notions of racial identity in the Black community, as well. Columnist Earnest Holmes says, "It matters greatly that we now have, in The White House, a person and a family that has dark skin pigmentation, if only because it allows us to tell our kids that they, too, can be President some day and really mean it. What we are witnessing every time we see him and Michelle and those darling girls actually living in The White House is a seismic shift that, at the very least, lets us know if we continue to work at it (and we all have to do our part, as Obama said) that the America we want, that post-racial America, will get here, and maybe even sooner than we expect."

What is our role, as Unitarian Universalists, in the work that needs to be done? What is our part? Like the nation at large, we have our own mixed heritage. There were Unitarians and Universalists of the 19<sup>th</sup> century who were strong abolitionists, including Julia Ward Howe, Theodore Parker, and others. In 1843, at the United States Convention of Universalists, Sylvanus Cobb's efforts led to the passage of an anti-slavery resolution. Rev. Parker hid and defended fugitive slaves, and was indicted by a Federal Grand Jury for obstructing the work of Federal Marshals attempting to enforce the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. On the other hand, some Unitarians, particularly those who were wealthy industrialists in the North or land holders in the South and who benefited from the existence of slavery, chose to leave the church over the issue. We have healing to do within our denomination.

We need to work on that healing in order to accept a larger role in the work of the nation. Rev. Bill Sinkford, President of the Unitarian Universalist Association, who is black, spoke last Sunday at the installation of the new ministers, the Revs. David and Leslie Takahashi Morris, at Mt. Diablo UU in Walnut Creek. He talked about the moment of possibility and potential that faces us as Unitarian Universalists as we move into a multi-racial, multi-cultural environment in our nation and around the world. His message is that Unitarian Universalists, because of our desire to be inclusive and honoring of all, have the chance to take a leading role in creating the kind of multicultural and multiracial culture that we hope for and that the election of Barack Obama makes us feel is a renewed possibility.

Rev. Sinkford says, "It is still the case that the most frequently asked question I receive as I travel the country is how we can become more racially and culturally diverse. My response, always, is that the objective of finding a few more dark faces to make our white members feel better about themselves is not spiritually grounded. Nor will it be successful. Racial and cultural diversity will, I pray, come to Unitarian Universalism. But it will come as we become known as a faith community that strives to live our open

hearted theology, and a faith community that is willing to be an ally in the struggle for justice.”

We are all good people. We are all well-intentioned. We share core values about the worth and dignity of every person, and a desire to be a welcoming community for people of all kinds who share our search for truth and meaning. We need to work on developing our cultural competence, on learning to be anti-racist, embracing multiculturalism. We need to learn to be good allies in the ongoing struggle for justice.

We want to be a part of creating the promised land, where we can elect a gay or lesbian person, a woman, a Muslim, or a Hispanic, and it is not newsworthy just for that fact alone. We want to create that place of promise for all of God’s children that Dr. Martin Luther King talked of over 40 years ago and the election of President Barack Obama renews our hope for.

May it be so, and may we all be part of making it a reality.