

## **“Inherit the Spirit”**

Delivered by Rev. Aaron McEmrys to the Unitarian Society of Santa Barbara, CA  
In celebration of the Birth of Martin Luther King, J.R.  
January 18, 2009

A few years ago I was at a union organizers conference in Kentucky, where my union, along with a number of sister unions was helping almost 40,000 workers form unions. It was a tough time. Most of us were working over eighty hours per week, driving all over the state to meet with workers in crumbling coal towns, strong-smelling whiskey towns and all but boarded-up textile towns. We were scattered across the state, sleeping in cheap motels and living on coffee and roadside diner food. Most of us hadn't been home in a long time. We were exhausted and lonely.

But that was nothing compared to what those workers were going through. Many of them had been harassed, threatened or even fired for supporting the union. These were folks who had always been poor, whose parents had been poor and whose grandparents had been poor. For them, losing their job might mean that their children would go hungry or that they would lose their homes. But amazingly – they kept going. But the campaign had been going on for months, and they were getting tired too.

So we decided to have a statewide get-together. There were maybe a hundred or so of us “professional” organizers and four or five hundred more volunteer organizers. It was one part group therapy, one part strategy session and one part pep-rally.

One night after dinner we had a surprise guest. I have forgotten his name now, which I will always regret, but I will never forget him or anything he said that night. He was an elderly African American man: tall and stooped with age and hard work. He had close cut grey hair and black plastic framed glasses. He walked slowly to the microphone, aided by two wooden canes.

He looked at us, seemingly startled by how many of us there were and he seemed surprised to find himself the center of attention. But slowly, quietly, he began to tell us his story.

When he was a young man, in the 1960s, he worked as a garbage collector for the City of Memphis, Tennessee. It was brutal, grueling work. All the workers were black, and all the supervisors were white, and the spirit of Jim Crow was alive and well. Pay was minimal, there were no health or retirement benefits – and people would frequently get fired or suspended for reporting a workplace injury, asking where their overtime pay was, or even for bristling when someone called them “boy.” All of this was considered “uppity” behavior and would not be tolerated.

He described what it was like to hoist garbage cans riddled with rusty holes into the truck. Maggots and slime and rotting juices would stream down into their shirt collars, even though most of the men wore scarves to keep the worst of it out. The city refused to replace the cans and would discipline anyone who complained. He told us about men forced to work with full-blown pneumonia and men forced to work on the day

their baby was born or the day their wives or mothers died. And all the time, they were almost never called by their given names; just “boy” – or worse.

One rainy February afternoon, two black sanitation workers sat inside the back of a garbage truck to stay dry. Old and poorly maintained, an electrical short in its wiring caused the compressor to start running, and Echol Cole and Robert Walker were crushed to death. The Memphis Sanitation Department gave the families of each worker a months pay plus \$500 for funeral expenses. No city official attended the funerals and no further compensation was extended. The sanitation workers of Memphis had had enough.

They decided to form a union. The City refused to negotiate with black garbage haulers, and the workers struck. Garbage piled up everywhere, and started to rot in the sun. After local newspapers reported that over 10,000 tons of garbage had piled up, the Mayor ordered the men to go back to work, but instead they started to march.

Workers and their families began marching up and down the main streets of Memphis wearing sandwich boards that read, simply – “I am a Man.” That’s all, just “I am a Man.” You see, it wasn’t about money or health benefits or pension funds – those things were all important, but the reason they were marching, the reason they were prepared to risk everything – was because they were sick and tired of being treated as less than human. Those simple signs said it all – I am a Man – a defiant affirmation of their humanity.

The City responded violently, and declared martial law. They called out the National Guard, and the streets were lined with attack dogs, machine guns and armored personnel carriers. But the workers, their families and an ever-growing tide of community supporters kept on marching, as many as 17,000 at one point. And as they marched they kept on singing “We Shall Overcome” even as they were maced, beaten and hauled off to jail.

And then, just when the workers thought they couldn’t go on much longer – something incredible happened. Martin Luther King, J.R. came to Memphis.

And at this point in his story, that stooped old man stopped talking. His voice choked up and he just shook his head slowly with tears in his eyes. Then he said, and I will never forget this – he said, “When Dr, King came to stand with us garbage men, when he talked to us and walked with us – it was as if Jesus Christ himself had come. Because he believed in us, because he thought we were worth something – we started believing it too.”

Martin Luther King gave his famous “Mountaintop” speech to those striking workers on April 3, 1968. He told them that, “We aren’t engage din 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 - - We are saying that we are God’s children. And because we are God’s children we don’t have to live like we are forced to live.”

He was murdered the next day.

Again, this old man had to stop his story. He just couldn't speak, and we were all in tears. And then, into the absolute silence of that hotel meeting room, he said, "after Dr. King was killed, we knew we couldn't give up – we would rather go to our graves than quit short of justice." The city of Memphis, under massive nationwide pressure, gave up within days of the assassination. They recognized the union, and those workers have worked with the dignity they deserve ever since.

The retired sanitation worker stood up slowly, and we thought he was done speaking. Some people started to clap, but he lifted a hand to silence us. When we were quiet, this is what he said, "Dr. King came for us when we called, even though we were just a bunch of poor nobodies, and even though it cost him his life. So let me tell you this – if you call, I will come. I will stand with you and walk with you no matter what. Because that's what Dr. King taught us – he taught us that when your brothers and sisters call – you come."

I will never forget those words for as long as I live.

And that's the kind of person I want to be – when my sisters and brothers call, I want to be brave enough to go to them. I want to be like that old man from Memphis.

"I am a Man." That's what the signs said. I would change them, if I had a time machine to read simply, "I am Human" – but I don't. They were the signs of the time, and the omission of women from those signs just reminds me that our struggles for justice are never over. But the theology behind those signs – that is a rock I can stand on. "I am a Man." Those workers shared a bed-rock belief with Martin Luther King, the belief that all human beings are sacred, children of god – and thus worthy of health, dignity, freedom and love.

We've got one small picture of Martin Luther King up here today. But you won't find his face in any of these big, blown up pictures – and that's how I think he would want it. The faces in these old photographs are the faces of the unknown and anonymous champions of justice – truly children of god. I believe the legacy of Dr. King does not lie so much in anything he did or said – but in the way his faith, love and courage helped people believe that they could change the world.

Martin Luther King was advised in no uncertain terms to avoid Memphis, to not get caught up in strikes or labor disputes. His advisors were afraid that it would dilute his message, and distract people from the "main" struggle – for the liberation of African Americans – for Civil Rights." But King had a much more radical vision – he saw anything that prevented people from living their lives as free and sacred beings, as evil. Nothing short of a complete dismantling of all those oppressions would do the trick. King recognized that all oppressions are interconnected, linked together like a poisonous dragnet.

Evil may take different forms: racism, classism, heterosexism, patriarchy and countless others – but it is still the same old evil, like a monster with many heads. None of them reigns supreme and none of them stand alone.

King believed that full humanity was the birthright of all people, and that to be truly liberated, all people would have to begin working together in “networks of mutuality”: poor people, women, African Americans and others in a rainbow coalition of possibility.

He seems to have known what was coming. When I watch footage of his Mountaintop speech in Memphis, I see a man almost out of steam. His face is pale and drawn, and if you watch closely you can see that his friends are discretely holding him up under his elbows as he walks. His voice sounds tired throughout, but as he speaks it gains power, as he acknowledges both the bitter and the sweet of his vision of the mountaintop. He seems to know he might not have long to live – but he keeps going anyway.

Looking out at a union hall packed with almost 1500 workers and their families on the eve before his death he said:

*“Well, I don’t know what will happen now. We’ve got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn’t really matter with me now, because I’ve been to the mountaintop.*

*And I don’t mind.*

*Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. 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. 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!*

*And so I’m happy tonight. I’m not worried about anything. I’m not fearing any man! Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!”<sup>1</sup>*

Martin Luther King, J.R. was shot to death outside the Lorraine Hotel on April 4, 1968, and we will never know what could have been. Many scholars and activists believe it is no coincidence that Dr. King was murdered while supporting those striking workers. Many people believe that the civil rights movement was one thing, but that once Martin Luther King started trying to unite oppressed people across racial lines, once poor white folks started working with poor black folks; once victims of racial injustice started working with victims of economic injustice – he had gone too far.

This is Dr. King’s unfinished business. This is our unfinished business.

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<sup>1</sup> Testament of Hope, “Mountaintop” speech

Martin Luther King's body is dead and long returned to dust. But his spirit lives on, and all of us, every single one of us – is an inheritor of that spirit. We just have to accept what Dr. King has left to us – we have to claim our inheritance, because that's the only way this world is going to change.

Shortly after her husband's death, Coretta Scott King challenged us to claim our inheritance: "Those of you who believe in what Martin Luther King stood for – I would challenge you to see his spirit never dies. We are going to continue his work to make all people free and to make every person feel that they are human beings."<sup>2</sup>

But what does this look like, to accept Mrs. King's challenge? It means acknowledging, as Dr. King says, that "either we go up together, or we go down together."<sup>3</sup> It means doing everything we can to make sure that everyone who is sick can go to the doctor, that anyone who wants to learn can go to school, and that everyone who is hungry can have enough food to eat. It means accepting the dangerous assertion that none of us are free until all of us are free and that anyone's suffering is my suffering.

This is the spirit Dr. King calls us to inherit.

We cannot betray Dr. King by museum-zing him, or by allowing ourselves to slip into abstraction or intellectualization – treating oppression as so many "issues" to be considered and studied, forgetting the real breathing human beings who suffer as we debate. True, we have to think clearly, we have to use our brains – but not as a substitute for action. Without action our beliefs can never be more than mere opinions. Instead, let us accept King's call today, just as he called those striking sanitation workers to "develop a kind of dangerous unselfishness."

Dangerous unselfishness is what our nation needs more now than ever before. We're living in hard times, I know, and the problems we face can often seem far too large for us to do anything about. We can feel paralyzed, full of despair and helplessness – so often people come up to me on Sunday and ask, "But what can we do – what can I do?"

Well, this morning, as we celebrate the life of Martin Luther King, J.R., I have a suggestion. If we want to carry on with his work, if we truly want to honor his memory and inherit his spirit, then we can pick up right where he left off – by continuing the struggle against poverty. And we can start by joining our own Unitarian Universalist Association and other denominations in the Let Justice Roll Coalition from across the theological spectrum in telling Congress to raise the minimum wage to \$10/hour in 2010, which will more or less restore the minimum wage to the same level of buying power it had way back in 1968, when those sanitation workers filled the streets of Memphis!

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<sup>2</sup> I am a Man: Photographs of the 1968 Memphis Sanitation Strike and Dr. Martin Luther King, J.R. (Memphis: Memphis Publishing Company, 1993) p. 132

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

As Dr. King knew all too well, economic oppression is the last bastion of racism and sexism. Jim Crow has been swept away by legislation, court rulings and changing sensibilities, but the spirit of Jim Crow hasn't gone away – it has just relocated.

Right now, in 2009, 25% of all African Americans and more than 30% of all African American children are living in poverty with many millions more just a heartbeat away.<sup>4</sup> Sisters and Brothers, the dollar bar has replaced the color bar, Jim Crow is not dead and Dr. King's work – and ours - is far from over.

Raising the minimum wage to \$10 an hour will make an immediate, concrete, life-saving difference to millions of people, especially to women and people of color. The Minimum Wage was first passed during the last Great Depression, and it is crucial that we do not leave the least among us behind as we totter on the brink of another one. So as you leave here today, please stop by our social justice table out in the garden and learn more about what you can do to help today.

Martin Luther King, J.R. was a prophet of hope and I can see tears of pride in his ghostly eyes as the nation he loved so much is about to celebrate the inauguration of its first African American President, a man who ran as a candidate of hope. But while prophets and leaders like Martin Luther King and Barak Obama can keep the dream of hope alive, only we, only we, the American People can build a land where all those generations of hope can finally meet the opportunity they need to blossom. So whatever you do, go from this place and live your values out loud. Prophesy, testify, and speak the truth. Go forth from this place as a prophet of a new age – truth-telling, justice-demanding, life-loving, love-offering and world-transforming!

I pray that all of us, both individually and collectively, will become ever more like that old sanitation worker from Memphis who stood there on his wooden canes and said “So let me tell you this – if you call, I will come. I will stand with you and walk with you no matter what. Because that's what Dr. King taught us – he taught us that when your brothers and sisters call – you come.” Now that's a spirit I want us to inherit.

Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> US Census, 2007