

The Dream Renewed
Rev. Dr. Cynthia L. Landrum
Universalist Unitarian Church of East Liberty
Clarklake, MI
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Unitarian minister and abolitionist Theodore Parker, who lived from 1810-1860 is famous for saying, “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice” (Parker). It’s a statement Martin Luther King echoed, when he said, “When our days become dreary with low-hovering clouds of despair, and when our nights become darker than a thousand midnights, let us remember that there is a creative force in this universe, working to pull down the gigantic mountains of evil, a power that is able to make a way out of no way and transform dark yesterdays into bright tomorrows. Let us realize the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice” (King, “Where”) Barack Obama echoed King and Parker’s words in his speech on the night of the election, saying, “If there is anyone out there who still doubts that America is a place where all things are possible; who still wonders if the dream of our founders is alive in our time; who still questions the power of our democracy, tonight is your answer.... It’s the answer that led those who have been told for so long by so many to be cynical, and fearful, and doubtful of what we can achieve to put their hands on the arc of history and bend it once more toward the hope of a better day” (Obama, “Victory”)

It’s a natural thing happening right now, that people are looking to our president-elect, Barack Obama, to be the fulfillment of the dream of Martin Luther King, Jr., to be the end of that arc that pointed towards justice, to think that the arc was pointing to Barack Obama himself. And here we stand the day before Martin Luther King Day, and two days before the inauguration of the first African-American president of the United States with America. It’s a moment of great national triumph where the connection between these two men, these two African-Americans, these two American patriots, where this strand between them in the web of life is vibrating with resonancy, from the freedom riders of the 60s, to Obama’s train ride across the U.S. this weekend, tracing the route that Abraham Lincoln took, from Martin Luther King saying, “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!” (King, “I’ve Been”) to Obama saying, “It was the call of workers who organized; women who reached for the ballot; a President who chose the moon as our new frontier; and a King who took us to the mountaintop and pointed the way to the Promised Land. Yes we can to justice and equality. Yes we can to opportunity and prosperity. Yes we can heal this nation. Yes we can repair this world. Yes we can” (Obama, “Yes”). Yes, the connection we feel right now on edge this historic moment between the greatest orator of one generation and the greatest orator of the next generation, that connection is palpable and real.

But that doesn’t mean that we have reached the mountaintop. It doesn’t mean that we have seen the promised land. What we have in this moment is a new leader pointing the way, using the same language, but from within the halls of politics rather than through the methods of civil disobedience. And we have come a long way since Martin Luther King, from African

Americans fighting to be able to exercise their voting rights to voting in an African American. But the work that Martin Luther King stood for, the message he proclaimed, the battles that he fought, they are not ended. There is still much work to be done. So here, in religious commitment, I draw us back from simply celebrating to remembering the work that lies ahead, because there is much still to be done. The list of tasks that awaits the new president is one of the most daunting in history—to remove gracefully from one war and win another, to create a healthcare program in this country that supports all of our citizens, to truly leave no child behind, to get the faltering economy back on course. And then, there’s the work that Martin Luther King was engaged in: the work of justice, of equality. We think of him as the champion of civil rights for African-Americans, and he was. And there’s still much to be done in terms of anti-racism work. But King also was a champion of justice for people of all races, a champion of justice for all classes, particularly. He was also a fighter against what he saw as a wrongful war in Vietnam. The King we celebrate would have much to say to this new president about the way the world is now, and how it needs to become. As theologian James Lawson says in this week’s Time Magazine:

Economic exploitation, greed, sexism, violence, racism: we have not yet dismantled those forces yet in our midst. Obama represents that a change has come, but if you do not deal with the socioeconomic, political forces that inhibit people and create torture and cruelty, you can’t make progress [toward] King’s understanding of this society as [one] of liberty, equality, and justice for all. (Fetini 47)

This week at our commUnity forUm at the library, we heard a professor of economics talk about why the economy is the way it is, and how to make it better. One of the primary causes for the current economic state that he listed was the vast gulf between the very rich and the very poor. According to a 2004 AP news article:

The wealthiest 20 percent of households in 1973 accounted for 44 percent of total U.S. income, according to the Census Bureau. Their share jumped to 50 percent in 2002, while everyone else's fell. For the bottom fifth, the share dropped from 4.2 percent to 3.5 percent. (Roberts par. 3)

Another article states, “Income inequality grew significantly in 2005, with the top 1 percent of Americans - those with incomes that year of more than \$348,000 - receiving their largest share of national income since 1928, analysis of newly released tax data shows.” (Johnston par. 1)

There’s been a lot of flap about what ministers were invited to give which invocations and which events for Barack Obama, and so, as a minister who was not invited to give an invocation, I’ve done some thinking about what I would say to the new president, if I had the opportunity, not so much as a prayer, but in terms of what I would like him to know. So this is not in the form of a prayer, but rather a letter.

A Letter to President Obama

Dear President Obama,

Everyone is talking about the tough road ahead of you, about the needed economic recovery, and the fate of our nation. I represent a small church in a county in mid-Michigan, an area where the recession started long before the media and politicians agreed to call this a recession. We've watched friends, relatives, and neighbors lose their jobs, watched the unemployment rates rise, watched our house values plummet, watched people lose their homes to foreclosure, and watched people move away in a great migration seeking jobs and lives elsewhere. Our community is reading *The Grapes of Wrath* this year as part of the NEA's "Big Read" because stories of the great depression have strong resonance to us here, as we've faced this recession for a few years now. Our state is shadowed by the despair of Detroit, of which Mitch Albom wrote recently:

And yet to live in Detroit these days is to want to scream. But where do you begin? Our doors are being shuttered. Our walls are falling down. Our daily bread, the auto industry, is reduced to morsels. Our schools are in turmoil. Our mayor went to jail. Our two biggest newspapers announced they will soon cut home delivery to three days a week. Our most common lawn sign is FOR SALE...

We want to scream, but we don't scream, because this is not a screaming place, this is a swallow-hard-and-deal-with-it place. So workers rise in darkness and rev their engines against the winter cold and drive to the plant and punch in and spend hours doing the work that America doesn't want to do any more, the kind that makes something real and hard to the touch. Manufacturing. Remember manufacturing? They do that here. (Albom)

What I ask you to remember, Mr. President, are that these are people who could easily have turned to despair. But they heard you when you said, "Yes we can." They heard you when you whispered of the audacity of hope. They heard you when you said we can get to the mountaintop. And they did what we always do here, as Albom wrote. We rose in the darkness and we went to work to create the America that you told us to dream of, told us was possible if we worked together. We don't want to be asked to sacrifice; we don't want to be asked to work together. We're doing that already. What we want is hope, the hope that was plastered everywhere during the election, the hope that inspired hundreds of artists to paint your face, the hope that inspired songwriters and essayists to write in tribute. We need the hope you spoke of when you said, "When there was despair in the dust bowl and depression across the land, she saw a nation conquer fear itself with a New Deal, new jobs and a new sense of common purpose. Yes, we can" (Obama, "Victory").

Something has happened in this election, something bigger than one person. You became, somehow, a symbol, an icon. We have in this country a separation of church and state, yet the yearning, the hope, the faith that have been expressed to you, about you, for you, the way in which you are seen as the fulfillment of King's dream of the promised land are not about you, a man, they are a the religious cry of a people seeking a hero, seeking a worldly savior to lead us to the promised land here on earth. The same deep cry for heroism that comes from a nation still

wounded and hurting from the attacks on September 11th, 2001, a cry for a hero that was briefly transferred this weekend to the pilot Chesley B. "Sully" Sullenberger, III. When he brought a struggling plane down safely in New York City. When he brought down that plane, it was as if he was the heroic resolution to the lost planes we still remember from eight years ago. We long for a hero, for the extraordinary, to help us through our troubled times. It's a large burden to bear on your narrow shoulders.

So I ask you to remember what you said in the election season about how we do this together, we the American people. Do call us to the sacrifice, the work, that it takes us to rebuild this nation. We may be struggling, we may be looking to you, but call us to do this work with you. And through doing that, remember that you are just one man, remember your roots, where you came from, the struggles of your parents and grandparents, and your own. Don't climb on the pedestal we set before you.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. gave us a dream many years ago. It was a dream he had about a world of equality, a world of justice, a world of peace. There are many who will say this week that the dream has been realized. I say, no, the dream was forgotten for many years, and now the dream is reawakened, the call renewed. You and he and Theodore Parker were right that the arc of the moral universe bends towards justice. You are right to tell us it is we who do the bending. But that arc is still long, only now we see it stretching out in both directions, knowing that we have come a long way, but there is a long way to go.

I was once, and still am, a daughter of slave owners, a little white girl "on the red hills of Georgia" (King, "I Have"). And I learned from my parents a step better than they learned from their parents how to respect all people and judge them by "the content of their character," just as this nation has judged you by "the content of your character," rather than the color of your skin (King, "I Have").

But there is still much to be done to achieve King's dream of freedom ringing from city and hamlet, freedom ringing from mountain and valley, much to be done before we are free at last. There is torture to end, Guantanamo, Iraq, the wrongs we have committed as a nation to be righted; there are civil liberties to be given to citizens who can still be fired from jobs because of who they are, not what they do – our gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender citizens. Peace and justice are attainable—but they are still not ours.

The change now is the dream renewed, reengaged, reinvigorated. Once again we hear the call to get to the promised land. Once again we remember to look to the mountaintop. And we say, not with conviction, but with hope, "Yes we can."

Yes we can get to the mountaintop. Yes we can reach the promised land. Yes we can have opportunity and prosperity, equality, and justice. But we have to do it together.

Sincerely – and amen.

Rev. Dr. Cynthia L. Landrum

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