

Martin Luther King and the Beloved Community
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“I met him in 1962, in Mount Vernon, Iowa...” begins the recollection David Rankin, a Unitarian minister, of his encounter with Martin Luther King, Jr. He remembers him as somewhat squat and ungainly, as disorganized and distracted, as impatient and burdened in spirit.

And then, Rankin goes on to say that through this startlingly ordinary man came the luminous presence and prophetic call of the spirit of God incarnated into the 20th century.

Rankin titles his recollection of King “Incarnation.” Incarnation means “spirit embodied.” It means that something of the higher orders comes to reside in matter and is grounded in the body, in time, in history, in life. “Incarnation”—a supreme ideal clothed in honest imperfection—is a fitting term for the dual reality of Martin Luther King’s life and work.

King’s whole adult life was stretched between two truths, the truth of the revolutionary vision that possessed him, and the truth of the limits that plagued him. He strove to live and speak, to move and motivate from the spiritual truth of human love and human potential for good. At the same time, he was confronted at every turn by the frailties of human nature (not the least his own) and the realities of human life in world wracked by suffering, divisiveness, injustice, and evil.

The recollections of those that knew King intimately or who have memorialized his life, speak of him in heartbreakingly human terms—his loneliness and exhaustion, his confusion and doubt about how to shape and lead the movement, his troubled introspection and morbid obsession with his own death.

Even as he preached with sweeping power about the ethic of love and non-violent activism, he also anguished over the brutal humiliations that others endured as they strove to carry out his ideal of non-violence.

And yet in and through this troubled soul—a phrase he often used to refer to himself when speaking in private—through this troubled soul came a great authority and an unswerving vision of a dignified, integrated, and healed humanity. He called this the Beloved Community, and this ideal is woven through his speeches and writings from the first to the last.

In one of his first articles, published during the Montgomery bus boycott, he stated that the deeper purpose of the boycott was “reconciliation, redemption, and the creation of the beloved community.” In 1957, he described the mission of the newly formed Southern Christian Leadership Conference as “to foster and create the ‘beloved community’ in America where brotherhood can be a reality. . . Our ultimate goal is genuine inter-group

and inter-personal living – that is, integration." And in his last book he declared: "Our loyalties must transcend our race, our tribe, our class, and our nation . . ."

"Incarnation" is indeed a fitting term for the dual reality that Martin Luther King inhabited in his life and work, the power of a pure ideal grappling with the clay of mortal realism. And "incarnation" is a fitting term for the legacy he has left with us, and the labor we are persistently called to carry forward. Those who are still moved by the *dream* of Martin Luther King are called to clothe the ideal of Beloved Community in the honest imperfections of our lives.

What did he mean by Beloved Community?

Beloved community meant to King, in essence, *true relatedness*: a completely integrated and just society wherein brotherhood and sisterhood would be an actuality in all of social life.

Just as peace is not fulfilled simply in the absence of war, the Beloved Community would not be achieved merely by desegregation. King said, changes in legislation would only produce "a society where men are physically desegregated but spiritually segregated, where elbows are together and hearts apart."

While changes to the law were obviously necessary, it was also obvious that love could not be legislated. Yet King *believed* in love and its transformative and redemptive power. As a Christian, he believed that love *was* the rock-bottom truth of our nature and God's nature. As in the song we sang this morning, he believed that "*Love prevails in heaven and earth.*"

And because of his commitment to that fundamental and final truth, King maintained that gradually, blacks and whites could learn to relate to each other anew, dismantling the non-rational barriers which had divided us for generations, and forging relationships of fellowship and harmony.

To King, Beloved Community meant *that* quality and degree of integration. It meant *total relatedness* and the welcomed participation and contribution of African Americans in all aspects of society.

After the march from Selma to Montgomery in the spring of 1966, several thousand marchers were delayed at the airport because their planes were late. King later described how moved he was by the sight:

"As I stood with them and saw white and Negro, nuns and priests, ministers and rabbis, labor organizers, lawyers, doctors, housemaids and shop workers brimming with vitality and enjoying a rare comradeship, I knew I was seeing a microcosm of the mankind of the future in this moment of luminous and genuine brotherhood."

(I'm quite certain that had he lived through the feminist movement, he would have found another way to say such things besides 'mankind, and brotherhood', but alas, his words reflect his time and culture.)

Fundamental to King's philosophy was the certainty of our social interdependence. Our individual personal growth would not take place apart from meaningful relationships with others, and we would rise in dignity, or fall into destruction and deformity, together.

Over time, King's concerns widened to include not only the struggle of blacks but of all people who are oppressed economically or by prejudice. His perspective widened to include not only American society but the world.

And as he became more cognizant of the global situation, as he assessed and critiqued the Viet Nam War and the effects of global capitalism, he moved toward a concept of the "world house" and "the solidarity of the human family".

He perceived the interconnectedness of all human struggle and suffering, and the interdependence of all human achievement and liberation. He expressed it in those famous words: "We are tied together in a single garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality."

His vision of Beloved Community expanded finally to include the ideal of a universal human community that transcended differences of race, class, sex, creed and nationality. He believed no one would be free—not even the oppressors—until all were free.

But the means to this end had to be the constant, unswerving, courageous practice of love, had to be the commitment to the hard discipline of non-violence, had to be the practice of inclusion, by which the downtrodden and the outcast could become integrated as full citizens.

The blessed or beloved community could only come into existence through the *practice* of love, inclusion, non-violence, reconciliation and redistributive justice. This exhortation set an impossibly high goal for the oppressed and their allies, and was dismissed an absurdity by the cynical and the powerful.

But King saw it as a collective pilgrimage. Just as Jesus preached that the Kingdom of God was both coming in the future and also already here amongst us and within us, so King preached that the Beloved Community was both a far-distant goal and a way of getting there, both a future end and a present means.

Now, if we were to take a look at the UU principles and purposes (which you can do if you want to right now by turning about 6 pages in from the front of the gray hymnal)--- if we were to take a look at the UU principles and purposes we would see that, taken altogether, they describe the Beloved Community, both as a goal and as an ongoing practice.

They describe Beloved Community on the interpersonal level, the congregational level, the social level and the global level. What are the primary concepts?: upholding the dignity and worth of each person, practicing democratic inclusion of all people in decision making, practicing compassion, justice, and equity, practicing the mutual encouragement to growth, and always recognizing the interdependence of our lives and of life as a whole.

The key, though, that gives meaning to any of this, is *practice*.

Going back to the idea of incarnation--of embodying something visionary within the challenges of current reality—incarnation is a matter of practice, of labor, of trying again and again, even though it seems impossible, even in doubt, even though the results seem disappointing or grossly inadequate...practice.

Marshal Frady, who wrote a biography of Martin Luther King, says:

Over the years, ironically, King has passed into the cloudy shimmers of pop beatification, commemorated with parades, memorial concerts, schools and streets and parks named for him, his birthday a national holiday, his image on postage stamps. But in the process, a benignly nebulous amnesia has settled over how in fact tenuous, fitful, and uncertain was his progress through those years from Montgomery to Memphis...The man has been abstracted out of his sweltering convoluted actuality, into a kind of weightless effigy of who he was. As another of his biographers, David L. Lewis puts it, in the nation's canonization of Martin King, 'we have sought to remember him by forgetting him.'"

What we have forgotten is how messy it all was, how confusing and painful, how he, like us, was always trying to figure out what the heck to do next, how to handle one crisis after another, how to repeatedly face not only those who viciously hated him and the movement, but how to hold together the movement itself, with all the infighting and ego struggles amongst the leadership, with the overwhelming scope of what they were trying to accomplish, and with all the demoralizing defeats that so vastly outnumbered their successes.

How are we called, in this time, in this place, to practice Beloved Community? What concrete expression of inclusion, reconciliation, justice, and transforming love are we called to incarnate? As poet and preacher Barbara Pescan once said, "We should try to heal that part of the cosmos where we're planted." What healing is our part of the cosmos calling for at this time?

Next week, we will gather after the service for a discussion in the parish hall to explore a question about inclusion and equality of all people under the law of our land.

We will be asking ourselves, as a community, if it is fitting that we declare ourselves in public support of the full, legal, marital standing, inclusion, and protection of gay and lesbian couples who have committed to life-long partnership. We will be asking whether,

as a community, it is consonant with our own practice and beliefs, that such couples should be regarded as equal, under the law, to their heterosexual counterparts.

Let us remember that beloved community is both a future vision, and also way of conducting ourselves now, a way of practicing the incarnation of our values.

UU minister John Beuhrens describes how the night after King was assassinated was a pivotal moment in his religious calling:

I sat in a meeting house, pondering the ancient words of the Hebrew prophet Micah: "What doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with thy God?" I came to believe that when the prophets are silenced or killed for posing the harder questions of justice, the hope for solutions is to be found not in the lives of great individuals but in communities that attempt to live in the spirit of the prophets – by keeping alive their questions. Not pretending to have all the answers, but living in the very questions themselves."

And so we are confronted by prophetic questions at this time, and like all human beings striving to understand how we are to incarnate our ideals into the clay of human life, let us gently remember that Beloved Community will often not be obvious or easy or simple, that it will require great courage, great love, great risk, and that to bring it down to earth, *we must practice, practice, practice.*