

THIS HIGHER AUTHORITY

Up until the time of his assassination in April 1968, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was — in addition to being a minister of the Ebenezer Baptist church — the president of the Southern Christian Leadership Council, an organization of African-American civil rights activists united to harness the moral authority of black churches and enact long-overdue legal reforms. The final address he gave as SCLC president was delivered just months before his death, at its tenth annual meeting, to a group of people he loved. He called it, “Where Do We Go From Here?” I believe Dr. King had an abiding curiosity about that particular question, but especially nearer to the end of his life.

On that day in August 1967, Dr. King was speaking in Atlanta to an esteemed audience of religious and civic leaders who had made significant strides in securing greater civil rights for African-Americans over the span of a single decade, after centuries of brutal enslavement and systematic subjugation, and he was encouraging them — oddly enough — to make their peace with power. As he explained to them, “power properly understood is nothing but the ability to achieve purpose. It is the strength required to bring about... change.” Dr. King added, “Now a lot of us are preachers, and all of us have our moral convictions and concerns, and so often we have problems with power. But there is nothing wrong with power if power is used correctly.” The challenge for SCLC members was that they so rarely had seen it used correctly; understandably, their suspicion of it remained hard to shake. Some of you here might sympathize with that difficulty.

Dr. King observed that surveying the history of the United States, the SCLC saw a troubled past in which Black Americans had learned “to seek their goals through love and moral suasion devoid of power,” as he put it, while White Americans had learned “to seek their goals through power devoid of love and conscience”, and had witnessed the painful outcomes that follow such a “collision of immoral power with powerless morality.” Yet he declared, “Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice. Justice at its best is love correcting everything that stands against love.” Dr. King wanted them to own the power of

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their love — and he also wanted them to publicly claim their rightful moral authority.

Moral authority is such a complicated idea for religious liberals in general, and for us Unitarian Universalists in particular. Our inclinations tend notoriously toward the anti-authoritarian. But I no longer believe this should be a point of pride of us. Quite the contrary. It can frequently be a liability. Because if we surrender this notion of moral authority, we lose too much of our power and forfeit too much of our own potential. We humans invariably rely on authority figures in positions of power to help us structure our societies and guarantee our basic rights. Of course we notice when when they fail, and often they fail badly.

Dr. King served the Baptist tradition, which like the Unitarian one, grew out of the Radical Reformation. Dr. King was named for the first avowed Protestant, Martin Luther himself. Protestants have traditionally protested certain kinds of religious authority, usually risking their lives to do so. But a protest is very different from a riot, as Dr. King noted in his 1967 address to the SCLC, and more productive, too.

All the leaders of the SCLC were also devoted followers — of Dr. King, yes, but also of the larger civil rights movement. In order for movements to gain ground, they have to be populated by leaders and followers alike. They have to be organized and coordinated in their protests in order to be effective. One of the complaints our UU leaders make — the religious professionals alongside the lay leaders in congregations — is that when people ask those designated leaders to lead, they aren't poised or prepared to follow them, not in any orderly fashion.

We UUs talk a lot about leadership skills, and we have them in abundance, but we need to remember that following is also a key leadership skill — knowing when to step aside, hang back, share the platform, keep our counsel, bring up the rear. This involves serious discernment. Our spiritual leaders deserve to have a few followers in the ranks, at least. In UU services of Installation like the one we held here last April, the congregation asks the called minister provide it with “moral leadership”. The pledge I made last year was to offer you my moral leadership “so

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far as the power within me lies... always seeking after greater wisdom.” Probably the greatest collective wisdom resides in the shared strength of a powerful love like the kind that Dr. King described.

In a poignant piece titled “Great Power Lives in our Love,” Quaker author Parker Palmer writes: “As we celebrate Dr. King’s life — and continue to feel the pain of justice postponed and denied — let’s honor his legacy by joining love to power in our personal and public lives. Let’s ask our... leaders to do the same.” The guiding question that Dr. Palmer provides is this: “*Am I using whatever power I have in the service of love — via my voice, my vocation, my personal and public witness?*” As we celebrated MLK Day, we should set any stubborn power struggles we regularly engage aside and each consider this question with utmost sincerity.

Several years ago, one of my best friends and I got into a ferocious argument. It had that amazing emotional pitch unique to a close relationship. My friend is a formidable woman: intelligent, eloquent, generous, authentic, forthright, and principled. I admire and respect her and often feel humbled both by who she is in my life and how she is in the world. I *love* her. I have loved her since my youth. So I cannot explain how we got into a shouting matching or even why; I no longer recall what specifically prompted this dispute of ours. But the coda of it stays with me still. Indignant, she told me: “You just want to be be right.” Offended, I replied: “No, I don’t. I don’t want to be right. I just want to know *what* is right.”

What is right? Those of us in positions of moral authority — in our households or congregations or towns or schools or hospitals or workplaces, whatever the setting — must remain eternally curious about that. This is the only way to exercise our forms of authority responsibly. There are definitely times, I admit, when I really like to be right. Who doesn’t? It’s exceedingly gratifying when we are! But I also truly want to gauge how accurate my attunement and orientation is moment by moment.

As your settled minister, I would never ask you to assume that I personally am right. But I do ask you to trust that I have a vested and immediate interest in what

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is right. Because while I am in your present employ as a servant-leader, I cannot forget that I ultimately answer to this higher authority that I call God and that others might call The Greatest Good.

Today, friends and members of UU Wellesley Hills will decide by ranked-order voting what organization devoted to racial justice will receive the totality of our plate collection next week. This entire month, we have made plate collections to fund the work of groups dedicated to challenging the systemic racism that pervades American life. Congregants here nominated each of the six organizations now under consideration and you all are put in the position of choosing between competing goods — between ameliorating the tragic effects of mass incarceration in the new Jim Crow, say, or racialized educational disparities, or gross economic inequality. There is not a single bad option among these worthy organizations.

Collectively, you will decide our next donation, and our Social Action Council will see that it gets made on behalf of the congregation. (Of course, if your favorite contender is not selected, you always have the generous option of donating to them privately, apart from your contribution to the plate.) The work that the Council does here at UU Wellesley Hills is crucial, and its leaders constantly recall for us how many wrongs still remain to be righted in our society, how considerable certain human needs are. They routinely ask us which ones we will join together in confronting next.

Sometimes causes come to the forefront for a while, other times they are consigned to the background for a bit. Progress happens in fits and starts and not at all as swiftly or as surely as we would like. Yet we continue to be inspired by certain exemplars of humanity. We follow in their footsteps. “Great leaders are honored, not by adulation, but by sharing their insights and values,” wrote Clinton Lee Scott, the late Universalist minister and American pacifist.

Decades ago, Dr. King told the African-American leaders of the SCLC, “We made an indifferent and unconcerned nation rise from lethargy and subpoenaed its conscience to appear before the judgment seat of morality...” In doing so, those

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on the SCLC exerted their moral authority. But he challenged them further to maintain it. “We must stand up amid a system that still oppresses us and develop an unassailable and majestic sense of values,” he insisted. “Let us be dissatisfied until that day when nobody will shout, ‘White Power!’ when nobody will shout, ‘Black Power!’ but everybody will talk about God's power and human power,” understanding that “God is love,” and that as Dr. King contends, “[the one] who loves has the key that unlocks the door to the meaning of ultimate reality.”

We all now intuit that Dr. King — whether we call him a prophet or a saint or a martyr or a visionary — held out the key to a better way. Although his life was violently and senselessly cut short, it was led with a bold and fearless spirit, and his moral authority remained consistent, clear, and uncompromising. “If you are seeking the highest good, I think you can find it through love,” he told the SCLC. He sent its leaders to “go out with a divine dissatisfaction” with anything less.

However you commemorate the MLK holiday tomorrow — perhaps through community service, perhaps through a civic program, perhaps through closer study of a racial injustice that our country urgently needs to correct — I do hope you keep it holy. I recommend taking a couple of minutes to watch the last speech Dr. King ever delivered, given at the Mason Temple in Memphis the day before he was shot. It is almost impossible to watch without weeping, but the tears seem a fitting tribute to the magnificence of his soul. The words he spoke made it plain that he expected to die and did not much fear that eventuality. What mattered to Dr. King was that his people, those who had faithfully followed his ministry and his movement, would continue on after their appointed leader's death.

Where would *they* go? Toward the Promised Land, Dr. King insisted, using familiar Biblical language, up to that proverbial mountain top, heeding a higher call. And where do *we* go now? In prior years, we UUs used to speak about “Standing on the Side of Love”, but these days we instead sing about “Answering the Call of Love.” I prefer that newer formulation myself. After all, love does not take sides, nor does it stay put; it travels far and wide and calls to us from any number of

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places where kindness is required. Various leaders will amplify its call. We must listen for that and then respond. As Dr. King told the SCLC, “love is ultimately the only answer to [humanity’s] problems.” When will give it the last word? Whenever will we realize its full and final authority over all of us?