

Message: We Have Work to Do

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What a glorious day this is! We celebrate the birthday of one of our greatest civil rights leaders, Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., a profound visionary. A man who inspired all races to inclusiveness and non-violent methods of problem solving. A man who lived in peace and died – paradoxically and tragically -- by violence.

We celebrate the inauguration on Tuesday of our 44th president, a man who is half-white, half-black, who represents hope and the dawning of a new future for our country. A man who is intelligent, practical and visionary in the same breath; accepting, curious and eager to learn; healthy, and devoted to his wife and children. Barack Hussein Obama, the skinny guy with the funny name and a truly diverse background.

I'm proud, proud, proud of our country. Proud to be an American, after a long season of drought and doubt. We've come a long way. But not far enough. I don't want to rain on this parade, because I am indeed proud of the progress we as individuals and we as a nation have worked for and achieved.

But we have hard work to do. Racism, personal racism and institutional racism, are alive and well. Within the last two weeks, a group of police officers in Oakland, California, captured a black man. While the prisoner was lying face down on the pavement, a white transit police officer pulled his gun and shot the prisoner in the back, shot him dead. That white policeman will be tried and punished, but the black man will not know and not care, because he is dead and cannot face trial for his alleged crime. This was an instance of personal racism on the part of the policeman, and institutional racism, because he was on duty as a "public protector of the peace." We have work to do.

According to a poll conducted by Stanford University last fall, "40 per cent of Americans harbored some form of prejudice against blacks, such as believing that black people were lazy, violent or given to complaining."¹ Mind you, these were attitudes that people were not ashamed or embarrassed to express to a pollster. "And these attitudes do not account for the

disparities health, education, income and wealth between blacks and whites that have been a constant feature in our society.”ⁱⁱ We have work to do.

Just three years ago, white students in Jena, a small town in Louisiana, hung three nooses from the only shade tree in the school yard after some black students had sought shelter from the blistering sun, with permission of the assistant principal. Later, black students were harassed and beaten at school events, and white perpetrators were punished with three days of “in school” suspension. But when a black student responded to taunts from white students and hit a white student, he and five others were jailed and initially charged with second-degree murder. The white district attorney and judge allowed seating an all white jury. This, my fellow citizens, is institutional racism. We have work to do.

I remind you that in 1965 when Dr. King sent out his call to the clergy in the United States to come to Selma, and help them confront the authorities who were blocking their crossing of the bridge, the Unitarian Universalist Association board disbanded and headed for Selma, as did more than 400 of our ministers. The Unitarian Universalists had the largest clerical representation of any denomination in the United States. And we only had about a thousand congregations altogether!

Four years ago, in Louisiana, I met the son of one of the black organizers, both Baptist ministers. The son told me that his daddy had told him about the murder of Rev. James Reeb, the Unitarian minister, and how so many Unitarians had come to Selma. Those ministers paved the way for us to continue the work. That African-American minister, whose father had been an organizer, preached at the Unitarian Church in Shreveport at the first anti-racist worship service held in that city since David Duke, the Ku Klux Klan leader, had run for governor 20 years before. The Unitarian Congregation shared a bus with the African-Americans who went to Jena by the thousands to protest the treatment of those boys by our “justice system”. With our cooperation, we built trust and good relationships. But we still have work to do.

Amos wrote, rebuking idol-worshipping rulers:

Take away from me the noise of your songs;

I will not listen to the melody of your harps.

But let justice roll down like waters,

and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. Amos 5

We have many avenues we can travel to support inclusiveness, social justice, and to combat individual and institutional racism. I invite you to speak up when you hear racist jokes. I invite you to stand up when you recognize unfair treatment of minorities. I beseech you to build upon this great moment in history, and make some history of your own by supporting anti-racist and civil liberties organizations, and social justice everywhere.

We each have but one life to live, and it can be confusing and overwhelming to choose among social justice projects. But no one is free until we are all free. I pray that part of our individual and institutional social justice focus will emphasize human rights, anti-racism, and genuine inclusiveness. We don't have a moment to lose. The time is here. The time is now. For us to get to work.

Amen

ⁱ Associated Press-Yahoo News Poll conducted by Stanford University, fall, 2008. Quoted by Andra Gillespie in the Washington Post newspaper, p. A17, January 17, 2009.

ⁱⁱ Andra Gillespie in the Washington Post newspaper, p. A17, January 17, 2009.