

**United First Parish Church In Quincy**  
**Sermon for 1/20/08 by Rev. Michelle Walsh**

(Accompanied by a prepared media presentation on Boston area street memorials and funerals)

**“Witnessing Soul – Witnessing Spirit”**

Teddy bears and empty shoes – street memorials to murdered young people on so many corners in Roxbury, Dorchester, and Mattapan. One young woman I know said recently: “...there are so many we see around here – it’s just like a shrine in Boston. You know, like shrines everywhere. Everywhere you turn your head, it’s a shrine – it’s sad. You shouldn’t have to see memorials on every corner, but that’s the way it is, it’s reality, I guess.”

“It’s a reality, I guess.” What does that mean to us as Unitarian Universalists on this weekend that we celebrate Martin Luther King Day? This morning I heard on the news that the latest statistic is that we’ve had 8 homicides so far for January 2008 in Boston, this is far more than the 2 in January 2006 and 3 in January 2007. This is not a great way to start the New Year.

The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. had a dream – a dream of “The Beloved Community” – a dream of a people who strove *beyond* the boundaries of tribe, race, class, ethnicity, religion, and nation – a people who strove *toward* a common unity in love and *toward* equality through justice. Dr. King understood our 7<sup>th</sup> principle – “respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.” He understood this principle very well when he wrote: “injustice anywhere is a *threat* to justice everywhere.”

A few years ago, one of our African American ministers, the Rev. Rosemary Bray McNatt met King’s wife, Coretta Scott King. Coretta told her that she and King spent many years attending Unitarian churches, but realized that they “could never build a mass movement of black people if [they] were Unitarian.”<sup>1</sup> Does that surprise any of us? But does it disappoint or disturb us as well? How complacent are we today about Dr. King’s vision, even

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<sup>1</sup> See Rosemary Bray McNatt’s essay “The Problem of Theology in Anti-Racism” in Bowens-Wheatley, M. & Jones, N.P. (eds.) (2003). *Soul Work: Anti-racist Theologies in Dialogue*. Boston: Skinner House Books, 27.

as we recognize his birthday as a *sacred* moment in *our* Unitarian Universalist liturgical calendar year? How do we represent the beloved community in relationship to young people and families struggling daily with such threats of violence in their midst – violence we saw renewed in multiple shootings in the city in this past week? Do we take seriously Dr. King’s vision and call?

As Unitarian Universalists today we sing that *we’ll* build a land where we bind up the broken, where the captives go free – we’ll build a land where the oil of *gladness* dissolves all *mourning* because *we’ll* build a land of peace and justice. We yearn for the beloved community in our social justice spiritual rhetoric and hymns, but we are *still* far from Dr. King’s vision when we put our faith into action. Is there *any* “oil of gladness” that *we* can offer that will dissolve the “mourning” and traumatic loss expressed by the street memorials and funeral excerpts we have witnessed here this morning?

We are *still* predominantly a white middle to upper middle class denomination, with only a small number of working class

congregations that are also still predominantly white. While over half of our churches have now become Welcoming Congregations on behalf of the Bisexual-Gay-Lesbian-and-Transgendered community, only a handful of churches have committed to the goal of economic and racial justice as established by *several* General Assembly resolutions over the past decade. And only recently has the UUA begun curriculum development for an Anti-racism Welcoming Congregation process. May I suggest that our speedier movements in the areas of justice for women and justice for the BGLT community have a lot to do with the fact that these are people who actually live in *our* midst – people with whom we have active and caring *relationships*.

The challenge comes in advocating for justice on behalf of those with whom we have *no* personal relationship – and this is *especially* challenging when we fear some risk to ourselves, perhaps of real or vicarious traumatization, when we allow ourselves to care deeply about people who carry some perceived or actual risk of harm. Perhaps this is the *real* barrier to caring about

and advocating for our *neighbor* when that neighbor is in some actual or potential danger.

There *is* a greater comfort and ease to caring about and advocating for those who live far away, such as Unitarian Universalists often do for those in Darfur. As *critically* important as it is to care about our global neighbors, *particularly* the genocide in Darfur, what *is* it that prevents us from a deeper involvement with those who live in our own backyard – *especially* when members of our own African American inner-city community openly speak of their experience as a “quiet genocide” and of the African American male as an “endangered species?”

Now I know some you sitting here in the pews today are applying your excellent and highly critical analytical brains to the term “genocide” and are saying to yourselves that one can’t really use such a term for the African American inner-city experience – that it’s not appropriate when compared with Rwanda or Darfur. But I would challenge you to ask yourselves if our call in response as Unitarian Universalists is to this type of distant analysis and

comparison. Instead, is it not our call to *be* the church of the open heart and listening ears, as we teach our children in religious education? To *be* the church that strives for justice, compassion and peace as we state in the covenant of our church here in Quincy? To *be* the church that acts with the transforming and enlarging power of love, as we covenant together in our living tradition sources and in our purposes and principles? Is *this* not our deepest call to put our faith into action?

Dr. King understood that *personal* social relationships are the key to forming a “beloved community” – and this knowledge was rooted in his personal experience of segregation – of blacks and whites being prevented by law from interacting with and knowing each other in their *fullest* humanity – in their fullest worth and dignity. Dr. King would write: “The first time that I was seated behind a curtain in a dining car, I felt as though the curtain had been dropped on my selfhood.”<sup>2</sup> “The curtain had been dropped

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Smith, K.L. & Zepp, Jr., I.G. (1998). *Search For The Beloved Community: The Thinking of Martin Luther King, Jr.* Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, p. 135.

on my *selfhood*” – what must a people do to break through such a curtain – to force themselves to be seen in their full humanity?

Perhaps they must call for dramatic action – for political theater and political art. Perhaps they must call for an extremity of language that metaphorically reflects and resists the daily trauma, risks, and terror with which each inner-city parent lives – that one day he or she might see *their* child in a coffin – a terror of which the youth themselves will candidly admit.

We witness to *political* art, to an “aesthetic of resistance”<sup>3</sup> when we hear language such as “quiet genocide.” We witness to this aesthetic of resistance in the mounting number and diversity of these tragic yet strangely beautiful<sup>4</sup> street memorials. We witness to this aesthetic of resistance in the orders of funeral services,<sup>5</sup> now

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<sup>3</sup> See chapter four particularly of Taylor, M.L. (2001). *The Executed God: The Way of the Cross in Lockdown America*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, p. 101. Taylor focuses on political theater, and the quoted term is by Angela Davis.

<sup>4</sup> I have less ambivalence in calling the street memorials “tragic but strangely beautiful” than I do in seeing beauty in black bodies hanging from trees or Jesus hanging on the cross, per James Cone’s lecture, because there are more overt signs of life and spirit and resistance in the construction of the street memorials. However, I still reach for James Cone’s intent in his metaphorical extremity as an act of political resistance before a predominantly white audience at Harvard. Cone, J. (2007). Strange Fruit. *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, Winter, pp. 47-55.

<sup>5</sup> It is outside the scope of this sermon, but credit must be given to Tina Chery, founder of the Louis D. Brown Peace Institute in Boston and a surviving mother of her murdered 14 year old son, for the design of these orders of services for funerals of murdered loved ones.

designed with a proliferation of pictures, poetry, and personal letters of, about, and to the murdered loved one.

We are witnesses to *the soul*, an embodied spirit, who has been lost – and we are witnesses to the *spirit* of the community – a community that continues to *desire*<sup>6</sup> the *particularity* of that soul and continues to remember the soul through its own forms of embodied witness – empty shoes, clothes and hats, food offerings, bloodied and bandaged teddy bears, teddy bears strapped to poles in bondage with each other and at times hugging each other, and for one teddy bear, a stick shaped like a wishbone carefully and protectively tucked under its chin.

We are spiritual witnesses to what remains in the aftermath of violent, traumatic loss – to an expression of “dangerous memories” in these street memorials that are intended to call forth *a response* in the witnesses. Sharon Welch writes: “Dangerous memories fund a community’s sense of dignity; they inspire and

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<sup>6</sup> I am influenced by the poetry of Wendy Farley’s use of the language of “desire” for the passionate human yearning for the Divine or Holy Mystery (or God) that is both threaded throughout our world and beyond our world. Soul in this conception is the particular embodiment of the Divine movement of the Spirit of Life, in Unitarian Universalist preferred language. See Farley, W. (2005). *The Wounding and Healing of Desire: Weaving Heaven and Earth*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.

empower those who challenge oppression. Dangerous memories are a people's history of resistance and struggle, of dignity and transcendence in the face of oppression."<sup>7</sup>

But what response does such witness of these dangerous memories embodied in these street memorials and orders of funeral services call forth in us as Unitarian Universalists? The root meaning of "witness" has both a passive component, as in "knowledge," and an active component, as in "testimony." Kathy Weingarten<sup>8</sup> has argued that witnessing has multiple dimensions, depending on one's awareness versus unawareness, and one's feeling of empowerment versus disempowerment.

The most dangerous position, of course, is for one to be empowered but unaware – I could make a joke about our current president here but perhaps I should restrain myself. (pause) But often, as religious liberals, we feel *aware* but disempowered – and thus we become cynical, apathetic, or actively depressed. Perhaps,

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<sup>7</sup> See chapter eight particularly in Welch, S.D. (2000). *A Feminist Ethic of Risk, Revised Edition*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press. Welch's use of the term "dangerous memories" comes from Christian theologian Johann Baptist Metz.

<sup>8</sup> Weingarten, K. (2000). Witnessing, Wonder, and Hope. *Family Process* 39 (4): 389-402.

though, the good news is that we *do have* relational power – a greater and deeper and more transformational power than we often realize!

James Luther Adams, our most famous UU theologian and social ethicist of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, wrote in 1941 words that still ring prophetically true today:

It is not reason alone, but reason inspired by ‘raised affections’ that is necessary for salvation. We become what we love...This element of commitment, of change of heart, of decision, so much emphasized in the Gospels, has been neglected by religious liberalism, and that is the prime source of its enfeeblement. [Adams continues] We liberals are largely an uncommitted and therefore a self-frustrating people. Our first task, then, is to restore to liberalism its own dynamic and its own prophetic genius. We need conversion within ourselves...Only by some such conversion can we be possessed by a love that will not let us go...<sup>9</sup>

“We need conversion within ourselves...” Strong religious language for a Unitarian Universalist, right? (Many of you know how interested I am in the language of reverence issue!) Adams is arguing that our relational *power* and *choice* lies in an experience

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<sup>9</sup> Quote from an essay by James Luther Adams entitled “The Changing Reputation of Human Nature” found in Beach, G.K. (ed.) (1998). *The Essential James Luther Adams: Selected Essays and Addresses*. Boston: Skinner House Books, pp. 77-78.

of *turning* – the root meaning of conversion is the word “turning” – that we need an experience of change of heart. Witnessing can be involved in just such a change of heart – by choosing to turn *toward* and not away from what we witness, by opening to it and not repressing it. Witnessing in-depth allows our heart to open and be moved so that our next natural step is a *desire* to be involved, a *desire* to give testimony, a *desire* to put our faith into action on behalf of justice. In Buddhism, we call this the presence of mindfulness that allows the deepest well-spring of compassion to flower, both for ourselves and for others.

If we truly believe in the inherent worth and dignity of each person, and in the interdependent web of existence, then we will risk allowing ourselves to become witnesses in such a way that we become open to the possibility of conversion – of turning and being transformed in the witnessing by a change of heart, mind, and bodily action. We become open to witnessing soul and to witnessing and participating in the Spirit of Life in such moments. And in these moments, and in an expansive sense of the Spirit of

Life and our interdependence with all of existence, *we* will build the beloved community through the *particularity* of our *relationships*,<sup>10</sup> *we* will build the beloved community *through finding opportunities* for relationships between diverse souls. *Your* Unitarian Universalist Urban Ministry is one such place for building those types of relationships. (I say *your* UU Urban Ministry deliberately because the UU Urban Ministry is not an arm of the UUA – it is supported entirely by the membership of congregations, they’re volunteer labor and financial resources.)

And we *do* need to build these relationships, both for ourselves and for our children, as our interdependence demonstrates that our gated white communities fail to keep the troubles of our diverse and complex global world from our doors – a world facing increasingly serious dangers from both terrorism and global

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<sup>10</sup> I am influenced by Marjorie Suchocki’s formulation that the commitment to universal well-being first starts by awareness of the particularity of our relationships and our dependence upon them. A conscious commitment to our interdependence on universal well-being spirals out of conscious awareness of the particularity of dependence. See Suchocki, M.H. (2003). *The Fall to Violence: Original Sin in Relational Theology*. New York: Continuum, particularly chapter four. I also relate this to Chopp’s citation of Ricoeur that “we see the absolute in the testimony of the particular (p. 10)” and that this is the movement of Spirit in the world. See Chopp, R.S. (1998). Theology and the Poetics of Testimony. *Criterion*, Winter, 2-12.

warming. Our children and our children's children will reap what we sow, both our successes and our failures.

The work of economic and racial justice is ultimately *soul work*,<sup>11</sup> to which each of us is called, and each in our own way and time – but it *is* a call to encounter souls that are different from ourselves, often to encounter souls who live in radically different circumstances from our own. One way that you can begin to respond to that call today is to participate in a forum with youth representatives and a volunteer from your UU Urban Ministry after the service at Noon in the parlor. You may actually find yourself inspired by the amazingly joyful and transformative work that we do, a work that has converted us to a deeper love that does not let us go!

Another way is to attend one of the adult education programs on racism in the coming months and deepen your understanding of the systematic ways in which we are blocked from creating and

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<sup>11</sup> This is the title and thesis of a book that emerged from a three-day consultation on theology and racism which the UUA convened with scholars, ministers, theologians, etc., including James Cone. See Bowens-Wheatley, M. & Jones, N.P. (eds.) (2003). *Soul Work: Anti-racist Theologies in Dialogue*. Boston: Skinner House Books.

living in the beloved community. But I *do* invite and challenge each of you to find *some* way to *personalize* your relationships in these areas as a spiritual commitment during this New Year – I make this invitation for yourself *and* on behalf of your children and the next generation of children. May we be guided by the Spirit of Life and Love, and by Dr. King’s vision of ‘The Beloved Community,’ as we do so. Blessed be. Amen.

## **Opening Words, 1/20/08**

On this weekend of Martin Luther King's birthday, we are called by our living tradition sources to listen to the words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love. We are called today to heed the final vow of our covenant here in Quincy – to strive for justice, compassion, and peace. As Elizabeth McMaster<sup>12</sup> writes: In the search for truth, may we be just. In the search for justice, may we be loving. And in the loving, may we find peace.

## **Closing Words**

In the words of Martin Luther King, Jr.: We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. May we as Unitarian Universalists know this as deeply in our bones as did King and in our witnessing, turn toward deeper action. Amen.

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<sup>12</sup> Quoted in *Rejoice Together*, collected by Helen Pickett, Boston: Skinner House Books, p. 39.