

Reflecting on Martin Luther King Jr.
A sermon delivered by Rev. Kate Rohde

It is one of life's ironies that both locally and nationally we have been shocked by violence and its aftermath in the weeks leading up to the celebration honoring the work of a man who practiced and preached peace and non-violence. An emotional teenager in Omaha and a mentally ill young man in Tucson have filled our newspapers, our airwaves, our thoughts, and our conversation, even as we turn towards a celebration of the man who addressed an issue that had and has been the cause of so much violence throughout our history, addressed it through non-violent, loving, and vigorous challenges. The oppression of African Americans in our country was central to the disputes which led us to our bloodiest of wars, The Civil War. That violence continued with lynchings, beatings, shootings and rapes visited upon black Americans by their countrymen. The Civil Rights movement put forth the crazy idea that we didn't have to live in violence and inequity with one another, that we could change things in a way that was not only non-violent but loving.

There has been a lot of political commentary over the week on what happened in Arizona. As a minister, I have to say I have preferred the measured, sermonic responses to the others. The best of which came from our president Wednesday night and the second best from comic John Stuart in an uncomedic commentary on Monday. I recommend looking them both up on the internet if you didn't get an opportunity to see them. But in some ways what happened here, a shooting by a distraught boy, may be even more worthy of our reflection not because it is more distressing, but because it has

become so common. I was surprised and dismayed to learn that there were ten such school shootings last year. I was dismayed not only at that amount of violence, but that it has become so commonplace that it hardly catches our attention anymore unless it is close to home. School shootings at Columbine 12 years ago got the kind of attention that we are paying to what happened in Arizona. Now it has become more like the crime stories on the evening news, little noticed and soon forgotten except by those whose lives were touched directly.

The question for us this morning and beyond is what part do we all have in the violence that is so commonplace in the spirit and actions of so many and what is our part in transcending it. That was MLK's challenge to the nation was to transcend our history of violence and injustice and approach one another even when confronting evil and injustice to approach each other with compassion with a view not to punish but to change minds and hearts.

One thing that came to my mind this week is the time in 1965 when a Finnish teenager came to stay with our family. Although we lived in a small, quiet, town, her family had concerns about sending her to America not only because it was far away, but also because so much they heard about us was crime and violence. While those images may not have reflected the town where she was to come—we still lived in a time where people didn't lock their doors in the day—we were surprised visiting her country that in the schools the children didn't have lockers. They just left their things in book bags in the halls with confidence that nothing would be missing on their return.

I remembered living in Vancouver in the 80's when they hosted a world's fair and the real fear I heard from members of the Unitarian Congregation that a big event like that would make the city far more dangerous because Americans and their guns would be crossing into their country by the thousands. Imagine if post 9-11 lots of young Saudis had been attracted here for some event. Canadians reacted to the possibilities of large numbers of Americans entering their country in the same way. This week on the BBC I heard sentiments of a similar nature. The British Commentator trying to describe our acceptance of guns and violence in a way that didn't outright call us crazy. And there was MLK himself who called this country the foremost purveyors of violence. Certainly in terms of wars, we fit the bill. During my lifetime amongst the ones I remember are: Korea, Laos, Vietnam, Nicaragua, the Dominican Republic -- twice, The Bay of Pigs in Cuba, Haiti, El Salvador, Grenada, Panama, Cambodia, Bosnia, Afghanistan—twice, Iraq—twice. We've been behind coups in Iran and Guatemala in the 50's and Chile in the 60's. We have enabled a great deal of military violence through aid often to people we ended up fighting in subsequent battles. Although violent crime has decreased considerably in our country over the past 30 years, we still lead the developed world and much of the rest of the world in the number of civilian murders.

That is not to say we are in any way unique. Countries and peoples without wars and violence are places we remark on more than those who, like us, have the impulse to use violence when we are angry or want to force others to do our will. Indeed there is something probably bred in us that we have to overcome in order to learn to live together without harming one another. One of MLK's great legacies was to raise the spiritual

issue of violence and to encourage us to turn away from it and to instead use persuasion, non-violent resistance, and even love. Martin Luther King was not arguing for niceness in the sense of avoiding confrontation or putting up with wrongdoing. He was arguing for a spiritual change in the way we look at one another, approach one another. Most of us here don't engage in violence, but we may accept it, promote it, or feel it in our hearts and thus be part of the problem rather than part of the solution.

I was raised in a relatively peaceful way. We were not allowed to strike each other, nor did people strike us. We were supposed to settle disputes without yelling and there were not often voices raised in anger. There was a lot of expression of love and affection.

There were rules and consequences, but not arbitrary nor unjust ones. Both parents came to a point of believing that war was rarely, if ever, the answer, and worked towards creating other ways to solve conflicts amongst nations and worked towards stopping our own government from engaging in war. Perhaps, though, one of the most unusual parts of our upbringing, something that all my siblings remember, is the way my father would engage strangers in conversation and that he wasn't shy about engaging with people who disagreed with him. I remember that on our drive to a neighboring town there was this farmer who always had large right wing billboards on his property and Dad would stop and buy apples at his apple stand and as often as not engage him in conversation, listening to him and sharing a contrasting point of view. It happened with the shoe store salesman or the cab driver. It happened with my grandfather, who was always respectfully disagreed with and engaged when political topics arose.

Although I knew other families were different, I didn't realize quite how very different they were until I began working with families professionally whose children had become wards of the court. I discovered that there was a large subculture in which children are taught to be violent. If a child was hit, he was told by his parents to hit back, harder or he would be hit when he came home. Notions of discipline included belts and switches for hitting children who had misbehaved. Although I realized that not every parent who acted in this way was abusive, it was very hard for someone like me to tell the difference between a parent who hit a child in a non-abusive way and one who was in a legal sense, an abuser. It was often a thin line that someone like me couldn't see. It did teach me that it is very much the mainstream in American culture to teach our children that physical violence is an appropriate response to provocation and indeed a preferred response. That there is a whole class of people who expect that their children will learn to answer violence or even bad but non-violent behavior with violence.

One of the things King saw and that his life teaches is that violence and aggression are not the actions of the brave. Yet neither is looking on while evil or injustice prosper. King tried to teach his followers and all of us, to find the Love that over and around us lies and use it to confront injustice. It was more than that. Looking over King's words over the week, one word that pops up often is creativity. He talked frequently about using our creativity to confront one another. Many of you may not be aware of it, but King's doctorate used the work of Henry Nelson Wieman, a Unitarian theologian who spoke of God as being "the creative event" and Creative Interchange, so I intuit that when King talked of creativity in confronting injustice, that holy place in

which we use our creativity in our interactions with one another was part of what he had in mind.

For me, it is challenging and helpful to ponder how King might speak to me and you and to us all today. I am generally an even tempered non-violent person, so usually that is not the issue for me. The issue for me is how to stand up for justice and oppose those things I believe are wrong in a way that is courageous, but brings light, rather than contributing more anger to an already volatile situation. There have been many things in recent years that I have felt very passionate about. I am passionate when it comes to the health care issue. I have family members whose very lives could be lost without access to health insurance. I am passionate when it comes to torture. I believe it is evil. I am passionate when it comes to racism especially passionate when politicians cynically use racial fears for their own power and gain. I could go on. But the question is, how do I act for the Good in a way that embodies the good I seek, rather than just giving in to anger.

Personally, how do I keep loving a brother who advocates for something that could kill my husband's daughter? Who argues for the free market in health care which means that a child born with a heart defect could die if she is unemployed? It is hard sometimes, but I do it because I have always loved my brother and always will. But what about the people who aren't my brother? The simple answer is that I have to act like a grown up. I have to take two steps back and a deep breath and realize that however wrong I may think them, these strangers have innate worth and will not be changed by wrath.

I remind myself that King, who was a very young man, found himself confronted not only by people bent on the daily oppression of him, his wife, his children and almost all the people who were most dear to him. He was confronted by people who hated him and wanted him dead including powerful people in the local, state, and national government. He was passionate for justice, but didn't give in to demonizing even the most evil of evil doers; much less people who he disagreed with, no matter how wrong they were. It was a difficult struggle, personally. He fell into depression. He thought about giving up, but he prayed instead and went on trying to overcome injustice in a strong, yet compassionate way. So speaking to us today, he certainly would encourage us to speak out, but to do so in measured tones with the awareness of the humanity and worth of those with whom we disagree. He would encourage us to help create a society in which we teach our children to solve their problems without violence and enmity. Where we teach them and ourselves the courage and patience required to live in an imperfect world. I think of the boy at Millard High, who seemed a rather ordinary teenager, who dealt with his troubles and frustrations, which were not far beyond the ordinary, with violence that shocked the community. What ought his parents, friends, and community have taught him, which would have caused him to respond in a better way? Did our ways of responding to our angers and frustrations help or hurt him?

I remember something that happened about a year after Dr. King died. It was a time of violence. He had been shot. Robert Kennedy had been shot. The war in Vietnam was killing thousands of our young men and thousands of men, women, and children in Vietnam. There were mostly peaceful protests, but a lot of anger. President Johnson had

been forced from office because of it. Chicago Police had rioted striking down protestors and bystanders. Black Panthers had been killed in a raid. There had been riots in the cities and the anger over the War had driven some young people to violence. Then there was a massive March on Washington by anti-war protestors. Something about that protest caused then President Nixon to send his people to various college campuses. My small liberal arts college, Reed, was one of the colleges chosen. It was a college filled with young people amongst whom those of us who were liberal Democrats were considered conservative fuddy duddies. It seemed a perfect atmosphere for trouble. Yet when President Nixon's men arrived, they were met by jugglers and clowns. Rather than an angry confrontation, the student leaders had chosen a tone of levity. The men in suits were a bit nonplussed. More so when, at the beginning of the dialogue the students brought in a birthday cake and sang happy birthday to one of the men whose birthday it was. The students asked hard, intelligent questions, and knew what they were talking about. But they had set a tone previously that was not confrontational, as so much had been. They had found a creative way to say, we don't hate you but we really don't know that we can take you seriously, that you will be any more honest than others before you.

And yet they engaged with the dialogue none the less. We heard later, that at least one of the men who visited with us was so much affected by what happened that he took seriously what had happened and changed the direction of his work. I learned many years later that at about the same time a young student was sitting down to dinner with the family of a friend, that friend was the daughter of the Speaker of the House. And the young student respectfully argued with the Speaker about the war, bringing up some facts of which the Speaker was unaware. In his autobiography, the speaker credits that young man with giving him the push that started him on the road to changing his mind about the war. In that era of violence and anger there were still people searching for that creative, respectful, interchange that might turn us in a new direction. It was not the silent majority, nor the angry minority, but those people who found a way to follow the precepts of Dr. King whom I remember with admiration and gratitude even in the midst of those terrible times. Despite those who would rewrite history, there were thousands and thousands who peacefully worked for civil rights and who peacefully and with respect tried to stop the war.

That was forty years ago. Since that time, although there has been much violence in the world we have seen amazing peaceful changes, the fall of the Berlin wall, the freeing of eastern Europe, the final end of apartheid. Just this week a tyrant was deposed in Tunisia through blogging and tweeting. We need grown-up voices today. Not just a few, but lots of leaders calling forth the better angles of our nature. Lots of citizens act like citizens and engage in respectful and creative ways to confront the issues of our day. I like the new formulation at the UUA—the campaign they call Standing on the Side of Love.

I like it because I think that no matter the issue if we envision ourselves not as standing against a person or group of people but if we are standing for something that is loving and just, we are more likely to act in the Spirit of Dr. King, who always preached standing on the side of love.