

DR. KING'S EXAMPLE

By

Robert P. Tucker, Ph.D.

[*Minister Emeritus* of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Lakeland, Florida]

The Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Lake County, Eustis, Florida - January 18, 2009

Copyright © 2009

In the world's broad field of battle,
In the bivouac of Life,
Be not like dumb, driven cattle!
Be a hero in the strife!

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

"A Psalm of Life," Stanza 5 [Seldes Quotes, 473]

All of us have our **heroes**. The author of those verses, Unitarian **Henry Wadsworth Longfellow** (d. 1882), is one of mine. If you were to ask me why, I would say it is because he was a brilliant person who knew how to use language to instruct the mind and to inspire the heart.

Another one of my heroes is the **Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.** He was and is an enormously controversial figure, loved by many, but also hated by many not only during his life, but even today.

Why, then, would I hold him in such high regard? There are several reasons: [1] He was a **brilliant scholar** who possessed the arcane knowledge and understood the rarefied vocabulary of technical theology and philosophy so seldom found outside of academe. [2] He was a **supremely eloquent public speaker** whose oratorical skills were beautiful to behold. [3] He was an **inspirational prophet of social justice** who successfully led a decade-long struggle to achieve civil rights for Americans of all races. But, he was also one thing more, and it is that which, above all else, has earned him a place among my personal choices for heroes. [4] He was a **man of peace**, and that, my friends, is harder than becoming learned, more difficult than being eloquent, and much greater than being able to rouse a crowd to excitement, for **to endorse a policy of nonviolence in a world which loves and embraces its opposite is nothing less than committing oneself to the awesome and painful task of seeking the moral high ground while all around you rest satisfied down below in the valley of the shadow of death and violence.**

Every year as we approach our participation in Lakeland's Martin Luther King, Jr., Parade, I set aside time to reread and meditate upon portions of Dr. King's *Autobiography*. In recent years, not just in January, but almost every time the news reports that another fanatical Muslim suicide-bomber has killed innocent people, I am reminded particularly of one chapter in King's book. It is Chapter 8, entitled "The Violence of Desperate Men."

Suicide-bombers, unfortunately, include not only men, but women and even children. Some of them, in fact, come from middle class families. They are, therefore, not so much desperate as they are deluded by fundamentalist extremism.

Be that as it may, my sermon this morning is not about suicide-bombers whom I can never respect, and for whom I can only have condemnation. Today's message is about Dr. King and his followers who were truly and personally desperate individuals, and yet were people whom I hold in highest esteem, and for whom I have nothing but admiration.

Why? Because they were people of peace who, in the midst of oppression, and at great risk to their own lives, adhered (with but few exceptions) to a policy of non-violence. How difficult that was, and how magnanimous they were can never be overstated.

To illustrate that, I want to share some things with you from Dr. King's Eighth Chapter.

The year was 1956. The Supreme Court's *Brown VS. The Board of Education* declaration that public school segregation was unconstitutional was only two years old. [McGeveran, 549] The Civil Rights Movement had barely begun, for it had only been on December the first, 1955, that Mrs. Rosa Parks had been arrested for refusing to get up and move to the back of a bus. (King, 50] It had only been on the fifth of December that a meeting of ministers and civic leaders had unanimously elected King to be President of the Montgomery (Alabama) Improvement Association which was to lead the now famous bus boycott. [King, 50, 56]

Very much under the influence of Unitarian **Henry David Thoreau's** "Essay on Civil Disobedience," Dr. King conceived of the Civil Rights Movement as "an act of massive noncooperation." [King, 54] At that meeting, in what he thought then was "the most decisive speech" of his life, Dr. King sought to balance the group's demands for social justice "with a strong affirmation of the Christian doctrine of love." [King, 58, 59] "Let us be Christian in all of our actions," he told his audience. [King, 60] In his *Autobiography* he wrote: "That night we were starting a movement that would gain national recognition; whose echoes would ring in the ears of people of every nation; a movement that would astound the oppressor, and bring new hope to the oppressed," and **that movement would have, as its key principle, the policy of non-violence.** [King, 62]

Organization was the first order of business, so Dr. King began to set up committees to give the movement guidance and direction. Since the police were strictly enforcing the taxi regulations, black cab drivers quickly had to stop giving cheap rides to blacks who were boycotting the buses. Soon, however, a volunteer force of hundreds of private cars and drivers was formed with dozens of dispatch and pick-up stations all across the city. Even white housewives helped out by transporting their black maids to and from work! [King, 63-66]

More important, of course, was the "basic philosophy [which] guided the movement." "In the first days of the protest," wrote Dr. King, "the phrase most often heard was 'Christian love.' It was the Sermon on the Mount... that initially inspired the Negroes of Montgomery to dignified social action. It was **Jesus of Nazareth** [who] stirred the Negroes to protest with the creative weapon of love." (King, 67; emphasis added)

But very quickly "the inspiration of **Mahatma Gandhi** began to exert its influence." Dr. King realized "that the Christian doctrine of love operating through the Gandhian method of nonviolence was one of the most potent weapons available to the Negro in his struggle for freedom." So it was that **"nonviolent resistance... emerged as the technique of the movement, while love stood as the regulating ideal."** "Christ furnished the spirit and motivation while Gandhi furnished the method." [King, 67; emphases added]

Most of Montgomery's blacks supported this approach. A few, however, favored violence. Like today's suicide-bombers, some believed in "aggressive violence." A member of Dr. King's own church "solemnly suggested that it would be to our advantage to 'kill off' 8 or 10 white people. 'This is the only language these white folks will understand... If we fail to do this they will think we are afraid.'" Others advocated only "retaliatory violence," saying "If nobody bothers me, I will bother nobody... But if I am hit I will hit back." (King, 67f.)

Somehow, Dr. King convinced them of two things: first, that "nonviolence... is not a strategy that one uses simply because it is expedient at the moment;" and second, that "nonviolence is ultimately a way of life that men live by because of the sheer morality of its claim." [King, 68]

The Montgomery bus boycott was an "immediate success" in ending black ridership, cutting off a major source of city revenue, and bringing city officials to the negotiating table. [King, 68] Black demands for courteous treatment on buses, first-come/first-served seating within the black and white zones, and employment of black drivers on predominantly black routes were reasonable and within the segregation laws. Nevertheless, city officials stubbornly resisted all change. [King, 68f.]

As tensions increased and tempers flared, Dr. King was tempted to give into anger, indignation, and resentment. Yet, he knew "that this was no way to solve a problem." You must not harbor anger," he told

Himself. "You must be willing to suffer the anger of the opponent, and yet not return anger. You must not become bitter. No matter how emotional your opponents are, you must be calm." [King, 70]

Such equanimity became even more difficult as city officials resorted to spreading false rumors about King and other black leaders in an attempt to discredit them in the eyes of their followers. [King, 71]

Soon, the city officials adopted a "get tough" policy that consisted of arresting blacks for minor and even imaginary traffic violations. Dr. King, himself, was arrested, jailed, and fingerprinted for doing 30 in a 25-miles-per-hour zone. Under fear of losing their licenses or having their insurance revoked, many black drivers dropped out of the volunteer car pool. [King, 72-76]

All during this time, Dr. King and other black leaders were receiving dozens of threatening phone calls and letters. [King, 76] When some of these became death threats, Dr. King told his audience at a mass meeting: "If one day you find me sprawled out dead, I do not want you to retaliate with a single act of violence. I urge you to continue protesting with the same dignity and discipline you have shown so far." [King, 76f]

Push came to shove on the night of January 30th, 1956, for then it was that Dr. King was put to the test to see if he would practice what he preached. He had gone to the First Baptist Church for a mass rally. His wife and child had remained in the parsonage. During that meeting, the Rev. Ralph Abernathy informed King that a bomb had exploded on the porch of the house, and it was not yet known if anyone had been injured. "I accepted the word of the bombing calmly," Dr. King wrote. "I urged each person to go straight home after the meeting and adhere strictly to our philosophy of nonviolence. I admonished them not to become panicky and lose their heads." [King, 78f]

Upon arriving at the house, Dr. King found "hundreds of people with angry faces" gathered there with the police futilely trying to disperse the crowd. One black was yelling at an officer, "You got your .38 and I got mine; so let's battle it out." King "realized that many people were armed," and that "nonviolent resistance was on the verge of being transformed into violence." [King, 79]

Fortunately, the bomb had not hurt anyone. The mayor, police commissioner, and several white reporters were in the house. Their words expressed regret and their pale faces expressed the fear for their own personal safety each was experiencing, for "the crowd outside was getting out of hand." [King, 79f]

Dr. King went out on the porch and asked the crowd to come to order. There was complete silence. He told them that no one had been hurt, and then he said:

We believe in law and order. Don't get panicky. Don't do anything panicky at all.

Don't get your weapons. He who lives by the sword will perish by the sword... We are not advocating violence. We want to love our enemies. I want you to love our enemies. Be good to them. Love them and let them know you love them.

As he finished speaking, "there were shouts of 'Amen' and 'God bless you.' " There were "tears on many faces." [King, 80]

Similarly, Dr. King also said this, some time later:

If we are arrested every day, if we are exploited every day, if we are trampled over every day, don't ever let anyone put you so low as to hate them. We must use the weapon of love. We must have compassion and understanding for those who hate us. We must realize so many people are taught to hate us that they are not totally responsible for their fate... [Even if] we stand in life at midnight, we are always on the threshold of a new dawn. [King, 81]

That event made Dr. King "think of the viciousness of people who would bomb [his] home." He "could feel the anger rising" as he realized that his wife and baby could have been killed. "I was," he wrote, "on the verge of corroding hatred." But "I caught myself and said: 'You must not allow yourself to become bitter.' " [King, 80]

"Just two nights later, a stick of dynamite was thrown on the lawn" of another black home. No one was hurt. "Once more a large crowd of Negroes assembled, but they did not lose control. And so," wrote Dr. King, "nonviolence had won its first and its second tests." [King, 81]

These bombings made Dr. King even consider the question of carrying a gun himself. He and his wife talked about it for days and "finally agreed that arms were no solution." "How could I serve as one of the leaders of a nonviolent movement," reasoned Dr. King, "and at the same time use weapons of violence for my personal protection?" He understood that if he and the other black leaders had become distracted by the question of their own safety, then they "would have lost the moral offensive and [would have] sunk to the level of [their] oppressors." [King, 82]

In stark contrast to the mentality of fanatical suicide-bombers, and "the violence of desperate men," Dr. King preached and practiced a philosophy of nonviolence. He did this because he understood that **"along the way of life, someone must have sense enough and morality enough to cut off the chain of hate and evil," and he believed that "the greatest way to do that is through love."** "Love," he wrote, "is a transforming power that can lift a whole community to new horizons of fair play, goodwill and justice." [King, 63; emphases added]

Christians often refer to Jesus as the "Prince of peace." [From Isaiah 9:6] By following his example, Martin became the King of peace, the prophet of freedom, and by his own sacrifice, the priest of civil rights for everyone in the United States. **Let us never cease to honor this great man, and let us never forget the lesson he taught: Violence is not an answer!**

Sources

King, Martin Luther, Jr. *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* New York: Warner Books, 1998. McGeeveran, William A., Jr., Ed. *The World Almanac and Book of Facts 2005*. New York: World Almanac Education Group, Inc., 2005
 Seldes, George. *The Great Quotations*. New York: Pocket Books, 1967.