

The Courage of Accountability
A sermon offered by Rev. Kathleen C. Rolenz
Sunday, January 14, 2023
Unity Church Unitarian

The date was August 11, 2017. Sixty or more religious leaders were packed into a stuffy basement in the local Baptist church. We were there to receive training in the tactics of non-violence. What we didn't fully understand was that the next day one of the worst outbreaks of violent protest would occur as the Unite Right Rally and counter protestors would clash around the removal of the statue of General Robert E. Lee. That day was August 12th – but the aftermath of that event is called simply “Charlottesville.”

I had been to such trainings before, but none with this degree of seriousness. In truth, I had thought that witness would be like many others I had participated in. We would show up, we sing songs, we would offer prayers and then we go home. Our trainers wanted to prepare us for other possibilities. “This is what we expect you to do,” they began. “If you are screamed at – you do not scream back. If you are confronted, you do not react. If you are pushed, you do not punch. You are to link arms, and hold the line. We will be watching you and supporting you, but if you fail to agree to these requests, we will ask that you remove yourself from the witness.

There will be a time when some of us will undertake an act of civil disobedience by blocking an entrance to the park so that the Unite the Right demonstrators will be inconvenienced in gathering around the statue. We are not sure what will happen at that point. If this is something you are not comfortable with, we honor that decision and encourage you to use our safe house in a nearby restaurant if you need to withdraw from the witness.” Someone jokingly said: “and that’s an order?” One trainer said – completely serious - “yes.”

As a Unitarian Universalist, I’m not good at following orders from on high. And yet, there was something in the tone and the severity of the charge we were given that night that made me realize that this wasn’t about me or what I thought would be the right thing to do when the Unite the Right Rally came into town the next day. It was about being part of a political and spiritual witness bigger than my own, and that I had to be accountable to everyone else who shared those values and who had come to participate.

Today’s sermon is entitled the Courage of Accountability, focusing on our worship theme for this month January, which is Courage. January worship themes often will be framed somehow by some aspect of the life of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, and his legacy of leadership and service. Around the nation tomorrow and throughout the week that legacy is remembered in ceremonies and services and acts of community connection and service.

It’s also a day and a time where some of us spend time studying the political and spiritual strategies of Dr. King – and the other luminaries of the Civil Right Movement – Bayard Rustin, Dorothy Height, Ralph Abernathy, Diane Nash to name but a few.

As we move farther away from the Civil Rights years and those that experienced them personally are fewer and farther between us, it behooves us to understand and to remember what exactly made it work?. How did this most effective movement for political change in America’s 20th century, that brought about in the de-segregation of public institutions in the South and in the Civil Rights Act of 1965, how did this movement sustain its strength?

The two words in the title of this sermon give us an answer— Courage and Accountability. Courage is a quality that comes to everyone’s mind first when you visit the Civil Rights historic sites or watch the old TV footage being broadcast in King Day remembrances during January, images of people being berated, harassed fire hosed, and beaten while involved in actions of peaceful protest. But courage wasn’t all it took to make those demonstrations possible. For King and the leaders alongside him, accountability was also required to stand with him, accountability to the philosophy of non-violence that he spoke about so often and that was essential to the movement’s success. That demand for accountability to this philosophy, to this spiritual practice, operated in the movement both internally within the leadership circles themselves and externally in how the movement comported itself and presented itself publicly.

Here is how one trainer, has written about his experience of leading non-violent action trainings in 1963

“There were two kinds of non-violent training: One was a classic Gandhian type training, learning why and how to peacefully face and defuse hatred and violence with courage and compassion. The main purpose of training in tactical nonviolence was to learn practical techniques, and of how to protect yourself from being maimed or killed while doing so. To do this, required discipline. To be effective, a demonstration has to adhere to a code of self-discipline so that a clear and positive message is conveyed to the public and the press. When faced with violence, discipline is essential for the safety of everyone in the action. When a mob has you surrounded, or the cops are itching for an excuse to whip heads and bust you on felony charges, one person “doing his own thing” can get a lot of folk hurt. But discipline does not come easy to the kind of people who protest against the way things are, which is why training in that discipline is so necessary.”¹

I want to reflect some more with you on this kind of accountability and discipline, not only in public witness and social justice work today, but also in the life of a church like ours.

How are we to understand the role of this political and spiritual practice of accountability today, not only in our anti-racist work and more broadly in how we understand what it means to be a part of a community like this one?

One more story from Charlottesville will illustrate the first test of discipline that I faced after our training in non-violent resistance was over. The clergy had joined with others in town who had come to witness against Unite the Right at a worship service and rally in the Episcopal church across the street from the University of Virginia’s Grounds. The service was inspiring and featured leaders like United Church of Christ leader Rev. Traci Blackman and Dr. Cornell West. Our brand new UUA President Susan Frederick-Gray was there with us. We were all pumped up. The music was loud! we were clapping and stomping – until someone said “wait, do you hear what’s happening outside?”

Outside the church you could see what looked like hundreds of tiki torches, carried by young men in white shirts and khaki pants. They were surrounding the statue of Thomas Jefferson, and they were chanting “You will not replace us! Jews will not replace us.” I wanted to go out and see for myself exactly what was happening, but the leaders told us that they were going to bar the church doors. We were told not to leave for quite a while, because the organizers understood that a violent confrontation could happen between progressive students and the Unite the Right demonstrators. So, the training we’d had anticipating the next day was already necessary, and it kicked in. I stayed put, followed the instructions of our leaders, and waited in witness and in prayer. It was the right decision.

¹ Hartord, Bruce. Non violent Training. <https://www.crmvet.org/info/nv3.htm>

The next day – August 12 put this discipline to the test. The religious leaders gathered in that same church at 6 AM for a worship service, and then we marched together to the park, only to be greeted by the out-of-town militia who had already surrounded the park. We positioned ourselves in front of the park, flanked by those holding AR-15's, linked arms, and held the line. I suspect that the fact that most of us were white made us less of a target than if we had all been people of color. Still, it was terrifying to be close to systemic hate.

Having the courage to be accountable to the disciplines of a faith-based movement or community is not an easy thing to do, especially when the stakes are so high, and the tensions are so great. As we locate ourselves in 2024, just ten months away from another Presidential Election, we must ask ourselves, does this model make sense for us today? Is it the right tool to combat the rise of white nationalism, of fascism, of active insurrection to undermine and overthrow democracy as the United States as known for over 200 years?

In our UU community, there is a presumption that the disciplines of non-violent spiritual witness are universally accepted and supported among us. But that's not necessarily true. One of my colleagues who was there in Charlottesville that day, came for a different reason than I did. He came as a chaplain to antifa - antifa being shorthand for the loosely organized anti-fascist movements that rise up to counter alt-right protesters. I want to tell you a bit about his story and why it's relevant for our reflection on this Martin Luther King Jr. Sunday.

I couldn't get permission to use his real name, so I'm calling him Rev. Mike. We talked to him later in the day as he was tending to the bruises, he had suffered in the violence that ensued when antifa marchers collided with the Unite the Right demonstrators. Later, Mike felt it was important for him to reflect with us on why he had come to Charlottesville in a different role and with a different philosophy than that of non-violent resistance. He wrote this:

"...The work of anti-racism and anti-fascism are closely linked, but they are distinct parts of our overall struggle. Fascism represents those who are explicitly organized to create and strengthen the structures of total tyranny and the wholesale murder of entire peoples. They are a threat to humanity itself...Antifa only exists as a response to the violence of fascism. It has no other agenda. It exists to stop them.

Our congregations on the other hand, exist to celebrate that which is of worth and to experiment and model the world that we dream about such that it can be replicated outside of them. We have been making good strides in our collective work to own and dismantle white supremacy in ourselves, our congregations, our institutions and our communities in the wider world. But at the same time, we must also show up to stop openly fascist organizing and we must do it every time.

*The first fundamental point is that fascism is violence. Always. The organized violence of fascism seeks to gain in strength and power by controlling public spaces. They use liberal commitments to tolerance and free speech to gain platforms for posturing and recruitment. As we have seen...when fascists are allowed to run rampant in the public space, they use every opportunity to inflict upon people the brutality they represent. Showing up as a fascist is a violent act. Anti-fascism is self-defense."*²

I struggle with my colleague's opinion, and not because I don't share his analysis or his fear of the rise of fascism in our country. Still, my faith tells me that I must reject the violence on the right and left, believing, as King wrote, that when you cross the line into being physically violent with another, there is no end to it. Violence always exceeds the original justification you

² [Name deleted] Reflections on Charlottesville, August 29, 2017

have for it. It expands its justifications to point of absurdity and terror, as we are witnessing the ongoing horrors in Israel and Palestine. Violence begets violence begets violence and there is no end.

This is where we plunge into some deep theological and spiritual waters. What is the right response to the deliberate attacks on values which we consider inviolate -- attacks that are rarely being fought right now with bodies standing up to other bodies-- but with hate speech, emotional terrorism, and legislation?

Examples of this are easy to find. I don't need to recite the bad news you see on your media every day. I do feel all the wins that the evangelical/political right in this country has achieved since 2016 are an existential threat to the very fabric of what it means to live in a nation that aspires to and must be characterized by...guess what ...diversity – equity - and inclusion! Those words do not only represent a program at Harvard University that the right is trying to undermine and dismantle. It is the description of what we call here at Unity Church “The Beloved Community”! How are we to be together as we face this struggle? What is our challenge – to the white supremacists who march around with tiki torches – to the politicians whose stump speech says that immigrants are poisoning the blood of Americans? What to say to anti-black and brown rhetoric cloaked in rhetoric about American exceptionalism? What is our challenge now?

I'm a pastor, not a politician, and a Unitarian Universalist church is a spiritual community sharing a faith in important common values while not agreeing on every political policy proposal. However, politics is ostensibly the art of turning values into legislation that build the common good. Church is the place where we get to practice and embody the values we want to see manifest in the world. It is also where we internally reflect the world you want to create externally. But you can't do that by yourself. Later on, in the interview that was quoted as a reading earlier today, Brandon Terry says *“I think King worried about the fact that so much of the questions of management of emotion – the building of character has become a privatized practice.” (On the other hand) in community “that’s constantly talking with each other and lifting each other up and engaging in practices like song, prayer and communal rituals to try to affirm this alternative set of ethical and political commitments against the whole rest of the culture...that’s the only way it can be done, ...you have an alternative form of social life that can sustain you in that work. The private practice isn’t going to do it.”*

Accountability to our values in a private and personal way is one thing – but accountability to others, in a partnership, in a family, in a church community, is a whole other thing. It begins with how we behave with one another.

This month and next I'll be collecting your responses to this question: *What is one behavior you do or have observed someone else doing at Unity Church that builds a community of integrity, open-hearted engagement and courageous action?* This exercise shapes a covenant that calls everyone into accountability for their behavior and actions. Not to police differences of opinion or to suppress dissent, but rather to remind us that creating this thing we like to call Beloved community takes discipline. It takes practice. It takes accountability to covenant. And it takes courage. At a Wellspring Wednesday in February, I'll reflect on what you said is important about how you want to be in relationship with each other. My hope is that through that process, a working covenant of accountability will emerge. King's Letter from a Birmingham Jail continues to guide us when we do remember We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. We are inextricably connected to one another – we are accountable to, with and for one another.

Towards the end of Nikole Hannah Jones book, *The 1619 Project*, Sonia Sanchez offered a poem called “Progress Report.” Although we should be taking a daily progress report, MLK weekend provides us with an opportunity to ask ourselves “how are we – as a nation – doing to eradicate white dominate culture and the wound of racism? What can we do? What should we do?”

Sanchez’ longer poem provides one response. In it she moves in and out of both despair and cautious hope, I leave you with this excerpt from Sanchez’s poem:

In this country, where history and herstory stretches in aristocratic silence,
our Black, white, brown activists have come at the beginning
of the twenty-first century carrying the quiet urgency of a star.

And the country is not the same.

i say, who are these people singing down the lids of cities with color?

i say, i say, who are these people always punctual with their yes,
their hearts, their hands?

I say, i say, i say, who are these singers

who resurrect summer language on our winter landscape?

"...What is needed is to hold one’s self like a sliver to the heart of the world,
to interrupt if necessary the rhythm of the world,

to upset if necessary, the chain of command but...to stand up to the world:

I do battle for the creation of a human world that is a world of reciprocal recognition.

Oh may we live that dream of a world of reciprocal recognition. Oh may we continue to not just dream of such a world – but to make it so. May it be so.