

To Be and Do

A sermon by Rev. John Morehouse in celebration of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Jan. 14, 2007

Many years ago after I'd delivered a sermon on the injustice of homelessness in America, my wife asked me rather pointedly 'what makes you think you can preach to others about a problem you may well be a part of?' My first response was to remind her that I came from a good liberal family who gave readily to alleviating the causes of homelessness in our society. But living by proxy, as she knows all too well, wasn't going to cut it. She listened as I went on self righteously about my noble credentials and then said "So what? Giving money doesn't give you the right to preach about it. Have you ever done anything about it in person?"

So partly due to her moral prompting and partly due to my own guilt I went out on a very cold Saturday to stand behind a chrome serving table at the local homeless shelter. The atmosphere was actually quite warm, although my heart was breaking seeing so many children and single mothers taking shelter and eating. The food was warm and there was plenty of it. Half way through the meal the door flew open and these two drunks came in pushing people this way and that, shouting for something to eat. My first reaction was to call the police but I didn't. Being the only male volunteer in the room, I yelled at them to keep it down and stop pushing. When the first got to the front of line he wanted to know what we were serving, although those weren't his exact words. I told him and as he took the plate he sniffed it and flung it back at me. I ducked and the plate missed me, but the food went everywhere. I let loose a tirade that turned more than a few heads since they all knew I was a minister, and I called the staff upstairs to come down and escort the two men out. As I cleaned up from the encounter I thought to myself "How ungrateful can you be"? Here he had come for free food, warmth and he had thrown it back in my face. I questioned whether I really did have the guts to be a part of the solution. Not answered easily. As I thought about that incident, I began to realize that my reaction was in part the result of who I was, a white, middle class man, just as his ungratefulness was a result of his being. How many of us, having lived a life full of violence, hunger and rejection would have been grateful for a plate of stale food? I was looking from the top down in life and he was looking from the bottom up; expecting him to be grateful was a condition of who I was and not a condition of his life.

Action and identity are like two fluids which react differently according to different circumstances. My gratefulness in life comes from knowing misfortune to be occasional not constant, for this other man ungratefulness is the only response to a life of constant hardship. Not that he should have thrown the food at me, but who he was and what he had to deal with played a large part in what he did. Sometimes doing and being roll along reinforcing themselves. To effectively undo a wrong we have to look seriously at who we are. If we believe that we are the imperial force of good and the planters of democracy, then no amount of evidence to the contrary will change that. When our being becomes so ingrained as to lose touch with reality, as I believe we are in Iraq, then our doing becomes not just harmful but morally culpable. We can in Dr. Scott Peck's words, "live a lie;" that somehow our being justifies our doing.

Martin Luther King, Jr. understood this intimate relationship between doing and being better than most. When he was recruited by the civil rights movement as its spokesman, he did so reluctantly, knowing full well that by accepting that role his actions would need to fulfill his words; his doing would need to fit his being. It's called integrity. Reluctantly at first, more fully as time went on, Dr. King continually kept aligning his actions with his words. Yes, he did have his hypocrisies, not the least of which were his marital infidelities. But through his all too short life he kept his doing in line with his being. Towards the end of his life, King took up the seemingly unpopular cause of protesting the Vietnam War. Urged by his fellow civil rights activists to not "dilute his message" of civil rights with the "white man's burden" of ending the war, Dr. King answered them "*Our only hope today lies in our ability to recapture the revolutionary spirit and go out into a sometimes hostile world declaring eternal hostility to poverty, racism, and militarism. With this powerful commitment we shall boldly challenge the status quo and unjust mores and thereby speed the day when 'every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight and the rough places plain.'*" (From MLK Stanford Papers Collection at <http://www.stanford.edu/group/King/>)

In other words, the war was a social justice issue, a moral issue, as much as the civil rights movement or the war on poverty. The doing of one injustice affected the being of the entire country, indeed the entire world. That is why this war is no different and is having as much of harmful impact on America's poor as it is on the people of Iraq, of whom over 600,000 have died according to Physicians for Social Responsibility.

Traditionally, religions have been about the task of providing a set of beliefs upon which a person takes action. That is the meaning of ethics; the doing of a moral understanding. But, as Dr. King understood, we have to sometimes stand against what our religion tells us to do. Reformations continue to evolve religious understanding even today. I sense one such reformation happening even in evangelical Christianity, not especially known for embracing the troubles of this world. Increasingly, conservative Christians are uniting with other groups to affect positive change in our society. Not on the so-called core values of marriage and abortion, but in terms of global warming, the causes of poverty and yes, the war in Iraq. I would ask us as religious liberals to pay attention to that, perhaps even in my lifetime we will see us realigning our being with our doing, reforming the way we work with other religions to affect change. It is my hope for this new year that we here at Pacific Unitarian Church will continue to build interfaith coalitions, perhaps even with those we have traditionally eschewed as "too conservative" to change our world.

This past week I accepted the invitation to serve on the Board of the South Coast Interfaith Council (along with our own Ed Hummel), in part to begin to find those moments when we can unite with other faiths to bring our being the inclusive religion we claim to be in line with our doing the work of the world. I see this as a long process, but I ask for your help.

Truly, in the spirit of Dr. King, I ask us to be aware when we are speaking ill of Christianity. This past week at the Dawn Unity Symposium on the topic "Apparent Contradictions in Scripture", I made several comments about mistranslation that led to the Bible being used as a tool for repression. Yet, I do not want Unitarian Universalism to be known as a bully religion. I want our search for truth honored but that truth to be

presented in love. I want us to be in community with those we live with and join with them in a common being and doing. I want us to be known for our open and honest search for truth AND known for our willingness to engage with others inclusively in solving our problems.

When Dr. King wrote his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” he answered the charge by white and liberal colleagues that his methods, his doing, were too radical. He decried the suggestion that the status quo was good enough when the Kingdom of God on earth required a challenge to that status quo. King asked “was not Jesus an extremist for love: ‘love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them’”? Was not Amos an extremist for justice when he said ‘let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream’?was not Thomas Jefferson an extremist when he wrote ‘We hold these truths to be self evident; that all men are created equal.’”....the question is, are we willing to do what it takes to live out what we believe? Are we here at PUC willing to accept our Christian sisters and brothers or our Jewish or Muslim or Hindu or B’hai or Sufi friends as co-equal with us in the struggle to live out our beliefs?

I believe we are. To be and do. MLK spent his life balancing the two. When he proclaimed his dream on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial he was envisioning the end of this long dance between what we believe and what we do. It is more than just a “can do” attitude. We have to measure our actions with our beliefs, our values, and our faith.

I am not asking us necessarily to do more than we are, if we are doing all we can do to live out our faith. For some, it is just getting to church, that is all good enough. Fine, you are doing your being. But if you are in the least feeling the call to reach out to those who you know you share at least some of your values with, let this be your invitation to do it. Some of you are uncomfortable with my ending the service with the words “And now the service truly begins” as if I am trying to make you feel guilty about your not doing enough! Heavens no. That phrase, not an original, is only meant to remind us that living our faith out in the world is all this is really about. That might be just finding the energy to get here. But it might mean more. It’s not a commandment, it’s an invitation. To do what you are. I believe that this church is both a sanctuary, a place of renewal, and a model of what we want the world to be. For those who are called, let this place, this service, give us the inspiration to do, in whatever small way what we hold true in the world. A refueling station for the spirit. An alignment shop for our being and doing. Do be do be do. Amen.