

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York
“Sum of Us Solution”

Rev. Samuel A Trumbore January 16, 2022

Call to Celebration

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who we honor this weekend, presented the prestigious Ware Lecture for our 1966 Unitarian Universalist General Assembly. He praised the work of Unitarian Universalists during the Montgomery Bus Boycott and our outpouring of support for the Selma march in 1965.

And then he challenged us. His words ring as true now as they did over 55 years ago. Here are a few of them from the beginning of that lecture which references earlier Rip Van Winkle sleeping through the American Revolution:

One of the great misfortunes of history, is that *all too many* individuals and institutions find themselves in a great period of change and yet fail to achieve the new attitudes and outlooks that the new situation demands. There is nothing more tragic than to sleep through a revolution. And there can be no gainsaying of the fact that a social revolution is taking place in our world today. We see it in other nations in the demise of colonialism. We see it in our own nation, in the struggle against racial segregation and discrimination. And as we notice this struggle, we are aware of the fact that a social revolution is taking place in our midst. Victor Hugo once said that there is nothing more powerful in all the world than an idea whose time has come. The idea whose time has come today is the idea of freedom and human dignity, and so all over the world we see something of a freedom explosion, and this reveals to us that we are in the midst of revolutionary times. An older order is passing away and a new order is coming into being.

In response to Dr. King’s words, may we be awake for the new order coming into being today, in society and in Unitarian Universalism, as we join together in the Celebration of Life.

Reading

As I did last week, I begin with a quote from Heather McGhee’s book, *The Sum of Us*:

The logical extension of the zero-sum story is that a future without racism is something white people should fear, because there will be nothing good for them in it. They should be arming themselves (as they have been in record numbers, “for protection,” since the Obama presidency) because demographic change will end in a dog-eat-dog race war.

Obviously, this isn’t the story *we* want to tell. It’s not even what *we believe*. The same research I found showing that white people increasingly see the world through a zero-sum prism showed that *Black people do not*. African Americans just don’t buy that our gain has to come at the expense of white people.

And time and time again, history has shown that we're right. The civil rights victories that were so bitterly opposed in the South ended up being a boon for the region, resulting in stronger local economies and more investments in infrastructure and education. (pp. 16-17).

The Rev. Dr. William J. Barber, II, co-chair of the Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival, wrote this to promote McGhee's book:

"The most consistent lie of racism is the lie that it benefits most white people. Just as Dr. King observed that poor white people had nothing to feed their children but Jim Crow ... systemic racism hurts everybody. That is why we have to link together across every dividing line to build a fusion coalition that can remake a nation that works for all of us."

In Dr. King's acceptance speech of his Nobel Peace Prize awarded in 1964, he said:

"I refuse to accept the view that mankind is so tragically bound to the **starless midnight** of racism and war that the **bright daybreak** of peace and brotherhood can never become a reality. I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word."

Spoken Meditation

Spirit of Life and Love,
 this weekend we honor the legacy of Dr. King
 that remains in our hearts as a vibrant challenge
 to love our neighbor and work for systemic change
 to bring about the beloved community among us.

We live in times of deep division, mistrust and violence,
 times that were familiar to Dr. King.
 The social progress dismantling Jim Crow and
 witnessing gains by Black people and People of Color,
 especially the election of a Black President,
 sadly has energized racist resistance and fear.

May this backlash against the small gains
 in building a just and equitable society, not intimidate us.
 May our hearts and minds remain open
 to the truth and value of racial reconciliation.
 May we renew our commitment to justice and peace,
 pursued through cooperation and love.
 May we be filled with the confidence,
 that we might realize and accept
 that we are all members of the same human family.
 May the example of Dr. King inspire us to see one another,
 as interrelated parents, siblings, and children
 with a common origin and destiny,

guided by the conviction, that together,
we can nobly fulfill the promise of our nation.

May the spirit of all that we value, and call holy,
be our inspiration and partner
to create communities of justice, peace and freedom for all.

Freely adapted to be more Unitarian Universalist in spirit from this prayer: Honoring
Martin Luther King: A Prayer for Progress and Peace Jan 18, 2021
<https://blog.bonsecours.com/stories/martin-luther-king-jr-day-prayer/>

Sermon

Last Sunday I wrestled with zero-sum thinking and its link to racism and white supremacy. The polarizing thinking that there are only winners and losers. Critical resources are limited and there isn't enough for everyone, especially power. If you are elevated, I am demoted. It is a competition and only one person or group can be on top.

There is another way to approach social existence that might be described as the "sum-of-us." It is the opposite of zero-sum thinking. It dismantles and rejects racism and white supremacy. It seeks ways for us to find common values, to share, to innovate, to expand resources and create opportunities. Rather than polarizing people, this approach connects people in a wider network of mutuality.

Sum-of-us was at the heart of Dr. King's thinking and preaching. In preparation for this morning, I reread a beautiful sermon he preached on the scripture, "Who is my neighbor?" Dr. King celebrated the Good Samaritan who embodied, in action, the qualities that were necessary to defeat racism. The qualities of:

- *universal altruism* that transcended tribe, race and class,
- *dangerous altruism* that put the well-being of another before his own, and
- *excessive altruism* that extended beyond what might be expected

are the high ideals put into practice that make the Samaritan so memorable. He preached:

Court orders and federal enforcement agencies are of inestimable value in achieving desegregation, but desegregation is only a partial, though necessary, step toward the final goal which we seek to realize genuine intergroup and interpersonal living. Desegregation will break down the legal barriers and bring men together physically, but something must touch the hearts and souls of men so that they will come together spiritually because it is natural and right.

Much as Heather McGhee enjoys making her case with data and statistics, she is also looking for *just the quality* that King highlights here. What is it that touches people's hearts and souls that moves them from zero-sum to sum-of-us thinking? She found an answer listening to Bridget's experience fighting for \$15 an hour.

Bridget was very skeptical, the word she used was insane, that Wendy's would consider anything like \$15 an hour a few years ago. She had been an honors student but had to drop out of school to support her family when her mother got sick. With three children and working in fast food for a decade, she saw herself in a dead end. But she decided to go to the Stand Up for Kansas City meeting anyway to organize for \$15 for fast food workers.

When a Latinx woman rose and described her life—three children in a two-bedroom apartment with plumbing issues, the feeling of being “trapped in a life where she didn't have any opportunity to do anything better,” Bridget was moved. “I was really able to see myself in her. And at that point, I decided that the only way we was gonna fix it was if all of us came together. Whether we were white, brown, Black. It didn't matter.” For Bridget to see herself in a Latinx worker was a breakthrough. She admitted, “When I first joined the movement, I had been fed this whole line of ‘These immigrant workers are coming over here and stealing our jobs...not paying taxes, committing crimes, and causing problems.’ [It was] other white people in my family who believe these kind of racist ideas. You know, us against them.” But she said she saw her bosses at Wendy's target Latinx workers, falsely promising them a raise if they didn't join the strikes. “They knew that if our Latino workers joined with our Black and white workers, that we'd have our strength in numbers, and that we was gonna win.” Since joining Stand Up KC, Bridget's worldview has changed. “In order for all of us to come up, it's not a matter of me coming up and them staying down. It's the matter of, in order for me to come up, they have to come up, too—because we have to come up together. Because honestly, as long as we're divided, we're conquered. The only way that we're going to succeed is together.” (pp. 133-134).

Another woman's heart who was changed is Cecile. Her ancestors were French speaking Canadians who came to Lewiston, Maine to work in the cotton mills and shoe factories one hundred years ago. She shunned speaking the French she heard at the dinner table as she grew up in the early 1960's. She wanted to talk like real Americans, like Walter Cronkite, and lose any hint of an accent, rather than be teased at school.

Lonely in her retirement, she began to feel a longing for the language heritage she had lost. There was an anglo French club of old folks in town but they were an American social club uninterested in speaking their ancestral language. She found native French speakers at weekly meeting of a group of residents of a low income housing project. They were immigrants from Africa that gathered to speak and enjoy their native language. Cecile was the only non-African in the group. This was a little uncomfortable at first until they welcomed her with open arms and enthusiastically helped her speak French with them.

Lewiston is a town that saw decline during the deindustrialization the Northern states. Their problems, and racist, reactionary politics, would be familiar to us here in upstate New York. Yet many Northern small towns are starting to experience some renewal due to immigrants. Immigrants are bringing new life to these towns starting new businesses. Without their inclusion and support in these towns,

wrote Art Cullen, the local newspaper editor in Storm Lake, Iowa, “there will be nobody left to turn out the lights by 2050” in towns like his. “Asians and Africans and Latinos are our lifeline,” he declared flatly in 2018. (p. 245)

We have a bit of that right here in Albany when we look at the shops on Central Avenue. The Al-Salaam Mosque and the little community that has developed to support it is filling the storefronts.

McGhee has *five discoveries* from her research I’d like to summarize for you that support her thesis that we need sum-of-us solutions so we can all prosper together.

1. We have reached the productive and moral limit of the zero-sum economic model.
2. The best strategy to move forward is to refill the pool of public goods. Generous public benefits are the springboard to build a thriving middle class for all.
3. We need solutions that have universal ends but means tailored to address damage done by historic oppression. This is a powerful way to frame reparations.
4. Zero-sum thinking needs to be systemically uprooted and replaced by sum-of-us values.
5. We must get on the same page before we can turn it. That means finding ways to grab the narrative from the forces selling denial, ignorance, and projection.

What zero-sum thinkers continually reject, to their detriment, is the foundation of economics: trade builds wealth rather than destroying it. When you and I exchange goods we both get something we want. I exchange something you want for something I want. We both win in a fair trade. The goal of a healthy economy is ensuring that the trading process is fair. Thieves and villains are the ones who don’t like fair trades. If you want to get rich, you’d prefer stealing labor and resources, selling them above their value and pocketing the difference, another name for predatory capitalism.

But that isn’t a good, sustainable way to build wealth with the benefits widely distributed. Throughout history we’ve had examples of productive cooperatives that build wealth where everyone benefits. In these systems the pie expands. There may not be enough for every desire to be satisfied but there is plenty for every basic human need to be satisfied. Human well-being is supported by basic needs being met, and not being enslaved for wages so a few can have their every desire satisfied. There is no reason we can’t feed and house our citizens here, attend to their health care and education, care for their children, and find meaningful employment for all who need a good job.

Those are the universal goods our society should provide for all. Yet the way we get to achieving that goal will not be the same. Some of us have enough already and don’t need an extra helping. Some of us have been suffering for 400 years and need an extra boost. Only our governmental systems have the leverage to offer the kind of leg up needed to counter generations of oppression before the 1960’s.

McGhee references the work of law professor and critical race scholar John A. Powell, director of the Haas Ongoing and Belonging Institute at the University of California, Berkeley. Powell advocates for “targeted universalism.”

With targeted universalism, you set a universal policy goal and then develop strategies to achieve the goal that take into account the varied situations of the groups involved. (p. 258)

A good example McGhee references is home ownership as a universal good. This has been the backbone of the American economy as a way for households to build wealth. Yet many in our society have already achieved this goal and developed significant wealth that way. The ones who haven't are disproportionately non-white former slaves. They are also the ones who were prohibited from buying affordable homes in red-lined areas where banks wouldn't lend. One way to repair that government supported harm would be to give special protected low-interest loans to ancestors of slaves or those who were refused loans in the past. Targeted solutions to help serve a universal good.

One way this is happening here in Albany is the [Affordable Housing Partnership Homeownership Center](#). In alliance with the [Albany Community Land Trust](#), they are committed to rebuilding neighborhood housing stock and creating high quality permanently affordable housing in the city of Albany.

Another universal good is public education. Some school districts have strong tax bases and don't need as much state funding as school districts in more economically depressed areas. All our children need a good education and teachers need good salaries whether they are in wealthy or poorer communities. They all need the technical tools and facilities to prepare students to succeed. That isn't happening, as Martha Musser will tell you in great detail. And we can advocate for that to change.

The other essential universal good is addressing climate change with the Green New Deal. Only government can direct the needed investment before it becomes cost effective to drive this change to limit the damage we are already doing to our climate that the children who have yet to be born will have to endure.

We can't make significant progress on these hard problems of housing, education and climate change through zero-sum thinking. We need to move *toward* sum-of-us thinking. And what McGhee has found in her work is *people are ready* for this. "When people have a chance to create a bond that's not based on skin color or culture, what they actually connect on are things they value in common." This isn't easy, McGhee says, but surprisingly, the discomfort is a source of power. Dr. Katherine W. Phillips argues this discomfort, what she calls *mental friction* creates diversity's powerful productive energy:

"Members of a homogeneous group rest somewhat assured that they will agree with one another; that they will understand one another's perspectives and beliefs; that they will be able to easily come to a consensus. But when members of a group notice that they are socially different from one another, they change their expectations. They anticipate differences of opinion and perspective. They assume they will need to work harder to come to a consensus. This logic helps to explain both the upside and the downside of social diversity: people work harder in diverse environments both cognitively and socially. They might not like it, but the hard work *can lead to better outcomes.*" (p. 263)

And this is also the potentially transformative power of encouraging the diversity of Unitarian Universalists too.

McGhee points out:

that the diversity that is causing an often-unconscious racial panic in so many white Americans *is actually our biggest strategic asset*. The research has borne this out in education, jurisprudence, business, and the economy. Put simply, we need each other. Our differences have the potential to make us stronger, smarter, more creative, and fairer. Once we abandon the false idea of zero-sum competition, the benefits of diversity become evident, from the classroom to the courtroom to the boardroom. (p 264)

May we take this message to heart. Even if zero-sum thinking currently stimulates reactivity in you, I encourage you to fortify your mind with the writers and authors who advocate for sum-of-us thinking.

But that will not convince us fully. Let us test the sum-of-us approach in action, as Bridget did, as Cecile did, and put ourselves in the places where our hearts and minds can be touched.

It is a great way to honor Dr. King's legacy, calling us to love the other and make common cause around shared values with our neighbors, and not miss the opportunity to cross and erase the line between them and us.

Prayer of Affirmation

Prayer for the Dead and the Living by Elizabeth Cunningham

Whenever we are brave
 whenever we are kind
 whenever we face ourselves
 whenever we forgive
 the dead shall live
 the dead shall live.

Whenever we join hands
 whenever we pray
 whenever we mourn
 whenever our roots reach down
 to drink from living waters
 the dead shall live
 the dead shall live.

Whenever we think clearly
 whenever we act justly
 whenever we sing
 though our hearts are breaking
 whenever we make beauty
 the dead shall live
 the dead shall live.

Then they will know
 the gift of their death is received.

Then they will know
the seed of their death bears good fruit.

Then they will know
they are not lost.

Then they will know
they are not lost.

And the dead shall live in us.

And the dead shall live in us.

Benediction

These are the words that conclude Heather McGhee's book, *The Sum of Us*:

The choice between these two visions has never been starker. To a nation riven with anxiety about who belongs, many in power have made it their overarching goal to sow distrust about the goodness of the Other. They are holding on, white-knuckled, to a tiny idea of *We the People*, denying the beauty of what we are becoming. They're warning that demographic changes are the unmaking of America. What I've seen on my journey is that they're the fulfillment of America. What they say is a threat is in fact our country's salvation—for when a nation founded on a belief in racial hierarchy truly rejects that belief, then and only then will we have discovered a New World. That is our destiny. To make it manifest, we must challenge ourselves to live our lives in solidarity across color, origin, and class; we must demand changes to the rules in order to disrupt the very notion that those who have more money are worth more in our democracy and our economy. Since this country's founding, we have not allowed our diversity to be our superpower, and the result is that the United States is not more than the sum of its disparate parts. But it could be. And if it were, all of us would prosper. In short, we must emerge from this crisis in our republic with a new birth of freedom, rooted in the knowledge that we are so much more when the "We" in "We the People" is not some of us, but all of us. We are greater than, and greater for, the sum of us. (pp. 270-271)