

Then and Now
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First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany
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Reading by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, from *Eulogy for James Reeb*¹

Sermon

The insurrection at the U.S. capitol was 4 years ago. In spite of the makeover some are trying to give it, it was ... shocking ... violent, destructive, with racist imagery, and the clear intent to disrupt that fundamental practice of democracy – the peaceful transfer of power. There was extensive property damage. 140 police officers were assaulted – including one who died the next day, and 4 others who died by suicide in the following months.² People who got caught up in this have suffered. So did confidence in a secure US democracy.

And it could have been worse. It may yet be. The rhetoric that inspired that event persists. Violent crimes motivated by race have been on the rise since then.³ The person in whose name these people acted is about to become president.

And there are, still, a lot of well-armed angry people with that strange notion that you express dissent through violence.

As with the murder of James Reeb, we've been asking the question "who." Who caused this? Who shall we blame? Those are good questions. And more than 1500 people have been criminally charged in connection with their actions that day - most have pled guilty or been found guilty. Some are in prison now. There's been talk, in these 4 years, of accountability for those who incited this violence – no actual accountability, but the question has been asked, as it should. But I also hear the Rev Dr King asking "what?" What is causing the violence we saw that day, and since, against each other and our very democracy? If we heed King's call to look to the "system, the way of life, the philosophy," what is going on?

For starters, the things he listed. With a few changes in proper nouns, King's words from 67 years ago have held up rather well. And, we might add others – perhaps things like fear and insecurity and people who manipulate both for their own gain; or the appeasement of bullies, the devaluing of critical thinking and truth itself, the siloing of our worlds, and taking our democracy for granted.

And ... white supremacy. This country was intentionally set up in a way that divided the advantages and sacrifices of living in this society unequally, and – though progress is real – that foundational inequality has stayed with us. It's in our criminal justice system, politics, voting, health care, education, financial systems - it's everywhere. And when that inequality is threatened, history tells us that what we get is violence.

Journalist Robert Evans, in his podcast "The Assault on America,"⁴ shares some history of the town of Hamburg South Carolina. The town doesn't exist anymore – it's a golf course now. But in 1876, he says, Hamburg "was a center of Black political power. The mayor and sheriff were

¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Eulogy for the Reverend James Reeb*, 15-16.

² <https://www.justice.gov/usao-dc/43-months-jan-6-attack-capitol>

³ <https://www.justice.gov/hatecrimes/hate-crime-statistics> see also

<https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/06/us/politics/trump-capitol-attack-jan-6.html>

⁴ Robert Evans, *The Assault on America*,

<https://podcasts.google.com/feed/aHR0cHM6Ly9mZWVkcyc5tZWdhcGhvbmUuZm0vSFNXMTk4NTUwNDg4MA/episode/MjhiMmRINTAtNTQ3Mi0xMwVjLTlhYTdtNDdkYWY4MDIxNWRk?hl=en&ved=2ahUKewjYmPWrpH1AhUemHIEHYnQDwYQjrkEegQIAhAF&ep=6>

Black, most of the city officials were Black. Black state politicians lived in Hamburg,” as did many African Americans trying to move up in the world.

But 1876 was an election year, and post-Civil War South Carolina was about 60% Black. For many white people, the prospect of multi-racial democracy was terrifying. They decided to make sure it never happened.

On July 8, they began in Hamburg, armed with guns and pitchforks - they marched on the city, killed the sheriff, ransacked Black homes and businesses, and then killed a few more people with the express intent of inspiring terror.

From there they moved on to other cities and towns. The rest of that year saw a coordinated campaign of threats, violence and killings to prevent African Americans from voting. It worked. In that same podcast, historian Wayne O’Bryant - whose family has lived near Hamburg since the 1870’s – shares that he had a Black ancestor on the voting rolls in 1876. “After that,” he says, there is no record of anyone in his family voting for another 92 years.”

The use of violence and terror, and the willingness to sacrifice democracy to maintain the unequal division of advantages and sacrifices, has been with us throughout this country’s history. It was there in the Civil War, in the lynchings and other racial violence that followed reconstruction (like what happened in Hamburg); it was there in the massacre in Tulsa, and in the decades and decades of hate crimes and police killings that continue to this day.

As we explore the “system, the way of life, the philosophy,” King invites us to expand our view of responsibility – to see beyond the person with a pitchfork to the recurring historical pattern.

Think about where we were back in 2021. We had our first Black president not long before (it feels longer than it really was), and even as the capitol building was invaded - two new senators from Georgia were elected: a black minister from Martin Luther King’s church and a son of Jewish immigrants who interned with John Lewis. And, we had just elected a Black female vice-president. Killings of Black men by police had been gaining attention, and Black Lives Matter was picking up broad support. This is the exactly the kind of racial progress that is - historically - accompanied by violence.

Most of the people convicted of crimes on Jan 6 don’t seem overtly racist. But they don’t have to be for this pattern to play out. The “system, the way of life, the philosophy,” has always resisted multi-racial democracy.

And King invites us to recognize responsibility in people who never touch a pitchfork, but whose actions perpetuate that system. Here, it’s easy to blame people who instigate events like this – the politicians and media personalities who play on people’s fears and hardship and push white supremacist ideology.⁵ But when we look a little deeper, we find that the ‘what’ that’s causing the violence of our time also includes the inattention of many, many people who didn’t create the unjust systems, don’t like exploitation, and deplore violence, but generation after generation reap the benefits. In that context, I hear King say, the inattention becomes a quiet complicity.

This isn’t about blaming or shaming, or anyone feeling bad about themselves. Nor is it about denying other kinds of oppression and hardship. King is asking us to hold all of the complexity of who we are, and what we do.

My own ancestors came to this country with courage and a dream, and very little else - they faced their own discrimination because they were poor, foreign and Catholic; these were never pitchfork-wielding people, and they worked unbelievably hard to move up in the world. I’m proud of them

⁵ <https://www.npr.org/2021/09/26/1040756471/what-is-white-replacement-theory-explaining-the-white-supremacist-rhetoric>

and grateful to them. And ... that quiet complicity has been there all along. And we have a lot of company.

That complicity sometimes looks like... celebrating the success that came from hard work, with no acknowledgement of the barriers to that success experienced by others. There's an insecurity there, as though an awareness of injustice affecting someone else somehow diminishes one's own achievement. ...

Sometimes complicity looks like ... reasonable concerns about process - agreeing with the need for change, but ... this isn't a good time, the language is wrong, the tactics are wrong, the pace is wrong. Those concerns may, sometimes, have merit. But they're rarely part of an ongoing conversation; more often, they're used to rationalize a comfortable distancing from a struggle for justice. Sometimes, objectively reasonable statements by peaceful people function to maintain systems of oppression.

And sometimes complicity looks like proclaimed neutrality – declining to “take a side.” But as Archbishop Desmond Tutu said, “If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor. If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse and you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality.”

The quiet complicity of good people who abhor violence leaves in place the same unjust “system, way of life and philosophy” that King tells us killed James Reeb, that has killed and oppressed many more before and since, and is doing violence to our democracy.

And that violence is, sometimes, a little sneakier than pitchforks. It's shown up, at the state level, as extreme gerrymandering designed to prevent fair representation; as well as new barriers to voting that have disproportionate impact; and even creating ways for partisan officials or legislative bodies to change election results. These tactics aren't new, but in recent years they've seen renewed enthusiasm and success. This assault on democracy may not grab the headlines, but it's no less dangerous. And the goal is exactly the same as it was for those who terrorized Hamburg.

Back in 2013, the Supreme Court invalidated portions of the Voting Rights Act. Since then, there have been repeated attempts to pass federal legislation to strengthen protections for voting rights – many of those bills named after civil rights icon John Lewis who knew Dr King well. Legislation passed the house a couple of times, most recently in 2021, but although it's been introduced three times since then, there's been no substantive action. And no prospect of action in the current congress.

So. We've got foundational oppression showing up as various forms of violence. And, as King said, “the blame is wide and responsibility grows.” What are we to do with that?

King gives us two stark options: to be an irrelevant church that stands as a taillight amid social evil ... Or to be a headlight and a voice.

As Unitarian Universalists, we are called to be a headlight - that illuminates “what is” right now, the future we seek, and our movement from here to there.

The goal, for King, is not really to illuminate the wrongness of others. He's asking us to look beyond the “who,” to the “what.” To shine our light on the system.

This moment in history is a hard one for many of us. Many things do seem to be going in the wrong direction. And yet, the larger context that King offers suggests another – perhaps more hopeful - perspective. In the words of author and activist adrienne maree brown:

“things are not getting worse
they are getting uncovered

we must hold each other tight
and continue to pull back the veil”⁶

Things are not getting worse. They’re getting uncovered.

On an immediate personal level, that may not be true. Things are indeed getting worse for at least some of us. But, Brown and King remind us that some of what we experience as moving in the wrong direction is actually uncovering things that have always been there. And holding each other tight, pulling back the veil and naming what we find there is how change begins.

For the way out of the cycle of violence that kills people and threatens our democracy, and in which we are all trapped, is through our own living - courageous communities learning to look at themselves, and change.

That learning and changing is messy, painfully slow and nonlinear. Our efforts can be at times ineffective, performative, and divisive. At some point, just about everyone feels uncomfortable, offended, angry, despairing or impatient. There are moments when we start to view someone else as “the problem.” There are conflicts. We may slip into ingrained patterns that sustain the system we seek to change.

But King calls us to keep trying, knowing that our response in this moment is connected to King’s response in his moment, and to others over the centuries. Our story is part of a larger story of prophetic people naming “what is” and guiding us toward beloved community with their living.

And in that larger story, we are so much more than people mired in entrenched oppression. We are also people who – at least sometimes - have the courage to pull back that veil, choosing to stick with a Love big enough to hold all of who we are. And we have one another.

In our efforts to be a headlight, in our love, and our community, there is hope for a more just future. Even as he was calling out systems of injustice, King saw that future. Here are his words, from the end of his eulogy for James Reeb:

... in spite of the tensions and uncertainties of this period, something profoundly meaningful is taking place. Old systems of exploitation and oppression are passing away. Out of the wombs of a frail world, new systems of justice and equality are being born. Doors of opportunity are gradually being opened. ... Here and there an individual or group dares to love and rises to the majestic height of moral maturity.

Therefore I am not yet discouraged about the future. Granted, the easygoing optimism of yesteryear is impossible. Granted, that those who pioneered in the struggle for peace and freedom will still ... be battered by the storms of persecution Granted, that we face a world crisis which leaves us standing so often amid the surging murmur of life’s restless seas. But every crisis has both its dangers and its opportunities, its valleys of salvation or doom in a dark, confused world. The kingdom of God may yet reign in the hearts of men.

May it be so.

Amen

⁶ <http://adriennemareebrown.net/2021/01/07/what-is-unveiled-the-founding-wound-poem-directive/>