

DRAFT

Reflections on Albany UU MLK Day Service, January 19, 2025

By Michael C. Hornsby

Good morning, everyone.

I hope you all can appreciate how difficult it has been for me to write, and deliver, a reflection on the life and legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr in this current political climate without lapsing into angry hyperbole or outright profanity. No, I will not do that. Not because I am trying to persuade you of the righteousness of working toward making our beloved country a place of equal opportunity and freedom for all, because I am tired and have given up trying to persuade others to do what is just and unselfish. I will let common decency rule the day, though when I think of Senator Tim Scott invoking Dr. King's name as he says that racism no longer exists in the United States; or when white lawmakers perverted Dr. King's words while introducing anti-Diversity, Equity, and Inclusivity legislation, declaring that racism doesn't exist *except as "wokeness" and "DEI" efforts to oppress straight white men; or....*

But I digress.

Every movie I've ever seen of Dr King's life ends abruptly after the March on Washington, with him basking in the glorious sun that shined just for him immediately following the "I Have a Dream" speech. (Or, as I refer to it, that gosh-darned dreaming speech! So eloquent, so profound, so inspirational, but so easily coopted by his enemies.) However, there's a remarkable HBO documentary from 2014 titled King in the Wilderness that chronicles his life beginning 18 months prior to his assassination. He wasn't a heroic figure then. He was almost irrelevant, a man whose time had passed, so weary and depressed that his aides had to beg him to get out of bed to keep an important speaking engagement. He was immensely unpopular, even in the Black community. Dr King and his strategy of nonviolent protest had given way to younger, more charismatic leaders who did not speak with the cadence of the church. Fundamental to their political strategy was an assertion of the right of self-defense, with some going further to advocate violent revolution.

Anecdotally, I remember my father and two of my uncles talking about civil rights one long, bourbon drenched Friday evening. Dad said that he respected Dr King, but that he “wouldn’t march to the corner store” with Dr King because “I am not about to let a white man hit me” – “Or spit on me!”, Uncle Benny enthusiastically interjected. (Uncle Benny must have had a few bad experiences involving white people’s saliva, I thought.)

Uncle Denver was a Black nationalist, who waxed poetically about the coming revolution and how we would need soldiers and how Dad should teach me how to shoot and he had a shotgun in the trunk of his car which he offered to get to teach 12 year old me how to shoot it before cooler heads won out: my father saw that my uncle was looking for his car keys, and I was putting on my shoes with a wild gleam in my eyes. Dad puffed on the well-chewed stub of his El Producto cigar. Uncle Benny chuckled as he knocked back half a glass of Jack Daniels. “Denver,” my father said, “where are you gonna shoot that cannon of yours in the middle of St. Louis? And, if it’s all the same to you, I would like for Mikey to live long enough to finish school before his uncle accidentally kills him in a training exercise.” And so to this day I am woefully unprepared to be a foot soldier for the glorious Black Revolution.

I digress once again. Please forgive me.

The point is that nonviolence as an instrument for social change depends on taking, and holding, the moral high ground and that is difficult to sustain over time, especially when there are ongoing assaults and abuse. A nonviolent social movement requires that oppressed people be willing to make huge sacrifices of blood and treasure, putting their bodies, and the bodies of their spouses and their neighbors and their *children* on the line. It also requires that there be a group of privileged citizens who care enough about those oppressed people that they are willing, at the very least, to expend political capital in service of the greater good.

During the civil rights era, Dr King benefitted from the myth that there was no racism in the North, and the South made such good villains! He later found that Northerners deeply resented him for working for racial justice in housing and employment, and there was no group to whom he could appeal for solace.

Dr King was a prophet, called by his God to speak truth to power. After the signing of the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act, he pivoted toward ending the Vietnam War. Dr King said, “We have an opportunity to inject morality into the veins of our civilization.” His anti-war stance was completely consistent with his philosophy of nonviolence. It also caused white people to denounce him as a traitor and to tell him to “stick to civil rights.” His prophetic vision continued to expand. He began to speak out against poverty and predatory capitalism. He said, “The issues that we are dealing with will call for a restructuring of American society.” He went to cities like Chicago and Boston, showing that racism was a national, not a regional, problem.

Prophets aren’t soothsayers, but many of them, like John the Baptist, Jesus Christ, and Dr King were resigned to violent deaths. Many, if not all, prophets die as blood sacrifices to societies that cannot bear them, as once called, prophets cannot stop telling the Truth.

We will hear more about Dr King’s vision during Rev Ann’s sermon. For now, let us note that we are on the eve of the inauguration of the most nakedly hateful American president since Woodrow Wilson. I’m not saying that all of his supporters are racist, but all racists appear to be among his supporters. Racism, sexism, transphobia, agism, classism - Dr King’s legacy is in peril, which means that democracy itself is in danger, as well.

I will conclude with a quote from The Book of Genesis, 37:19 – 21, forwarded to me by a very dear friend:

They said to one another,  
Behold, this dreamer cometh...  
Let us slay him...  
And we shall see what will become of his dreams.