What They Dreamed

by Rev. Diane Dowgiert, January 20, 2019

*A* story from the desert fathers: Abba Lot came to Abba Joseph and said: Father, according as I am able, I keep my little rule, and my little fast, my prayer, meditation and contemplative silence; and, according as I am able, I strive to cleanse my heart of thoughts: now what more should I do? The elder rose up in reply and stretched out his hands to heaven, and his fingers became like ten lamps of fire. He said: Why not become fire?

Fire is a symbol for transformation whereby one thing becomes something else. Wood becomes flame and smoke and ash. A caterpillar becomes a butterfly, a water bug becomes a dragonfly, a tadpole becomes a frog, an acorn becomes a tree – transformation is an innate process of life.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. whose birthday we celebrate tomorrow, would have been 90 this year had he not been assassinated at the prime of his life. Now, 51 years later, here we are. We’ve been doing all the things – we’ve marched, protested, and demonstrated, we’ve read the books, attended the workshops, seminars, and lectures, we’ve written letters, some have even gone to jail for the cause of racial equality. And yet, here we are. We are not free of injustice. As Dr. King said, “a threat to justice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”

While the world has changed dramatically since Dr. King’s death 51 years ago, and there has been movement on the journey toward racial justice, we have not achieved the Promised Land that Dr. King envisioned. And so, I ask myself, what more should I do?

When we celebrate Martin Luther King Day, his iconic *I Have a Dream* speech usually comes to mind, where he laid out his vision of equality, a vision of a welcome table open to all, a vision of freedom and justice, a vision of a society where people are judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character, where children of all colors will be able to join hands as sisters and brothers, siblings in one human family.

To achieve King’s vision requires not change but transformation – a societal transformation such that when it is done, we will be so radically changed that we won’t recognize ourselves.

To begin the process of transforming, or metamorphizing, which is the scientifically correct term, a caterpillar sheds its skin to form a chrysalis. Inside the chrysalis, the caterpillar’s body breaks down into a soupy-like substance. From there, the constituent elements of atoms, molecules and strands of DNA rearrange into the form of a butterfly.

Spiritual masters and gurus talk about the shedding of ego, the letting go of constructed ideas of who we are, those that are imposed by parents and society, and those we impose upon ourselves. Dr. King and the movement he was part of worked to change laws. The were successful in changing voting laws and segregation laws. They also worked to change hearts and minds, which is where the transformation takes place.

While we remember King’s *I Have a Dream* speech, his most seminal work was *Letter From Birmingham Jail*, written from his cell in the Birmingham jail. The letter begins, “My dear fellow clergymen,” and goes on to address their public criticism of King’s activities as unwise and untimely. In the letter he expresses his grave disappointment with the white moderate, saying,

“I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Counciler or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to ‘order’ than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says: ‘I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action’; who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a "more convenient season." Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection.”

In the letter, King lays out a 4-part process for the transformation of

society through non-violent, direct action, drawing on the work of Ghandi, who was influenced by the writing of Leo Tolstoy, who was influenced by the writing of Adin Ballou, an often-overlooked figure in our Unitarian Universalist history. Ballou was a pacifist who believed that dependence on force to maintain order was unjust. He refused to participate in such a government. The impulse to transform society has long been a part of our UU tradition. King gave us a roadmap.

1. Collection of the facts to determine if injustices exist
2. Negotiation
3. Self-purification
4. Direct action

Of the first step, the collection of facts to determine if injustices exist, King addresses one of the criticisms from the white clergymen – the willingness of marchers and protesters to break laws. He makes a distinction between just and unjust laws. “A just law,” he says, “is a man-made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law.” He goes on to say that “an unjust law is a code that numerical or power majority group compels a minority group to obey but does not make binding on itself.” King and the movement he was a part of were willing to break unjust laws by committing civil disobedience. Again, we hear echoes of our UU tradition and Henry David Thoreau who went to jail for refusing to pay taxes to support an unjust war. Thoreau also wrote a book titled Civil Disobedience.

There are two steps that come before choosing direct action or civil disobedience. Once it has been determined injustices exist, the next step is negotiation, sitting down with the people who have the power to make change. One of the things the white clergymen criticized King for was using direct action instead of negotiation, for not being patient. King reminded them that negotiation was tried. He was told to wait for some more convenient time. “We have waited for more that 340 years for our constitutional and God given rights,” King reminded, and went on to talk about the urgency of now. Now is the only time to make change.

If negotiation fails, the next step is self-purification, the process by which each individual determines their own willingness and ability to engage in direct action that may result in arrest. It also includes training in von-violent resistance, how to stay calm in the face of aggression and how to not return violence even when it is being perpetrated against you.

I think of this as the stage of metamorphosis where the caterpillar turns to a soupy goo. It’s a relinquishment of ego, a letting go of control, deciding to act from a place of conscience, no matter the outcome. It involves facing one’s own fears, which may be why society seems impossible to transform. It means facing our fears. It’s why we do social change work together. We can hold each other and find courage together.

Not everyone is called to direct action. It is a relinquishment of ego to honestly say “no, I am not willing or able to take this risk at this time” and still be in solidarity with those who are.

The final step is direct action. On my heart today is a concrete example of direct action. Four volunteers with No More Deaths, a humanitarian group that leaves water in the desert for migrants making the perilous journey across harsh desert lands, were found guilty of federal charges for leaving jugs of water on public land. I was instrumental in No More Deaths becoming part of the ministry of the UU Church of Tucson where I served as minister for 10 years. It could have been me that was found guilty. There were many times when I was the one leaving gallon jugs of water on desert trails. If history repeats itself, these volunteers will most likely not face jail time, but be given probation and community service.

Direct action can be a small act, like leaving water in the desert, or it can be facing off with police in riot gear, being handcuffed and taken to jail. Always, it comes from a place of conscience, acting in harmony with what King called moral law.

Martin Luther King had a dream and a vision. He saw the possibility of a just and equitable society, a vision that carried a movement of people to march, to protest, to demonstrate and go to jail. In his letter from Birmingham Jail, he said that he would not make it to the promised land of his dream. Maybe he had a premonition of his assassination.

On this holiday celebrating the birth and legacy of Martin Luther King, we are called to rekindle his vision, knowing that we may not get to the promised land ourselves, but we might make it more possible that our children and our grandchildren will.

In addition to rekindling a vision of a just and equitable society, I have a challenge for you. Today or tomorrow, learn about Adin Ballou and our UU history of non-violence. Just google his name. Then, read the *Letter From Birmingham Jail*. Even if you have read it before, read it again. It clearly lays out the promise and the challenge of the time we live in today.

The closing lines of the letter read, “Let us all hope that the dark clouds of racial prejudice will soon pass away and the deep fog of misunderstanding will be lifted from our fear-drenched communities, and in some not too distant tomorrow the radiant stars of love and brotherhood will shine over our great nation with all the scintillating beauty.”

On this holiday weekend, once you have rekindled your vision of the world you want to live in and the world you want your children and grandchildren to live in – once you have connected with sources of wisdom from our own UU faith tradition – Adin Ballou or Henry David Thoreau – once you’ve read or re-read what has been called Dr. King’s most important piece of writing, you may find yourself asking, “what more should I do?”

Maybe we should become fire.