

Sermon 20220116

Dr. King's Impossible Dream

Dr. King's inspired many in our nation and across the globe to work for racial, economic, and international justice. His dreams for equality, equity, and inclusion, particularly in America are still yet to be fully realized. But there is hope; we can achieve the impossible if we only... Come this Sunday as we explore what it would take to make a seemingly impossible dream reality.

The title of the reflection today is Dr. King's Impossible Dream. As we commemorate the birth, life, and death of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, we do so with the consideration for his dream of beloved community. He envisioned a nation united and at peace, where all its people are free and equal – able to pursue true happiness.

Much of his life's work and ministry was revolving around, in more modern terms, diversity, equality, and inclusion. But his message was broader than these terms. Toward the end of his life, he expanded his vision to address global oppression and spoke a great deal about militarism and was a war opponent. Dr. King was a prominent advocate of nonviolence. He knew well that in any war or conflict the first people to suffer are the poor and the disenfranchised.

In his "I Have a Dream" sermon and other speeches, he laid out his vision and hopes for the Civil Rights movement. However, the original intent behind the speech was an appeal to end economic and employment inequalities.

He said, "I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal.' I have a dream ... that one day right down in Alabama, little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers. I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by [the content of] their character."
"I have a dream!"

It has been over fifty years since his voice was silenced by a sniper's rifle; over fifty years since his March on Washington and the passing of Civil Rights laws; fifty plus years since he articulated the dream of a generation, the hopes of the hopeless.

And decades since, the United States has seen significant progress toward the dream that Dr. King imagined. The prevailing question is whether or not his dream has come true nationally and across the globe. Looking at this moment in our nation, some might conclude that Dr. King's dream was always unsustainable and improbable – an impossible dream to begin with and one that could never be fully realized.

Yet, even Dr. King believed that there had been great progress in his day. He said, "In many ways we have come a long way in bending the arc of justice." He went on to say, "We can all glory that things are better today than they were ten years ago or even three years ago. We should be proud of the steps we've made to rid our nation of this great evil of racial segregation and discrimination."

It is true, legally mandated racial segregation in America has been dismantled. We can visit any playground and see little black children hand in hand with their white counterparts; most white neighborhoods now allow for black home ownership; and although there are still great disparities in education and employment, the number of African American college graduates has increased significantly since 1964. African Americans have come to occupy positions of power and influence, as CEOs of large private organizations, mayors, governors, legislators in Congress and, of course, the presidency with the advent of Barack Obama.

I can recall people saying recently that racism no longer exist because we elected the first black president. Now, we all know this isn't the case. Race is still a factor in whether some people can get employment, housing, education, and so on.

About half of the respondents in a Pew Research Center poll stated that "a lot more needs to be done before people in the United States would 'be judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.'"¹ Unfortunately, in our day, as it was over fifty years ago, the stubborn and complex problems surrounding race relations, inequality, and injustice still exist. If anything, the election of former president Barack Obama only exacerbated the racial divide that has been the sick undercurrent of America's social experiment since its founding.

¹ <https://www.news18.com/news/india/50-years-after-martin-luther-kings-dream-still-not-realised-in-us-poll-633493.html>

While we can probably acknowledge the progress in the last decade, it seems we're having to fight the same, or similar, battles as our forebears fought. Dr. King warned us against the blinding myth of an exaggerated progress. His words are still relevant today: people who have been historically oppressed, such as African Americans, still do not possess the full freedoms that many others have in this great nation. And to echo the words of Dr. King, "The plant of freedom is only a bud and not yet a flower." Indeed, we have come a long way, but much work still remains.

56 years ago, Dr. King believed that a social revolution was taking place in our nation. Speaking to Unitarian Universalists in a Ware Lecture at the UUA General Assembly in Hollywood, Florida, in May 1966, Dr. King implored the attendees "[Not to] Sleep Through the Revolution!" He encouraged those in the struggle to remain aware, awake, and vigilant.² He said, "There is nothing more tragic than to sleep through a revolution."³ Or in other words, to not recognize the season that we are in; or not to be able to affect change in our time when it is in our power to do so.

Indeed, there seems to be a social revolution happening in our day. The social revolution – is the dream, which has always been toward greater rights for those who have been historically shut out, oppressed, and/or marginalized. And to any advancements, and we can look back throughout our history, with every step forward there has always been opposing forces. It doesn't matter how much sense it makes that the society should care for the weakest, or that national and affordable health care is in the best interest of the nation. There will always somebody opposed to it.

We must recognize that we are in a battle, perhaps, for the soul of a nation. And if this is a real battle, we must recognize that with any forward progress– any positive forward motion there will always be pushback – resistance. There will always be somebody saying "no!". They don't even bother anymore trying to be stealth or tactful in their resistance, these forces can be observed and witnessed throughout the society.

² <https://www.uua.org/ga/past/1966/ware>

³ <https://www.uua.org/ga/past/1966/ware>

In fact, the notion of *taking our country back*, is not a mere political slogan; it is a call to battle. Its intent is, in fact, to take the country back to some long-gone period in our history. To perhaps a time, when things were great for a certain segment of the society.

If some in our great nation were to have their way, they would take us back to an era of Jim Crow-type laws and restrictions which disproportionately affected marginalized communities. They will take us back to those dark days of backroom abortions. They would strip LGBTQ folk of the right to marry and send them back into the closet. They would resegregate and openly practice discrimination in the schools and in other public accommodations. We know this because we are currently seeing the reverberations of such sentiments throughout the society. Bakers and wedding photographers, doctors, restaurants, and so on, have fought for and in some instances, have won at the highest court of the land, the right to discriminate.

We see this in the resistance against the Black Lives Matter movement, the state bans on Critical Race Theory, multiculturalism, and other diversity, equity, and inclusion endeavors – these are but pushbacks against progress, perceived or realized. And the arguments against these progressive achievements are rarely grounded in truth. This has happened in nearly every era. The KKK, Jim Crow, and Confederate statues are examples of the kinds of pushback against the actual or perceived forward movement of freed slaves, Black people or other disenfranchised groups in general.

And you'd think that mainline churches would stand up for justice and equality and to be on the side of poor and marginalized. Dr. King felt that the church bore a great responsibility in rectifying injustices because as he writes, "When the church is true to its nature, it stands as a moral guardian of the community and of society." But the mainline churches of today are far from being the moral guardians of anything. Many of the devout have aligned themselves with a political party and have embraced harmful conspiracy theories and untruths or have acted in ways that are nonsensical and / or anti-christian.

Many believe that we are at a crossroads in our nation with the possibility of our democracy failing; some may feel that the dream itself has failed. Faced with all the social and racial conflicts, political strife and division, and an ongoing and relentless pandemic that has wreaked havoc on our national conscience, many have given up.

Relationships are strained, people are quitting their jobs, and others are weary, disillusioned, and hopeless; they wonder how much more they can endure. No doubt, we are all exhausted and at times may feel like giving up.

This is not the time to give up, or to give in! I know that it seems that the world is changing, and we fear what our democracy may look like after it has faced some of its greatest threats. This is not the time to get weary, "for," as the Bible says, "in due season, we shall reap if we faint not."

I have certainly thought about giving up. I have wondered if the struggle has been worth it. I will tell you this, I have never been more encouraged than from reading the words of Dr. King and learning deeper about his life and the lives of other Civil Rights activists.

No doubt, they too felt all alone and were discouraged and at times had lost hope that we would ever see full equality in our nation. It was too dangerous a dream to have. But they pushed, they kept the faith, they persevered in the face of great challenges, threats of death, bombings, lynching, and other harm. Dr. King himself faced the constant threats to his life, some of which were followed by his family's home being bombed and by him being stabbed, jailed, and gassed.

He experienced setback after setback. US Presidents Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson promised him support and then reneged on their promise to support legislated integration. He and other peaceful protestors at times encountered violence from local police forces, who used their bully clubs and tear gas on the peaceful protestors, with the brutal tactics often supported by city mayors and state governors who were openly opposed to change.

He witnessed others in the struggle being killed or injured. In Birmingham, he was called upon to eulogize four little Black girls, blown up while playing in their own church. I had to sit with this for a bit. I had to look at the very dangerous time in which they lived.

If I had the mandate that he had and was faced with as much opposition as Dr. King faced, there is no way that I would have endured. I would probably be on a beach in Mexico enjoying margaritas. I don't see how I could have hoped for or believed that change was even possible, given the forces that were against it. For me, it would have been an impossible dream. But I do, we do have the mandate; it is ours to bear

It's hard to imagine staying in a fight that seemed impossible to win; one that might even cost you your life. But these were some prophetic people! They envisioned the future. They could see the fulfillment of the dream. And seeing it, even if from afar, carried them through the violence, the betrayals, and the hopelessness of the immediate moment. They knew that with every threat, arrest, and instance of beatings, they were that much closer to freedom and the fulfillment of the dream.

Even knowing that they may not reach the promised land with the rest of us, they persevered. I look at the sacrifices that so many activists and advocates have made, such as the Unitarian minister Rev. James Reeb, activists Medgar Evers, and so many others who suffered and some paid the ultimate price; and I wonder, who am I to complain? Who am I to grow weary of this work when I have not endured nearly as much? When I have enjoyed the freedoms that, no doubt, their sacrifices have extended to me. They each had a glimpse of the world they knew someday could be – the dream... They give me hope. They should inspire all of us not to give up, not one inch.

They were not alone, and we should know that we are not alone in the struggle for justice. Together they accomplished great things and together we will also reach the promise. When Dr. King and many other social warriors of the movement needed help, they often called on their white allies, the Unitarian Universalists, the Catholics, the Jewish Rabbis, and other activists. The Unitarians were there. We have always been there. We should be proud of the contributions and the sacrifices that those in our movement made during that time ... and now. In many ways we carry the mantles of these great people who went before us. They prepared us for this moment.

Because those who are against us are still planning and preparing for battle; they're going to fight to the end. We will likely experience great difficulties in the days and years ahead. If today shares any connection to Dr. King's Day, then it is likely that it will

get worse before it gets better. If they bombed and killed us then, they will do this again. I expect that we will again see political violence, like what took place last year on January 6th. We may see domestic terrorism rise.

But let us not get too alarmed and afraid or fall in the despair. There are more with us than there are against us. There are more of us on the right side of a forward-focused history than there are those who long for a return to the "good old days." We will not take up arms; that's not our way. And though there are many new laws to restrict our voting, we will meet them at the ballot box; we will meet them peacefully in the streets; we will meet them on college campuses and in boardrooms. And like Dr. King, we will love the hell out of them. And ultimately, peace and goodness will prevail.

So, I'm here today to encourage each of you to look beyond the clouds and the chaos; look beyond the ranting and the raving; look beyond the lies and the targeted misinformation; look ahead, even if for a small glimpse of the promised land. Can you see it? What does it look like? What does the dream fulfilled feel like? Feels a little but like home doesn't it?

Truly, we are on the cusp of something great. How do we stay strong thought it all? How do we further the dream? Here are some things that I would encouraged us to do.

Firstly, we must renew our vision and revisit the mandate before us. We must recommit ourselves to the work of unwrapping and then dismantling centuries of division, homophobia, misogyny, tribalism, racism, classism, and all the other -isms that serve only to keep us apart and others oppressed. We have been called for such a time as this; only we can do the work that must be done – in our time.

Dr. King quotes Victor Hugo, who once said that "there is nothing more powerful in all the world than an idea whose time has come." He goes on to say, "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." These words are still vital and relevant today. The old is passing away, and a new thing is upon us..

Secondly, we need to reclaim the truth. One of the greatest threats to our democracy and to our way of life is the notion that an alternative truth exists. Someone said that we are now living in a post-truth era, where people can openly trade a truth for a lie. One can claim a lie as the truth, then go about saying it a thousand times until they get people to believe the lie. The thwarting of truth is a type of pushback–resistance. We must reclaim the truth from the mouths of those who would adulterate it. Dr. King said, “We shall overcome because Carlyle is right—“no lie can live forever.” We shall overcome because William Cullen Bryant is right—“truth crushed, will rise again!” During his Nobel Peace prize acceptance speech, he said, “I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality. This is why right temporarily defeated is stronger than evil triumphant.”

And as it says in the Bible, “We shall know the truth, and the truth shall set us free.” If we are to live in freedom, we must always embrace the truth, the unadulterated and sometimes difficult truth. If they ask what you did well, tell them you said yes to Truth!

Thirdly, we must refuse to remain silent in the face of injustice. Evil thrives in silence, and so injustice cannot be left unchallenged. Dr. King said, “Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.” “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” “Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.”⁴ It has been said that, “Throughout history, it has been the inaction of those who could have acted, the indifference of those who should have known better, the silence of the voice of justice when it mattered most, that has made it possible for evil to triumph.”

We must refuse to be silent or silenced.

And then finally, we need to keep pushing. With any positive social advances, there will always a negative response. We cannot have progress without pushback. But what make us strong isn't necessarily the progress, it's the oppositional push – the opposing force against us.

⁴ Источник: <https://raymundtamayo.com/protestantism-and-currents/question-has-martin-luther-kings-dream-been-realized.html>

But if we hold onto that which is right, that which is loving and life-giving, in the end we will win the day. They might win a few battles. Yet, the momentum, the revolution, and the dream are ours. With all the hell that is breaking loose every day, one might get the impression that the dream is no longer viable or possible: but we are the people who believe in achieving the impossible. Because what we believe in, we also have the power to make happen. And if we continue to persevere, our labor will not be in vain. One day, the dream will be realized.

Again, I want to encourage you not to give up. Although the struggles are intense and relentless, hold on to what you believe in; hold on to your integrity and your values. Hold on to the truth and know that your work has not been in vain. Hold on to the assurance that what you do and contribute matters.

On Martin Luther King Day, such a dream might still seem impossible to imagine. Dare to dream regardless. A song from the musical "The of Man La Mancha" contains the words that are fitting for the moment:

To dream the impossible dream
To fight the unbeatable foe
To bear with unbearable sorrow
To run where the brave dare not go

To right the unrightable wrong
To love pure and chaste from afar
To try when your arms are too weary
To reach the unreachable star

This is my quest to follow that star
No matter how hopeless, no matter how far
To fight for the right

Without question or pause
To be willing to march
Into hell for a heavenly cause

And I know if I'll only be true
To this glorious quest
That my heart will lie peaceful and calm
When I'm laid to my rest

And the world will be better for this
That one man, scorned and covered with scars
Still strove with his last ounce of courage
To reach the unreachable star
The fight the unbeatable foe
To dream the impossible dream

Let us wake up to this world in which we live: to its beauty and wonder, and also to its tragedy and pain. May we be ever mindful that we are inextricably tied together in an inescapable great web of mutuality, of which all of us are a part. May we have the strength to do what must be done in this world. May we find the courage to live our lives as lives of conviction, of spirit, and of faith.

Let us embrace the dream, even if it seems an impossible one. For even the seemingly impossible dreams can and do come true.

May it be so. Amen, Hallelujah, and blessed be!

