

## **“The Stories That Inspire”**

**By Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD January 19, 2025**

Our lives are shaped and molded and cultivated through the stories that surround us – a contrast, often, of stories of love or hate, of justice or complacency or injustice, of faith or fear, of hope or despair – a dichotomy of perspectives and motivations of how to simply be in this earthly realm. It is that choice we have of what stories we allow to form us, those that empower versus those that disempower. It is these narratives and accounts and tales that impact us throughout this time of pervasive division that engulfs us and inundates us daily and weekly and monthly – some of us are fearful. And so today we lean into that dichotomy, that intention, that choice.

We can submit to rhetoric we are surrounded with – fear and anger and violence. Or we can listen to that of the likes of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. – the minister, activist, and political philosopher who played a profound role in the Civil Rights Movement in the fifties and sixties. Dr. King, following in the footsteps of Gandhi, promoted nonviolent resistance and agape love in response to brutality and hate and unrighteous anger, and deep, pervasive racism. His teachings of love and hope and justice and faith prevailed and will guide us in our reflections today.

I think of the stories of Rev. Dr. King, the likes of which poet Jane Hirshfield elaborated upon. Those stories that remain, quote, “a basic human path toward the discovery and ordering of meaning and beauty.” A discovery of meaning and beauty shielding us of “chaos’s companion, despair.”<sup>1</sup> This is the power and inspiration of stories that lift up and celebrate worthiness and justice and faith. There are stories that empower us – when we see all that is possible, and all that has already been done. Of that goodness and inherent dignity for all that is real and achievable. Meaning, and beauty. There are stories that disempower, which can be

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<sup>1</sup> *Soul Matters Worship Archive* January 2025

so very easy to slip into, questioning “what can I possibly do?” Furthermore, a pessimistic, dismissive, hopeless, and disempowering message of despair, inaction, indifference. An invitation not to lean into change, but to embrace the status quo of a world that is so very broken. May we choose empowerment.

I lean into this today in part to address the inauguration of which leads to fear in many of us. I’ve heard these fears articulated by some of you. And so, what I want to highlight is action over inaction. As our Story for All Ages highlighted, may we learn from the undefeated, the undeniable, the unflappable, the unafraid, the audacious, the dreamers, the doers.<sup>2</sup> Now is not the time to give up, even if shrouded in hopelessness. We cannot wallow in the current political climate, but move forward, one act of justice and faith and love at a time.

I invite us into our first dichotomy – love versus hate; a tale, a narrative, an account. Our storyteller for today, Rev. Dr. King, offers “Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that.”<sup>3</sup> The darkness that envelopes us through the shroud of hate is pushed into the shadows with that flame, that flicker we kindle through acts and deeds and declarations of love. Responding to hate with more hate simply further fosters a devastating and pervasive, often violent anger. This hate – what seems so very prominent in today’s current events – is the hate and injustice surrounding our beloved, beautiful, inherently worthy transgender siblings. A hate fostered to further marginalize, disempower, dehumanize, stigmatize, and disgrace, retracting and even making illegal that of which our siblings need simply to survive. Let this narrative not dictate our actions, unless it is used as a catalyst toward the healing power of love for all of these, for the least of these, further crafting a story of change and healing and empowerment as all are freed from the bondage of this devastating hatred. May we be guided by love, finding beauty and meaning.

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<sup>2</sup> *The Undefeated* by Kwame Alexander and Kadir Nelson

<sup>3</sup> *Strength to Love* Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

I return to Dr. King, and the story he promotes, as, quote, “Hatred paralyzes life; love releases it. Hatred confuses life; love harmonizes. Hatred darkens life; love illuminates.”<sup>4</sup> Are we to be paralyzed by hate promoting devastating inaction, or offered a sense of profound and liberating relief that accompanies love? Are we going to be lost in the confusion of the masses, or promote and live through a healing harmony of all beloveds on this earth we call home? Are we going to live under that veil of darkness, or illuminate the goodness both pervasive and profound in this blessed world? Philosopher Paul Tillich offers, “Love is the drive towards unity of the separated.”<sup>5</sup> We, in this time of deep and divisive political division, can we create a healing unity of all of those who breathe and move and eat and love and live in this finite realm? In this reflection of empowerment and disempowerment, I offer this, the disempowerment of a life of hate. A story, a tale, a narrative of anger and violence. It is to feed into unrighteous anger and violence. Disempowered through hate – we could tell ourselves we cannot create meaningful change as we slip into profound indifference towards the marginalized; promoting and intensifying the animosity we are surrounded by. We could slip into despair and inaction – the easy choice, as we deem our siblings unworthy. We could be disempowered because of the lack of humanization, the indifference towards creating bridges that unify. We could breed unrighteous anger and inaction, dehumanization, and stigmatization by our intentional lack of action bred by indifference and hate. No. Love – love is what we need to overcome this division and hate. Love – that of which Dr. King promoted as the most powerful of all emotions and catalysts to justice. Love – that which can create empowering change and tend to the deep wounds of our nation. Pervasive, profound, and powerful love.

I see a continuum of justice towards complacency towards injustice. The pervasive stories of injustice overwhelm our airwaves. There is the story of the January 6<sup>th</sup> insurrectionists not held accountable for their devastating actions. There is the narrative of using the justice system to pursue and ultimately rid oneself of political opponents or perceived enemies. This is pervasive, devastating, and demoralizing. It affects each blessed being on this earthly realm. We need

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<sup>4</sup> *Strength to Love* Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

<sup>5</sup> *Love, Power, and Justice: Ontological Analysis and Ethical Applications* By Paul Tillich

simply orient ourselves towards the guiding principle of our faith – we are all but one sacred piece in the interdependent web in which all of humanity is intimately connected. The marginalized and the indifferent. The victims of violence and the perpetrators of violence. As one being hungers, those who have never known anything but abundance feel that desperation. As a single mother works multiple jobs, that exhaustion and overwhelm touches the spirits of those who do not know what it means to be overworked. As one being faces violence, that injured one – that victim – that undeserved physical and emotional pain connects us in intimate ways, as this injustice cannot help but inundate the minds and spirits of all who stand witness. When one undocumented worker is deported, we feel the pain that would accompany the destruction of our own families. When one woman is forced to bring an unwanted pregnancy to term, we may share the fear and anger and helplessness and distress – we cannot help but be emotionally affected by the pain of another. "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere,"<sup>6</sup> spoke Martin Luther King Jr, yet one quote among many with this guiding theme of interconnection.

Stories of justice – narrations of success of our ancestors and forbearers who served to heal this world – are empowering because it gives us inspiration to heal all that is broken. It gives us the confidence and strength and perseverance to promote and act for love and inherent worthiness – tenets of our faith. King, Gandhi, Mother Theresa, Nelson Mandela – they guide us towards all of that which is possible in our pursuit of equity and pluralism and transformation. Of making sure all have the capability to flourish both in body and in spirit. We each hold that power to create profound change in this blessed world. Injustice is disempowering, promoting the status quo as marginalization, oppression, violence, and bigotry prevail. Stories of justice, in contrast, are profoundly empowering as we tend to our broken siblings one act at a time. Let us join forces to heal the world. We have seen it done and can imagine a world where love is more powerful than hate, justice prevails over all injustices, and faith pushes fear aside. So may we create that world, one act of justice at a time.

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<sup>6</sup> "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

And yet between these two – between justice and injustice – is complacency. I note two kinds of complacency of which we are burdened by. One is due to overwhelm – the narrative “I cannot possibly make a difference,” and so we do nothing. I cannot make an impactful change, so I will make no change. I am reminded of a classic story of a child and starfish. A man, walking down a beach covered with starfish, sees a young girl throwing them back into the ocean one at a time. “What are you doing?” He asked. “You cannot possibly make a difference.” The girl looked up, threw one more starfish into the ocean, and said, “I made a difference for that one.”<sup>7</sup> Unless we each make one such small act, nothing ever will change, the world will remain broken, and the brokenness will spread. I offer a second form of complacency, and that is privilege. One who is privileged may have the ability to offer, “well, my life is fine. I’m not affected.” This ego-centric, self-serving attitude will corrode the soul, dissolve the spirit. We are intimately interconnected, and any pain one inflicts through intentional inaction will spread to all in this blessed realm.

I turn to the final dichotomy – stories of fear versus stories of faith. It is fear that I offer stokes the hatred and injustice we discussed earlier. Leaders inundate our hearts with fear. The news fuels fear every day, against, quite often, immigrants, terrified peoples leaving their countries in devastation to find a better life. And yet what we hear are lies or profound exaggerations that serve to keep us separate and stoke, yes, fear, that which guides the country towards hate and injustice. Immigrants become dehumanized in ways that perpetuate unrighteous, prejudiced anger among the masses. All stories of intentionally fostered fear – which are far too common and prevalent – are disempowering, feeding anger, violence, and animosity, promoting bigotry, hatred, and -isms, deeming some of us worthy and some unworthy, fostering deep schisms between people of different identities. It disempowers because it strips life away from all of those involved, the victims and the perpetrators. So may we counter this with faith.

Dr. King, a Baptist minister, was guided in all of his work by the profound power of his faith. “The end of life is not to be happy,” wrote King. “The end of life is not to achieve pleasure

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<sup>7</sup> *The Star Thrower* by Loren C. Eiseley

and avoid pain. The end of life is to do the will of God, come what may.”<sup>8</sup> What does this look like to a Unitarian Universalist? What is the story of our faith? To many, this idea of God is understood as an entity or essence of love and compassion and hope and pervasive goodness, and so it is this divine compassion and hope we bring to the world. Our faith empowers. It is a connection to something far greater than ourselves found in a beloved entity or entities or nature or essence that guides us towards love and justice and equity and interdependence. It is perseverance and it is courage, and it is an inspiration to heal the world. Faith is a profound inner strength, feeding and nurturing and strengthening our spirits. It is a “knowledge within the heart.”<sup>9</sup> As such, when guided by this goodness and love and compassion and hope, fear simply does not make sense – what does make sense is unconditional love and acceptance. Yes, to all immigrants. To all of our LGBTQIA+ siblings. Faith is empowerment as it gives people the courage and strength to face challenges and live a life of purpose. Does this not, too, overcome hate and injustice?

We are profoundly shaped by stories, and we have the opportunity to select those stories that will mold and create us. So may we choose stories of empowerment. May we choose that which betters our lives and the lives of those around us, fostering pervasive goodness in this oft broken world. May we be guided by the work of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., one who countered pervasive anger and violence with an intentional, spiritual call towards nonviolence. That is profound. King, who taught us the transformational power of unconditional, agape love. Whose story of compassion and righteousness guides us to this day. So may we leave this hallowed space ready to embrace love and rid ourselves of hate, ready to fight for justice as, one act at a time, we rid the world of the injustices that seek to divide us and destroy us. May our faith overpower the fear we are fed as all that is divine – all that is greater than us – guides us in an unceasing goodness that serves to change the world. Now is not the time to give up, but a time to act. So may love, justice, and faith

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<sup>8</sup> "The Most Durable Power," by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

<sup>9</sup> Quote Kahlil Gibran

overpower this blessed, beloved, and beautiful finite realm, embracing each of us as we live lives of compassion, hope, intention, and dignity. This day, and every day.

May it be so, and Amen.