

**“Journey Beyond God”
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[We watched a You Tube video collage of images of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., accompanied by the song “Pride” by the band U2 prior to the homily.] Dr. King’s calls to take action against racism, poverty, and war remind us of our aspirations. They also remind us of the ways that our behavior undercuts our aspirations. I was 12 years old when Dr. King was killed. I kept a diary in those days. 1968 was the only year in which I kept a diary. Lo and behold, I managed to find that diary of mine from 1968. I had not looked at in decades.

Experience requires interpretation, and our interpretation of experience changes as we mature. In part for comic relief and in part to get in touch with the 12 year old who recorded Dr. King’s death in her diary, I share a few snippets from this diary. [show it] Inside the front cover: “The property of Ann Marie Schranz. This is not to be read except by the owner’s written consent.” “I had a pet guinea pig, Jenny. Now Mary (my sister) has a fish (Heidi), and a turtle (Poker). I am a Christian Lutheran. I get a 40 cent or 35 cent or 45 cent allowance. It depends. My favorite TV shows are Star Trek, Gilligan’s Island, Get Smart, etc. Mom won’t let me wear a mini-skirt.”

In my 1968 world, the most consistent information I recorded was who did dishes – my sister or me. I also noted church highlights: January 7 – Went to church, Sunday school. We discussed how vague the Bible was in some places and detailed in others (for example, no proof of 3 kings). January 21 – We sang “We Thank Thee, Father” in choir. It sounded pretty good except the amen. We sang “Loving Shepherd, Ever Near” in choir. February 10 – Went to Saturday School and choir. Tomorrow is our church’s 15th anniversary, so we are singing “Oh Jesus, I Have Promised.” March 31 – Went to church. Sang an icky song. There is a chilling entry from that summer which read, “At Vacation Bible School. Real nice opening devotions. Did lesson. Had recess and 2 cookies and Hi-C. Then making a real neat project. I’m making a sword and Bible. Had closing devotions.

February 6 – In art, we are drawing portraits. I drew a good portrait but it didn't look like Maria. I'm going to be a nurse or missionary when I grow up. April 8 (at grandparents' house in the country) – I got to drive a tractor. Climbed a tree. Almost caught a frog. June July 14 – We drove to Hollywood & Vine. Also Sunset Strip. Window shopped. There were some Hippies. Saw the Chinese Theater. Drove through Beverly Hills. Saw some “pscodelic” houses. They were cool and had lots of mirrors. July 17 – We camped at a seashore. Lost my glasses. A big wave. POW, they were gone. I'm so sad. I liked them.

September 30 – Today Mom was mad at me. She said I wrecked my shoes by walking without those big heavy oxy boots for rain. I love her anyway! I know she knows best. December 2 – As I was in Language Arts today, I was thinking how much I've matured. But then I realized I'm not so mature. Maybe because kids wear stockings and lipstick makes them think they're mature but they're about as mature as a fourth grader! Then I added my own commentary: “Wise words.”

Looking back at the girl who wrote in the diary, I see a fortunate child, one always had a roof over her head. She never lacked for food. Food was inconsequential. The only mention of a specific food or meal occurred early in the year, January 5, when I recorded, “Had Pop-Tarts for breakfast.” Two or three days in the year I noted that I was on a diet.

The fortunate child had friends, including a best friend, Laurie. Best friend status did not prevent her from being judged. December 1: I was working on my Scotland booklet. Laurie came over, and we compared. SHE IS A PLAGARIST (in full capital letters). The fortunate child had acquaintances. As Valentine's Day approached, she had a plan. “I'm giving Jimmy a valentine that says, “I'm sending you my heart.” I'm giving Steve one with seashells that says “Shell we be valentines?” Phil's is “It's a bloomin' shame you won't be mine.”

The fortunate child had a religious home, a place in the choir. The choir had a place in the church, and the church had a place in the great scheme of things. Life makes sense, the hymn lyrics taught us, if we have the right attitude, try to do our best, and trust God through Jesus to take care of the details. To simple tune, the fortunate child sang:

Father, We Thank Thee

Father, we thank Thee for the night,
 And for the pleasant morning light;
 For rest and food and loving care,
 And all that makes the world so fair.

Help us to do the things we should,
 To be to others kind and good;
 In all we do, in work or play,
 To love Thee better day by day.

Images from the 400 year old King James version of the Bible imprinted themselves on the fortunate child:

Loving Shepherd of Thy Sheep

Loving Shepherd, ever near,
 Teach Thy lamb Thy voice to hear,
 Suffer not my steps to stray
 From the straight and narrow way.

The fortunate child was white and grew up in a white neighborhood in a predominantly white town. In her high school graduating class of 800, there were two African American girls, twins. Latinos and Latinas made up 5% to 10% of the class. There were no Jews, as far as she knew. The fortunate child had no experience with tools that might deconstruct master/slave imagery in the hymn “Oh, Jesus, I Have Promised”:

O Jesus, I have promised
 To serve Thee to the end;
 Be Thou forever near me,
 My Master and my Friend;
 I shall not fear the battle
 If Thou art by my side,

Nor wander from the pathway
 If Thou wilt be my Guide.

These images were powerful and comforting. With remarkable speed, images of an attentive personal God pulled the fortunate child out of a slump. September 6 – All alone in the world. The world goes on without you. You are nothing. Nobody cares. September 7 – A quote: “Just a little while longer, and he who is coming will come; he will not delay.” In large scrawling letters: Alleluia. God wants me. I’m not alone any more. And these words were accompanied by a sketch of a cross with rays around it.

These diary details are not important in and of themselves. They remind me that the experiences of living occur in contexts. The experiences of living require interpretation, and useful interpretations are more likely to emerge in community than in isolation. On April 4, 1968, the diary entry reads:

April 4 – I did dishes. While we were watching TV, there was a bulletin that Martin Luther King had been assassinated. RIP King Martin Luther!! It was a terrible tragedy. President Jonson gave a speech “He lived by non-violence and was killed by violence.” One boy shot a white man and said, “I can’t go on! I can’t go on! My King is dead.” His favorite hymn included the words “we shall overcome some day.” On his tombstone was engraved “Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty I’m free at last!” RIP King Martin Luther. April 7 – Yesterday there were riots in 46 cities (worst were in Washington, DC and Chicago) because of King’s death.

As a Unitarian Universalist, I look for ways to deepen my understanding of the reach of racism and to strengthen my resolve and skill as an anti-racist white person. As I mentioned in my column in yesterday’s *Inland Valley Daily Bulletin*, one point of entry into this process for me was reflecting on the eulogy that Dr. King presented at the funeral of Unitarian Universalist minister and Civil Rights activist James Reeb, who was killed in Selma in March 1965.

James Reeb was from Boston and had come to Selma along with dozens of other Unitarian Universalist ministers to protest segregation, restrictive voting requirements, and brutality by law enforcement officers. One night after marching, James Reeb and two other white ministers ate dinner at a restaurant in downtown Selma. After dinner, they mistakenly took a wrong turn. As

they neared another café known locally for its ties to members of the Ku Klux Klan, Reverend Reeb and his two white clergy companions were attacked. James Reeb was hit in the head with a baseball bat or steel bar, and suffered a massive skull fracture. Two days later, he died.

The funeral for James Reeb was held shortly after the funeral held for James (Jimmie Lee) Jackson, whose death inspired the Selma to Montgomery marches. The Rev. Reeb was one of two Unitarian Universalist Civil Rights activists killed during the Civil Rights struggle. The other was a woman from Michigan, Viola Liuzzo. Dr. King's eulogy for James Reeb takes on added poignancy given that Dr. King himself would be tragically killed just three years later. In the eulogy for James Reeb, I hear Dr. King's own hopes for living a life of transcendent meaning:

“Death comes to every individual. There is an amazing democracy about death. It is not an aristocracy for some of the people, but a democracy for all of the people. Kings die and beggars die; rich men die and poor men die; merchants die and maids die; old people die and young people die. Death comes to the innocent; it comes to the guilty. Death is the irreducible common denominator of all men.”

Dr. King continued, “I hope we can also find some consolation in the great affirmations of religion, which tell us that death is not the end. Whether we call it ‘immortality of influence,’ whether we think of it – immortality – in terms of continued personal existence, somewhere there is something in our faith that reminds us that death is not a period which ends this great sentence of life, but a comma that punctuates it to a loftier significance. Death is not a blind alley that leads the human race into a state of nothingness, but an open door which leads men into life eternal. Let this daring faith, this great invincible surmise, be our sustaining power during these trying days.”

What powerful words, and how skillfully Dr. King used language meaningful to the non-theistic Unitarian Universalists in his presence. He knew his audience. The phrase “immortality of influence” is associated with Unitarian minister John Dietrich, whose religious humanism profoundly shaped Unitarianism in the 1920's through the 1950's. John Dietrich signed the 1933 Humanist Manifesto and wrote in 1934: "If we live in a great impersonal universe with no friend

to guide, it matters tremendously how we conduct ourselves, for we are actually the makers of human destiny." Our responsibility, John Dietrich continued, "is to put beauty in place of ugliness, good in place of evil, laughter in place of tears; to dispel error with knowledge, hatred with love; displace strife and contention with peace and co-operation."¹

In his eulogy for James Reeb, Dr. King spoke to theists, as well as to atheists. Dr. King avoided directing his remarks to the lowest common philosophical denominator in a diverse group. Instead, Dr. King drew attention to what I call a harmonic overtone in consciousness. He drew attention to a sound not yet widely audible, an octave above the lowest common denominator. I think of it as the highest potential commonality instead of the lowest common denominator. "Death is not a period which ends this great sentence of life, but a comma that punctuates it to a loftier significance." Theists and atheists were included. Christians and non-Christians were included. Dr. King showed us how to communicate with those who do not share our particular beliefs: Draw attention to the highest potential commonality. For me, that is his lasting legacy.

This means we religious liberals (who often though not always are political liberals, as well), might need to bite our tongues once in a while in this election year. The U.S. presidential election is 10 months away, and already we hear vitriolic words and read of divisive actions in the political arena. New technologies make it even easier for those advocating hatred and violence to reach a wider audience. We face a political and cultural environment different than the one faced by Dr. King, but our choices are similar.

In Christian terms, will we love our neighbors as ourselves? Will we forgive those who have spitefully used us? Will we pray for those who persecute us? In non-Christian terms, will we treat our political opponents and our religious antagonists with respect? Will we affirm the humanity of the misguided human beings who do not see things our way? Will we use ridicule very sparingly, seeking more often to use a more gentle humor?

Regarding the "Occupy" movement, tell me again how "the 99%" are helped by demonizing the "1%." The "othering" of the 1% does not help our religious development. Until we care about

¹ See <http://www25.uua.org/uuhs/duub/articles/johnhasslerdietrich.html>.

all of us, 100% of us, we fall short of our potential. For a model, I look to Dr. King's words when he spoke to the New York Times a month after a bomb exploded on the porch of his home. He was at a church meeting at the time. His wife and their young daughter were at home, but thankfully they were not hurt.

When Dr. King arrived home after the bombing, the mayor, the police commissioner, and some white reporters were already there. Dr. King went inside the house. But outside, many African Americans gathered and the crowd became increasingly angry. Dr. King came out on the porch and addressed them. Quietly he informed them that he and his family were okay. He told the crowd not to panic and not to get weapons. He reminded them that God said he who lives by the sword will perish by the sword. He advocated nonviolence. Love our enemies. Be good to them. Let them know that you love them. The crowd dispersed.

One month later, Dr. King told *The New York Times* concerning the Montgomery bus boycott, "There are those who would try to make of this a hate campaign. This is not a war between the white and the Negro but a conflict between justice and injustice. This is bigger than the Negro race revolting against the white. We are seeking to improve not the Negro of Montgomery but the whole of Montgomery." If he were alive today, I wonder whether Dr. King would have been satisfied with caring for the 99%. It is true that his patience wore thin as time went on and justice seemed as far away as ever, so it is certainly possible. However, as Dr. King cared for the whole of Montgomery, I care for 100% of the population.

The service theme this Sunday is "Journey Beyond God," which is the title of a new book by Unitarian Universalist minister Peter Tufts Richardson. Perhaps I have spent too long breathing the crisp air of Dr. King's eulogy for James Reeb, for in this moment it is difficult for me to emotionally connect with the book *Journey Beyond God: Religious Philosophy for Our Time*. Part of that difficulty relates to the literary form of eulogies vs. essays. Eulogies are bracing. The insistent force of eulogies shoves aside clingy cobwebs and jettisons the stale air of a stale spirit.

Next to eulogies, which at their best speak to the highest potential commonality, essays and even memoirs may seem tame and tangential to core existential questions. I wonder whether essays

and memoirs tend toward a common denominator in hopes of being understood in virtually the same way by all readers. Another day, in another mood, I will attempt to do justice to Peter Richardson's fine book. Another day, in another mood, I would feel validated and uplifted by Peter Richardson's insistence that "the gods have human faces." He writes:

"Seven years into ministry I explored transitioning from a strict humanism to a free floating theism filled with poetry and imagination . . . I fixed on the concept of an evolving God, an energy within nature which through human history, and perhaps histories on other planets as well, gradually grows to its fulfillment and that of universe itself. I worked in such avenues for twenty years, questing but questioning, doubting. I had my confirming moments but kept finding what was attributed to God really came from me, was created in my humanity and projected, found, in universe. The gods indeed have human faces, a recognition that can be profound wherever on the globe they may appear. It has come to seem more straightforward to give credit where credit is [due]. God is redundant."²

Peter Richardson emphasizes our heritage as social animals. "It is in our natures from millions of years of experience as social animals to behave morally towards others. It is equally deep in our natures to open ourselves to worship, even as the chimpanzees sing in the trees at dusk. We live in each others' company."³ As one who identifies as both humanist and mystic, I will go with that imagery. This day, in this mood, I feel to be one of those primates. I feel myself to be a social animal in the company of other social animals. I live in the trees. I sing at dusk. I recognize some of you from those trees. You were there, and we were singing those songs.

As dusk deepened, we sang songs with titles like "Father, We thank Thee," "Loving Shepherd of Thy Sheep," and "Oh, Jesus, I Have Promised." As we jumped from bough to bough, scurrying and scrambling toward safety and comfort, we sang about "immortality of influence," about who or what is redundant, and about why or how we are convinced. The journey beyond God must have room for God.

² *Journey Beyond God: Religious Philosophy for Our Time*, Peter Tufts Richardson, Red Barn Publishing, 2011, p. 23.

³ Page 33.

Up there in the treetops, the melodies of humanism and the melodies of mysticism intertwine. Now and then, I imagine that I hear a harmonic overtone in consciousness, an octave higher, a song almost out of hearing's range. And I wonder, what songs will we who scurry and scramble sing when our fur is silver gray? What songs will we sing in trees with a different smell, touch, and taste? What will be the high pitched melody if the day ever comes when we leave the trees and walk on the ground? No need to consider that; that will never happen. It has never happened before. That melody . . . I cannot shake myself free of it.

I imagine my primate pal Peter Richardson saying, "Whatever you do, do not try religion alone. Be annoying, be cloying, be toying, be anything but solitary. Stay with your peeps. Stay with your troupe. You can watch their backs, and they can watch yours. In more formal language: "Rarified atmospheres have their place but sooner or later we need attunement to the lives of others, how our principles, surmises, working hypotheses are being lived out by others. Even the most advanced among us need reality checks and midcourse corrections."⁴ "We are here to live in community, as social animals, to further the common well-being, to grow spiritually, to practice an appropriate ethic, to love life and to find a spiritual poise in our living."⁵

May we find a spiritual poise in our living. May we listen for harmonic overtones of consciousness and contain our surprise if they originate within us. May it be so!

⁴ Page 50.

⁵ Page 126.