

Living and Dying for Justice

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First Parish in Brookline

We live in a country with greater resources than any in the history of the world; what will history say about how we lived? You may say that your life is already busy with work, children, family obligations, or your many and assorted good works; I say blessings on all you do, but between our head and our heart is our voice, and our voices reflect our choices, the way we reconcile what we think and what we feel, what we know and what we desire. If we choose to express no voice when our government sends our youth to kill people in other countries; no voice when our government leaves New Orleans in distress; no voice when our government uses torture and terror on prisoners; then we are indeed choosing even if only by default, we are choosing injustice as the legacy we leave our children.

On April 4, 1968 the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. was shot dead by marksmen apparently trained and in the employ of the U.S. government. We were told otherwise at the time, and due to the riots that followed, and the assassination of Robert F. Kennedy just two months later, the facts were never firmly established until the family sued 30 years later for wrongful death and won a guilty verdict against the U.S. government and others on December 8, 1999. The legal transcript is available at the MLK Center's website www.thekingcenter.org and the story is movingly told by Dexter King (7 when dad was shot) in his book "Growing Up King." I was 12 when MLK and RFK were killed, and I remember the blood and chaos that ensued, as we learned that we could not trust our government. My children, born in a different time, have asked me why most Americans now "know" that John Kennedy, Martin Luther King, and Robert Kennedy were each killed by lone crazed gunmen, without any government training or support, when the truth has been in the public domain for several years, for any who have ears to hear and eyes to see. Yet such knowledge, that our government has trained assassins that have killed world leaders in many countries of the world, including for a time our own, threatens our sense of ourselves as being a bastion of freedom and liberty in this violent world. Reasonable people can disagree about just what was our government's role, but no intent to kill is nearly impossible to defend.

And I will encourage you to look at the life of Martin Luther King, Jr. for what it means to live and die for justice in the world. In 1956, because of his part in the Montgomery Bus Boycott, he is jailed, and then upon his release his house is bombed. Then he is indicted for conspiracy, wins bus desegregation in federal court, and is invited to speak at the Democratic National convention, all before he turns 28-years old. In the following year he promotes non-violence, his house is bombed again, he is featured on the cover of *Time* magazine, his first child is born. The next

year he will meet with Vice President Richard Nixon and then President Eisenhower, and the first Civil Rights legislation since Reconstruction is passed by Congress, before Dr. King is arrested for loitering and sent back to jail. Later that month he will be stabbed in Harlem and almost die. Upon his recovery he and Coretta make a pilgrimage to Gandhi in India. In 1960, when he had arrived at the august age of 31, his family moved to Atlanta where he is again arrested, acquitted, but then arrested again the following year, and the one after that. When we celebrate MLK day now, we seldom talk about how frequently he was threatened and arrested by local authorities.

In 1962 he met with President John Kennedy to advocate for full civil rights for blacks. The following year his fourth child was born, and the following month he was again arrested for demonstrating in public; he wrote his now famous "Letter from a Birmingham jail" as a result of that arrest. The police became even more violent, using dogs and fire hoses against marching protesters including young adults and children. MLK's hotel room was bombed but he survived, though Medgar Evers, the NAACP leader in Jackson, Mississippi was assassinated a month later. King again met with President Kennedy, and delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech as part of a March on Washington for jobs and justice. We sometimes forget that MLK fought as hard for economic justice as he did for racial justice. Later that year four young black girls were killed by a bomb exploding in their Sunday school room, MLK met with President Kennedy again, seemingly making good headway, until President Kennedy was assassinated. In 1964 MLK joined in the Mississippi "Freedom Summer" where both black and white civil rights workers were murdered by authorities, and riots broke out in New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. For his unwavering insistence on nonviolent reconciliation, which he brought to demonstrations, MLK was awarded Nobel Peace Prize in Stockholm that year.

Yet within weeks his resolve was tested as Malcolm X was murdered, King was jailed again in Selma, Alabama with 200 others marching for voting rights, where the police attacked and beat the peaceful demonstrators and white racists beat some of them to death, including UU minister James Reeb. That March, President Johnson addressed Congress about the need for a comprehensive voter rights bill, yet the following day black and white demonstrators were savagely beaten in Montgomery, Alabama by police on horses. MLK reached out to all Americans to join in this crusade for justice, and the active marchers swelled from 3,000 mostly black marchers to 25,000 marchers representing all Americans, and protected by federal troops. Yet Viola Liuzzo was still shot and killed by white racists as she drove black marchers. In August 1965 the Voting Rights Act is signed into law, and the following week the LA Watts riot will leave 35 dead, 28 of whom are black. We are a violent society.

In 1966 MLK turned his attention to the north, to Chicago, and to discrimination in housing. He came out against the Vietnam War, the injustice of our military tactics in fighting that war and its impact on the poor and marginalized in the United States. His April 4, 1967 speech at Riverside

Church in NYC positioned him as an implacable foe of U.S. military and economic injustice. In 1968 he continued work for voter and civil rights, and poor people continued to die in the ensuing riots, but increasingly his attention turned towards a “Poor People’s Campaign” to take back the power in this country. On November 5, 1967 he preached the sermon I excerpted in our reading: “So precious that you will die for it.” Five months later he led a strike of Memphis sanitation workers and within a week he was assassinated.

Forty years later we are in the midst of another bloody war. We are the aggressor and we refuse to abide by international standards of decency, or the UN declaration of human rights. The war is being fought by the young and poor on behalf of the greedy and the powerful. Our government has again lied to us, yet even when their lies have been proven, the war goes on. This is a topic, our untrustworthy government fighting an unpopular war, which can anger and polarize us, so you will seldom hear me preach about it from the pulpit. I am a loyal and patriotic American, so I am deeply troubled our government and our military are among the most cruel and dangerous forces on earth. A more honest and compassionate President would help, but this runs far deeper than who is our President.

I have deep respect for the young men and women who, out of patriotism, bravado, or financial necessity, offer themselves up to be trained as killers and are sent for multiple tours of duty fighting a war that they did not choose on behalf of our nation. I have nothing but contempt for those national leaders who risk the lives of these young people in pursuit of their own wealth, power, and nation building. I say shame upon those who would discard the lives of these, mostly poor and marginalized, young people so cheaply. These young people deserve better, and we as a nation certainly ought to aspire to higher values than this. Their deaths passed 4,000 this week. Shame on us for allowing it!

As Charlie Clements, our President of the UU Service Committee, points out: “Deception and lies led us into war...[recently] a non-partisan, not-for-profit group published a study revealing that President George W. Bush and seven of his top officials, including Vice President Dick Cheney, National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice, and defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, made more than 900 false statements in the two years following September 11, 2001 about the threat to our national security posed by Saddam Hussein. Now [at the] fifth anniversary of the U.S. invasion of Iraq... the record shows that the statements were part of an orchestrated campaign that effectively galvanized public opinion and, as a result, led the nation to war under decidedly false pretenses. On at least 532 separate occasions (in speeches, briefings, interviews, testimony, and the like), Bush and these three key officials, along with Secretary of State Colin Powell, Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz, and White House press secretaries Ari Fleischer and Scott McClellan, stated unequivocally that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction..., links to Al Qaeda, or both. This concerted effort was the underpinning of the Bush administration’s case for war. It is now beyond dispute that Iraq did not possess any

weapons of mass destruction or have meaningful ties to Al Qaeda. This was the conclusion of numerous bipartisan government investigations, including those by the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence (2004 and 2006), the 9/11 Commission, and the multinational Iraq Survey Group, whose 'Duelfer Report' established that Saddam Hussein had terminated Iraq's nuclear program in 1991...

We have not yet touched upon the burden that Iraqi civilians have paid and are paying. Body counts of civilians vary from 50,000 based upon media counts to more than 500,000 based upon household sampling techniques. They are bearing the unimaginable consequences of this war every day and yet they are scarcely mentioned [in the U.S.]. The U.S. military says: 'we don't track civilian deaths'. [But the UUSC] is bringing an Iraqi-American physician to GA who has traveled back to Iraq several times and she will trace what has happened to her family members; her stories are powerful and heart rending."

We, as a denomination, as loyal Americans, are facing the question of what makes us relevant? Why do we matter? We only matter if we can find our integrity, our sense of truth, in the midst of lies. We only matter if we can find our collective voice to say: we are loyal Americans, and America is better than this. We will stand up for what is right, for the poor, for the oppressed, the marginalized, and the forgotten. We are a very small faith, but our voices matter because someone must speak out, someone must go deeper, someone must care enough to stand on the side of what is right. It looks like that someone is us, and UUs around the country are rising to the challenge.

Two weeks ago, UU President William Sinkford wrote a pastoral letter witnessing for peace. I want to quote some of that letter:

"It has been five long years of war and occupation in Iraq. Five years. Nearly 4,000 U.S. soldiers dead; many more wounded and maimed. An unknown number of Iraqis dead, some estimate a million; certainly hundreds of thousands. And millions of Iraqis displaced from their homes. Many of you, like me, have been praying and protesting this war, since before it began. There are some things we know: We know that the invasion of Iraq and the occupation was based on lies. We know that our nation chose to act unilaterally, disregarding the international community. We know that if there had been no oil beneath those sands, and no oil in the region, this war would never have taken place. And we know that this war has squandered the reputation of this nation; squandered the sympathy and solidarity the rest of the world felt for us after 9/11. We know all these things. We know that the financial cost of this war, ultimately to be measured in trillions of dollars, has made the United States a debtor nation. But perhaps the greatest cost has been to the spirit, to the soul of this nation."

We, as patriotic Americans, must make our collective voice heard. The stakes are too high for us to leave it to politics! On March 19th, the fifth anniversary of our War on Iraq, many of our congregation gathered in Coolidge Corner, or other locales, to join in the nationwide protests against the war. Leslie told us the story of what happened to some of the UU protesters in Hartford, Connecticut. Now Jody Leader and the Social Action Council are offering a program here on Saturday May 3rd called "Torture and the American Psyche" which will include an interrogator at Abu Ghraib and some American psychoanalysts talking about the damage this war has already done to our American psyche. The UU Service Committee has made Iraq, the poor, and the marginalized, the center of their efforts of living and dying for justice in 2008. You can find their myriad programs at www.uusc.org. And the UUA Commission on Social Witness will report at our UU General Assembly in June how we as a denomination are doing in terms of Peacemaking. Now is the time, there is no other time; we are the people called to act, there are no others who can do it on our behalf; if we truly believe in the rightness of our vision, we must only lift every voice and sing for our vision to become reality. Amen.