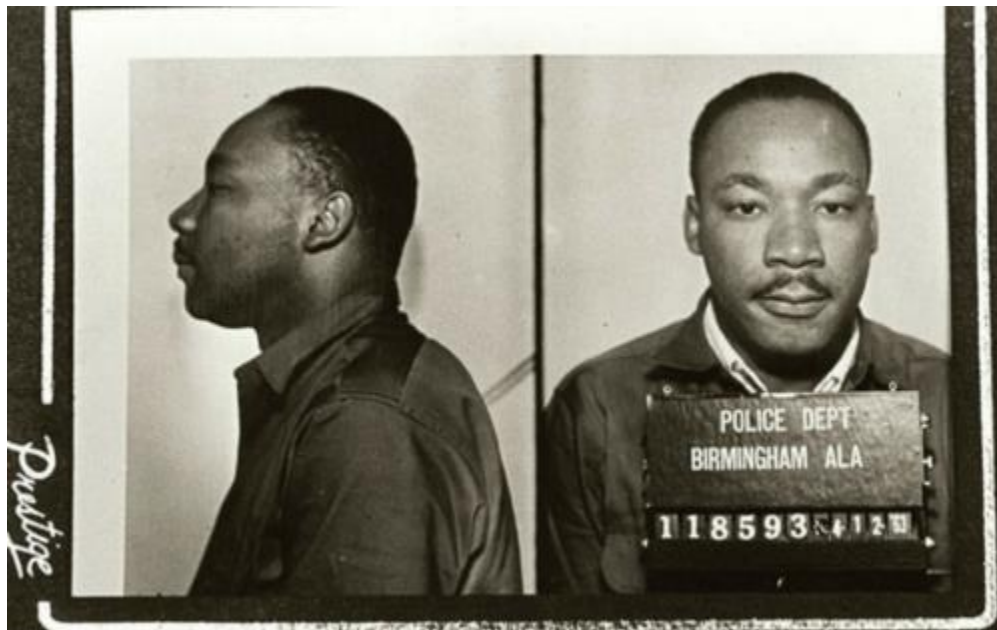


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WHAT MATTERS with Janee Woods

<https://janeewoods.com/2017/01/15/commitment-courage-and-resistance-making-real-the-promises-of-democracy/>

Commitment, Courage and Resistance: Making Real the Promises of Democracy



Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. mug shot. Photo from <https://prisonphotography.org/martin-luther-king/>

The Unitarian Society of Hartford invited me to be their pulpit guest this morning at their special service celebrating the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King's birthday, which has fallen on a Sunday for the first time in many years. Tomorrow, Monday, is the national holiday and day of service honoring his legacy. Here's the text of the reflection that I shared from the pulpit.

Good morning. Thank you for welcoming me into your house of worship today, at this very special service when we honor the great Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s unwavering leadership in the Civil Rights Movement, the sacrifice of his life by **assassination**, and the inspiration of his legacy as we still strive to achieve the ideals of the **Beloved Community** that he imagined and encouraged all of us to believe in too.

In 1963, Dr. King **had a dream** that we would be delivered from "the sweltering heat of injustice and oppression," that we would "someday be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice." A dream that the children of slave owners and the children of the enslaved would "sit down together at the table of brotherhood." That we would be "judged by the content of our character and not by the color of our skin."

On that historic day, one of the greatest days in our country's history, he had more than a dream. He gave us a call to action. He urged us, and I quote, that:

“We have also come to this hallowed spot to remind America of the fierce urgency of now. This is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism. Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy. Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice. Now is the time to lift our nation from the quicksands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood. Now is the time to make justice a reality for all of God's children.

It would be fatal for the nation to overlook the urgency of the moment.”

That moment he spoke of was 50 years ago. That's longer than I've been alive. Yet that moment and sense of urgency feel hauntingly familiar today, only five days away from the inauguration of a President who ran on a platform of white nationalism, xenophobia, **Islamophobia**, misogyny, and rampant capitalism.

Millions of citizens watched him campaign and still decided to cast their vote for him. No matter what they said they actually believed, effectively their vote also demonstrated a belief that racism and other forms of oppression are not deal breakers when it comes to their decision about who is fit to be the the most powerful elected leader in the world, representing what we say are the shared values and concerns of the people of this country.

In some ways that's simply mind boggling to me but I've also been alive in this world long enough to know that when white people and rich people have the power to preserve their whiteness and richness, then they'll often do just that at the expense of the rest of us, all the while claiming it isn't about race or class. Rather, they claim it's about protecting “family values” or restoring the “American way of life.”

What does “the American way of life” even mean anyway? I look back on our history and there are no times at all that I, especially as a black woman, would want to return to. None.

Collectively, as a society, we've passed down through the generations this idea, a myth really, about the nature of our country and what will happen for each of us if we work hard and are good citizens. The notion of American democracy is chock full of promise. The **Declaration of Independence** holds the Preservation of Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness as its foundational elements. The **Constitution** promises the establishment of justice, the assurance of domestic tranquility, general welfare and the blessings of liberty. So many ideals!

Yet still. Here we are.

We've made a lot of progress, not enough progress, but a lot. I'm grateful to be in a better place than where we started even though we have far to go. Despite my gratitude, I remain vigilant, knowing that the founding fathers never intended for these ideals to be promised to me. Or to many of you who are here today.

Flash forward a couple of centuries. The **Civil Rights Act** promises us that discrimination is no longer the law of the land.

Isn't it though? It may not be the de jure law (the official law) of the land but it's certainly the de facto law of the land.

It's hard to believe in the promises of democracy and justice, like those in the Civil Rights Act, when young black girls in classrooms are **slammed to the ground** by armed white male police officers for no justifiable reason. When little boys in playgrounds are **gunned down** by cops in mere seconds. **Michael Brown. Sandra Bland. Philandro Castile.** It's very hard to believe. Especially when we can't breathe.

We need new promises. The goal isn't simply equal rights for everyone. That's a worthy aspiration but it's too small to hold the entirety of the new promise of democracy that we seek. Equal rights simply aren't enough when we're talking about equal rights that attempt to exist in the context of a political, economic and social system deeply rooted in white supremacy. The true promise we need is liberation for all of us from systems of oppression. The prize for making good on that promise is the actualization of our full humanity.

So what should we do to make real the promises of democracy? And how do we do it?

I don't have all the answers, no single one of us does, but I have found encouragement and wisdom in the teachings of Dr. King's words and philosophy of nonviolence.

We must commit to seeking justice and uplifting the truth.

As a first step, each one of us must discover for ourselves that moment of revelation when we decide how we can best serve justice and why that matters. Relish that moment and know you have taken a step toward freedom. However, also know that the long transformation of our broken democracy into a space where liberation is possible will be chaotic and sometimes painful. We may not live to see the fruits of our labor but we still must labor.

We must summon courage to forge a different path during uncertain and volatile times.

Courage does not require an absence of fear. Rather, courage requires boldness and faith, a deliberate movement forward in the shadow of fear.

Courage means rejecting the false safety of the known, the status quo, in which we feel comfortable because we already know how this works, even though it's not working for most of us, especially the most vulnerable among us. We know what to expect, even though we sometimes need to deal with the pain of knowing that even though this game is rigged at least we know that it's rigged so we can manage our expectations and our disappointment. That's not good enough. Courage demands we have faith that we can do better, be better. Courage is born from a deep understanding that bowing down to fear results in the paralysis of our ability to believe and to know that we ourselves are the sparks that can blaze into change.

When we cannot find the path that leads to courage, we should look to the leadership of our children and youth. We do not own this country. We are stewards protecting it for our children and the many generations after them. They should have a say. We should look to the leadership of Black people, descendants of the African ancestors who were brought here in shackles, who survived the unthinkable torture of the **Middle Passage**, brutal life on the plantations, and the retribution of Jim Crow, because courage, resistance and survival have been passed down in their DNA and intergenerational memories. We should look to the courageous leadership of LGBTQ

and transgender people who have fought for their right to love whom they love and to exist. We should look the leadership of migrants who continued to hold courage during perilous border crossings, escapes from countries with regimes far worse than our own, because they had a dream that one day, in America, life would be better. We should look to the leadership of women, especially women of color. For the most part, it's the leadership of white men that sunk us to where we are today so we should try something different for the next 400 years or so.

Courage allows us to resist. We must nonviolently resist systems and institutions designed to imprison us in the cages of white supremacy and racism.

Resistance includes reclamation of Dr. King's true legacy. History has whitewashed his accomplishments- we remember him nostalgically as a Nobel prize winner, a Christian pastor, a dreamer. He was but we must also reclaim his most important legacy as a non-stop agitator of the status quo and unapologetic truth-teller. He went to jail 29 times. Following his example, thousands of people have been arrested and jailed. Dr. King was under surveillance by the FBI. He was considered to be an enemy by the state, like a domestic terrorist. He had only a 40% approval rating with white folks at the time of his death. So it's clear that his version of peace was not passive or quiet.

The peace he yearned for has not been achieved yet. White fear and racial resentment remain very real so we must continue Dr. King's legacy of resistance.

On that note, resistance and compromise cannot coexist. People say "work with Trump, try to help him be successful." I say NO. I resist and say NO because compromising lends legitimacy to the idea that the ideologies upon which he was elected aren't and shouldn't be deal breakers when it comes to our democracy, to our collective humanity, to justice and to morality.

Resistance is hard, tiring work. To survive, we must find the the joy and purpose in the struggle for our collective liberation. We need touchstones, to remind us that while we are imperfect human beings we are capable of vast love and forgiveness.

A couple of years ago, I had an opportunity to engage in some much needed **self reflection** and to distill the guiding principles that have nurtured my commitment to social justice and **resistance** against the forces that threaten the ideals of an authentic democracy and our human dignity. These are my five guiding principles:

The first is: "Seek truth."

I believe in the fundamental truth that all people have inherent dignity and worth. When conflict or disagreement arises, I look to see whether that truth is being honored. If it is not, then I do my best to uphold that truth.

The second principle is: "Sometimes justice requires sacrifice."

The pursuit of an authentic democracy, where individuals are rewarded equitably for their contributions, doesn't need to be an exercise in selfishness. Sometimes my personal interests, especially interests I hold because of unearned privilege, must give way for the interests of the broader community, so that we all can enjoy safety, prosperity, good health and dignity.

The third is : "Ask for help with humility, accept help with grace, and give help generously."

I cannot achieve justice on my own and I do not know all the answers. I am only as strong as others in the movement so I must give them my support. Sometimes, I must give other oppressed people support and hold no expectation of their support in return.

The fourth is: “Be ready.”

It is my responsibility to be vigilant and disruptive because remaining passive in the presence of oppression has the same effect as condoning the acts of the oppressor. I must keep myself primed for acts of resistance, however small or large.

The fifth principle is: “Give more love.”

Hate, oppression and violence cannot exist in the presence of love. We are less likely to silence the voices or devalue their lives of people whom we love.

Love.

The Greek language gives us many beautiful words for describing the human experience, especially when it comes to love. Dr. King mentioned three of them in his [1967 Levels of Love speech](#)— *eros* (romantic love), *philia* (friendship) and *agape* (all encompassing love of humanity, we are to love one another not simply because we should love another but because we are loved by our Creator). Today, I imagine he would also talk about a different Greek word- *kairos*. *Kairos* means “a propitious moment for decision or action.” This can apply to both challenges and opportunities. Right now, we remain burdened with the challenges of racial inequality and income equality but we have the opportunity to make one of the most important decisions of our lifetime. We can batten down the hatches and hope we somehow make it through the next several years all the while knowing that our democracy and our humanity will be taking a beating, or we can resist. We still might take a beating if we resist but at least we’re resisting instead of passively accepting the beating and hoping in time that conditions will improve. Hope is not enough when we are pressed by urgency. [Isa Noyola](#), a transgender activist, once said that “Hope is for people who have time to wait.” Current events are making it impossible for us to ignore the fact that we must resist before it’s too late.

Will you find courage and resist? Or will you simply hope to make it through somehow?

This Meeting House stands in a peculiar location. Located right in the corner of an intersection that divides the tree-lined streets and well-kept homes in a well-to-do predominantly white suburb from the apartment buildings, bodegas and fast food joints in a very poor black and Latino city. Will this meeting house be a guardhouse protecting the status quo or will it be a beacon to those who seek Dr. King’s Beloved Community? Will this meeting house be a monument to the hate that threatens to run rampant through the streets of our communities and the halls of Washington, DC? Or will this meeting house be an open door welcoming all who seek a place where they can gird their strength and feel embraced by communal love so that they can resist?

I had the privilege of visiting the [Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr National Historic Site](#) in Atlanta, only a few days after this Presidential election. It’s quite an experience. I stood quietly in front of the stone tomb where Dr. and Mrs. King’s earthly remains are interred. Their tomb is centered on a beautiful reflecting pool. The atmosphere is solemn and peaceful, but in an uneasy way, which I now realize is fitting. In these uncertain times the loss of Dr. King’s leadership is mourned even

as we celebrate his life, today, on his birthday. Tomorrow's holiday in his honor is a reminder that we still need to keep pressing forward toward building the Beloved Community.

In April 1967, about a year before his assassination, in Cleveland, OH, a city rocked by riots and racial divide, **Dr. King challenged** his followers to keep momentum, saying:

“If you can't fly then run, if you can't run then walk, if you can't walk then crawl, but whatever you do you have to keep moving forward.”

The challenge, our *kairos*, remains the same, 50 years later in 2017.

If you can't crawl, I hope you can still find the courage to resist. If you can't crawl, then **take a knee**, until we the Beloved Community fulfill Dr. King's dying wish and make good on the promise of a nation indivisible with liberty and justice for all.