

A Musical Conversation in Honor of Martin Luther King, Jr.

A sermon by Rev. Jackie Clement and Rob Juice
Delivered at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Bloomington-Normal, IL
January 19, 2014

Music *God Bless the Child* **Rob Juice**
Billie Holiday & Arthur Herzog, Jr.

Connections *Ballou-Tolstoy* **Rev. Clement**
God bless the child, indeed. And blessings to Julie Prandi who did the research for today's sermon.

In the nineteenth century there was a Universalist clergyman by the name of Adin Ballou who had a notion that people living by what he termed a *Standard of Practical Christianity* could create a truly beloved community, that God could bless every child through the human creation of a just and peaceful society. It was the era of the utopian phalanx and so Ballou founded the Hopedale community. It lasted 14 years, longer than most of the utopian communities of its day, but in his history of Hopedale Ballou called it a failure because his vision for a better world was not fulfilled in the ways he had dreamed.

But as part of his work in leading the community Ballou wrote what was arguably his most important book, *Christian Non-Resistance* (1846). In it he wrote these words: “Non-resistance... announces **the impossibility of overcoming evil with evil**; and, making its appeal directly to all the injured of the human race, enjoins on them, in the name of God, never more to resist injury with injury; assuring them that by adhering to **the law of love** under all provocations, and scrupulously suffering wrong rather than inflicting it, they shall gloriously ‘**overcome evil with good,**’ and exterminate all their enemies by **turning them into faithful friends.**”

You may hear echoes of these words in those of Martin Luther King, Jr. when he said that “at the center of nonviolence stands **the principle of love,**” and that “love is the only force capable of **transforming an enemy into friend.**”

Ballou further wrote that the love needed for nonresistance “is not mere natural affection nor **sentimental** passion but a pure enlightened, conscientious principle. It is a divine **spring of action**, which intuitively and spontaneously dictates the doing of good to others, whether they do good or evil.” Martin Luther King said this: “Non-violent resistance does call for love but it is not a **sentimental** love. It is a very stern love that would **organize itself into collective action** to right a wrong by taking on itself suffering.”

Despite the similarities of sentiment and language, it was more than another 100 years after Ballou wrote *Christian Non-Resistance* before the nation would know the name of Martin Luther King, Jr., but one of Ballou's contemporaries was a Russian count named Leo Tolstoy. Although best known for his novels and short stories, Tolstoy also wrote passionately about pacifism grounded in Christianity. In his book *The Kingdom of God Is within You* he wrote of Ballou: “For fifty years Ballou wrote and published books dealing principally with the question of non-

Founded in truth and love, bolstered by moral right, the end goal of *satyagraha* is another word Gandhi coined during his days in South Africa – *sarvodaya*, “universal uplift,” the betterment of all.

Music *Feels So Good*
Chuck Mangione

Rob Juice

Connections *Gandhi-King*

Rev. Clement

Gandhi’s work in opposing British colonialism through *satyagraha* was, in its immediate goal, successful, but it also had more far-reaching effects.

While in college Martin Luther King, Jr. heard a sermon by Dr. Mordecai Johnson, who had just returned from India. Dr. Johnson told his audience about Gandhi—how he freed his people without firing a shot or uttering a violent word.

King wrote these words about that experience:

His message was so profound and electrifying that I left the meeting and bought a half-dozen books on Gandhi’s life and works. Like most people, I had heard of Gandhi, but I had never studied him seriously. As I read I became deeply fascinated by his campaigns of nonviolent resistance. I was particularly moved by the Salt March to the Sea and his numerous fasts. The whole concept of ‘Satyagraha’ ... was profoundly significant to me. As I delved deeper into the philosophy of Gandhi my skepticism concerning the power of love gradually diminished, and I came to see for the first time its potency in the area of social reform. Prior to reading Gandhi, I had about concluded that the ethics of Jesus were only effective in individual relationship. The ‘turn the other cheek’ philosophy and the ‘love your enemies’ philosophy were only valid, I felt, when individuals were in conflict with other individuals; when racial groups and nations were in conflict a more realistic approach seemed necessary. But after reading Gandhi, I saw how utterly mistaken I was. Gandhi was probably the first person in history to lift the love ethic of Jesus above mere interaction between individuals to a powerful and effective social force on a large scale. Love for Gandhi was a potent instrument for social and collective transformation.

King went on to put Gandhi’s philosophy of *satyagraha* into action in the civil rights movement, using the force of truth and love to the betterment of all. Like Gandhi, King’s life was taken in violence by someone who could not hear words of truth and love. Today we remember him and those who stood with him in the struggle for universal uplift.

Although I can draw a straight line from Ballou through Tolstoy to Gandhi and so to King, it would be disingenuous to pretend this was the only path of influence, to pretend that it was only these four men who have bent the arc of the moral universe toward justice. Certainly King was aware of and influenced directly by the work of Tolstoy, William Lloyd Garrison, Henry David Thoreau, and many others. But note that what Gandhi said of Tolstoy’s works and what King said of Gandhi’s are identical – that it cured them of skepticism in the power of love. The power of love, soul force, truth force. Something we all have access to, something we can all share with one another that skepticism might fall away and that we might continue to bend the arc of the moral universe through the power of love, soul force, truth force.

What we do, what we teach, what we stand for ripples out into the world in ways that we do not see and cannot ever fully know in our lifetimes. We do not have to be in the daily news to have the impact of our actions and examples felt. Even the writings of a simple “Massachusetts country clergyman and religious communist,” one who deemed his life’s work a failure might serve to move the world toward freedom.

Music

What a Wonderful World
Bob Thiele & George David Weiss

Rob Juice

Namaste.

Por lo tanto puede ser.

© 2014 Jacqueline R. Clement, All rights reserved