

The Power of One, the Power of Many¹
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Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church

READINGS Excerpts from "Where Do We Go From Here?"

A 1967 Speech by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.²

There are forty million poor people here, and one day we must ask the question, "Why are there forty million poor people in America?" And when you begin to ask that question, you are raising a question about the economic system, about a broader distribution of wealth. When you ask that question, you begin to question the capitalistic economy. And I'm simply saying that more and more, we've got to begin to ask questions about the whole society. We are called upon to help the discouraged beggars in life's marketplace. But one day we must come to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring. It means that questions must be raised. ..you begin to ask the question, "Who owns the oil?" You begin to ask the question, "Who owns the iron ore?" You begin to ask the question, "Why is it that people have to pay water bills in a world that's two-thirds water?" These are words that must be said.

Now, don't think you have me in a bind today. I'm not talking about communism. What I'm talking about is far beyond communism. My inspiration didn't come from Karl Marx.... Communism forgets that life is individual. Capitalism forgets that life is social. And the kingdom of brotherhood is found neither in the thesis of communism nor the antithesis of capitalism, but in a higher synthesis. It is found in a higher synthesis that combines the truths of both. Now, ...it means ultimately coming to see that the problem of racism, the problem of economic exploitation, and the problem of war are all tied together. These are the triple evils that are interrelated.

...And I must confess, my friends, that the road ahead will not always be smooth. There will still be rocky places of frustration and meandering points of bewilderment. There will be inevitable setbacks here and there. And there will be those moments when the buoyancy of hope will be transformed into the fatigue of despair. Our dreams will sometimes be shattered and our ethereal hopes blasted... But difficult and painful as it is, we must walk on in the days ahead with an audacious faith in the future... When our days become dreary with low-hovering clouds of despair, and when our nights become darker than a thousand midnights, let us remember that there is a creative force in this universe working to pull down the gigantic mountains of evil, a power that is able to make a way out of no way and transform dark yesterdays into bright tomorrows. Let us realize that the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.

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2 Full speech may be found at http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/documentsentry/where_do_we_go_from_here_delivered_at_the_11th_annual_sclc_convention/

The Power of One, The Power of Many

One year ago, on January 18th, a young Egyptian woman posted a video on her Facebook page. She challenged her friends and neighbors to come to a protest at Tahrir Square on January 25th. We might never have known her name, except that hundreds of thousands of people did come to Tahrir Square. It was the start of the uprising that led to the end of the Mubarak regime in Egypt on February 11th. Her name is Asmaa Mahfouz, and at that time she was 26 years old.

I was so impressed when I heard her story, that I wanted to share with you a part of that video, so you can see for yourself the action of one courageous person to change the world. There is a translation of the whole video in your order of service.³

Video clip: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SgjIqMdsEuk>

Asmaa Mahfouz reminds us of the power of one person to change the world. If we look at her story more deeply, however, we find that even though she acted courageously on her own, she was also a part of a larger movement of young Egyptians, a group called the April 6th Youth Movement. That group had started a few years earlier, organized through Facebook in the spring of 2008, to support a strike by textile workers in an industrial town in Egypt.

Participating in that effort changed Asmaa's life, and taught her the power of organizing, networking, and conquering your fear. She said, "As long as you say there is no hope, then there will be no hope, but if you go down and take a stance, then there will be hope."⁴

During the next few years the April 6th Youth Movement leaders kept learning about non-violent resistance and political action, and used blogs and social media sites to facilitate debate and discussion about the issues of their country. When the people of Tunisia were able to bring down a corrupt government, these young leaders had hopes they might do the same in Egypt. Asmaa took the courageous stance of identifying herself publicly, and her courage inspired others to join in. Amazingly, the regime of President Mubarak ended eighteen days after the January 25th demonstration.

The power of one woman and the power of many thousands of others, standing together for human rights and dignity, brought new hope to their country.

This weekend, we celebrate the birthday of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Junior. It is a wonderful time to reflect on how much he helped to bring justice and equality to our country. He is one of my heroes, and his words and actions continue to inspire us with the power of non-violent activism to change the world.

³ The translation is reprinted at the end of this sermon.

⁴ Some information on Asmaa & the April 6 Youth Movement came from the website: moralheroes.org/asmaa-mahfouz.

But there is a temptation within these birthday celebrations. That temptation is to turn Dr. King into a one and only—a saint—someone who did what no one else might do. If we succumb to that temptation, we will undermine the work of Dr. King, and the work of thousands of others. If we succumb to that temptation, we will lose sight of how change really happens, and we will lose sight of our own power to be heroes for our world.

Dr. King did not act alone. We know this, but it is important to remember it again and again. He accepted an invitation to leadership from a group of activists who were already involved in the struggle for civil rights. He learned about the power of nonviolence from a man rarely heard about in the history of civil rights, a man named Bayard Rustin. Let me tell you a little more about Bayard Rustin. In 1956, while Dr. King was working to organize the Montgomery Bus Boycott, Bayard Rustin became his advisor on the Gandhian tactics of nonviolence.⁵

Bayard Rustin had been actively involved in civil rights for decades. His grandmother was a Quaker, and he was deeply committed pacifist. He had been a conscientious objector in World War Two, when that meant doing time in prison. He organized the black inmates to protest segregated dining halls in their prison. He visited India shortly after the death of Gandhi, to deepen his understanding of non-violent tactics for social change. He was part of an earlier Freedom Ride, in 1947, called the Journey of Reconciliation, organized by the Fellowship of Reconciliation, in which black and white men paired up to challenge the segregated buses of interstate travel. In 1956, Rustin was working at the War Resister's League, when he took a break from that work to be an advisor to Dr. King.

Rustin once commented, "I think it's fair to say that Dr. King's view of non-violent tactics was almost non-existent when the boycott began." When Rustin first met Dr. King, there were armed guards protecting the King home. Rustin convinced King that guns would undermine the civil rights struggle. Because of his influence, King embraced non-violence as the method and philosophy of the movement. Later on, Rustin was also the chief organizer of the 1963 March on Washington.

You might be asking, why didn't we hear more about this person who had such an important influence for civil rights? Well, Bayard Ruston was a gay man in a time when being gay was a crime. He had been arrested once for homosexual activity in 1953. Ruston accepted his behind the scenes role in order not to give an opportunity for others to discredit the civil rights movement. He was an activist all his life, and in his later life he worked openly on behalf of gay and lesbian equality. Bayard Rustin bears witness to the power of one person to change the world, and the importance of joining one's talents and energy to contribute to the power of many.

⁵ More information about Bayard Rustin can be found at <http://stateofthereunion.com/home/season-2/bayard-rustin>.

Another of my heroes also worked behind the scenes of the civil rights movement. Her name was Ella Baker. She does not have a national holiday in her honor, but Ella Baker was instrumental in founding the Southern Christian Leadership Conference with Dr. King, and was its first staff person. She stayed at SCLC for two years. If Baker "could have changed anything about the movement, it might have been to persuade the men leading it that they, too, should do more work behind the scenes. Baker was a staunch believer in helping ordinary people to work together and lead themselves, and she objected to centralized authority."⁶ She said, "You didn't see me on television, you didn't see news stories about me. The kind of role that I tried to play was to pick up pieces or put together pieces out of which I hoped organization might come. My theory is, strong people don't need strong leaders."⁷

After the Greensboro sit-ins, she was inspired by the student activists, and wanted to help them. She organized a meeting at Shaw University for student leaders in April 1960. From that meeting the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee was born. She believed that young people had the greatest power to change the world, and devoted her energies to listening to them, advising them, and fostering their capacity for leadership.

Bernice Johnson Reagon, of the vocal group Sweet Honey in the Rock, wrote a song in her honor that includes words that describe her vision:⁸

To me young people come first, they have the courage where we fail
And if I can but shed some light as they carry us through the gale.
The older I get the better I know that the secret of my going on
Is when the reins are in the hands of the young,
who dare to run against the storm.

Not needing to clutch for power, not needing the light just to shine on me
I need to be one in the number as we stand against tyranny.
Struggling myself don't mean a whole lot, I've come to realize
That teaching others to stand up and fight
is the only way my struggle survives.

What inspires me most about Ella Baker is the way she helped to create leaders for the movement, how she helped others to find their inner power, and so multiplied the positive force for change. The danger with heroes is that we are tempted merely to admire them, rather than to emulate them. But all of us have the capacity to be heroes, to use our power for the common good.

Now, some of you might be saying to yourself, "I don't have the power to change the world, I can't be a hero." "I'm just an unknown person in a small town in a small state."

6 From http://americanswhotellthetruth.org/pgs/portraits/Ella_Baker.php

7 "Women in the Civil Rights Movement", pp. 51.

8 Ella's Song, Lyrics and music by Bernice Johnson Reagon, Songtalk Publishing Co., copyright 1981.

We live in a world in which heroism has been supplanted by celebrity. The newspapers and television stations tell us all about the stars of movies and sitcoms, tell us who is getting married to whom, who is having a baby, who has lost or gained weight. People are willing to air their dirty laundry, expose their intimate arguments, just to get a chance to be on television. There are even people who are famous just for being famous. But heroism isn't the same as fame.

Dr. King, in his sermon "The Drum Major Instinct," talked about the temptation to want to be out front, to be praised, to be like the drum major at the front of the parade. All of us are tempted by the ego. But that is not what true greatness is, nor what a hero is.

King turned to the definition given by Jesus, that the one who is truly great is the one who serves. He said:

...and.. the thing that I like about it: by giving that definition of greatness, it means that everybody can be great, because everybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and your verb agree to serve. You don't have to know about Plato and Aristotle to serve. You don't have to know Einstein's theory of relativity to serve... You only need a heart full of grace, a soul generated by love. And you can be that servant.⁹

The world today is not so different from the world in which Dr. King spoke those words. We are still encouraged by media and advertisers to look for greatness in possessions, in honors, in the praise of others. We are encouraged to live as individuals only, using our gifts for our own benefit and advancement. But those who do achieve greatness, those who change the world, are those who bring their individual gifts into the service of the common good.

All of us have the capacity to serve. We don't have to organize a march on Washington to serve. We don't have to speak before thousands. We merely have to use our gifts, our own passions and talents, to work for what we believe in. There are heroes sitting in every row in this room. Sometimes we know what our neighbors are doing to change the world, but often we do not. And perhaps that is a shame. I think if we knew what ordinary people were doing, we might find more courage to use our own power for the good. When we join the power of one to the power of many, transformation is possible.

I know it is not easy. I struggle between hope and discouragement. As we look back at the inspiring gains of the civil rights movement, we must also look around at the issues still faced today by people of color in our country. As we look back at the amazing transformations of the Arab Spring last year, we must see also the challenges people in Egypt and other Arab countries are facing now to bring the dream of democracy into practical manifestation. Change does not happen in one moment, or in one demonstration against tyranny. There have been many sacrifices. Many people have died.

9 MLK, "The Drum Major Instinct," a sermone given on 4 February 1968, printed online at http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/documentsentry/doc_the_drum_major_instinct/

Change is not easy. Sometimes we may look at the enormity of the problems we face, and fear that we are powerless before them. But that would be a sure method for defeat. Remember what Asmaa Mahfouz said to her friends: "As long as you say there is no hope, then there will be no hope, but if you go down and take a stance, then there will be hope."

If you do what you can do, there will be hope. If you write a letter to the editor, there will be hope. If you teach your children about your values, there will be hope. If you have a discussion with your friends, there will be hope. If you occupy Maine, there will be hope. If you visit your senator, there will be hope. If you join your hopes with the hopes of those around you, there will be hope.

We must look to our deepest values, our dreams and visions for our community and our planet, and find strength from the beauty and truth within them. Poet Audre Lorde put it so simply. "When I dare to be powerful - to use my strength in the service of my vision, then it becomes less and less important whether I am afraid."

There have been thousands upon thousands of people who've gone before us, who have believed in compassion, equality, and freedom, and have given their service to that vision. There are thousands upon thousands of people now, who share that belief and who are serving the vision of compassion, equality, and freedom. We are not alone.

Another of my heroes was Dorothy Day, who was an activist for peace and justice, and who opened her home to the homeless. She wrote,

People say, what is the sense of our small effort. They cannot see that we must lay one brick at a time, take one step at a time. A pebble cast into a pond causes ripples that spread in all directions. Each one of our thoughts, words, and deeds is like that. No one has a right to sit down and feel hopeless. There's too much work to do.¹⁰

So let us remember it—let us remember the power we have, each of us, to make a difference in our world. Let us remember that we must join together with each other, to make a difference in our world.

As long as we say there is no hope, then there will be no hope, but if we go down and take a stance, then there will be hope. May it be so.

¹⁰ Quoted in *Singing the Living Tradition*, #560.

ASMAA MAHFOUZ: [translation/transcript] January 18, 2011¹¹

Four Egyptians have set themselves on fire to protest humiliation and hunger and poverty and degradation they had to live with for 30 years. Four Egyptians have set themselves on fire thinking maybe we can have a revolution like Tunisia, maybe we can have freedom, justice, honor and human dignity. Today, one of these four has died, and I saw people commenting and saying, "May God forgive him. He committed a sin and killed himself for nothing." People, have some shame.

I posted that I, a girl, am going down to Tahrir Square, and I will stand alone. And I'll hold up a banner. Perhaps people will show some honor. I even wrote my number so maybe people will come down with me. No one came except three guys — three guys and three armored cars of riot police. And tens of hired thugs and officers came to terrorize us. They shoved us roughly away from the people. But as soon as we were alone with them, they started to talk to us. They said, "Enough! These guys who burned themselves were psychopaths." Of course, on all national media, whoever dies in protest is a psychopath. If they were psychopaths, why did they burn themselves at the parliament building?

I'm making this video to give you one simple message: we want to go down to Tahrir Square on January 25th. If we still have honor and want to live in dignity on this land, we have to go down on January 25th. We'll go down and demand our rights, our fundamental human rights.

I won't even talk about any political rights. We just want our human rights and nothing else. This entire government is corrupt — a corrupt president and a corrupt security force. These self-immolators were not afraid of death but were afraid of security forces. Can you imagine that? Are you going to kill yourselves, too, or are you completely clueless? I'm going down on January 25th, and from now 'til then I'm going to distribute fliers in the streets. I will not set myself on fire. If the security forces want to set me on fire, let them come and do it.

If you think yourself a man, come with me on January 25th. Whoever says women shouldn't go to protests because they will get beaten, let him have some honor and manhood and come with me on January 25th. Whoever says it is not worth it because there will only be a handful of people, I want to tell him, "You are the reason behind this, and you are a traitor, just like the president or any security cop who beats us in the streets." Your presence with us will make a difference, a big difference.

Talk to your neighbors, your colleagues, friends and family, and tell them to come. They don't have to come to Tahrir Square. Just go down anywhere and say it, that we are free human beings. Sitting at home and just following us on news or Facebook leads to our humiliation, leads to my own humiliation. If you have honor and dignity as a man, come. Come and protect me and other girls in the protest. If you stay at home, then you deserve all that is being done, and you will be guilty before your nation and your people. And you'll be responsible for what happens to us on the streets while you sit at home.

Go down to the street. Send SMSes. Post it on the net. Make people aware. You know your own social circle, your building, your family, your friends. Tell them to come with us. Bring five people or 10 people. If each one of us manages to bring five or 10 to Tahrir Square and talk to people and tell them, "This is enough. Instead of setting ourselves on fire, let us do something positive," it will make a difference, a big difference.

Never say there's no hope. Hope disappears only when you say there's none. So long as you come down with us, there will be hope. Don't be afraid of the government. Fear none but God. God says He will not change the condition of a people until they change what is in themselves. Don't think you can be safe anymore. None of us are. Come down with us and demand your rights, my rights, your family's rights. I am going down on January 25th, and I will say no to corruption, no to this regime.

¹¹ Transcript from Democracy Now, http://www.democracynow.org/2011/2/8/asmaa_mahfouz_the_youtube_video_that.