

Go Lifted Up¹

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Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church

Reading Excerpts from Dr. Melissa Harris-Lacewell

I still stand in open mouthed wonder at the realization that black people in America came to believe in a loving, benevolent and just God when there was so little empirical evidence to support that world view. It is humbling to remember that women and men who were born into slavery, and never expected anything but slavery for their children and grandchildren, nonetheless believed that they were equal human beings worthy of the love of a benevolent and intervening God. It is a different kind of knowing, one with at least as much power as reason and evidence.

Black liberation theology emerges from this tradition of rejecting scriptural evidence of a slavery-supporting God and roots itself in a biblical interpretation of God as an advocate for the oppressed.²

...Black folks read the Bible with an eye on what it has to say about experiences of bondage and oppression. In this way the Bible is both a moral guide and a political text. Even though slaveholders declared that God wanted slaves to obey their masters, black people believed that God wanted them to be free. They believed this because they read the story of Moses. Though the confederate states claimed that God instituted segregation; black Americans believed differently because they read Amos. Today many black Americans worry when our country engages in self-righteous foreign policy because we have read Isaiah.³

Sermon

Today we celebrate the Christian holy day of Easter, and the fifth day of the Jewish celebration of Passover. But along with that, April 4th is also the 42nd anniversary of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. I have been thinking about his life and his faith, in the context of our Unitarian Universalist questions about faith and God.

I heard Dr. Melissa Harris-Lacewell speak at this year's MLK Breakfast in January. For those who may not know of her, she is a professor of political science and African American Studies at Princeton University, a national commentator, and also a Unitarian Universalist who is studying at Union Theological Seminary in New York. She gave the Ware Lecture at last year's UU General Assembly.

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² "Progressive Bible Study," posted by [MELISSA HARRIS-LACEWELL](http://www.thenation.com/blogs/notion/534293/progressive_bible_study) on 02/24/2010 at http://www.thenation.com/blogs/notion/534293/progressive_bible_study

³ Our Jeremiah, at <http://www.theroot.com/views/our-jeremiah>

I was struck by her comments in January which were repeated today in our reading, about the amazing faith experience of black people in America--how black people “came to believe in a loving, benevolent and just God when there was so little empirical evidence to support that world view.”

After being stripped of every vestige of human dignity, forced to abandon their languages and religions, and cut off from their families, they were compelled to adopt the religion of the slave-holders. And while the masters used the Bible to justify slavery, within the stories of Moses and the prophets black people began to find a message of hope and liberation. They were inspired and encouraged to believe in their own worth and dignity, that they were “equal human beings worthy of the love of a benevolent and intervening God.” They were inspired to rebel against the masters, to escape from their bondage, and seek a path to freedom.

And really, what were the slave-holders thinking? The central story of the Jewish scriptures, and adopted into the Christian bible, is the story of Moses leading the slaves out of bondage in Egypt, on a journey toward freedom and the promised land. If you take away that story, you don't have a story. The God of Moses, the God of the Bible, was willing to intervene to help a suffering people find a new life.

Now, I want to interject a comment here, to say that there is no way to prove that this kind of God exists. How could anyone prove that God is on the side of the poor and the outsider? We can't. In fact, historians and scholars will argue that there is no historic evidence that the exodus of slaves from Egypt ever happened. We are moving outside of the realm of reason and evidence. As Harris-Lacewell says, “It is a different kind of knowing.” But we do know that the slaves in America created their own kind of exodus. They found some kind of power in the stories that strengthened their hearts and lifted up their spirits and set them free.

I remember a similar story I heard about Dr. Martin Luther King. There was a time shortly after the beginning of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, when Dr. King was seriously doubting whether to continue his involvement in the movement. He had been receiving threatening phone calls and letters at his home, and while at first he took them in stride, after a while, he began to grow afraid. After a particularly strenuous day, late at night, already in bed, he got a phone call with yet another angry threat. He got up and began to pace the floor and then went into the kitchen.

He wrote about this moment; he said:

I was ready to give up. I tried to think of a way to move out of the picture without appearing to be a coward. In this state of exhaustion, when my courage had almost gone, I determined to take my problems to God. My head in my hands, I bowed over the kitchen table and prayed aloud. “I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But now I am afraid. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they too will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I've come to the point where I can't face it alone.”

He goes on to say,

At that moment I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never before experienced him. It seemed as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice, saying, “Stand up for righteousness, stand up for truth, God will be at your side forever.” Almost at once, my fears began to pass from me. My uncertainty disappeared. I was ready to face anything. The outer situation remained the same, but God had given me inner calm.⁴

Three nights later, his home *was* bombed, but he was able to deal with it calmly. His experience of the presence of God had given him a whole new strength.

This is the kind of God I want to explore with you today. As I said before, there is no way to prove that such a God exists. At least, there is no proof outside of the experience of it. But there is a power in the experience that enabled Dr. King to go on to lead his people, with courage and truth. And there is a power in the story, just the experience of hearing that story about Dr. King, that inspires me in my own work for justice.

To look closely at the story of Dr. King is to see its deep resonance with the story of Moses. God didn't speak to Moses to give Moses a comfortable life. When Moses heard the voice of God, in the story of the burning bush, it was a voice calling him to free his people. And just so, Dr. King wasn't praying about material wealth or success in his career, or even protection for his family. He was praying about standing up for what he believed was right--the struggle of black people to be treated with dignity and equality. He was praying for the courage to bear witness to justice. And the answer he received was linked to that justice work--that inner voice said, “when you are standing up for righteousness, God will be at your side.”

Dr. King went on to lead the movement with courage and strength. There were other threats and many troubles that came his way. His God didn't protect him from all those troubles, but King felt God at his side. And the story of Moses continued to be a constant source of his inspiration.

On April 3rd, 1968, the night before he was killed, Dr. King delivered a speech in Memphis, Tennessee, where he had come to support the sanitation workers' strike. There had been threats against King related to this trip to Memphis; he mentioned the threats in his speech. He mentioned earlier dangers, too, including the time he was stabbed by a deranged woman in New York City. But he talks more about his gladness. He speaks about his gratitude for being alive to witness the sit-ins, and the bus boycott, and all the other ways that black people had aroused the conscience of the nation and stood up for freedom. He encourages the striking workers not to be afraid, and talks about all the practical necessities of their current struggle.

⁴ Martin Luther King, Jr., *The Strength to Love*, Chapter 13, reprinted in *A Testament of Hope, The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King Jr.*, p. 509.

He ended his speech in words that his listeners would have known were an echo of the story of Moses. As the Hebrew people were close to entering the promised land, God brought Moses up on a mountain, where he could see the promised land, even though he would not be allowed to enter it with them. It was on that mountain that Moses died.

Here is what Dr. King said:

Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land. And I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.⁵

There is power in a story. For Dr. King, the story of Moses was a doorway into the power of God to lift up the lowly. King said that preachers should draw on the prophet Amos to say, "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream." He said that preachers should say with Jesus, who himself was quoting the prophet Isaiah, "The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to deal with the problems of the poor." Dr. King took the stories of the prophets and wove them into new words of hope and liberation, words that gave people the power to make a change.

There are still many people who try to argue against this justice-loving God of the Bible. Just a few weeks ago, Fox News commentator and radio personality Glenn Beck attacked churches that preach a gospel of social and economic justice. Glenn Beck says if your church preaches that, you should "run as fast as you can." According to Beck, social and economic justice are code words for communism and Nazism. I am guessing that Beck would have a few arrows to sling in our direction at A2U2.

Rev. Jim Wallis, founder of the progressive Christian group Sojourners, responded to Beck on his own blog. He suggested that Christians should run from Beck. He says, "When I was in seminary, we did a study of the Bible and we found 2000 verses in the Bible about the poor, about God's concerns for the left out, the left behind, the vulnerable and God's call for justice. One of my classmates took an old Bible, and cut out every single reference to the poor, to social justice, to economic justice, and when we were done, the Bible was just in shreds. If I were ever to talk to Glenn Beck, I would like to hand him that old Bible from seminary and say, Glenn, this would have to be your bible. ...The God of the Bible is the God of justice."⁶

⁵ "I See the Promised Land", reprinted in *A Testament of Hope*, p.286.

⁶ This first came to my attention in Leonard Pitt's column in the *Portland Press Herald* on March 24th, "The Gospel according to Glen Beck." This response is paraphrased from a video interview of Jim Wallace on MSNBC at <http://blog.sojo.net/2010/03/15/video-jim-wallis-talks-about-glenn-beck-and-social-justice-on-msnbc/>

So let us come back to the question of how Unitarian Universalists might relate to this God of justice. It is a part of our deepest values as Unitarian Universalists to be involved in the work of social justice. But for many UU's, that work comes out of a belief in human dignity, and God has nothing to do with it. That is really fine. We are joined together by our common values, and by our acceptance of diverse theologies among us.

But for some of us, there have been moments when we were in despair about injustice, or afraid of what our truth was revealing to us, or ready to give up, like Dr. King had been. And in those moments, we also felt a divine presence, a presence of courage and hope and strength, empowering us into transformation. This God may not have intervened to take away a difficult challenge, but rather enabled us to find wholeness and self-worth in the meeting of it.

For me, the divine presence gave me the courage to leave the church of my childhood, and leap into the unknown, to find myself as a woman, as a whole and equal person. When all around me the church was saying that women had their place, and it was not in the priesthood or the leadership, when I was hearing that women were weak and vulnerable and needed men to guide and protect them, something enabled me to reject that characterization, and claim fullness. Something I barely even had a name for--but it was a sacred power nonetheless. And for me, the risk involved imagining that God might be a woman, a goddess. That I might be created in the image of that goddess. And even though there was nothing in the Bible that described this goddess, yet it was still the stories of the God of justice that led me out of those old male-dominant images and into new possibilities. As Ntozake Shange put it, "I found God in myself and I loved her fiercely."⁷

This experience in my own life became a window to understand, at least in part, the kind of transformation the slaves had experienced. How miraculous and lonely it could be, how long the journey, and how frightening the desert. But yet, something unmistakable like a fire to guide the way. It taught me that the divine is a power beyond institutions, beyond containers, yet able to be present in our lives--*especially* in those moments of transformation, when "the mighty are cast down from their thrones, and the lowly are lifted up."

I do not ask that anyone believe in the God of my own transformation. It doesn't work like that. But I do offer it to you as an option of hope. If you are going through a hard time, if you are discouraged, if you are seeking to follow the truth of your heart, if you are sore oppressed. If you are having trouble believing in your own worth and dignity. I invite you to call on that God, and see whether there might be a presence that can help you through.

I don't understand the mechanics of the divine presence. I wonder if it has something to do with the commitment to give oneself to a sacred calling, or to do the work of justice. I don't know why some people call for help, and never seem to hear an answer. There is no formula that I can teach you, except to say that trouble can sometimes be a doorway, if we knock.

⁷ From her 1976 play, "For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/ When the Rainbow is Enuf"

It makes me think about something my grandfather wrote in a little black notebook that has since disappeared. Today, April 4th, is also the anniversary of the death of my own grandfathers, one in 1964, and one in 1967. My grandpa Johnson died when I was not quite 11 years old. He was not a Catholic, which was a big deal in my family. But apparently he had been a spiritual man, and had even considered a call to ministry as a Unitarian. The story I learned from the notebook is this. My grandfather said that my young cousin Michael had gone with him into a church building and asked, “Where is God?” My grandfather commented, “If you can’t find God outside of the church, you will never find him inside the church.”

But even without a formula, even without a sure way to find this God who helps the lowly, I believe the stories of such a God can give us hope and courage. I am reminded of an old Jewish legend. Whether it is true or not, I do not know. But that is the thing about stories. The truth to be found in stories is not about whether or not they are factual. Some of the most helpful stories happen only in fiction.

This is a story about a Jewish community who had a very wise and powerful Rabbi. When the people were in trouble, their Rabbi used to go into the woods, to a special place, where he prayed a very special prayer, with ritual and song, and the people would be helped. But eventually the rabbi died, and his successor did not know the full ritual with all its songs. So when the people were in trouble, he went into the woods, and prayed the special prayer, and it was enough, and the people were helped.

Eventually, he too died, and the next Rabbi who came to them did not know the place in the woods. But he did know the special prayer, and so when the people were in trouble, he prayed the prayer, and it was enough, and the people were helped. Finally, he too died, and the next Rabbi didn’t know the rituals or the songs, he didn’t know the place in the woods, or even the special prayer. But he knew the story. And it was enough. And the people were helped. May it be so.

Closing Words

I will tell you something about stories
They aren’t just entertainment. Don’t be fooled.
They are all we have, you see,
All we have to fight off illness and death
You don’t have anything
if you don’t have the stories—
Leslie Marmon Silko⁸

⁸ *Ceremony*, p. 2.