



Unitarian Universalist Congregation of York

“Dr. King and Rev. Lawson: The Tools of Nonviolence in an Increasingly Violent World”

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In the fall of 2018, a group of activists came to Washington, D.C. in order to protest the nomination of Brett Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court. While there were people joining the protest of many ages and races and genders and backgrounds, the majority of them were young women. Emboldened by the #metoo movement to tell their own stories of sexual harassment, abuse, and mistreatment, they came to express their opinion that a man who perpetuated that culture of harm should not be allowed to sit on the highest court in the land. As the peaceful protests continued, a group of local clergy sympathetic to the cause came to lobby lawmakers but more importantly, to provide pastoral care and support to those activists who were constantly willing to engage with their own painful personal histories in order to speak their truth to power. There was a young woman attending those protests, who was there for powerful personal reasons, and she sought the advice and counsel of one of the clergy, to share some of the burden she brought with her to her work. The clergy person she chose was me; I was only a student minister then, wearing a clerical collar in public for the first time. The trust and faith she placed in me forever changed my idea of ministry and its relation to peaceful public protest.

This is only a small part of the legacy of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who was born on this day in 1929, and whose birth we celebrate with a national holiday. People - like that young woman - who choose to confront a system of injustice, a system that perpetuates harm and violence, people who choose to do that work in a non-violent manner, are the people who are Dr. King's living legacy.

The philosophy of nonviolence embraced by Dr. King arose from the actions and philosophy of Mohandas K. Gandhi, who used nonviolent resistance to lead the successful campaign for India's independence from the colonial rule of Britain. Seeing small acts of violence as reflections of the larger violence of unjust systems, King partnered with clergy and community leaders all over the south to create the civil rights movement for racial equity in the United States. Today, thank goodness, many of us learn about Dr. King, but today I would like to spend a few minutes learning about one of King's great collaborators in the philosophy and practice of nonviolent direct action, the Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr. Born in Uniontown, Pennsylvania in 1928, Lawson was raised in Ohio, and it was there that he experienced racism and physical violence for the first time. Running an errand for his family, the young Lawson was called the N-word by a white child in a parked car, and Lawson slapped him in response. When he told the story to his mother, she asked him, "Jimmie, what good did that do?" She reaffirmed him as a person in a long soliloquy he recalled that ended with "There must be a better way." Lawson, who is still with us at age 94, has had a long career organizing nonviolent movements for social change, leading a Methodist congregation in Los Angeles for many years and teaching Nonviolence and Social Movements at UCLA. He relates this story in a book based on his nonviolence courses. After his mother's talk, Lawson reflected, "I said to myself, 'Never again will I use my fists on the playground when I get angry or when someone else gets angry with me.' And I heard myself saying, 'I do not know what the better way is, but I will find it.'"

Lawson conducted his first sit-in when he was a junior in high school. During high school he also felt called to be a pastor like his father, and after graduating in 1946 he began studying at Baldwin-Wallace College. He heard a talk on Gandhi and the nonviolent independence movement in India, and thought again of that "better way" he was determined to find. As an immediate consequence, he became a draft resister, and as the movement to draft young men for the conflict in Korea gained steam, Lawson was arrested for resisting the draft and served three years in prison. Upon his release, he took a three-year teaching position in India, to experience life outside the United

States and to learn more deeply about the culture of the newly independent India and the movement that helped create it.

In 1957, James Lawson met Martin Luther King for the first time, and King helped to convince him to continue his work in the United States in the south, as a part of the civil rights movement. Lawson worked in and around Nashville and other parts of Tennessee, and was instrumental in leadership in the Memphis sanitation workers' strike. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. commended Lawson and this campaign in his ["Mountaintop"](#) speech delivered in Memphis on April 3, 1968. The next day, King was assassinated. Lawson, along with other civil rights leaders and clergy, was there to help process this tremendous loss and to keep the nonviolent action for social change going.

In 2013, Rev. Lawson - still speaking for justice and nonviolent change - said "Nonviolence is love in action. And love, as Gandhi understood it, is the call that creation tells us to respect all of life. And to even have confidence in life. So, he calls love...trust in life, respect for life, reverence for life."

Gandhi, and Lawson, and King, all struggled with their own personal responses to individual violence. It started there, and then could be extrapolated out to the violence inherent within larger social systems. As we heard in our reading today from Dr. King's Nobel Peace Prize [acceptance speech](#), "Violence is immoral because it thrives on hatred rather than love. It destroys community and makes brotherhood impossible. It leaves society in monologue rather than dialogue. Violence ends up defeating itself. It creates bitterness in the survivors and brutality in the destroyers." The violent practice of enslaving other humans has led to deep scars not just on the bodies of the enslaved but also on the minds and psyches and deep history of those enslaved and their descendents, and has left echoing remnants of brutality on those who enslaved them, and their descendents. It is this violent system, our violent system, that continues and perpetuates harm, even as reckonings have occurred and changes have been made.

It is this kind of reckoning I wanted to call to mind today with our chalice lighting (thanks Steve) - which is short enough that I will here repeat it in full. This is a poem by Ross Gay called ["A Small Needful Fact."](#)

"A Small Needful Fact

Is that Eric Garner worked
for some time for the Parks and Rec.
Horticultural Department, which means,
perhaps, that with his very large hands,
perhaps, in all likelihood,
he put gently into the earth
some plants which, most likely,
some of them, in all likelihood,
continue to grow, continue
to do what such plants do, like house
and feed small and necessary creatures,
like being pleasant to touch and smell,
like converting sunlight
into food, like making it easier
for us to breathe."

Eric Garner, who died by an act of violence at the hands of police for the crime of selling loose cigarettes, in all likelihood set out plants that still provide oxygen to this day. Deprived of breath by a violent system, actions of his life taken in peace, remain a benefit to all.

If harm perpetuates harm, then love - the active and motivating love called upon by Gandhi and King and Lawson - also perpetuates itself. Love leads to more love. The more times you resist the temptation to answer violence with violence, the more that muscle is built up, and the pattern of violence continues to be disrupted.

Let's return again for a moment to King's Nobel Lecture: "In a real sense nonviolence seeks to redeem the spiritual and moral lag that I spoke of earlier as the chief dilemma of modern man. It seeks to secure moral ends through moral means. Nonviolence is a powerful and just weapon. Indeed, it is a weapon unique in history, which cuts without wounding and ennobles the man who wields it.

"I believe in this method because I think it is the only way to reestablish a broken community. It is the method which seeks to implement the just law by appealing to the conscience of the great decent majority who through blindness, fear, pride, and irrationality have allowed their consciences to sleep."

We already learned that Dr. King loved the story of Rip Van Winkle - remember, "Don't sleep through the revolution" was the message he chose to deliver to the annual General Assembly of Unitarian Universalists two years after his Nobel Lecture. The great and decent majority who have allowed themselves to sleep through change and upheaval.

We have seen recent change and upheaval and we have also seen recent awakening, and recent re-awakening. Rev. Lawson might remind us to think of the "better way" that he has spent his life looking for. He started looking for that better way when he vowed never to act in violence when he was angry or when someone else was angry with him. To think instead of peace - of active love, of respect and reverence for all life - and choose not to contribute to a single act of personal violence that reflects a larger culture of violence. Even in our moments of flashing anger, we can never know what act for love others have taken. We cannot know what plants have been placed in earth, what truth has been spoken in love, to clear a way for us all to breathe. For us all to live in that better way.

For everyone living the legacy of Rev. Dr. King and Rev. Lawson, for every young woman holding her peace in a world of torment, for every person saying no to every act of interpersonal violence, for every poet reminding us of

truths so large we cannot see them, for all these and more, we give thanks.
May their witness encourage us to stay awake all the way through this
necessary revolution of love.

So may it be.