

“I Can Still Sing ‘We Shall Overcome’”

Rev. Leland Bond-Upson, given at First Unitarian, Honolulu, January 9, 2011

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Good morning. Today we deal with no fewer than four of the seven Principles of the Congregations of the UUA:

The First: The inherent worth and dignity of every person’

The Second: Justice, equality, and compassion in human relations.

The Third: Acceptance of one another; and

The Sixth: The goal of world community, with peace, liberty, and justice for all.

Before I begin, I want to tell you that I will be quoting extensively from the writings and speeches of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Some of his constructions will sound jarring, because the campaign for inclusive language wouldn’t begin in earnest until 1969, a year after his assassination. I ask you to not think ill of him for this. He would have been an early adopter.

Secondly, I have heard it said that some folks here think my sermons are a little too short. And here I thought that would be seen as a blessing. Well--this one is going to be a little longer, and I trust this will put an end to that kind of talk.

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Three rivers come together in southeastern Washington State, the Yakima out of the Cascades, the Snake out of the Rockies, and the mighty Columbia, out of Canada. Three towns grew up at this confluence, called the Columbia basin, and these towns became known as the Tri-Cities: Richland, Kennewick, and Pasco. The Columbia Basin lies in the rain shadow of the Cascade Range, and the area is described as semi-arid, although with the sagebrush, cactus, sand dunes, and summer heat reaching 115, it seems a lot like a desert. There are long stretches there where the wide Columbia flows through barren land, and nothing grows along its banks.

I grew up in Richland, which had been a tiny farming community set between the Yakima and the Columbia Rivers, known for the quality of the strawberries and asparagus that thrived in the flood plains of these rivers.

Five miles downstream, on the north side, is Pasco, named for a railroad town high in the Peruvian Andes. Our Pasco grew up around a railroad junction and switching yard serving the Northern Pacific, Union Pacific, and Great Northern railroads. There was a concentration there of people we liberals called Negroes, who were attracted to Pasco by the employment opportunities on the railroads. Those of us of a certain age recall that for years the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters was almost 100% Negro.

Across the river from Pasco, on the same side as Richland, but downstream, lies the town of Kennewick. "Kennewick" means 'winter paradise' in the Yakima tongue. Kennewick has become somewhat famous since the discovery, in 1996, of human remains, 9300 years old, known as "Kennewick Man," that apparently are *not* Native American.

During WW II, Richland was chosen as the bedroom community for the Hanford Atomic Energy Reservation, which was planted in the aforesaid desert, and drew water from the nearby Columbia to cool the reactors. Old Richland was almost gone when our family arrived in 1948. By that time it was 20 or 30 times larger, and everything was new, including most of the trees. And this is country that needs shade trees, and shelterbelts made of trees, against the dust storms.

Kennewick was a much older and more established town than Richland, with hints of what passed for wealth in that area: large houses on leafy, tree-lined streets.

There were two Negro families in Richland, the Jacksons, and the Wallaces, and as far as I could see, they were accepted. It helped that both the Wallace boys were ace basketball players in a basketball-crazy town.

By 1958, our little Richland Unitarian Fellowship had grown strong enough to buy a real church building for itself, in Kennewick. Fifty years later, it's still there.

As a kid, I was surprised and increasingly dismayed by the racism displayed by my classmates. It was a casual kind of prejudice, usually in the form of stereotypical jokes. Almost all of us in Richland were from somewhere else, and some of the ones from the South used the n-word with an energy and hatefulness that I did not understand. As a child of liberals in Mormon and John Birch Society country, I had already learned to be wary of these people.

The overt prejudice and racism around there in the 1950s and early 60s were vented more against the Mexican migrants, who worked the upriver orchards of the Yakima Valley. Woody Guthrie wrote and sang several songs about them and their condition only half a generation earlier.

Then one day, in 1961, the civil rights movement came to the Tri-Cities. To my great surprise, it turned out that Kennewick was 'whites only.' I hadn't noticed. We soon learned that Kennewick was known to the Movement as "the Birmingham of the Northwest."

My last demonstration, to protest the impending war in Iraq, was almost exactly eight years ago (1/18/03). My first demonstration, 50 years ago, was to protest housing discrimination in Kennewick, Washington. Thirty or so Unitarians, Jews, UN and ACLU types got a permit, and paraded down Clearwater Avenue, the main street of Kennewick.

The Freedom Riders were getting beat up in the South. I was 15, and apprehensive. It turned out I didn't need to be. Kennewick may have been lily-white, but it wasn't anything like Birmingham, Alabama. A couple of people whistled in derision, and a couple more called out cheerfully to my dad "hey Larry, what the hell ya doin'?" And that was it. We re-assembled back at the church, and talked nervously and excitedly about what we'd just done.

[When my mother read this sermon, she remarked that one of Negro woman who marched with us that day thanked her and the other church ladies repeatedly for being allowed to use our church's ladies room. Apparently this was a most uncommon experience for her.]

A little later, the scene shifted across the river to Pasco, which did have black folks. As part of some civil rights event, I attended my first services in a black church there, and for the first time knew what it was like to be the only face that looked different from all the others.

There was a young inter-racial couple there, committed to the Movement, engaged to be married. Observing them, the minister of this black church got to talking with my Dad, and asked him if he thought inter-racial marriage would increase once the worst of segregation and discrimination was remedied. My Dad said he thought it would. The minister replied he thought it wouldn't. He thought these kids were motivated by an idealism that would not often overcome the cultural differences. I tell you this just because I remember it so clearly—and because, happily, my Dad was right.

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We in the Northwest had heard something about Rosa Parks and the Montgomery bus boycott, and possibly a mention of somebody named King who was leading it.

We had seen on our little black and white TV screens the face of race-hatred as Eisenhower sent in the National Guard to force integration at Little Rock's Central High over the objections of Arkansas Gov. Orval Faubus.

And in 1962 we heard about Mississippi Gov. Ross Barnett's attempts to deny entrance to Ol' Miss by James Meredith. Both Jack and Bobby Kennedy were active in forcing the issue, which was a great source of the hatred felt for the brothers by the segregationist South, and began the shift from a Democratic Solid South to the Republican one we have now.

And we saw, early in 1963, Gov. George Wallace declaring at his inaugural, "segregation now, segregation tomorra, segregation foreva."

On August 28, 1963, MLK burst upon the scene with his eloquent, emotional concluding speech at the March on Washington. He was a preacher, making the case for righteousness in the social and political and economic world. He often employed the words of the Old Testament prophets, because they spoke directly to the condition of Jewish bondage in the land of Egypt.

It has been said that the great poets take the mundane and transform and elevate it into the universal. With his oratory, and unshakable commitment to non-violence, he raised an already moral cause to new, and all-embracing level. He showed us that justice for black was also redemption for white. He convinced us that the destinies for each of us, regardless of race, are intertwined with the destiny of all. He lent humble nobility to the cause of justice, which he could describe in such a way so that any who wished to, could understand. As he wrote in his famous "Letter From a Birmingham Jail:" written April 16, 1963, addressing white, "moderate," clergymen:

"We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed. Frankly, I have never yet engaged in a direct action movement that was "well timed," according to the timetable of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the [word]"Wait!" It rings in the ear of every Negro with a piercing familiarity. This "Wait" has almost always meant "Never." We must come to see with the distinguished jurist of yesterday that "justice too long delayed is justice denied."

We have waited for more than three hundred and forty years for our constitutional and God-given rights. The nations of Asia and Africa are moving with jet-like speed toward the goal of political independence, and we still creep at horse and buggy pace toward the gaining of a cup of coffee at a lunch counter. I guess it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say,

"Wait." But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate-filled policemen curse, kick, brutalize and even kill your black brothers and sisters with impunity; when you see the vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society; when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six-year-old daughter why she can't go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in her eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children, and see the depressing clouds of inferiority begin to form in her little mental sky, and see her begin to distort her little personality by unconsciously developing a bitterness toward white people; when you have to concoct an answer for a five-year-old son asking in agonizing pathos: "Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?"; when you take a cross-country drive and find it necessary to sleep night after night in the uncomfortable corners of your automobile because no motel will accept you; when you are humiliated day in and day out by nagging signs reading "white" and "colored"; when your first name becomes "nigger," your middle name becomes "boy" (however old you are) and your last name becomes "John," and your wife and mother are never given the respected title "Mrs."; when you are harried by day and haunted by night by the fact that you are a Negro, living constantly at tip-toe stance never quite knowing what to expect next, and plagued with inner fears and outer resentments; when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of "nobodiness"; then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait. There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over, and men are no longer willing to be plunged into an abyss of despair. I hope, sirs, you can understand our legitimate and unavoidable impatience."

Four months later, Dr. King would be out of jail, addressing all of America and much of the world from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial.

In 1964, King won the Nobel Peace Prize for his work in confronting violent racism with non-violent tactics. He was only 35 years old.

A long-time childhood friend of mine in Richland did *not* understand how this could be. He said “How can he get a peace prize when he’s down there agitating, making trouble?!” This friend’s parents were from Georgia.

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Dr. King did not do this alone, of course. There were great leaders of the civil rights movement before and after him.

First, we must remember A. Philip Randolph, best known as the leader of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. In that role he won the first labor contract between a company and a black union, in 1937. The astounding thing about that is that this company was the Pullman Company, the most viciously anti-labor company in America. One of its present-day spiritual descendant, the Coors Brewing Company, is anti-labor, anti-black, anti-women, anti-gay—and funds any number of reactionary causes. The Pullman Company was much worse.

Randolph was also central in pressuring President Roosevelt, as preparation for WW II was gearing up, to prohibit discrimination in the defense industry. This opening of defense industry jobs was the biggest single draw for the southern African American to come north, and thus begin a new chapter in American life. [Hwy 61]

Randolph was also the main man in pressuring President Truman to make desegregation part of the new peacetime draft, and in 1948, Truman signed the executive order barring discrimination in the military.

[A year before, on April 15, 1947, Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier in Major League Baseball.]

Secondly, we must remember Thurgood Marshall. Marshall was the staff counsel for the NAACP, and had been admitted to argue before the Supreme Court in 1939. He argued and won the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, which marks the beginning of the Civil Rights struggle as a mass movement. Thirteen years later, Lyndon Johnson appointed him the first black

Supreme Court Justice. Ill health caused him to resign from the Court in 1991. President Bush and his advisors' idea of a suitable replacement for this giant was . . . Clarence Thomas.

Thirdly, we must remember Bayard Rustin. Rustin had much to do with converting Martin Luther King to the philosophy of non-violence. He groomed King for leadership, to be the public face and voice of the movement. A. Philip Randolph called for the 1963 March on Washington, but Rustin organized it. It ended with King's "I Have A Dream" oration. Rustin himself, although perfectly capable of public leadership, always had to stay a step back, because he did not conceal the fact that he was gay. (A few years ago, PBS broadcast a program on Bayard Rustin's life, titled "Bayard Rustin, Brother Outsider." It's worth viewing.)

And we must remember the civil rights organizations, though we don't have time to talk about them: NAACP, CORE, Whitney Young and the Urban League, and King's SCLC.

And we must remember our Unitarian civil rights martyrs, though we don't have time to talk about them: Viola Liuzzo, Jimmy Lee Jackson, and the Rev. James Reeb.

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Just as Randolph weathered attacks by young militants of his day (including the young, hot Bayard Rustin), King maintained his faith, challenged as he was by younger, more impatient black leaders—Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael (SNCC), and H. Rap Brown. The Movement was being eclipsed by the Viet Nam war resistance; and by the downfall of Lyndon Johnson, the greatest political friend the Movement ever had.

King remained steadfast. His efforts broadened from opposing overt segregation in the South, to covert racism in the North. From the plight of sharecroppers he moved to the plight of the poor generally, black, brown, and white, urban and rural.

In a once-famous sermon entitled "Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution," King said

“In a few weeks some of us are coming to Washington to see if the will is still alive or if it is [dead] in this nation. We are coming to Washington in a Poor People’s Campaign. Yes, we are going to bring the tired, the poor, the huddled masses. We are going to bring those who have known long years of hurt and neglect. We are going to bring those who have come to feel that life is a long and desolate corridor with no exit signs. We are going to bring children and adults and old people, people who have never seen a doctor or a dentist in their lives.

We are not coming to engage in any histrionic gesture. We are not coming to tear up Washington. We are coming to demand that the government address itself to the problem of poverty. We read one day, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.” But if a man doesn’t have a job or an income, he has neither life nor liberty nor the possibility for the pursuit of happiness. He merely exists.

We are coming to ask America to be true to the huge promissory note that it signed years ago. And we are coming to engage in dramatic nonviolent action, to call attention to the gulf between promise and fulfillment; to make the invisible visible.”

King used this sermon for at least 3 years, from 1965 until his death in 1968, and changed it to suit the changing times.

He began to oppose the war in Viet Nam, and was beginning to point out the connections between the corporations, the military, and the disparity of wealth:

“I want to say one other challenge that we face is simply that we must find an alternative to war and bloodshed. Anyone who feels, and there are still a lot of people who feel that way, that war can solve the social problems facing mankind is sleeping through a great revolution. President Kennedy said on one occasion, “Mankind must put an end to war or war will put an end to

mankind." The world must hear this. I pray God that America will hear this before it is too late. . .

I am convinced that it is one of the most unjust wars that has ever been fought in the history of the world. Our involvement in the war in Vietnam has torn up the Geneva Accord. It has strengthened the military-industrial complex; it has strengthened the forces of reaction in our nation. It has put us against the self-determination of a vast majority of the Vietnamese people, and put us in the position of protecting a corrupt regime that doesn't care about its suffering people.

It has played havoc with our domestic destinies. This day we are spending five hundred thousand dollars to kill every Vietcong soldier. Every time we kill one we spend about five hundred thousand dollars while we spend only fifty-three dollars a year for every person characterized as poverty-stricken in the so-called poverty program, which is not even a good skirmish against poverty.

Not only that, it has put us in a position of appearing to the world as an arrogant nation. And here we are ten thousand miles away from home fighting for the so-called freedom of the Vietnamese people when we have not even put our own house in order. And we force young black men and young white men to fight and kill in brutal solidarity. Yet when they come back home that can't hardly live on the same block together."

For all its uncompleted work here in America, our Civil Rights movement has inspired millions around the world. Let us note the most notable:

The Catholics of Northern Ireland, inspired by the success and moral character of non-violent protest, began their own civil rights association. It was met, in 1969 with a vicious attack on the road to Londonderry. The attackers shared the fundamentalist Protestantism of our worst Segregationists. Thus began the current Troubles, which plagued the Province for the next 30 years. Ireland didn't have an Irish Martin Luther King. It had the IRA.

Another example is the pro-democracy movement in China that rose and was crushed in 1989. There is no better symbol of the power of non-violence than that image of a single man facing down a tank.

Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu negotiated an end to Apartheid (which is the Afrikaans word for 'segregation.')

Aung San Suu Kyi : [àun s^hán su tòi] another Nobel Peace Prize winner, continues her courageous work for democracy in Burma.

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I visited friends in the Mississippi Delta a few years ago, and happened to be able to go inside the local public elementary school. It is new, clean, and has all the fixin's. Mississippi's come a ways, I'm thinking. But then I see that the pupils were all—100%--African American. The white pupils were all—100%--enrolled in private Academies. Mississippi has not come very far after all. Old times there are not forgotten.

No matter—we must simply carry on. As far from the prize as we may be, we are nearer it than we were before. I close with the words of Dr. King:

“And so I refuse to despair. I think we're going to achieve our freedom. Because however much America strays from the ideals of justice, the goal of America is freedom.

Abused and scorned though we may be . . . our destiny is tied up in the destiny of America.

We're going to win our freedom, because both the sacred heritage of our nation, and the eternal will of the almighty God are embodied in our echoing demands.

And so I can still sing “We Shall Overcome.”

We shall overcome because the arc of the moral universe is long,
but it bends towards justice.

We shall overcome because Carlyle is right: no lie can live forever.

We shall overcome because William Cullen Bryant is right: truth
crushed to earth will rise again.

We shall overcome because James Russell Lowell is right: truth
forever on the scaffold, wrong forever on the throne, yet that
scaffold sways the future.

And with this faith, we will be able to hew out of the mountain of
despair, a [jewel] of hope.

With this faith, we will be able to transform the jangling discords of
our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood.

With this faith we will be able to speed up the day when all of
God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles,
Protestant and Catholic, will be able to join hands, and live together
as brothers and sisters all over this great nation.

That will be a great day, that will be a great tomorrow. In the
words of the scripture, to speak symbolically, that will be the day
when the morning stars will sing together, and the [children] of
God will shout for joy."

[long pause]

Soon we will sing the Movement hymn and anthem 'We Shall
Overcome,' and it will have different meanings for each of us:

- What do you hope will be overcome in your lifetime, and in your
life?
- You'll walk hand in hand--with whom? God? Other races? Your
spouse? Your children or grandchildren?
- You shall all be free—free from what? Abuse? An addiction?
Pain? Debt?

- You shall live in peace. Peace, meaning, no more war, no more fighting? Or a state of peace within yourself? Or both. Or all, or something else.

Please use this time to silently meditate or pray on these things. (at 45 seconds cue Dennis to play 2nd half, pianissimo)