

Setting the Course

Rob Eller-Isaacs

January 17th, 2010

I have a confession to make. I've never been to Ohio. Don't get me wrong. I've been to the buckeye state. I've been to Cleveland, Columbus and Kent. But I've never crossed the river from Kentucky, that place where no one black or white is free. I've seen Ohio shimmer there on the far shore but neither I nor anybody here has crossed that icy river. I have a confession to make. I know where we're going but I don't know the way. I know we have to cross that river without a bridge, without a path, "having to move faster than the ice goes under."

It is completely unreasonable. It makes no sense. We had better stay here where we are, safe and sane here in Kentucky. But the man whose life and ministry we gather to honor today told us that "Reason, devoid of the purifying power of faith, can never free itself from distortions and rationalizations." We, who welcome reason as a gift of God, we who celebrate the progress that great gift has wrought, have cause to ask ourselves what place that purifying faith, of which the prophet Martin writes might have in this good life we share.

The courage I hope to inspire today begins with confession. Confession is hard for us. We are people who like to think things through. We like to read the map and make a plan and follow-through. We like to know how we're going to get from here to there. We like to think we're smart enough to find our way without even stopping to ask for directions. And so, just like the children Moses led, we wander in the wilderness not knowing where we're bound.

Do you know who owns this place? Let me hear you say, we do. And do you know who the we who owns this place may be? Some years ago after months of careful study your board of trustees answered the question this way; *the moral owners of Unity Church-Unitarian are all those who yearn for the Beloved Community and see Unity Church as one instrument toward its realization.*

The Beloved Community is across the river over in Ohio. We've never been there and we don't know how to get there but some of us have seen it shimmering there on the far shore. Our colleague Tom Schade, one of the ministers at First Parish Unitarian in Worchester, Massachusetts writing in Soul Work: Anti-racist Theologies in Dialogue points to the need for the purifying power of faith to help us find our way. He writes:

The Beloved Community will not occur because we build it with a political and social strategy, but as we recover a proper understanding of the human person in relation to the divine. The Beloved Community will occur because each of us, having experienced a sense of God's judgment and forgiveness of our own social being, will be able to see each other from God's point of view. The Beloved Community is a by-product of religious awakening, but not its cause or goal. The crucial fulcrum of that awakening is the sharing of our own flawed, imperfect, sinful selves, our hunger for forgiveness, and our compassion for each other's suffering.

Born into one of the leading families of the black church in America, Martin Luther King Jr. showed early promise as a preacher. When the time came for him to prepare for ministry he headed north to Crozer, an American Baptist school now merged into Colgate Rochester in upstate New York. While there he was first exposed to liberal theology and in particular to the work of Henry Nelson Wieman, the great process theologian of the time whose term for God was “creative interchange.” He pursued graduate studies at Boston University from which he received an earned doctorate in 1955. His thesis topic was “A Comparison of the Conceptions of God in the Thinking of Paul Tillich and Henry Nelson Wieman” He **was powerfully drawn to liberal theology.**

The Rev. Rosemary Bray McNatt in a 2002 UU World article entitled “To Pray Without Apology” recalls a conversation with Coretta Scott King. “Oh, I went to Unitarian churches for years, even before I met Martin,” she told me, explaining that she had been, since college, a member of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, which was popular among Unitarians and Universalists. “And Martin and I went to Unitarian churches when we were in Boston.” What surprised and saddened me most (McNatt goes on) was what she said next. Though I am paraphrasing, the gist of it was this: “We gave a lot of thought to becoming Unitarian at one time, but Martin and I realized we could never build a mass movement of black people if we were Unitarian.”

I share this vignette not in order to claim some small share of Martin and Coretta’s significance but instead to wrestle with the cultural realities their brief sojourn among us imply. We are a white church. In this divided nation where the color of one’s skin still matters far too much, there’s nothing to be gained by lying to ourselves. But just as every person’s identity is far more complex than appearances imply this white church has some beloved members who have seen beyond its cultural complexion to the radiant truth at the heart of our purifying faith. I won’t embarrass these brave pioneers whose search for spiritual sustenance has led across the color line by telling them how deeply touched I am to walk with them. I respect Martin and Coretta’s choice to return to the black Baptist church. I share their concern that “liberalism’s superficial optimism” often undermines our best intentions. But I still believe we have good gifts to bring especially as we learn to recognize and then confess our limitations.

Once we’ve made heartfelt confession we become more able to seek out others who, whether or not they feel drawn to our church, are eager to be good companions on this fool’s walk across the undulating ice-floe to Ohio. We know where we’re going. The old hymn tells it well. *“Wider grows the Kingdom, reign of love and light. For it we must labor ‘til our faith is sight. Prophets have proclaimed it, martyrs testified, poets sung its glory, heroes for it died.”* We have no roadmap, no triptic to follow, no proven path which promises to take us there. Alone friends we will never find our way. But if we can, in all humility, show up, make friends and with our neighbors do our best to describe the land to which we’re bound then I have to believe we can get there.

This work of prophecy cannot be done alone. No team of experts is equipped to set the course. Though we harbor images of lonely individuals risking their lives to cry out for a future

more loving and just than today the reality is that prophecy is always grounded in community. James Luther Adams, the great Unitarian Universalist 20th century theologian wrote:

A church that does not concern itself with the struggle in history for human decency and justice, a church that does not show concern for the shape of things to come, a church that does not try to interpret the signs of the times, is not a prophetic church. We have long held to the idea of the priesthood of all believers, the idea that all believers have direct access to the ultimate resources of the religious life and that every believer has the responsibility of achieving an explicit faith for free persons. As an element in this radical laicism we need also a firm belief in the prophethood of all believers. The prophetic liberal church is not a church in which the prophetic function is assigned merely to the few. The prophetic liberal church is the church in which persons think and work together to interpret the signs of the times in the light of their faith, to make explicit through discussion the epochal thinking that the times demand. The prophetic liberal church is the church in which all members share the common responsibility to attempt to foresee the consequences of human behavior (both individual and institutional), with the intention of making history in place of merely being pushed around by it. Only then...can we together foresee doom and mend our common ways.

Friends, I've come to believe the only way to find our way across the river to the promised-land is to act as if we live there now. If we can dream it we can make it real. On April 3rd, 1968 at a Memphis rally in support of striking sanitation workers, Martin Luther King Jr. ended what would turn out to be his last speech with these stirring words:

Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really 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 so 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!!

And having finished, exhausted and utterly drained he fell back into the arms of his colleagues, those partners in prophecy who made Martin's ministry possible. They helped him collapse into a chair while people cheered and made their way out into the night. I close the way that Carl Sandburg closed his great epic poem called "The People, Yes."

This old anvil laughs at many broken hammers.

There are men (and women) who can't be bought.

The fireborn are at home in fire.

The stars make no noise.

You can't hinder the wind from blowing.

Time is a great teacher.

Who can live without hope.

In the darkness with a great bundle of grief

The people march.

In the night and overhead a shovel of stars for

keeps, the people march:

Where to? What next?

And let the people say, Amen.

