

2008 UUSC SOCIAL JUSTICE SUNDAY SERMON
Written and delivered by Carmen Emerson
First Parish – Waltham, Massachusetts (March 2008)

On Voices and Choices

On April 4, 1967, The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. addressed a meeting of Clergy and Laity Concerned at Riverside Church in New York City, delivering a speech titled, "Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence."

I was not yet five years old at that time, but I can remember watching the evening news with my father that year. One night, after a news report on the number of troops killed in Vietnam, I asked my father to explain to me what "troops" meant. And when I came to understand that troops meant *real people* I asked him, in disbelief, "Well why would people kill other people on purpose?"

He cleared his throat – which indicated to me that he was stalling – and I took a deep breath – which indicated to him that my questions were just getting started – and then he decided it was well past my bedtime. My question was never answered. But such questions, unanswered, have a way of persisting.

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At the time of his Riverside address, Dr. King had begun to focus his nonviolent protest philosophy against the socio-economic injustices that ultimately hurt *all* Americans, black and white, rich and poor. Yet, this leader of the Civil Rights Movement and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize faced widespread criticism for speaking out against the war in Vietnam. King replied to his critics, explaining that he was compelled to speak against the Vietnam War because he considered the war abroad a war against the poorest people at home. And he did so because, in his own words, "...my conscience leaves me no other choice." *My conscience leaves me no other choice. /////*

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Through his personal choices and sacrifices, King modeled active engagement of one's life in the work of social justice, notwithstanding the long odds or the dangerous struggles inherent to challenging the status quo. With his keen intellect, King offered those gathered at Riverside a clear critique of the historical and political decisions that initiated the Vietnam War and led to a commitment of American troops there. His Nobel Peace Prize provided him the credibility to speak to the ineffectiveness of violent protest against real, imagined, or created enemies.

for action – the calls to engage in the *responsibilities* of being human – individually, and in community.

As to our Humanist heritage, we are reminded by minister and scholar, William R. Murray that the individual freedom and self-determination inherent to religious humanism ask us to carry great responsibility, "for what we say and do." *Voices and choices*. Murray further reminds us that our humanity can flourish only in a true democracy, one in which all voices – poor and wealthy – will be heard, and one in which choices toward human dignity and fulfillment are available to *all* Americans, not merely the privileged few.

There is no doubt that we are a theologically diverse religious movement. In such times as these it is essential for us to remember that we are politically diverse, as well. *This is our strength as a faith tradition!* Our theological and political diversities uniquely position us to be a strong, clear voice of reason and faith. When UUs model that we need not think alike to love alike, we raise the tenor of the national and global conversation of justice and peace.

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At Riverside, King named war as "an enemy of the poor," both domestically and internationally." He asked those gathered to understand that, [quote] the "conditions of poverty, insecurity, and injustice" serve as "the fertile soil in which the seed of communism grows and develops." Acknowledging the difficulties of the work of ahead, King asked those gathered, "Shall we say the odds are too great? Shall we tell them the struggle is too hard?" Such questions, unanswered, have a way of persisting.

Forty years later, a national fear of communism has been replaced by a national fear of terrorism. Fear remains a most effective method of control. It is a formidable weapon, deftly welded by those desperately reliant upon and invested in a common enemy from without, distracting us from the deeper possibilities which lie within.

Forty years later, exchange the war in Iraq for the war in Vietnam, consider the state of healthcare, education, affordable housing, veteran care, and civil liberties in our nation, and hear King's words again: *//// "A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death."*

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In the five years since the United States declared war on Iraq, we have lost nearly 4000 American soliders; over 60,000 American Soliders have been

wounded. Over 700,000 Iraqis have been killed, and there are 4 million Iraqi refugees.

This country spends \$275 million per day on the War. In the five years since the United States declared war on Iraq, we have spent more than \$500 billion, with billions more in the pipeline. According to the National Priorities Project, over \$141 million of those funds have come from the Waltham community.

\$500 billion. //// Is that number even meaningful to you? (If so, your canvass co-chairs may want to talk to you after the service.) Frankly, I have a hard time wrapping my mind around that figure – it is almost too abstract. So let's think of it in a different way:

- In a time of record home foreclosures and homelessness in America, \$500 billion could have provided well over 4 million affordable housing units.
- In a time when our public school systems continue to struggle, \$500 billion could have provided over 8 million elementary school teachers, or 61 million Head Start schools. Those are a lot of children not left behind.
- And speaking of children, \$500 billion could have provided health care for 277 million children.

Can you imagine what could have been happening in the Waltham community with the \$141 million you've spent on the war? Can you imagine what conscientious national leaders could have been doing with even half of \$500 billion? Can you imagine the improvements to Walter Reed Hospital or other VA hospitals throughout this nation? Can you imagine the healthcare and benefits that could have been provided to veterans of the Iraqi War, the Gulf War...Afghanistan, Vietnam...and even World War II?

In testament to King's prophetic voice, let us focus on the Gulf Coast region, where the poorest people of the world's wealthiest nation struggle in a recovery effort subjugated to the same disparities of race and class which called to King's conscience over 40 years ago.

Affordable housing in New Orleans is nonexistent; only one of seven general hospitals in New Orleans is operating at pre-storm levels; thousands of teachers have been fired while hundreds of students have been placed on waiting lists because there is no room for them in public schools; post-traumatic stress incidents and suicide rates are steadily rising, but funding for mental health services continues to be reduced.

2.5 years later thousands of people still have not received the funding promised to rebuild their homes. And yet, this year Louisiana taxpayers will be asked to fund \$1.2 billion for proposed Iraq War spending.

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Now I know that I've thrown a lot of numbers at you this morning. The numbers are numbing, the odds are long, the struggle is hard, and the stories are heartbreaking. /// But the stories are also hopeful and inspiring, reminding us that our voices and our choices do indeed matter.

Consider the story of New Orleans resident, Viola Washington, who was trying to flee the city when she found an abandoned truck and went back to help rescue over 100 people. She returned home months later to find *everything* gone. Everything...you've seen the pictures, and if you've been there since Katrina you can understand what Viola meant. "There was work to be done," she said, "but where do you start when everything's gone? Then I thought, 'Well, I have myself.'" The hard struggles continue, but with support from the UUA-UUSC Gulf Coast Relief Fund, Viola is back on her feet, working every day to locate temporary housing and aid for poor families returning to New Orleans.

Talk to your friends and colleagues about the time they've spent in Mississippi and Louisiana, volunteering in our Gulf Coast Relief Program. Listen to their stories about rebuilding homes and hope as they worked with Gulf Coast residents and UU Service Committee Program Partners. They return from the Gulf Coast as changed people, understanding in a renewed way what it means to put our faith into action. ///

During a trip to New Orleans in September 2007, Mary Fontenot of All Churches Together (ACT), a UUSC program partner, told me, "You Unitarian Universalists – you all just didn't talk about what needed to happen here – you asked us, those of us who live here, what we needed, and then you came down here and started working with us to help us make it happen. I know we're from different religions, and I know that we do not believe the same things...but you all are doing what matters." *We need not think alike to love alike.*

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Throughout the history, theology, facts and figures considered today, certain questions persist: Why do we kill other people? Why do we take care of some while neglecting others? When faced with the overwhelming needs of this nation and of the world, are the odds too great? Is the struggle just too hard? Have we rationed our moral outrage to the point of apathy? Are we still a democracy?

Whom do we hold accountable? Is the spiritual death of our nation eminent? Do our voices and choices really make a difference? *What can we do?*

My friends, we can educate, we can act, and we can speak out!

Every day we can choose to *educate* ourselves and others about military spending. We can learn what it truly costs – in blood and treasure both for us and other nations – to continue the war in Iraq. We can *act* by supporting the UUSC's human rights work for peacemaking and justice, and by volunteering in the Gulf Coast Relief Program. We can *speak out* by writing letters and making phone calls to our elected leaders and to candidates. Please visit the "JusticeSunday" link on the UUSC website for "Educate, Act and Speak Out!" program resources.

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"Between the head and the heart is the voice, and our voice reflects our choices...Our [voices reach] the world through the manner in which we live..." My friends, as people of a theologically and politically diverse faith, it is our highest calling to hold each other up through the work of justice and peacemaking.

We need not fear unanswerable questions. We covenant to accompany one another in a search for truth and meaning, and questioning is a sacrament to us.

We need not surrender to apathy or be mesmerized by uncertainty. We are active agents in our own salvation. We have roots in the wisdom resources which ground us and wings in the principles which guide us.

We need not forfeit the dignities or responsibilities of human freedom. We need not fear that the odds are too great and the struggles too hard. From Michael Servetus to James Reeb we have a social justice legacy that is in our bones. We know or can learn how to do this work, we need only choose to do it.

Finally, we need not ration our outrage, we need not settle for being less than we are, and we need not suffer a spiritual death. We are beneficiaries of a celestial inheritance – we have ourselves, we have each other, and – individually and collectively – we have the power of our voices and our choices.

Would you please rise and join me in singing Hymn No. 159.

BENEDICTION

Between the head and the heart lies the voice. Between the past and the future lies choice.

All those years ago, at Riverside Church, King expressed the hope that love would have the last word. Over 40 years later, and also in the din of war, the conversation of justice and peacemaking continues. Inspired by our relationships with the divine, and with one another, may we find courage for the work ahead. Strengthened by our theological and political diversity, may our voices ring clear and true as we claim our place and our power in this ongoing conversation.

Through our voices and our choices, by word and by deed, may we educate, act, and speak out, so that love may indeed have the last word.

Blessed be, amen.