

The Significance of Struggle©

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Struggle, it is something every one of us in this room is familiar with. On some level, in some manner, each of us has experienced a time of struggle. Struggle is an integral part of being human. But it isn't limited just to us humans. Struggle can be found in all that we see around us.

An initial reaction to the word is likely to be less than positive. The word itself seems coarse and hard with its guttural sound. **Struggle!** It is quite likely that many of you, like me, would generally prefer to have considerably less struggle in our lives. But there is very little if any chance that we are going to eliminate struggle while we live. If you are hoping that struggle will soon disappear from your life, I would recommend you not hold your breath waiting for that time to arrive. I don't want anyone to require CPR.

As you know, tomorrow is a National Holiday. It is the day set aside each year to honor the late Martin Luther King, Jr.—a man who knew a great deal about struggle. Typically when the word holiday is mentioned we think of a day off from work, a break in our regular routine, or a time of celebration. Each of these applies to the Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday. But there is something else that the day reminds us of as well. It reminds us of the significance of struggle. Like Independence Day on July 4th, Martin Luther King, Jr. Day symbolizes a watershed movement in this land. A movement for an end to oppression and domination. Like Veteran's day, the holiday invites us to remember King and all those who fought, and some of whom died, for the high ideals contained in the Declaration of Independence; "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." Like President's day that replaced the two holidays honoring Presidents Washington and Lincoln, tomorrow honors an important leader in our country. But King was never elected to any political office. He was a minister, a Baptist minister, who became a prophetic voice not only in his church, or even his denomination, but for all those who had suffered the effects of racism and prejudice. He never served in the armed forces but he was a warrior just the same. He was a warrior who not only believed in and preached nonviolent resistance, he lived it. And like other prophets and warriors who came before him, he didn't get to witness the realization of his dream. In his dream everyone, irrespective of race, would be considered equal under the law of the land and there would be justice for all. In his dream all people would treat one another as brothers and sisters.

It is easy to think of King in very positive terms. He was a leader who believed in many of the values we hold dear. He stood for justice and equality for all. He spoke out for those who were less fortunate, calling this country to provide for the poor and the needy. He was critical of our country's involvement in war because he believed that violence was not the way to resolve problems. Along with these aspects of the man, there were also other less admirable attributes. As the earlier reading suggested, King liked to "bend an elbow," or more pointedly, he liked to indulge in the consumption of alcohol, and not just in moderate amounts. He was also unable to remain faithful to his wife. He seemed to be speaking about some of his shortcomings in sermons he

delivered to the Ebenezer congregation which he served. Here is what he shared with his congregation one Sunday morning. "We often develop inferiority complexes and we stumble through life with a feeling of insecurity, a lack of self-confidence, and a sense of impending failure. A fear of what life may bring encourages some persons to wander aimlessly along the frittering road of excessive drink and sexual promiscuity." (Garrow 577) It might seem that I am being critical or disparaging by bringing up these aspects of Dr. King. My intention however is not to put him down but to lift him up. And to lift up what he represented as well. He understood and championed the value that is stated in the first of our UU Principles, "The inherent worth and dignity of every person." Martin Luther King, Jr. is someone we should all hold in very high regard. I believe it is important for us to recognize that he was a person who had flaws and shortcomings just as we all do. He had personal struggles that at times were greater than he was able to overcome. His struggle against oppressive systems in our culture led to increased freedom and justice for millions of people. His struggle against his own personal demons reminds us that he was flawed just as we all are. By acknowledging that he struggled with flaws within himself, while at the same time acting to confront what was wrong in our country, we are able to see him in more realistic terms. The reading today helps us to see that in many ways he was much like ourselves. He felt insecure and overwhelmed. He doubted himself and wanted the struggles he was dealing with to somehow be reduced or eliminated. Haven't all of us felt that way at some point in our lives? I know I certainly have. And yet in spite of his own struggles, he did all that he could to alleviate some of the struggles others were facing. That is what King not only expected of himself, he asked it of others as well.

On one level, there are immense differences between the struggles I face or you face, and the struggles that Martin Luther King, Jr. was involved in. I don't know that any of us will be faced with making decisions that will impact our culture and our country as significantly as King did. On another level however, I realize that none of us knows when some decision we make, or action we take, will have an important influence on the life of another or even on the lives of many people.

I think of Rosa Parks, a seamstress in a department store, who has been called "the mother of the freedom movement." On December 1st, 1955 she refused to give up her seat on a Montgomery, Alabama bus. Her decision was pivotal to the civil rights movement and to King's rise to a position of leadership in that movement. Supposedly when she was asked years later why she sat down at the front of the bus that day she replied, "I sat down because I was tired." She wasn't talking just about being physically tired. She was indicating "that her soul was tired, her heart was tired, her whole body was tired of playing by racist rules (Palmer 32-3)." She was tired from the struggle of dealing daily with the oppression of racism. Rosa Parks had no way of knowing that her decision would have such a powerful effect on herself, on others, and on our country. Like Parks, we have no way of knowing when some action on our part may make a significant difference.

I would offer this example from my own life. About twenty years ago, while living in the Flathead Valley of this great state I was feeling stressed and sensed a need to get away to clear my mind. My wife, Sandy, and I decided to go cross country skiing in Glacier National Park as a way to unwind and get re-energized. As we were skiing that morning I noticed a person's bootprints in the snow. The fresh tracks seemed odd to

me. We were over twenty miles from the nearest town, there had been no other vehicle in the parking lot that day, and the tracks seemed to wander in an erratic fashion. Some time later we met up with the person who had made the tracks. The young man was homeless and had hitch-hiked to Montana from Ohio. He shared with us that three days before someone told him of a cabin where he might stay. He had been wandering in the woods ever since. He was wet and cold and he had eaten the last of the food he started out with. This young man had no idea of the grave danger he was in. After sharing some of our food and water with him we convinced him to give us his pack and to follow us back to where we knew we could find help. The Park Ranger we eventually made contact with later told us that had we not been there that day it was very possible the young man would have eventually succumbed to the elements.

I was out there that day in an attempt to get away from my own struggles only to meet up with someone whose struggles were clearly more significant and more urgent than my own. As I put on his pack that day, a pack that held all of his worldly possessions, I felt its weight. I noticed how much more difficult it was for me to maneuver on my skis. I tried to imagine carrying it for three days while walking through the snow, not knowing where I was or where I was going. I forgot about my own struggles—the reason I was there in the first place. In putting on his pack I felt the purpose that was calling me that day, the purpose of assisting another in their struggle. Before heading out that day there was no way for me to know that in trying to put my struggles aside for a time I would end up taking on the weight that another was carrying. After putting his pack on my back the three of us began the two mile journey back to where help could be found.

I share this story because I believe it is very likely that neither Martin Luther King, Jr. nor Rosa Parks knew the weight they would eventually carry for others. Both of them were aware that they were struggling and that others like them were struggling as well. Both of them knew that something needed to change. They understood that they were not struggling alone. They knew there were others who were in the struggle with them.

It seems to me this is one of the fundamental points of religion. We are not in this struggle alone. Each of us may have our own unique way of understanding or explaining what I am referring to here. Some of you may have a sense that a Higher Power is present with you as you walk through life. Some of you may have a Buddhist perspective and believe that if there is no self then there is no way to be alone. Others of you, whose beliefs are reflected in our seventh UU Principal, recognize the interdependent web of existence and know that there is no way to be alone when all things are connected, one to another. However you may think of it, what I encourage you to remember is that you are not in the struggle alone. Sometimes all we are able to do is recognize what we are struggling against. At other times we may be able to realize what we are struggling for. But more important than what we are struggling against or for is who is struggling along with us. Feeling the presence of those who are struggling with us can make the challenges that arise seem somehow less daunting. Knowing that we are not alone in the struggle can give us strength when we are tired or when we are full of doubt.

All of you, I am certain, know struggle personally. Whatever struggle you may be dealing with, I encourage you to consider who could be struggling along with you. Who could be willing to help with the load you are burdened with? I know that in our culture

independence and self-reliance are highly valued. But I would suggest that our interdependence and our willingness to be there for one another are at least equally important and possibly even more so.

In some religious traditions what a person believes is of paramount importance. The important beliefs are put into statements or creeds. Unitarian Universalism however does not have a creed. We assert that people don't have to think alike to worship together or to work together to make the world a better place for all to live. So while having a creed is not important to us having a covenant is. Covenant is what unites us. Covenant is what says that we will be there for one another. Here at UUFB we recognize the importance of our covenant. It is written in our bulletin. We say it together every Sunday just as we did earlier in our service. I want to invite us to say it together again. This time as we say it let us remember Martin Luther King, Jr. and the example his life demonstrates of how to face the struggles we may encounter. Join with me now in stating the covenant that is printed in the bulletin and that we carry in our hearts.

Love is the spirit of this church, and service is its prayer.
This is our covenant with one another, and the Spirit of Life:
To live together in peace, to seek truth in freedom,
And to help one another.

So it is and so may it be.