

## **“We Dream and Hope” by Rev. Meg Roberts**

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Two people. Two dreams. Yet each faltered, each experienced despair. What helped them to hold their ground? What can we learn from them, so that we too can move through our own struggles in this world?

The first person loved peace. He believed in non-violence and in the power of truth. Mahatma Gandhi was this man. He wanted to change unjust laws by having mass demonstrations of civil disobedience. These demonstrations did not, however, turn out as he had hoped. People weren't peaceful. People rioted! A policeman was killed. People were trampled by horses. They committed acts of violence, tore up railway lines, cut telegraph wires. It was pandemonium. Martial law was brought down.

Gandhi was in despair. This was not what he had asked for, what he had hoped for. He was trying to effect positive change in bringing home rule to India and it was not working. He held a public meeting in Ahmedabad. Gandhi writes, “I tried to bring home to the people the sense of their wrong, declaring a penitential fast of three days for myself, appealed to the people to go on a similar fast for a day, and suggested to those who had been guilty of acts of violence to confess their guilt. I had committed a grave error in calling upon the people in the Kheda district and elsewhere to launch upon a civil disobedience. . . . I had called on [them] before they had thus qualified themselves for it.” This was what Gandhi later referred to as his ‘Himalayan Miscalculation.’

Gandhi was not alone in feeling despair. For the second person, it happened one night, after years in the civil rights movement, after they have made some progress. But that night, someone threatened to kill him. Martin Luther King Jr. hung up the phone. King wrote: “It seemed that all of my fears had come down on me at once. I had reached saturation point. . . . In this state of exhaustion, when my courage had almost gone, I determined to take my problem to God. My head in my hands, I bowed over the kitchen table and prayed aloud. The words I spoke to God that midnight are still vivid in my memory. ‘I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But now I am afraid. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they too will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I’ve come to the point where I can’t face it alone.”

We all have dreams. We hope for the best.

What do any of us do when life throws us challenges? When we see our own limitations? When things don't turn out the way we expected them to? When the world is threatening?

We've all experienced times when the harshness of the world invades our lives. For many of us, it isn't on the scale that Gandhi and King experienced—  
in Gandhi's case, being oppressed by the foreign rule of Britain, in King's case being oppressed as an African American due to racism. But our human experiences have their connections.

Sometimes this harshness is due to forces over which we have little control: we lose our job, someone we love dies, a relationship ends, or suddenly we become ill. Other times those harsh forces lie inside ourselves, that critical voice in our head that won't stop nagging us to be somehow different than we are. I don't know how you are feeling these days, but with the news

filled with stories of violence and suffering, with the killings continuing in the Sudan, in Iraq, in Israel and in Palestine, there are times I just want to turn it all off. Avoid it. Escape. Can this really be happening? I mean, it's the 21st Century!! Haven't we humans learned anything yet!?! A little escapism doesn't hurt, but the situation is still there waiting for you when you return. So then what do you do?

You dream. Now I don't mean day-dream, although that can come in handy sometimes too. But I mean, you take your deepest values, your deepest understandings of truth, your most strongly held principles, and you dream about what the world would be like if these existed on earth. And you build hope that this is possible. Maybe these dreams will only be partly fulfilled in your lifetime. Maybe they are dreams held for future generations to fulfill. But in the process of making your dreams a closer reality, you learn. That's why I turn to people like Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King. To look at people who took their understanding of truth, based on their experiences, and then dreamed dreams and built hope. Experiences hold the seeds of change. As Jim Scott's song, which we sang earlier, says, "seeds for the sowing are laid in store, nurtured in love and conscience refined, with body and spirit united once more."

One of the things I have always admired about Gandhi was that in his various experiences, he sought always to find the truth in them. The title of his autobiography is "The Story of My Experiments with Truth." In all his experiments, he discovered for himself that there were seeds in the tradition of Hinduism that he could cultivate and thereby created a profound philosophy. For him, there was no other God but Truth, and the realization of Truth for him was through ahimsa (a Sanskrit word meaning 'nonviolence'). He believed that there is a unity to all of life. Yet in the acts of living (eating, drinking, moving about) one destroys the life of other creatures. One tries, therefore, to have compassion for all creatures, and through purification of thoughts, speech and action, to "rise above the opposing currents of love and hatred, attachment and repulsion." To overcome these opposing currents, Gandhi committed his life in service.

In applying his understanding of truth, Gandhi also knew how important it was to test his understanding within a community. In his 'Himalayan Miscalculation,' Gandhi realized that people did not understand what was being asked of them. And Gandhi held himself responsible. He knew that he would have to do things differently next time. He knew that he would have to train special volunteers in the ways of Satyagraha, a word meaning 'love force'--using 'love force' rather than 'brute force.' He realized that nonviolence and love force could be used for change, but that they were appropriate only in certain occasions, with special planning and training.

Martin Luther King also believed that truth is central. For King, truth was from God. When he was sitting at the kitchen table, feeling desperate and afraid for his life, he had an experience that changed him: "At that moment I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never before.... It seemed as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice, saying, "Stand up for righteousness, stand up for truth. God will be at your side forever.' My uncertainly disappeared. I was ready to face anything. The outer situation remained the same but God had given me inner calm.'"

Yet in our process of dreaming dreams, how do we know whether to trust that inner voice? There have been many who believed some sense of divine directive was given to them who then used their human powers for harm, such as those who carried out the attacks on 9-11. There are so

many examples in history of leaders on both sides of a conflict invoking God to be with them in their struggle (such as Osama bin Laden and George Bush). How do we know what is truth?

In our tradition, we believe that each of us has the right of conscience to decide what we believe to be true. That inner voice may give us some insight to explore, whether we believe it is divinely inspired or is wisdom that has arisen within us from our own experiences. As Unitarians and Universalists, we believe that we must hold our ideas of truth in relationship with other principles. For example, we believe in a world community with justice, peace, and freedom for all. And that all people have worth and should be treated fairly. We believe we are all connected, in a type of kinship. And that we should attempt to love our neighbours as ourselves. So if the 'truth' we come to in our individual experiences does not support these core principles, we have to reconsider this 'truth.'

We also believe that our understanding of truth can be refined through discussion and exploration within a community. We each follow our inner voice, but we can test the truths we come to within our communities, so that these truths can be refined and then guide us on a path to action.

At one point, King found himself confused about what the truth meant to him. He had become disillusioned about the effectiveness of Jesus' inclusive love: loving your neighbour as yourself, loving your enemy. He had thought it only appropriate in personal relationships, but how effective was it for social reform? Then, when he was thirty, he and his wife Coretta went to India to study Gandhi's methods of nonviolent protest. King found that Jesus' love ethic and Gandhi's method of nonviolence create a combination that would help the civil rights movement in the United States. If the civil rights movement could be inspired to use love-force not brute force, change could happen. Black Americans could actually begin to see benefits from the rights that exist in the constitution, and have de-segregation, so they didn't have to sit at the back of the bus, forced to live separate lives, often in wretched poverty.

Love is creative. Nonviolent demonstrations against injustice recognize your enemy as related to you. They use peaceful means to arrive at peaceful ends. This approach appeals to the conscience of other humans (whether it be the perpetrators of the injustice or the bystanders who are doing nothing to change society's wrongs). When these others see nonviolent protest, it draws their attention to the imbalance of power and people begin to question what is going on. Peter Paris, in looking at the work of Martin Luther King Jr., writes about King's view: "The end of love is community, and nonviolence facilitates that goal. The opposite of love is hate, which aims at the annihilation of its object and the destruction of community" (Peter Paris, *Black Religious Leaders: Conflict in Unity*, 110). I would add that hate is built on fear. The opposite of love is fear, which, when intensified, results in such hate that the humanity of the other people is overlooked.

I am doubtful that nonviolent demonstrations would be effective against fascists, against terrorists, against extremism in whatever form it takes, but I do know that it can prick the consciences of others who may be able to stand up in defense of those who are being oppressed. I do know that responding to harshness in our lives in many circumstances with love has a powerful effect.

What do we mean by 'love'? There are various types of love: erotic love, love of friend, love of country, love of material goods. By 'love' King meant the Christian concept of agape. For me,

agape is a loving kindness, a goodwill towards others. It persuades us to respond to all human beings as equal. This kind of love attracts us into a new kind of community, expanding who we accept, giving special care to the marginalized and oppressed. It is about loving my neighbour as myself, about trying to see that my enemy is also my kin, connected to me, deserving to be treated with fairness, so that justice may be served for all. Such love does not look to serve my needs alone, but the needs of all in the community.

Using peaceful means to arrive at peaceful ends is the method used by many of you who participate in marches for peace and for civil rights. And even in these times of demonstrations, do we always use peaceful means to arrive at peaceful ends? Do we respond to our enemies as our kin? I find that it is so easy for me to demonize those who I disagree with (such as U.S. President George Bush). Yet how can I both recognize his humanity and also vehemently disagree with his policies (whether they be the pre-emptive strike on Iraq, or the weaponization of space through the ballistic missile program)? How I focus instead on his actions and words (rather than name-calling)? Can I still find the inherent worth of my opponent, because he still is a human being? It takes effort to love this way. I need to stretch beyond my comfort zone as to who I consider my 'equal.'

If loving kindness is important to us, if inclusiveness is important to us, if we believe that we are all fundamentally equal, we are all included in a world community of love. Now of course these are lofty ideals, and none of us are perfect--that's not what being human is about. No one person is responsible for the creation of this community of love. Neither Gandhi, King, you or me, alone. It's about being in community, each doing his or her part. It's about acting on our beliefs. For out of moments of despair and feelings of powerlessness, we can build hope. We ask for help from members of our community and offer what help we can to each other. I build on the hope that what I've learned from Gandhi and King. I've learned that loving my enemy means recognizing their humanity, and focusing on disagreeing with their actions and words (often vehemently), and trying to change the outcome, but still not resorting to demonizing them.

Do we all not hope for a better world? And is that hope not built on some experiences in our world?

If you lived in the 1700s in North America, and someone told you that someday people of African descent would no longer be slaves, would you have believed them?

If you lived in the early 1800s, and someone told you that someday women would get to vote and become heads of governments, would you have believed them?

If you lived in India during the early 1900s, and someone told you that someday you would have home rule thanks to nonviolent resistance, would you have believed them?

Would you have believed that officially-sanctioned segregation would end in the United States because of the pressure that came about due to nonviolent resistance?

Would you have believed in the 1970s that apartheid would end in South Africa without massive violence and bloodshed?

Even though we face hardship, even though we face a troubled world, we can lift ourselves up by dreaming dreams and building hope. I have a dream, just as Martin Luther King did: I have a

dream that love will transform the world—that this is not only reasonable but necessary. I build my life on that hope.

What dream do you hold today? What injustice would you like to end? On what will you build your hope?