

On Resisting Tyranny
Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver
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The Reflection on the Theme by Kelly Kanyid is not available in order to protect the identity of an undocumented subject.

On Resisting Tyranny© by Rev. Kathryn A. Bert

This is an excerpt from what turned out to be Martin Luther King's last address, delivered April 3, 1968 at Mason Temple, the Church of God in Christ Headquarters in Memphis Tennessee. Said, King:

"All we say to America is, "Be true to what you said on paper." If I lived in China or even Russia, or any totalitarian country, maybe I could understand some of these illegal injunctions. Maybe I could understand the denial of certain basic First Amendment privileges, because they hadn't committed themselves to that over there. But somewhere I read of the freedom of assembly. Somewhere I read of the freedom of speech. Somewhere I read of the freedom of press. Somewhere I read that the greatness of America is the right to protest for right.¹ And so just as I say, we aren't going to let dogs or water hoses turn us around, we aren't going to let any injunction turn us around. We are going on....

"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!!"

"I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain." Said King, the night before he was assassinated.

I used to wonder, in my youth, what it would have been like to come of age during the Civil Rights movement of the 50's and 60's.. I was four years old in 1968, so don't remember the assassination of King. I'd love to know from my elders, how many of you remember the assassination of Dr. King? I see

X hands up – and for those of you younger than me, I invite you to ask your elders about their memories and their learnings from that time. This is good coffee hour conversation.

I wondered at the demonstrations, the protests, the assassination, the violence. I wonder no more. Though different, this is also so much the same. Instead of the National Guard being sent to protect protesters, they are being deployed to arrest – and apparently kill – protesters. But the similarity is stark. King's words about the freedom of assembly, the freedom of speech, the freedom of the press resonate through the decades and hold renewed meaning today. "Somewhere I read that the greatness of America is the right to protest for right."

And make no mistake, we are right, in this demand that due process be followed, the freedom of assembly, free speech and a free press be honored. Regardless of your thoughts on immigration, whether or not you think immigration should be limited, or if people should follow certain steps, what is happening on the streets of Minneapolis/St. Paul is wrong. People being followed for being brown, and asked for their ID without cause, dragged out of vehicles, beaten up and tear gassed. There is no moral justification for these actions. And in this way, I believe I know what it was like to have watched Bloody Sunday on TV, March 7th, 1965. I do not know what it was like to have been on the Edmond Pettus Bridge that day, as Alabama Highway Patrol troopers attacked civil rights demonstrators, but I do believe I now know what it was like to watch the coverage of those events, as the events in Minnesota unfold before our very eyes. And some people in Minneapolis, unfortunately, do know now what it was like to have been on that bridge in 1965.

The murder of Renee Macklin Good brings back the memory of Viola Liuzzo in 1965. She was also a white woman, killed for the audacity of driving activists, black men, between the cities of Selma and Montgomery. In case you don't know this history, it was the night of March 25, 1965 that Liuzzo was driving a young black civil rights volunteer, Leroy Moton, back to Montgomery after having participated in the historic Selma to Montgomery march. They were on their way to pick up more marchers when a car carrying four Klansmen began chasing them, and opened fire into Liuzzo's car. She was struck and killed instantly. Leroy Moton was knocked unconscious by the following crash leading the Klansmen to believe he was dead, though he awoke unharmed.

That Liuzzo was killed by a Klansman and Good by state-sanctioned officers should be alarming, though the stories aren't as different as that sounds. Liuzzo was a Unitarian Universalist, a member of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Detroit, and when I served in Lansing, MI, I had members there who still remembered her. Her reputation was smeared following her death the way the administration has sought to smear Good's memory.

It turns out – and this is something I only learned this year– it turns out that the smear campaign against Viola Liuzzo was mounted by J. Edgar Hoover and the FBI, as a means of diverting attention from the fact that a key FBI informant was in the car with Liuzzo's killers. If you hadn't heard of Viola Liuzzo before, it likely because she was erased from textbooks and public memory because her name was discredited – mostly based on gender, and wholly unfounded.

So, we've seen this before. We know this story. And we know how it ends. We have seen the mountain top. And we've looked over, and we've seen the promised land. And we may not get there – we, the individuals in this room, but we – the collective we that knows right from wrong. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!

That is not my usual rhetorical style, but I think King used the Christian story effectively to teach a nation the difference between right and wrong, to teach non-violence and non-cooperation with evil. There are Christian churches locally – Lutheran and Methodist and UCC - who are organizing an event to take place on Saturday. They are organizing against Christian Nationalism. Here's a description of the event, which was also outlined in Friday's bulletin, these churches are "celebrating our commitment to love and justice through a worship service and resource fair where local justice and service organizations will present opportunities for action. Although we are a Christian group taking a stand against Christian Nationalism, people of all faiths and no faiths are invited to join us." I wanted to let you know about this event, in case you are interested in joining. They have consciously chosen to make it ecumenical rather than interfaith – that is, Christian, because it is Christianity that has been perverted into this Christian Nationalism. The group 'Christians against Christian Nationalism' defines Christian Nationalism as "a political ideology that seeks to merge Christian and American identities, distorting both the Christian faith and America's constitutional democracy." In any case, we've been invited to participate in this event, and I hope that some of you will.

Alexander Karn makes the point that these events and rallies and protests are not just aimed at affecting change 'out there' but they are also effective at changing us 'in here' – and that, my friends, is where the power lies. This is a truth explored by the Side with Love organizing strategy team in their 30 Days of Love campaigns – something that started well before the first election of Donald Trump – I think I first introduced it in worship in 2013 to my former congregation. The Thirty days of Love is a spiritual journey for social justice. It is a period of intentional action, service, education, and reflection to focus on our work for justice. We mark it as beginning on this Sunday as we celebrate the birthday of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and we end it on February 15 with an all-ages service on Bouncebackability. Our February theme is Embodying Resilience. If you're interested in signing up for emails or texts from the Thirty Days of Love campaign, we'll include that information in the Tuesday bulletin.

This month we are Practicing Resistance. Of course, it is the cruel, unreasonable, or arbitrary use of power or control we are resisting: Tyranny. Which is exactly what this president is administering, through his ICE agents and threat of the insurrection act to punish the Minnesotans who are so vigorously defending their immigrant neighbors.

The call came out this week to clergy all over the nation to head to Minnesota to support the citizens who are being threatened with violence and destruction. I want to read you this call, because it ties the history of the Black Civil Rights Movement in America to this moment in time:

"On Monday, March 8, 1965, as state violence was unleashed against Black citizens in Selma, Martin Luther King Jr. penned a telegram to clergy across the nation:

"In the vicious maltreatment of defenseless citizens of Selma, where old women and young children were gassed and clubbed at random, we have witnessed an eruption of the disease of racism which seeks to destroy all of America. No American is without responsibility. All are involved in the sorrow that rises from Selma to contaminate every crevice of our national life. The people of Selma will struggle on for the soul of the nation, but it is fitting that all America help to bear the burden. I call therefore, on clergy of all faiths representative of every part of the country, to join me for a ministers' march to Montgomery on Tuesday morning, March 9th. In this way all America will testify to the fact that the struggle in Selma is for the survival of democracy everywhere in our land."

“That call was answered. Clergy came from across the country. Among them was Rev. James Reeb, who was brutally beaten and later died from his injuries. Alongside the lives of Jimmie Lee Jackson and Viola Liuzzo, his sacrifice stands as a permanent reminder of the cost of answering history when conscience demands it.

“It is in that same spirit—and with that same clarity—that we issue this call now.”

They write, and then they go on to say:

“In the targeted violence against immigrant communities from Latine and Somali neighborhoods—where families are being torn apart by masked agents, where communities are organizing, resisting, and protecting one another, and where Renee Good’s life has been taken with reckless disregard for the preciousness of human life—we are witnessing an eruption of corruption, racism, and the worship of money over life itself, now threatening the soul of this nation.

“No American is without responsibility for the 600+ and growing number of people kidnapped and missing from our communities, nor for Renee’s murder. All are involved in the sorrow that rises from Minneapolis and contaminates every crevice of our national life.

“The people of Minneapolis will continue to struggle for an end to suffering and violence, and to redeem the soul of this nation. But this moment also demands that others come—to witness what is being tested here, to learn from how communities are responding, and to help bear the burden together. What is unfolding in Minneapolis will not stay here.

“We therefore call on clergy and faith leaders of all faiths, representative of every part of the country, to join us for a day of witness and resistance—a working convening rooted in accountability to impacted communities and designed to build the relationships, skills, and commitments needed for sustained action across the country.

“In this way, all who come will bear witness to the fact that the struggle in Minneapolis is for a new America, a new Beloved Community, and a new democracy everywhere in the world.” End quote.

How could I say ‘no’ to that? I am going because I have colleagues who can’t: Who have children at home, who don’t have the funds, whose health is precarious. I am in the fortunate position of being able to go, and so I will.

But don’t get me wrong. This fight is happening in our own community as well. Though the federal government hasn’t dispatched agents at 5 times the number of local police, we do have ICE agents in our community and they are injuring, kidnapping, and disappearing our neighbors.

We have more whistles to hand out this morning, thanks to Ransom Reed. If you don’t know what I’m referring to, there’s a pamphlet with explanation also available. We still have BINGO cards available encouraging you to frequent businesses in the neighborhood who are targeted by ICE and threatening their livelihoods.

Timothy Snyder outlines the rules for effective resistance in such easy to digest terms: “it’s ok to take a little step, so long as...it's something you know something about, do with other people, do regularly, [and] it makes you a little bit uncomfortable. If it meets those criteria, then you're helping democracy. “

It may seem like we’re losing right now, that the Tyrants have all the power, but we hold the moral ground, because of that, will prevail in the end.

The Emperor has no clothes! We know it. The children know it. And we are not afraid to say so out loud.

We will prevail in the end. And we may not get there – we, the individuals in this room, but we – the collective we that knows right from wrong. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!