



Spirit of Life Unitarian Fellowship

Kirribilli Neighbourhood Centre
16-18 Fitzroy Street, Kirribilli
(near Milsons Point Station)

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Schedule of Services

Services are held every Sunday at 10:30 at Kirribilli Neighbourhood Centre

1 July, Rev Rex Hunt, "No one Says Much Good of Winter: Seasons and Self."

Seasons and self.



8 July, Kirribilli markets. No meeting

Lower Snowy R., Kosciuszko National Park.

15 July, Ginna Hastings & Max Lawson, "Robert Louis Stevenson: Presbyterian Pirate"

Robert Louis Stevenson, author of Treasure Island, traveller of the south seas, couldn't escape his Scottish Presbyterian background. This talk will tell of this fascinating man and discuss his book Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.

22 July, Jan Tendys, "Brexit - a tragedy."

Australians could just say, "More trade for us - why should we care?", but a strong UK is important in this time of climate crisis.

29 July, Rev. Geoff Usher, "A radical and Optimistic Heresy."

Many observers of contemporary society have noted that we are in a period of cultural warfare. Christian fundamentalists and other conservatives are waging a fierce battle against what they perceive to be the evils of liberalism. This is not the first time such a struggle has occurred. At a similar time of deep societal conflict over two centuries ago, Universalism arose in America as a radical and optimistic Christian heresy in response to the grim doctrines of eighteenth century Calvinistic Puritanism.

The Life and Death of a “King”

by Noel Preston

April 4, 2018, marks the 50th anniversary of the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. This essay explores the question: “What lasting legacy has King and his Civil Rights movement bequeathed?”

There are accolades and honours aplenty bestowed on Martin Luther King Jr, the Negro Baptist preacher. Chief among these “gongs” was the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964 “for combating racial inequality through non-violent resistance”. In 1986 President Reagan declared Martin Luther King Day a National Holiday observed each year around King's birthday (the 3rd Monday of the month). Posthumously, he received the Presidential Medal of Freedom and, with his widow, Coretta, the Congressional Gold Medal. As well as a special Centre/museum in Atlanta, there are many, many other awards including street names and monuments dedicated as memorials.

For me, the most noteworthy tribute is the bust which stands high above the main entrance to Westminster Abbey as one of ten twentieth century Christian martyrs.

The passage of laws (the Civil Rights Act 1964 and the Voting Rights Act 1965), which ended official segregation and gave new rights to the descendants of slaves, is the most evident of achievements by the movement King led. Millions who hitherto lived in inferiority and subservience are now empowered. No longer 'Negroes' - as their oppressors named them, and as King himself used this term - they are now 'Afro-Americans'. And an Afro-American has become President. Without King there would be no Obama.

Sometimes overlooked in Martin's story is the trajectory of his prophetic mission – first civil rights, then the demand for peace and an end to the war in Vietnam, and, as well, the call to eliminate poverty which he rightly knew was a pre-condition for a just society. King developed a social analysis. He saw the connections.

Indeed, I would speculate that his opposition to discrimination would, in our times, extend to the rights of the LGBTQI community. Moreover, I believe that in our era, King would be an environmental campaigner as well. His prophetic message would proclaim that nations and their governments must care for all life on Earth if justice is to prevail. Indeed in his famous Letter from Birmingham Jail he named the essence of an eco-centric message: “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.”

King's developing analysis of the relationship between social issues, and the role of economic systems in their evolution, was arguably one of the factors, in the 1960s, which gave global inspiration to the growth of a more sophisticated social justice awareness and commitment across Christian Churches. Overlapping with King's public activity was a period where the World Council of Churches gave a strong social justice lead to member churches, while it was also a period of reform in the Vatican and across Catholicism. In Australia, in the sixties and seventies, this influence was associated with programs such as Action for World Development and opposition to the Vietnam War, as well as more significant support to the emerging call for Aboriginal rights.

The King family, like others who grew up in his home state of Georgia, experienced the sad truth that, though slavery had ended after the Civil War, segregation and official discrimination (as in the right to vote and attendance at schools for instance) was widespread across the South but also a common practice in cities of the North. King's role in challenging the segregation of the South began in Montgomery, Alabama where he was a young Baptist preacher. The Montgomery Bus boycott was triggered after Mrs Rosa Parks, a 43 year old Negro seamstress, returning from a long day's work refused to move from her bus seat for a white man. This was no planned insurrection. Rosa explained later that she was just too tired. This incident, on December 1, 1955, created a protest movement in Montgomery which

continued for over a year before it was resolved. More significantly, the boycott triggered a nation wide response that challenged official and unofficial segregation.

Often in the company of his constant lieutenant, Ralph Abernethy, and other black clergy of the Southern Leadership Christian Conference (SCLC), King led numerous marches, addressed thousands of rallies, and was arrested and imprisoned dozens of times over the next 12 hectic years. The zenith of the escalating campaign was the massive march on Washington in 1963 culminating in the famous "I have a Dream" speech. Along the way there were bombings, many death threats and many deaths. There was not only the Ku Klux Klan to deal with, but public officials such as Alabama's Governor George Wallace and his Police Chief, Bull O'Connor. The Kennedy administration was ambivalent about meeting the SCLC Campaign's demands. **It was up to President Lyndon Johnson (himself a Southerner) to take the action needed. And so the Civil Rights Act 1964 and the Voting Rights Act 1965 were passed and the Courts at all levels began to dismantle official segregation.** None of this eliminated racial discrimination in the North as well as the South. By the mid 1960s other forces began to take up the campaign: groups like the Black Panthers and individuals like Malcolm X and Stokely Carmichael. More and more the protest actions became violent and this, of course, was a repudiation of Martin's absolute commitment to Non-Violent Direct Action.

The last couple of years before his assassination were disturbing for Martin Luther King. Any serious assessment of his legacy must give considered reflection to this phase of the Civil Rights struggle. There were disputes within the SCLC, and constant demands for his presence from all over the nation. As well, there were the escalating challenges of other black voices. It seems that King didn't always handle these pressures well. He battled with depression; he was drinking too much at times and his womanising was seemingly a coping mechanism he resorted to.

One of the pressures exercising King's mind and mission in this period was the conviction that his prophetic ministry should be publicly aligned with the peace movement opposing America's war in Vietnam. The other concern which weighed heavily on his mind and heart was the condition of the poor, white and black, in American society. He had hesitated to be public on these fronts because he was uncertain whether it might undermine the focus on civil rights for Negroes. **But the connection between all these social justice issues was clear to him.** He was now ready to declare more openly his sympathy with democratic socialism. Indeed, it appears that to suppress these convictions was only adding to his depression and guilt. He knew that broadening the struggle was essential for the vision he had of "the beloved community" which, roughly, was his translation of what Jesus meant when he spoke of "the Kingdom of God".

So, to his peace activism: On April 4, 1967, one year to the day before his assassination, he preached at the famed New York City church, Riverside church. His sermon was precisely prepared and one of his most powerful. He began by noting that for two years he had been silent but his conscience now left him no choice. He detailed policy changes to end America's involvement in the Vietnam war which he said was a "symptom of a far deeper malady within the American spirit". He clearly linked his opposition to the war with the public witness he had waged since 1956. He accused the nation of taking "the young black men who had been crippled by our society and sending them to this immoral war on behalf of so called freedom when they have not found freedom in southwest Georgia and East Harlem".

The immediate reaction was hostile, much more so than he had ever expected. Some accused him of cherry-picking causes because interest in the southern civil rights issues was waning. Radicals thought he was yesterday's man, too southern, too religious and too soft. The nation's major newspapers and media accused him of going too far and undermining his previous work. His relationship with President Johnson was seriously damaged.

But the peace movement embraced him, and in the last year of his life encouraged him to speak on anti-war platforms. He was approached about running on a peace ticket in the forthcoming Presidential election as a running mate to Dr Benjamin Spock .

But alongside the anti-war campaign, **the cause of anti-poverty** also emerged as a priority for him. His forays into northern cities like Chicago convinced him that the Negro and many whites lived in unacceptable poverty. His “democratic socialist” instincts and his views about economic inequality came to the fore. He knew that his opponents would use this against him and the work of the SCLC. Even though he was vulnerable to damage - and after 12 years non-stop campaigning he was damaged - he chose to listen to Jesse Jackson, Stanley Levison, James Lawson, “socialist church leaders” and trade unionists. On December 4, 1967 King announced the Poor Peoples' Campaign. They planned a Poor Peoples' March on Washington later in 1968. He began to speak at rallies around the nation as a build up for this. However, he sensed the mood and determination for such a March and Campaign was not as intense and widespread as in 1963 in the build up to that year's great civil rights march. As part of the Poor Peoples' Campaign he was invited by the Rev James Lawson to visit Memphis. In Memphis the garbage workers had been on a long strike for an improvement in their unlivable wages and conditions. Lawson was proposing a march and rally led by King.

The other area of conflict for King was his sexual involvements outside his marriage. Here he was particularly targeted by J Edgar Hoover and the FBI. Hoover was convinced that King was guilty of financial fraud and was also a closet Communist; but the FBI could find no proof of either. However, on the personal front, there was wire tapping evidence that King lived a double life for a period. So, a package of accusatory evidence about her husband's sexual activity was sent to his wife. In the inevitable show-down Martin was overcome with guilt. The FBI campaign to destroy Martin came close, especially when he received a cruel letter purporting to come from a black man, but in

fact designed by FBI operative, Bill Sullivan:

“King, look into your heart. You know you are a complete fraud and a great liability to all of us Negroes...You are no clergyman and you know it...you are a colossal fraud and an evil, vicious one at that. You could not believe in any personal moral principles. ...King there is only one thing for you to do. You know what it is...There is but one way out for you. You better take it before your filthy fraudulent self is bared to the nation... “

Godfrey Hodgson, one of King's biographers, sums up this aspect of the story by saying that there is no doubt that King and his friends at times acted as if they were sex addicts. Though this was the sixties and not the ME TOO generation, King knew “at some level” that he was diminished by the contrast between his conduct and his principles. But Hodgson warns us to take the details of the lurid and titillating accounts, coming from the hypocrite Hoover, “with shedloads of salt”, as did Kennedy and Johnson .

He had long been pre-occupied with death. Coretta had realised this and later his colleague, Andrew Young, spoke of a “depression that he had not had earlier. He talked about death all the time.” On the night before the fateful April 4, he made one of his most personal and profound addresses. Referring, prophetically, to his death, he said: **“Like anybody I would like to live a long life...But I am not concerned about that now....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 .”** Not so incidentally, the autopsy conducted after his death found that he had the heart of a sixty year old.

Despite a growing sense that the public appetite for non-violent direct actions was seemingly waning, King went to Memphis. Memphis was the location of his murder.

Throughout his public life King insisted that non-violent direct action, and with it,

non-cooperation with evil is the moral way to bring about change.

Fifty years on, it is time to assess this strategy. But was it just a strategy? King would deny this. For King, this was the way to build “the beloved community”, inclusive of white and black, which was his goal. This “dream” was primarily informed by the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth and prophets of the Old Testament. In particular King had studied and adopted the philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi and its modus operandi of non-violent resistance employed in the movement to liberate India from the British Raj.

In 1963 King published a book of sermons titled “Strength to Love”. As a young preacher myself I regularly turned to it in my sermon preparation. More than once I used the following quotation from a sermon King named “Loving your enemies”. Its eloquence expresses the heart of his philosophy of non-violent action.

“To our most bitter opponents we say: 'We shall match your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure suffering. We shall meet your physical force with soul force. Do to us what you will, and we shall continue to love you. We cannot in all good conscience obey your unjust laws, because non-co-operation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is co-operation with good. Throw us in jail, and we shall still love you. Bomb our homes and threaten our children and we shall still love you. Send your hooded perpetrators of violence into our community at the midnight hour and beat us and leave us half dead, and we shall still love you. But be assured that we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer. One day we shall win freedom, but not only for ourselves. We shall so appeal to your heart and conscience that we shall win you in the process, and our victory will be a double victory .”

Beyond its oratory this is an unqualified statement of his core belief. However, after 12 years of a non-violent campaign, doubts were being generated about the efficacy of non-violence for the movement against racism, war and poverty. There were activist critics

who made it clear they saw King's movement as too soft and unable to bring about the revolution that was needed if racism were to be overcome at all levels in the USA. Indeed, it could even be argued that the political gains of the movement only came about because hard headed calculating politicians saw that King's way was a more politically acceptable alternative to the militant pathways of Black Panthers, Carmichael and Malcolm X. They concluded the most pragmatic way forward was to listen to King and accept his agenda to end racial discrimination. However, in confronting the issues of Peace and Poverty, as well as the racial divide, it may not be so clear that a Gandhi style, non-violent action would be the only way forward. An openness to multiple strategies, including inevitable violence, was being espoused across the movement for social change. King and his colleagues were being confronted with an argument for pragmatism over the idealism so apparent in his 1963 sermon on “Loving your enemies”. **Was the next stage of his public leadership for him to remain an idealistic prophet relying on moral persuasion alone or should he become a politician ready to sanction strategies of material coercion? His untimely death prevented us seeing the resolution of this tension, though that death itself was, in a way, a resolution.**

Garment workers listen to the funeral service for Rev. Martin Luther King jr. Photo, Wikipedia



I wonder whether Martin dusted off his copy of Professor Reinhold Niebuhr's 1932 book, “Moral Man and Immoral Society”. Niebuhr was the renowned American Christian

political ethicist of the mid-twentieth century. King was on the record as claiming Niebuhr was one of his mentors. So he was well aware of Niebuhr's early (1932) challenge to an idealistic and absolutist Christian ethic approach to politics. No doubt King had encountered, in "Moral Man and Immoral Society" Niebuhr's reference to the Gandhian philosophy / strategy. In it, Niebuhr passingly acknowledges that a Gandhi style non-violent activism may be an ethically suitable approach for America's racial minority to challenge segregation. That said, Niebuhr has much to say that implies there is little place for absolutist idealism in dealing with political issues. He affirms that "violence and revolution are not intrinsically immoral" and that, despite the "advantages of non-violent methods, they must be pragmatically considered in the light of circumstances".

Apparently, Niebuhr and King never engaged directly on this question. King certainly was strategic in calculating ways and means for his pacifist campaigning. To that extent he shares Niebuhr's contextualism in ethics. Niebuhr mostly stood in the shoes of the politician in his texts and teaching. In the end, King rejected that possibility and remained a twentieth century, martyred prophet who never renounced his absolute commitment to non-violence.

The question we are left with, in the case of King, is: Is his dream an illusion?

It is evident that King's dream remains unfulfilled in the USA and across the planet. Specifically, in my country, Australia, there are unresolved civil rights and social justice issues, including our failure to recognise First Australians constitutionally. Beneath the surface of our society, racism still lurks. Australia's recent treatment of asylum seekers, and the electoral support for it, is, in part, racist.

The America of King's grandchildren is still a racist society. Consider one statistic: by the early 21st century there were more black men in prison than in college. In North and South of the USA the crusade must still be waged that "black lives matter". America is still a na-

tion built on violence and militarism. The corrosive addictions of American capitalism and militarism still destroy many lives – and the world still operates out of fear, division and greed.

At the time of King's death, one of the most eloquent testimonies to his influence was given by close friend and entertainer, Harry Belafonte, in conjunction with lawyer Stanley Levison:

"Martin Luther King was not a dreamer although he had a dream.....under his leadership millions of black Americans emerged from spiritual imprisonment, from fear, from apathy and took to the streets to proclaim their freedom..." Belafonte went on to recall what Martin had said in a sermon only two months before his assassination, **"He wrote his own obituary to define himself in the simple terms his heart comprehended, 'Tell them I tried to feed the hungry. Tell them I tried to clothe the naked. Tell them I tried to help somebody'. Then Belafonte concludes, "And that is all he ever did. That is why... he is matchless, that is why, though stilled by death, he lives."**

Those who have written biographies of Martin Luther King readily concede that his was a flawed character. Perhaps, barely in his mid-years, King needed to take time to restore his inner life, though the burden he carried seemingly denied him that release. There is not only the charge of plagiarism in his doctoral thesis. but also, as we have seen, he was unfaithful in his marriage many times. In this he was not the exception among the gallery of public figures who have dared to seek social and political change. Remembering he was a Christian clergyman, we could debate whether private immorality detracted from his public witness and political contribution – but we will not. Certainly his wife knew of some of his sexual liaisons. However, she was still able to write:

"...there was never a moment when we were not united in our love and dedication, never a moment when I wanted to be anything other than the wife of Martin Luther King. "

The anniversary of his death in 2018 coincides with Easter, as it did that fateful day in Memphis. The Easter story is Crucifixion followed by Resurrection. The one who was closest to him, Coretta, made this connection in her grief. She wrote:

“As the clouds of despair begin to disperse, you realise there is hope, and life, and light, and truth. There is goodness in the Universe. That is what Martin saw as the meaning of Easter.”

He knew also that bracketed within the vision is the need to act despite the cost. Perhaps the abiding lesson of these last 50 years for activist dreamers and their more pragmatic colleagues is that **THE STRUGGLE NEVER ENDS**. As Martin famously declared, **“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere”**.

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Note on the essayist: Dr Noel Preston AM is a retired Uniting Church Minister and formerly Assoc. Professor in Applied Ethics at QUT and Griffith University. (He was a student at Boston University School of Theology, Martin Luther King's alma mater)

END NOTES:

Hodgson, G. (2009) p. 191

Hodgson., p.125

Hodgson, p.127

Smiley, T (2016) p.165

(Emphases partly by the present editor but containing those of Dr Noel Preston. JT)

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### Viola Liuzzo

(April 11, 1925 – March 25, 1965) was a Unitarian Universalist civil rights activist from Michigan. In March 1965 Liuzzo, then a housewife and mother of five with a history of local activism, heeded the call of Martin Luther King Jr and traveled from Detroit, Michigan, to Selma, Alabama, in the wake of the Bloody Sunday attempt at marching across the Edmund Pettus Bridge. Liuzzo participated in the successful Selma-to-Montgomery marches and helped with coordination and logistics. Driving back from a trip shuttling fellow activists to the Montgomery airport, she was murdered by members of the Ku Klux Klan. She was 39 years old.....

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After the third march concluded on March 25, Liuzzo, assisted by Leroy Moton, a 19-year-old African American, continued shuttling marchers and volunteers from Montgomery back to Selma in her car. As they were driving along Route 80, a car tried to force them off the road. After dropping passengers in Selma, she and Moton headed back to Montgomery. As they were getting gas at a local filling station, they were subject to abusive calls and racist scorn. When Liuzzo stopped at a red light, a car with four members of the local Ku Klux Klan pulled up alongside her. When they saw a white woman and a black man in a car together, they followed Liuzzo as she tried to outrun them. Overtaking the Oldsmobile, they shot directly at Liuzzo, mortally wounding her twice in the head. The car veered into a ditch, crashing into a fence.

Although Moton was covered with blood, the bullets missed him. He lay motionless when the Klansmen reached the car to check on

their victims. After the Klansmen left, Moton began searching for help, and eventually flagged down a truck driven by Rev. Leon Riley. Like Moton and Liuzzo, Riley was shuttling civil rights workers back to Selma.....

## James Reeb

(January 1, 1927 – March 11, 1965) was an American Unitarian Universalist minister, pastor and activist during the Civil rights movement in Washington, D.C. and Boston, Massachusetts. While participating in the Selma to Montgomery marches actions in Selma, Alabama, in 1965, he was murdered by white segregationists, dying of head injuries in the hospital two days after being severely beaten. ....

A member of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), Reeb went to Selma to join protests for African American voting rights following the attack by state troopers and sheriff's deputies on nonviolent demonstrators on March 7, 1965. After eating dinner at an integrated restaurant on March 9, Reeb and two other Unitarian ministers, Rev. Clark Olsen and Rev. Orloff Miller, were beaten by white men with clubs for their support of African American rights. Several hours elapsed before Reeb was admitted to a Birmingham hospital where doctors performed brain surgery. While Reeb was on his way to the hospital in Birmingham, civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. addressed a press conference lamenting the cowardly attack and asking all to pray for his protection. Reeb died two days later. His death resulted in a national outcry against the activities of white racists in the Deep South.

Read more: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Viola\\_Liuzzo](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Viola_Liuzzo)  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James\\_Reeb](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Reeb)

**(The families of Viola, mother of five children, and James, father of four children, must be held in our memories too. In celebrating these two UUs—who happen to be white—I in no way wish to detract from the members of other faiths and their families, many of them Afro-Americans, who also died in the causes led by Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. JT)**

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Would you care to join Spirit of Life Unitarian Fellowship?

Membership is open to all adults and includes this newsletter. *Full membership \$50 concession \$20*. Please note that all membership applications are subject to approval at a meeting of the Committee. Ask Rev. Geoff Usher for an application form at the Sunday service.

If you have a news item or written article you believe would be of interest to the congregation, we invite you to submit it for Esprit.

It would be helpful if items for publication, including articles and talk topics with themes could reach Esprit editor by the 15th of each month: jantendys@yahoo.com.au or hand to Jan Tendys at the Sunday service.

Do you have a topic of a spiritual / ethical nature that you would like to share with the congregation? As Unitarians, we support an "Open Pulpit" and invite members of the congregation to lead the service if they so wish. *Please see Caz Donnelly at the Sunday service*

Fellowship contact 0466 940 461

Website www.sydneyunitarians.org