

The Perils of Worshipping King
The Rev. Yvonne V. Miller
January 22, 1999

Today's Reading

To Savor the World or Save it
I rise in the morning torn between the desire
To save the world or to savor it - to serve life or to enjoy it;
To savor the sweet taste of my own joy
Or to share the bitter cup of my neighbor;
To celebrate life with exuberant step
Or to struggle for the life of the heavy laden.
What am I to do when the guilt at my bounty
Clouds the sky of my vision;
When the glow which lights my every day
Illuminates the hurting world around me?
To savor the world or save it?
God of justice, if such there be,
Take from me the burden of my question.
Let me praise my plentitude without limit;
Let me cast from my eyes all troubled folk!
No, you will not let me be. You will not stop my ears
To the cries of the hurt and the hungry;
You will not close my eyes to the sight of the afflicted.
What is that you say? To save, one must serve?
To savor, one must save?
The one will not stand without the other?
Forgive me - in my preoccupation with myself,
In my concern for my own life
I had forgotten.
Forgive me God of justice,
Forgive me and make me whole.

-

By: Richard S. Gilbert

From: In the Holy Quiet of This Hour

This past Monday, as you all know, we celebrated Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday, and a lot of us from this church went and joined in the march that was held. For those of you who weren't there, it was a beautiful day, warm, sunny, and bright; and we had a great time. But, once again it appears that High Street Church was the only predominantly "White" church to join in that march, and I understand, from some of you, that's been the case now for many years. For myself, I think I was torn between conflicting emotions. One was a feeling of pride in being able to be a part of this community. The other feeling was of disgust and sadness that that was the case. But, I was glad to be there, and I will probably be there again next year with you. Still, even though I do plan to honor that day with you, I wanted us to reflect a moment about some of the dangers that come with putting any person too much up on a pedestal. And it's that which I'd like to talk about this morning

The Book of Ecclesiastes tells us that there is a time for everything. Chapter 3 tells us: "For everything there is a season and a time for every matter under Heaven. A time to be born and a time to die. A time to plant and a time to pluck up what is planted." You might know these words; they're often read at funerals and memorial services.

But today I'd like to suggest that just as there is a time for everything, there is a time for heroes, and there is a time when we must get rid of our heroes. In our collective life as a society growing up, there is a time for heroes. There are times in history when evil wears the cloak of innocence and oppression travels in the guise of normalcy, and in those times we need heroes. We need people who will help us see past the banality of everyday life to the festering wounds of injustice behind the appearance. There are times when we need visionaries to help us see what we haven't seen before. In those times we need heroes.

But, noticing things is not everything. As you know, our tradition teaches us that it is not enough just to *see* the evils of the world. Our faith teaches us that we must also work to *change* them, and so it's not enough to see or to describe or to name, we must also act. But there are times in our lives, and certainly there have been in mine, when we find ourselves paralyzed by indecision and uncertainty. And there are times when we are silenced by fear. In those times we need heroes. We need models; everybody does. We need people who can show us not only what must be done, but who can also show us the full potential of human greatness. Villains show us the full extent of human evil and lift up to us a mirror of those parts of ourselves that we would rather ignore. Our saints and our heroes, Mother Theresa, for example, or Dr. King, show us the love and the courage that we are capable of as human beings; and we need those models. In times of paralysis and indecision -- whether emotional or spiritual or political -- we have a need for heroes.

But as the book of Ecclesiastes says, "There is a time for everything." I'd like to suggest today that there is also a time when we need to put our heroes away. When our heroes turn into idols, that's when we need to put our heroes away. Now it's been said that the sin of idolatry is taking something that is finite, and limited, and you setting it up in place of what is infinite and eternal; what's transcendent and lasting. When you lift something up -- whether it's a material object like a golden calf or whether it's a person -- and you put them *in place* of your ideals, that's idolatry. Sometimes by putting individuals like Dr. King on pedestals the way we have done, we are guilty of the sin of idolatry: we are taking what is mortal and human and flawed; and we are substituting that for living our own principles of justice and love.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, one of our great Unitarian predecessors, once wrote in his essay *Self-Reliance*, that to the extent that we have heroes, we limit ourselves. He argues that by worshiping another person to that extent, we place limits on ourselves and we give up our own potential for greatness. We ignore, or we don't see, or we dismiss what we ourselves are capable of. We think that only another person and not us, not ourselves, have the ability to transform the world. So we think, for example, that it takes a Dr. King to make a difference. We feel we have to be larger than life to make a difference. In that way our worship of heroes limits us. It limits our view of ourselves; it limits our actions in the world. So we need to have heroes -- that's true -- but at times we also need to let them go at times and claim our own powers -- our own potential for transforming the world.

Hero worship is also a negative thing when it becomes a substitute for our own action. When we celebrate Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday and lift up the other heroes of the civil rights struggle as a substitute for doing something on our own, then it's time to put those heroes away.

Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday comes every year, and so I have spoken about him every year for several years now. But this is the first time that I have talked about King to an audience of people who were actually part of the civil rights movement. I am aware, today, as I am standing here that many people here in these pews were part of that struggle -- that you joined in the sit-ins to desegregate the lunch counters in Georgia and other states, and took to the streets. I'm also aware that other people here tried to do the best they could, and felt constrained, by tradition and upbringing. But despite those limitations, they did what they could in the way of kindness, equality, and justice.

I have been told that our fellowship here, The Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Middle Georgia, was the first integrated church in Macon. I have been told that our Fellowship stopped meeting at the YMCA in the 1950's because of its segregationist policies. I am aware that we have many heroes here in our pews. And still, our work isn't done. Our faith compels us to fight for justice in the world. Our faith compels us to continue our commitment to the struggle. I am horrified, as many of you probably are, that in some religious circles today, particularly some of those that surround us, the fight against poverty and social injustice is just not a pressing issue. Because Jesus died on the cross, that means that we're all saved. In this kind of fundamentalist theology, only our own personal salvation matters. *We know this isn't true.* Our faith compels us to work, not for a complacent sense of personal salvation, but for the creation of justice in this world.

The world we live in now, in 1999, is a different one from the days of the civil rights era. It's different, not in that racism has disappeared; it's different in that racism now wears a different face. Poverty is the face of racism today, poverty and its twin, indifference. This is what racism looks like today. Five percent of all the housing in our cities nationwide is substandard. In Macon, it is 20% of our housing that's substandard - four times the national rate. *That* is the face of racism in Macon today. Public schools that are under-funded and teachers who are under-trained -- that is the mask of racism today. A generalized kind of indifference to the suffering of other people -- that is the face of racism. Roads that go through people's neighborhoods and destroy them -- destroy their communities without a thought -- *that* is racism today.

As a country we should not be celebrating Martin Luther King's birthday once a year -- but we should be celebrating justice everyday.

Now the question is, "What can we do?" We might feel that there isn't much that we *can* do, but there are always some small things that *can* be done. And as Edward Everett Hale reminds us from the reading, "even though we can not do everything, we can still do something." So that shouldn't prevent us from doing the small things that we can do.

Now here at High Street we do quite a bit. Our long-standing relationship with Burke Elementary School, for example, has brought us deep rewards on both sides. And every year we do the Christmas in April project where we fix-up a run-down house somewhere in this city. Several times a year we serve at the food kitchen. I'm sure there are many other projects that I can't think of right now that you can remind me of. This is an activist place. We have to struggle. We must continue to fight that pervasive and crippling sense of invisibility among people of color. We can show solidarity and a sense of outrage when a driver is stopped because of the color of his skin. Because we should be outraged when that happens -- an injury to one of us is an injury to all people of color. We should get to know the culture, (the cultures, plural), of people who are different from ourselves, and we should support that culture. Tolerance

doesn't mean very much if it's only the result of a kind of bored indifference. And it's that bored indifference that I think is so common today.

A *real* commitment to diversity, if we're going to have one, requires an effort to go out and try to understand another person's culture and get to know it. So I would suggest for those White people here, that we buy books written by black authors, so that more black authors can get publishing contracts. I suggest that we go to films made by black directors so that Hollywood will see that films about people of color can make money. And so that we can also help put an end to the White monopoly of the media and to the dominating "Whiteness" that surrounds us in film, TV, and books. Finally, I suggest that we continue to do our work to reach out to the black churches here and to support them. Because I have long thought that if there is any hope for our urban poor it will come from the black churches. Religion has always sustained African-American culture; it has always provided the hope and the inspiration for resistance and rebellion and change. And I don't see that hope coming from anywhere else, maybe you do, but I don't. I don't see any other voices in our culture that would provide the energy for the kind of transformation that we need.

The Religious Right likes to say that our society is suffering from a pervasive moral decay, and that what we need is a spiritual revolution. And I have to say that I *agree with them*. We just don't agree on what that revolution ought to look like. Now I think that what we need is, we need a revolution that draws from our Universalist roots -- that says that everybody is a child of God; that there's a place at the table for everyone, that everyone is welcome at the table -- that all can be seated and none shall go hungry. That's the kind of revolution we need. That's the kind of spiritual revival that is called for.

When people like Jerry Falwell talk about moral decay they usually always point at two things, abortion and homosexuality. And I'd like to say just for the record, "homosexuality does not cause unemployment, and it has never caused teenage pregnancy." And maybe if they had taken those sex education courses that they would like to deny to our children, they would know that. But I do agree that a revival is necessary, a revival of the heart, of the spirit, of the soul of this country, of its *conscience*. And that revival must also take place on an individual level - inside our own hearts. We must each examine ourselves and think carefully what it is we can do to help set that place at the table, what it is *we* can do. No matter how large, no matter how small it is. That's what I'd like to leave you with today; the hope that we can each examine ourselves to find, at least, *that one small thing* that we can do. Because even though we might not be able to do everything there is still something that we can do.

So may it be. Let us have a moment of silence.