

WADE IN THE WATER: The Spirituality of Martin Luther King.  
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Well, it's still going on, isn't it?

Golf Channel suspended anchor Kelly Tilghman for two weeks for saying that young players who want to challenge Tiger Woods should "lynch him in a back alley." Her suspension ends in time for the Buick Invitational on Jan. 24, when Woods will make his 2008 debut. <http://www.orlandosentinel.com/sports/orl-golfrail1608jan16,0,1127842.story?track=rss>

Tiger Woods camp says it's "a non-issue." Al Sharpton disagrees. Sharpton says it's not about Tiger Woods. What's it about? Billy Holiday could tell you what it's about. Nina Simone could tell you what it's about:

Southern trees bear a strange fruit,  
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,  
Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze,  
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.

Pastoral scene of the gallant south,  
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth,  
Scent of magnolias, sweet and fresh,  
Then the sudden smell of burning flesh.

Here is a fruit for the crows to pluck,  
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck,  
For the sun to rot, for the trees to drop,  
Here is a strange and bitter crop. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Strange\\_Fruit](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Strange_Fruit)

Jena, Mississippi, was just a few months ago, and we still need to be reminded. Dr. Martin Luther King, Junior, was born 79 years ago, and we still need to be reminded, still need to hear his voice, still need to follow him into troubled waters. We need to be reminded, not to fix things but work constantly for just peace.

Birmingham, AL, was so infamous for its violence against blacks it was known as Bombingham. When Dr. King was incarcerated there in April 1963, he wrote from his jail cell of the city, "Its ugly record of police brutality is known in every section of this country. Its unjust treatment of Negroes in the courts is a notorious reality. There have been more unsolved bombings of Negro homes and churches in Birmingham than in any other city in this nation. These are the hard, brutal, and unbelievable facts." (THE AMERICAN IDEA 172)

The racist historian, Nell Irvin Painter, tells us that we continue to be in denial about the record of violence against African Americans in the country. She wrote, "Any sojourn in southern archives covers the researcher in blood, and slavery, particularly,

throws buckets of blood in the historian's face. Yet violence and pain seldom appear in historical writings, for professionalism prompts historians to clean up the mess before going into print." (SOUTHERN HISTORY ACROSS THE COLOR LINE, page 6)

But if we remain in denial about this genealogy of violence, how can we comprehend Dr. King's spirituality? What sense can we make out of his non-violence? Was his call to non-violence just to be polite in after dinner conversation? Dr. King's call for non-violence rises up in the midst of centuries of torture and blood.

Gathered before the Lincoln Memorial in August of 1963, he said:

I am not unmindful that some of you have come here out of great trials and tribulations. Some of you have come fresh from narrow jail cells. And some of you have come from areas where your quest -- quest for freedom left you battered by the storms of persecution and staggered by the winds of police brutality. You have been the veterans of creative suffering. Continue to work with the faith that unearned suffering is redemptive.

<http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkihadream.htm>

**"You have been the veterans of creative suffering. Continue to work with the faith that unearned suffering is redemptive."**

Here is King's message: creative suffering. What is unearned suffering? It is not suffering brought on just because you have a body failing to cooperate with you. The aging process, our genetic make up will have their ways with us and all are heirs of the flesh. Unearned suffering is suffering inflicted on one person or group by another person or group for the sole purpose of profit by the predator. At that point the vulnerability of the flesh becomes the friend of those whose suffering is unearned.

In our reading this morning, drawing upon the wisdom distilled in the Spirituals, Howard Thurman draws out the slaves' view of death:

It is the guarantee of the sense of alternative in human experience, upon which, in the last analysis, all notions of freedom finally rest. Here is a recognition of death as the one fixed option which can never be taken from man by any power, however great, or by a circumstance, however fateful. (page 58)

Many of the great ships that carried the enslaved from Africa to the New World had netting about the railings. The netting was there for a simple reason. Down in the holds, hundreds of Africans were stacked up together, with only two feet of head room, shackled together, with little air to breathe or gruel to swallow. Occasionally they were let one deck. Even though sharks followed behind the slavers, many Africans shouted 'Halleluiah' as they landed in the water, free at last from the grasp of the profiteers. The netting was put up to prevent their leaping to freedom.

Death promised that ever there was an option, that wading in the water, getting wet, being a veteran of creative suffering, was not the worst that could happen. One of the things

that has always struck me about Dr. King, was what he had written on his gravestone: “Free at Last, Free at Last.”

The water is still there, the sharks still swimming in it. Last Spring our Choir concert was a celebration of the music of New Orleans. Several times, a number of St. Johnners have gone to New Orleans to rebuild people’s lives and homes.

Many home owners have found more to fear than hurricanes and FEMA. The [Institute for Policy Studies](#) has released a report, “Foreclosed: The State of the Dream 2008.” The group accuses mortgage lenders of deliberately targeting the poor and people of color with high-cost loans.

[http://www.democracynow.org/2008/1/17/report\\_subprime\\_mortgage\\_crisis\\_causing\\_african](http://www.democracynow.org/2008/1/17/report_subprime_mortgage_crisis_causing_african)

Unearned suffering! to speak in the language of Dr. King. Here in Cincinnati, we have had pause to think of Alice Walker’s remark, “having a black skin was a crime during all the years black people were locked up in slavery.” When she then continues to speak of “a prison plantation system..” we wonder if our school system has become one of prison preparatory schools for so many of our young people. (WE ARE THE ONES... page 222)

So as we gather to recall Dr. King’s 79<sup>th</sup> birthday and his message, let us recall his spirituality. He said before the Lincoln Memorial:

Some of you have come fresh from narrow jail cells. And some of you have come from areas where your quest -- quest for freedom left you battered by the storms of persecution and staggered by the winds of police brutality. You have been the veterans of creative suffering. Continue to work with the faith that unearned suffering is redemptive.

<http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkhaveadream.htm>

What is creative suffering? How is unearned suffering redemptive. Does it not remind us of the human condition?

The masters of the slaving vessels, John Newton, author of Amazing Grace being the best known, treated their sailors almost as badly as the slaves. When the cargo of flesh was unloaded in Cuba or Charleston, the sailors were no longer needed. The captains would discharge them penniless to wander forlorn about alien seaports. It was not unusual for an enslaved African to take in a dying sailor from a slave ship, caring for them in their last days.

Drew Gilpin Faust, the President of Harvard University, in her new book on the Civil War, entitled THIS REPUBLIC OF SUFFERING, tells a touching story. After that horrendous war, the national government sought to locate the remains of deceased Union soldiers. Often, Faust tells us, they found the remains had been buried, and their graves cared for by local African Americans in the South.

Wade, wade in the water.

How is unearned suffering redemptive? It reminds us we are human, surely. More than that, when bad things happen to us, when someone turns on us without reason, what shall we do?

An old theology claims that the wrongs of this world will be righted in the next. There will be payback in the great bye an' bye. This world but a veil of tears and we shall sing a great song in the hereafter.

King was not one to urge us to *wait* on someone who could turn out to be a predator as much as an advocate. Unearned suffering is redemptive **if we learn how to maintain compassion while maintaining our dignity in the face of abuse and violence.** Unearned suffering becomes redemptive depending upon **how we respond, what we do.** When in the face of abuse we see in the eyes of our abuser another ourselves, another person just like ourselves, unearned abuse has redeemed us. From his cell in Birmingham, King wrote. "Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and establish such creative tensions that a community that has refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue." (page 173) When the abuser seeks to cut off the relationship, the non-violent actor seeks to maintain the relationship. But not on the abuser's terms but on terms of justice and peace.

In 1965 the Vietnamese Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh wrote a poem for the young people he worked with in that ravaged country, urging them to die without hatred:

Promise me  
Promise me this day,  
Promise me now,  
While the sun is overhead  
Exactly at the zenith,  
Promise me.

Even as they  
Strike you down  
With the mountain of hatred and violence;  
Even as they step on you and crush you  
Like a worm,  
Even as they dismember and disembowel you,  
Remember, brother,  
Remember:  
Man is not your enemy.

The only thing worthy of you is compassion –  
Invincible, limitless, unconditional.  
Hatred will never let you face  
The beast in man.

One day when you face this beast alone,  
With your courage intact, your eyes kind,  
Untroubled  
(even as no one sees them)  
Out of your smile  
Will bloom a flower.  
And those who love you  
Will behold you  
Across ten thousand worlds of birth and dying.

And so it is that we too, on this celebration of the birth of Dr. King, are called to wade in the water, to find compassion. We here at St. John's continue our work for peace and justice.

This day we have honored Bob and Sylvia Mersfelder's participation of fifty years in St. John's. They continue to provide us with role models in the quest for peace in justice, working for ending the death penalty and conservation. I have come to know Sylvia best as we have attended meetings together working for the Collaborative Agreement. Now she is working with St. John's Peacemakers.

Working within the framework of the UUA's peacemaking initiative, we are developing our own peace pledge for our congregation. Next Sunday, the Chair of our Social Action Coordinating Council Jim Decker is leading a 10:00 am forum to see what commitments we here might agree to. So far he has written:

**We commit to:**

**Identifying and supporting social and community actions and institutions that build a peaceful and just society.**

**Fostering peace through education. This includes developing understanding of the sources of violence within society and our immediate community, and developing understanding of societal changes likely to result in greater peace. This also includes education and training in practical conflict resolution and peacemaking skills.**

**Promote within the local community and society-at-large, a culture that respects human dignity and human rights, and that fosters respectful tolerance for differences.**

**Support the democratic process and promote democratic participation. The democratic process is to be promoted with respect to economic, social, and political decision-making, by persons with legitimate interests in outcomes, regardless of gender, nationality, ethnic or racial heritage, economic status, or sexual orientation.**

**Responsibly oppose and witness against actions and circumstances promoting emotional or physical violence. The violence we wish to oppose may be manifest as individual behavior, group behavior, or structural violence whereby the violence originates from oppressive aspects of social institutions (e.g., institutionalized racism, institutionalized sexism).**

**In the interest of promoting peace, support the open and free exchange of knowledge and respectful exchange of opinions.**

**Promote societal peace through encouraging and promoting economic and social institutions that support biodiversity, fair exchange, and sustainable development practices.**

Next Sunday, join Sylvia and Jim in wading in the waters of peace and justice.

Do not be afraid of wading in the water. There are worse things than getting wet. The loss of your self is worse. To your own self be true! In the words of Howard Thurman:

Give me the courage to live!

Really live – not merely exist.

Live dangerously,

Scorning risk!

Live honestly,

Daring the truth—

Particularly the truth of myself! (A STRANGE FREEDOM, page 33f)

Dr. King calls us to wade in the water. Some will bring their speed boats and yachts, thinking they won't get wet. They may splash you. But we who wade in the water, risking, loving, we are holding hands. **We** shall build a world of compassion and justice.