

“The Moral Arm of the Universe”

Martin Luther King Jr. was a magnificent orator. But he's become almost too closely associated with the “I Have A Dream” speech that he delivered on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. People have forgotten how the spirit filled his words on other occasions, as in the march from Selma to Montgomery that took place two years later.

It was a defining moment in America's civil rights struggle. Peaceful marchers making the 50 mile trek to Alabama's capitol to demand the simple right to vote were met by blue-helmeted state stormtroopers at the Edmund Pettus Bridge, set on by dogs, gassed with mace, beaten with truncheons made of lengths of rubber hose wrapped in barbed wire. The orgy of violence prompted King to issue a summons to the nation's clergy to join him there. Thousands responded to the invitation, including hundreds of Unitarian ministers like James Reeb, who was beaten to death with a baseball bat outside a southern greasy spoon called the Silver Moon Café. But despite the bloodshed, King finally reached Montgomery two weeks later, along with hordes of national guardsmen who had been federalized to protect the protesters. The segregationist governor George Wallace hid inside the executive mansion, as outside a peaceful army of all creeds and states and races listened to King describe the road they'd traveled: a road littered with bombed churches and murdered children and victims and martyrs still to come.

A hard journey lay behind them, and a difficult path ahead, but they would eventually reach their goal, King assured them. And what was that long sought destination? “Our aim,” he told them, “must never be to defeat or humiliate the white man, but to win his friendship and understanding. We must come to see that the end we seek is a society at peace with itself, a society that can live with its conscience.”

How long would it take to reach that promised land? Here King became most eloquent. “I tell you today,” he pledged, “that however dark the hour, or however difficult the moment, it will not be long. How long? Not long, because no lie can live forever. How long, not long because truth pressed to the earth will rise again. How long, not long, because you still reap what you sow. How long, not long, because the moral arm of the universe is long but it bends toward justice.”

When King drew on that phrase, historians will tell you, he was invoking the words of another great preacher, the Unitarian minister and abolitionist Theodore Parker, who was part of the Transcendentalist circle that in the years before the Civil War represented New England's religious and social avant garde. As head of Boston's Vigilance Committee, he was responsible for assisting fugitive slaves on their journey north. In 1850, he began writing sermons with a loaded gun on his desk to protect Ellen Craft, a member of his congregation given sanctuary in his church until she could be smuggled into Canada. Four years later, Parker was

indicted in federal court for protecting another freedman named Anthony Burns. Shortly afterward, he began to secretly raise funds for John Brown to support his scheme for a slave insurrection, ending in the disaster of Harper's Ferry.

Parker was a radical by any measure, but his positions were rooted in faith rather than politics. He took such audacious stands because he believed it was the only possible way to align himself with the power of good, the ethical trajectory of history that commanded the assent of human hearts as surely as the laws of mathematics demanded the assent of human minds. However frequently one might make errors in calculation, you could never really doubt that five was the square root of twenty-five. And however frequently one fell short or ran astray of the truth, one still knew inside that lying was wrong, just as Parker knew innately, beyond contradiction, that slavery was a sin. It was a fact, like the facts of astronomy or the equations of physics. "The moral arc of the universe is long," were his exact words, "but it bends toward justice."

But if King was not entirely original, neither was Parker. For the Transcendentalists got their name and drew their inspiration from the German philosopher Immanuel Kant. He lived in the later part of the eighteenth century, toward the end of the Enlightenment, a period of great scientific breakthroughs.

Up until then, for instance, people had never before grasped how really big the universe is. They had still been living in a very small world.

But in the 1700's, scientists were beginning to realize the really inconceivable scale of creation. Kant helped push that development along. He was the first, for instance, to suggest that the smeared, faint blobs of light that astronomers could spot in the sky and that they were starting to call "nebulae" might actually be what he called "island universes," or separate galaxies, each containing millions or billions of stars. And as people's understanding of the heavens grew, it became increasingly hard to believe that the same God who created all of this immensity, worlds upon worlds, light years in extent, actually had his eye on the sparrow, as the Bible claimed, or cared about human beings in any special way.

In this dawning modern era, when people were beginning to question the old religious verities, Kant said that there some kinds of knowledge that were certain, even though they couldn't be weighed or directly observed or experimented on or scientifically demonstrated. Time and space were examples he gave, not realities that are known through the senses (for who has ever touched or tasted time, or heard the sound of space?), but categories of consciousness that are universal or as he put it, "transcendental," which is where the name "transcendentalism" came from. Space and time were features of being and perception that overarched all our particular data about the world, dimensions that order all our other experiences rather than experiences themselves. Morality, the differentiation of good and bad, right and wrong, better and worse, Kant suggested, was the same kind of

transcendental category, a universal dimension of human existence without which our other experiences of the universe just wouldn't make sense.

"Two things fill the mind with awe," he said, "the starry heavens above, and the moral law within." It's a haunting phrase. For it suggests a connection between nature and human nature, outer space and inner space, the grandeur of creation and the grandeur of the soul. And this, I think, is what it ultimately means to believe in God. It's not to subscribe to antiquated myth or supernatural explanations of how the world came to be. It doesn't mean clinging to a pre-Copernican cosmology. No, the old man in the sky wasn't Kant's God, it wasn't Parker's, nor was it King's.

Martin had been to the Boston University School of Theology, after all. He'd written his graduation thesis on Paul Tillich, who called religion the "depth dimension" of human experience, who defined faith as "ultimate commitment." King was thoroughly familiar with all the objections to a naively anthropomorphic deity. Believing in God, for him, essentially meant believing that goodness has power. That human values have some actual purchase on events. Believing that kindness, forgiveness and love are in fact among the most powerful energies in the universe, not weak or ineffectual or pollyannish responses to life, but rooted firmly in what Tillich called "the ground of Being," possessed of the same creative fire that lights the stars.

This was the faith that motivated King. "I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality," he professed. "That is why right, temporarily defeated, is stronger than evil triumphant." Non-violence was always more than a tactic for Dr. King, more than a method of turning a spotlight on police brutality or gaining sympathy for an unpopular cause. He refused to meet force with force, return blow for blow, because he believed that, appearances to the contrary, the world was not ultimately ruled by military arsenals or brute force. Cruise missiles might have tremendous destructive capacity, measurable in megatons, but strategies for massive retaliation had no constructive potential, no ability to heal the wounds that keep people living in a state of perpetual fear and animosity toward their neighbor. Only the spirit of reconciliation and the quality that Gandhi called satyagraha or "soul force" could do that. For finally the world is ruled by mercy and not by might. As Dr. King testified, "I am convinced that the universe is under the control of a loving purpose and that in the struggle for righteousness we have cosmic companionship."

This is a bold faith, and not one that even many self-professed Christians share. Security comes from strength, we're told, and those who question this dogma are dismissed as weak, wavering, perhaps even effeminate. So when Archbishop Desmond Tutu became the head of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, some sneered. Many called it the Kleenex Commission, he relates, charged as it was with listening to the stories of both victims and offenders, not with the aim of assigning blame or inflicting retribution for crimes committed, but with

the aim of restoring civility to a country where the social fabric had been mangled. Terrible deeds had occurred in his homeland: disappearances, assassinations, torture by electrocution, rape, unimaginable cruelties inflicted upon the innocent, and there were serious concerns over how the damage could be repaired. "Could it ever be sufficient," Tutu asked, "for a perpetrator, someone who had committed some of the most dastardly and gruesome atrocities to get off scot free as it were with only a confession," not even necessarily with any expressions of repentance or remorse, since all the law required for amnesty was a full and public disclosure?

Amazingly, that was sufficient in most cases, not only for individuals to feel their wrongs had been redressed, but for the nation of South Africa to avoid the bloodbath of reprisals many predicted was inevitable. It worked, Tutu suggests, because alongside traditional retributive justice, African jurisprudence is thoroughly permeated with the ethos of *ubuntu*: "the central concern is the healing of breaches, the redressing of imbalances, the restoration of broken relationships, a seeking to rehabilitate both the victim and the perpetrator, who should be given an opportunity to be re-integrated into the community he has injured by his offense."

This was always King's objective as well: to liberate whites as well as blacks from the dehumanizing effects of racism. In a sermon written in 1957, he reflected that

Forgiveness does not mean ignoring what has been done or putting a false label on an evil act. It means, rather, that the evil act no longer remains as a barrier to the relationship. Forgiveness is a catalyst creating the atmosphere necessary for a fresh start and a new beginning.

And why should we care about fresh starts? Because, King explained, *Returning hate for hate multiplies hate, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that. Hate multiplies hate, violence multiplies violence, and toughness multiplies toughness in a descending spiral of destruction.*

King finished by addressing those who called his philosophy unworkable, unrealistic, impractical,

My friends, we have followed the so-called practical way for too long a time now, and it has led inexorably to deeper confusion and chaos. Time is cluttered with the wreckage of communities which surrendered to hatred and violence. For the salvation of our nation and the salvation of mankind, we must follow another way. King wrote these words from inside a southern jail cell during the Montgomery bus boycott: not at all a safe or savory location for a black man in Alabama a half century ago. Yet even behind bars, he counseled "love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you."

At various times during his long journey toward freedom, he had been arrested, threatened, spied on, and stabbed. Many times he must have questioned his faith, as Tutu did.

As the archbishop confides in his book *No Future Without Forgiveness*, “there had been so many moments, during the dark days of apartheid’s viciousness, when we had preached *‘This is God’s world and God is in charge.’* Sometimes, when evil seemed to be on the rampage and about to overwhelm goodness, one had held to this article of faith by the skin of one’s teeth. It was a kind of theological whistling in the dark and many times one was tempted to whisper in God’s ear, *‘For goodness sake, why don’t You make it more obvious that You are in charge!’*”

I ask the same question, when children are burned in a church in Kenya, when genocide continues in Darfur. Talk of a divine presence in history or a higher power for good sometimes feels like fantasy or wishful thinking. For I believe that if mercy and charity enter into human affairs, it has to be through us. Each time we choose to negotiate rather than retaliate, each time we choose not to return evil for evil, each time we decline to demonize others, each time we say no to torture and thuggery in high places, each time we confront the soulless and impersonal structures of evil with the persuasive power of love, doors open. Possibilities for mutual survival and co-existence enter into the world.

For I believe that if God has hands in this world, they must be our hands, doing the work of defending the defenseless, confronting the oppressor, healing the wounds, and all the rest: saving the oceans, reigning in the military-industrial complex, taking the profit out of making war, ending poverty, checking the power of multinational corporations, giving every child an equal start in life, restoring free elections and civil liberties, stopping violence against women, giving workers a living wage, making healthcare a human right, building the beloved community. For this work, God’s arms must be our arms. May they bend toward peace and justice.