

The Fierce Urgency of Now
The Reverend Cynthia A. Frado
UU Society of Amherst, MA
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Martin Luther King, Jr. was perhaps the greatest preacher of the 20th century, and the wisdom, insight, and eloquence of his words are just as relevant today as they were 50 years ago. He once gave a speech in 1967 at Riverside Church in New York City to a group of Clergy and Laity concerned about the Vietnam war. Replace the word “war” with any of the concerns of immediacy that confront us now, and his message of urgency and motivation rings loud and clear on this weekend dedicated to the memory of his life, ministry, and service to our nation. The mantle of justice is now ours to bear.

He began by quoting these words by the Executive Committee of the Peace organization that invited him to speak. *There comes a time when silence is betrayal.*” He goes on to say:

The truth of these words is beyond doubt, but the mission to which they call us is a most difficult one. Even when pressed by the demands of inner truth, [people] do not easily assume the task of opposing their government's policies.... Nor does the human spirit move without great difficulty against all the apathy of conformist thought within one's own bosom and in the surrounding world. Moreover, when the issues at hand seem as perplexed as they often do in the case of this dreadful conflict, we are always on the verge of being mesmerized by uncertainty; but we must move on.

We must move on, indeed. The abhorrent changes in governmental policies and the acceptance of normative immoral behavior have debased our society, mesmerizing us all with uncertainty, taking us from being that *beacon on the hill* to the depths of dark despair. Some say we have no choice but to wait three years until the next election before we can begin to undo the damage. I wonder,

though, how much will be destroyed, how much will be unraveled if we remain silent while the America we know and love becomes a mere shadow of its former self. There comes a time, says Martin Luther King, when *silence is betrayal*. It is a betrayal to all that we hold sacred, to the desperation of our common humanity for food, shelter, medical care, education, and equality under the law.

This past year we have been assaulted with policies that would endanger our environment, that would jeopardize health care for millions, that would diminish the worthiness of people of color, those of the Islamic faith, LGBT people. We have been shocked by policies that would challenge reproductive rights, that would give more benefits to the wealthy and lay a heavier burden upon the middle class, that would alienate us from our allies and the important work of the United Nations. The list of injustice is long, but the arc of justice is longer.

In his speech of long ago, Martin Luther King acknowledged the challenges set before us. He said:

*Some of us who have already begun to break the silence of the night have found that the calling to speak is often a vocation of agony, **but we must speak**. We must speak with all the humility that is appropriate to our limited vision, but we must speak. And we must rejoice as well, for surely this is the first time in our nation's history that a significant number of its religious leaders have chosen to move beyond the prophesying of smooth patriotism to the high grounds of a firm dissent based upon the mandates of conscience and the reading of history. Perhaps a new spirit is rising among us. If it is, let us trace its movement well and pray that our own inner being may be sensitive to its guidance, for we are deeply in need of a new way beyond the darkness that seems so close around us.*

This may not be the first time in our nation's history that religious leaders have chosen to move beyond the prophesying of smooth patriotism to the high grounds of conscience, but I pray that it will not be

the last. We need the call of affirmation to embrace action. We need to know that even in the vast sea of our humanity, one small voice can still be heard above the cacophony. We need to know that we do not have the privilege of waiting for a future moment to change the course of our history.

Martin Luther King said, *We are now faced with the fact that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. In this unfolding conundrum of life and history there is such a thing as being too late. Procrastination is still the thief of time. Life often leaves us standing bare, naked and dejected with a lost opportunity. The "tide in the affairs of men" does not remain at the flood; it ebbs. We may cry out desperately for time to pause in her passage, but time is deaf to every plea and rushes on. Over the bleached bones and jumbled residue of numerous civilizations are written the pathetic words: "Too late." There is an invisible book of life that faithfully records our vigilance or our neglect.*

This is not about money or physical prowess. This is not about allegiance to one political party or another. It is about recognizing our responsibility to each other and the planet that sustains us. It is about the power of my voice and yours.

The conflicts that are presenting themselves to us are alarming and disheartening, and the constant distractions that barrage us on a daily basis feed the notion of our impotence. But a powerful voice from our past continues to remind us of the power of our own voice. We cannot afford to be silent, leaving the fallout of this administration to harm our children's and grandchildren's future. This is the fierce agency of now!

If you cannot march in protests, you can help make signs. If you cannot make signs, you can write to your Congressional Representatives on both the State and National levels. If you cannot write, then you can pick up the phone and let your voice be heard to those same representatives. If you prefer not to call, you can join groups that are

working toward justice and protecting our natural resources. Whatever your age, whatever your abilities, there are ways to join your voice with others to protect human rights and planetary rights. Apathy and paralytic conformity are not an option.

Martin Luther King leaves us with these words:

Human progress is neither automatic nor inevitable... Every step toward the goal of justice requires sacrifice, suffering, and struggle; the tireless exertions and passionate concern of dedicated individuals.

Let us carry those words in our hearts as we face the challenges of today with renewed conviction that when we join our voices together, they can effect positive change as we hold truth to power and regain the moral high ground to once again become that *beacon on the hill*.

AMEN and Blessed Be