

The Peace That Eludes Attainment¹

The Rev. Edmund Robinson
Unitarian Universalist Meeting House
January 17, 2010 – Martin Luther King, Jr. Sunday

Reading: From President Obama's speech accepting the Nobel Prize for peace, Oslo, Norway, December 10, 2009:

I do not bring with me today a definitive solution to the problems of war. What I do know is that meeting these challenges will require the same vision, hard work, and persistence of those men and women who acted so boldly decades ago. And it will require us to think in new ways about the notions of just war and the imperatives of a just peace.

We must begin by acknowledging the hard truth: We will not eradicate violent conflict in our lifetimes. There will be times when nations -- acting individually or in concert -- will find the use of force not only necessary but morally justified.

I make this statement mindful of what Martin Luther King Jr. said in this same ceremony years ago: "Violence never brings permanent peace. It solves no social problem: it merely creates new and more complicated ones." As someone who stands here as a direct consequence of Dr. King's life work, I am living testimony to the moral force of non-violence. I know there's nothing weak -- nothing passive -- nothing naïve -- in the creed and lives of Gandhi and King.

But as a head of state sworn to protect and defend my nation, I cannot be guided by their examples alone. I face the world as it is, and cannot stand idle in the face of threats to the American people. For make no mistake: Evil does exist in the world. A non-violent movement could not have halted Hitler's armies. Negotiations cannot convince al Qaeda's leaders to lay down their arms. To say that force may sometimes be necessary is not a call to cynicism -- it is a recognition of history; the imperfections of man and the limits of reason.

¹This dialogue is obviously imaginary; the facts of the history of nonviolence stated are largely from a talk "Theorists of Nonviolence: Ballou, Tolstoy, Gandhi, and Sharp"

by Michael True, Adin Ballou Annual Lecture, Hopedale, Massachusetts, April 27, 2008 , <http://www.adinballou.org>. President Obama's Nobel acceptance speech can be found at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-acceptance-nobel-peace-prize>.

I raise this point, I begin with this point because in many countries there is a deep ambivalence about military action today, no matter what the cause. And at times, this is joined by a reflexive suspicion of America, the world's sole military superpower.

Our hearts this morning go out to the people of Haiti and to all who are involved in the massive rescue effort now underway. In a few minutes we will have a chance to contribute financially to that rescue effort. Here in Chatham we get very exercised when the ocean breaks through the barrier beach and a couple of houses have to be abandoned. It is difficult to relate to the photos showing whole neighborhoods reduced to rubble. It reminds me of Hurricane Hugo, which I lived through in 1989 in Charleston, but Hugo was nothing compared to this earthquake for damage, and only a few people died in it.

We are here this morning, though, to honor Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. by talking about another great cause of human suffering, war. The war winding down in Iraq and the war ramping up in Afghanistan may seem as remote from our sunny land as the destruction in Haiti, but we know that people in this congregation have loved ones at risk, and that every so often we will pick up the newspaper and learn that another Cape Cod service person is coming home in a casket. So, in reflecting on President Obama's Nobel acceptance speech and the present holiday honoring Dr. King, I came up with the following imagined scenario.

The scene is the White House Oval Office. A phone is ringing. At first, the President can't find it, it is in an out-of-the way corner buried under a pile of old papers. As he finally reaches it, it occurs to him that it's the red phone left over from the Cold War, that hasn't been used in two decades. He picks it up gingerly.

Obama: This is President Obama, what can I do for you?

The voice at the other end of the line is unmistakable.

King: This is Martin Luther King, Jr.

Obama: Dr. King? Uh, where are you calling from?

King: Where do you think?

Obama: Well, I expect it's somewhere up above. But this is a real honor. What can I do for you.

King: I'm calling to discuss what you said about me in your Nobel speech in Oslo.

Obama: Well I recognized that there was a lot of irony in my being awarded that prize while I was fighting a war.

King: Yes you did.

Obama: And I recognized that I stood there as the first African American President of the United States as a direct consequence of your life's work.

King: Yes, I heard that; and what did you mean by that?

Obama: Why of course your work for racial justice in the Civil Rights

Movement.

King: But that's only part of my life's work; I not only worked for racial justice, but for nonviolent social change.

Obama: I know that, and I acknowledged that.

King: Yes, you quoted me, "Violence never brings permanent peace. It solves no social problem: it merely creates new and more complicated ones," but apparently you don't believe the words you quote.

Obama: Well, it's true enough that violence doesn't solve problems in the long run, but in the present I'm dealing with a gang of religious extremists who have killed a few thousand people in my country and are bent on killing more. Just two weeks ago an Al Qaeda plot to blow up an airline fizzled, though it came close to succeeding. If we could capture them rather than kill them, we would, but Al Qaeda is hiding out on the border of Afghanistan and Pakistan, and they have the protection of the Taliban.

You know the Lone Ranger took a vow never to kill the bad guys, and they always arranged it so he could shoot the gun out of their hands, but it doesn't work that way in real life. If you know that someone is intending to kill you and you have no reasonable means of escape the law allows you to kill in self-defense.

King: I take my law from a higher source. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says "Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also (Matthew 5:39);" later he says, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' 44 But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.(Matthew 5: 43-45)"

Obama: With all respect, Dr. King, I don't think that's the sum total of Jesus' teachings. Jesus also said

34 "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. 35 For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; (Matthew 11: 34-5)

King: I can see you know your scripture.

Obama: And furthermore, most Christian denominations and all Christian kingdoms in history have held that war is permissible. St. Augustine justified war, and the great medieval Christian theologian Thomas Aquinas set forth three conditions for a just war.

King: I'm familiar with those: the war must be fought on behalf of a sovereign state, the cause must be just and the intentions must be good. Do you think America's present adventure in Afghanistan meets that test?

Obama: Yes. We are fighting there on behalf not just of the United States but of a coalition of nations under the sanction of the United Nations, so we are in effect fighting on behalf of all sovereign nations. Our cause is just in that we were attacked by a gang of murderous religious extremists in 2001 and when we commenced fighting in Afghanistan, Al Qaeda was harbored and protected by the

Taliban, which controlled the country. And we have the intention only to ensure the destruction of Al Qaeda, not to occupy Afghanistan indefinitely.

King: But the Taliban has been replaced by a provisional government and now by an elected one, however corrupt. Doesn't this dissipate your justification to continue to wage war there? You have no dispute with the Afghan government, in fact you are allied with it.

Obama: But we still haven't captured the leadership of Al Qaeda and the Taliban will resume control of the country if we don't fight them.

King: But don't you see how you are digging yourself in deeper. You send remote-controlled planes into dangerous areas and the people conclude from that that Americans consider their lives too valuable to lay on the line, but they are perfectly willing to destroy civilian lives. Can't you see how violence feeds on itself?

Obama: "The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy. Instead of diminishing evil, it multiplies it."

King: Yeah, that's right. Who said that?

Obama: You did. And it's a good thought.

King: It's not just my thought. I got a lot of my ideas about nonviolence from Mahatma Gandhi. It was he who worked out the principle he called Satyagraha, which is firmness in the truth. It is a way to accomplish the social change you want without physically harming your opponent.

Obama: Yes, I know that you got your ideas on nonviolence from Gandhi, and I respect you both. I tried to say that in accepting the Nobel. Gandhi was the leader of his people, and his ideas may have worked for him in India, but this is not India and it is not the 1940s.

King: But I'm not sure you appreciate that the ideas have been around before Gandhi. Gandhi was inspired by reading Leo Tolstoy's book on religion, *The Kingdom of God is Within You*, where Tolstoy puts forth the idea of nonresistance to evil as the essence of Christianity.

Obama: Well Tolstoy was a great writer but he never led a political movement and never put those ideas into action, and Russia of the turn of the Twentieth Century is a far cry from America of today.

King: But Tolstoy got his ideas about nonviolence from an American clergyman, Adin Ballou.

Obama: Adin Ballou, who was he?

King: He was a Universalist minister of the mid Nineteenth Century, who founded a utopian socialist community in Massachusetts and wrote a book setting forth his idea of Christian non-resistance. Tolstoy called him his favorite American author. He served a Unitarian Church in Hopedale, Massachusetts.

Obama: You know, when I was little, my grandmother would take me to a Unitarian Universalist fellowship in Hawaii. And when she died just after my election last year, we used that building as a base for scattering her ashes. But I don't remember ever hearing about this Adin Ballou.

King: He was the guy who started it all.

Obama: Does that mean that all Unitarian Universalists today are pacifists?

King: Not by any means; they're not all anything; each one thinks for themselves.

Obama: Well, I can't let national policy be swayed by crazy theories coming out of fringe religions. The majority of the American people are pushing me to confront Al Qaeda with more force, not less.

King: But don't you see that the struggle in Afghanistan is for the allegiance of the people, and the more America uses high technology that kills civilians, the more the people are going to look to the Taliban for protection?

Obama: Yes, we've thought of that and we're rearranging our strategy to try to put our troops closer to the people, even though it makes them more vulnerable.

King: In your Nobel speech, you said that you respected the tradition of nonviolence that Gandhi and I started and that there was nothing weak or passive about it.

Obama: But I didn't say it was effective at all times and in all places. Do you think it is?

King: Well there have been amazing social changes that have taken place in the Twentieth Century which have been free of bloodshed. The fall of Communism in most countries occurred without bloodshed in 1989-90.

Obama: But there had been huge wars fought trying to contain Communism.

King: Apartheid was dismantled peacefully in South Africa.

Obama: But only after years of armed struggle by the African National Congress.

King: Gandhi's nonviolent tactics persuaded the British to give up India.

Obama: And in the ensuing partition, a war erupted which killed close to a million people. Gandhi himself was assassinated by a Hindu who thought he had been too generous to the Muslims, just as you were assassinated by a white supremacist who hated your work for racial justice.

King: You're right.

Obama: Let's suppose I were standing in the courtyard of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis on April 4, 1968, and I had a gun and I saw James Earl Ray raise his gun to shoot you and I knew he was going to try to assassinate you. Would your principles of nonresistance to evil prevent me from shooting him to kill in order to save your life?

King: You can take action to prevent him from shooting. Adin Ballou said, "To oppose, resist, restrain, reprove, disfellowship and endeavor to reform evildoers benevolently, without resorting to any absolute injury, tends to the highest good of all parties concerned, to maintain the authority of the divine law and to do away with all evil from the human race."²

Obama: That's all very well and good if I'm standing right by him, but suppose

²Adin Ballou, Practical Christianity Lynn Gordon Hughes, Ed. Providence:

I'm thirty feet away, and the only way I can keep him from firing is to shoot him myself.

King: Well, this sounds like an action movie. In real life, this situation wouldn't arise.

Obama: Now who's being a realist? In my Nobel speech, I said the reason I couldn't follow your ideas of nonviolence was because I had to be realistic.

King: Yes, I remember. You said

"I face the world as it is, and cannot stand idle in the face of threats to the American people. For make no mistake: Evil does exist in the world. A non-violent movement could not have halted Hitler's armies. Negotiations cannot convince al Qaeda's leaders to lay down their arms. To say that force may sometimes be necessary is not a call to cynicism -- it is a recognition of history; the imperfections of man and the limits of reason."

Obama: So what's wrong with that?

King: Your ideas on evil, for one. You speak as if it was a separate entity, like nitrogen. If you make evil into a thing, you can justify almost anything to oppose it. Your predecessor exploited this to the hilt.

Obama: Evil doesn't exist?

King: Evil exists as an adjective, not as a noun. There are evil acts, I'll grant you that. I would rather call them harmful.

Obama: And evil people.

King: No, there are people who commit evil acts, some over and over again. But as soon as you say there are evil people, you are drawing a line between them and the rest of humanity. That kind of line-drawing, demonizing and dehumanizing certain people, is what is most clearly against the ethic taught not only by Jesus but by the Buddha and other religious figures.

Obama: I can't say that Al Qaeda is evil? They destroyed thousands of innocent lives and far from regretting it, continue to plot new attacks on innocent civilians.

King: But if you want to oppose them intelligently, you need first to understand them, to understand the appeal of their distorted form of Islam to the young Muslim men they recruit. Until you understand Al Qaeda's program, you will not defeat it. It is a franchise operation, and if you kill its leaders in Afghanistan, others will spring up in Yemen and New York and Boston and elsewhere to take their place. They are only as far as the nearest computer terminal.

Obama: We know that, but what does that have to do with whether they are evil or not?

King: The word evil is a thought-stopper. It is designed to shortcut any analysis and go straight to the adrenalin supply. It's a trigger for the flight-or-fight response. You can't understand anyone's motivations or how they operate when you're calling them evil.

Obama: But the public wants a President who stands up to evil.

King: No the public wants its President to diminish the threat from fringe religious groups so it can feel safe.

Obama: Ok, I'll try to figure out what to do about those Unitarian Universalists

to make this country safer. I hear Sasha calling me. Thank you for your call, Dr. King. It's been an honor and a pleasure.
Amen.