

## **Forty Acres and a Mule**

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Unitarian Universalist Meeting House

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The shootings in Tucson have horrified the country, and President Obama's call for a renewed dedication to American ideals has given us all a hope that some good might come out of this tragedy. Many of my colleagues are putting aside their prepared subjects at this time in order to focus on these events. I see a connection between what has happened in the last week and what I meant to speak on this morning and will try to make it before I have finished here.

This year we approach the day set aside to honor Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in the context of the one hundred fiftieth anniversary of the Civil War. In my native South Carolina, some celebrated the sesquicentennial of that state's secession from the union by having a Secession Ball. When the media asked the organizers of the ball whether secession was really something they wanted to celebrate, the organizers responded that the war was really about states rights, not about slavery.

In my childhood in the South, I heard this revisionist proposition constantly; I thought in the intervening 40 years it would have died a quiet death, but there it was, embarrassingly, in the newspaper again. It does not seem to bother those who hold this view that the very document created by the secession convention in December 1860 says they are seceding because of the election of a president who is supposedly hostile to the institution of slavery. And this despite the fact that Lincoln took the position in the election campaign that a president has no power to abolish slavery in the states where it was legal.

The Civil War was the great wrenching conflagration in our nation's history and though this Southerner had ancestors who fought for the confederacy, I fully accept Lincoln's view that the war was a moral reckoning for slavery. The Civil Rights movement a century later was a continuation of the unfinished business of moral reckoning. And even with a person of partial African descent in the White House today, the business of moral reckoning is still unfinished.

Slavery itself ended on January 1, 1863, when Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation. Though he had taken the position before that he had no power to free slaves in states where slavery was legal, he now took the position that since those states were now in insurrection, he had the power through military necessity to act to free the slaves in the arenas of war. This had the political effect of setting up slavery-free-zones in areas under union control in the south and thus encouraging slaves to migrate into those zones.

Not surprisingly, slaves responded by pouring into these union-controlled zones. It became a management problem, and this is what led General Sherman to issue Special field order 15, January 16, 1865, 146 years ago today. By the order he declared that no whites were to remain in the Georgia and South Carolina Sea Islands and that the land there was to be divided among the former slaves, with each family to get a plot of no more than 40 acres. Though not included in the order, the army was also getting rid of some unneeded animals, so the news of Forty Acres and Mule spread quickly among the former slaves<sup>1</sup>.

The policy was very short-lived. After the war, Thaddeus Stevens and other Radical Republicans tried to turn the land redistribution into law, but there were doubts of its constitutionality and it never mustered the support necessary. Reconstruction brought many punitive measures on the South, but the idea of the federal government simply taking plantations from white owners and giving them to the slaves never mustered a majority.

A couple of years ago the scholar Henry Louis Gates did a study of the family tree of 20 successful present-day African Americans, ranging from Oprah Winfrey to astronaut Mae Jemison and surgeon Ben Carson. He found that 15 of the 20 descended from at least one line of former slaves who managed to obtain property by 1920, at a time when only 25 percent of all African American families owned property<sup>2</sup>.

For example

“Ten years after slavery ended, Constantine Winfrey, Oprah’s great-grandfather, bartered eight bales of cleaned cotton (4,000 pounds) that he picked on his own time for 80 acres of prime bottomland in Mississippi. (He also learned to read and write while picking all that cotton.) “

Gates maintains that this rare early property ownership is what today distinguishes the haves from the have-nots among African Americans. There is a widening disparity between the black middle class and the black poor.

Most freed slaves never got their forty acres, nor the mule. For 300 years, America had prospered from their unpaid labor and yet after emancipation, they were left largely to fend for themselves. Most became tenant farmers on the holdings of their former masters.

Fast forward a century. In the last year of his life, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. made a connection between war and poverty and racism. In August of 1967, addressing his own

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<sup>1</sup> From “Reconstruction: the Second Civil War” on “The American Experience” PBS [http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/reconstruction/40acres/ps\\_so15.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/reconstruction/40acres/ps_so15.html)

<sup>2</sup>Henry Louis Gates, Jr. “Forty Acres and a gap in wealth,” New York Times November 18, 2007.

Southern Christian Leadership Conference, he defined a bold new social goal: a guaranteed national income and housing:

Now our country can do this. John Kenneth Galbraith said that a guaranteed annual income could be done for about twenty billion dollars a year. And I say to you today, that if our nation can spend thirty-five billion dollars a year to fight an unjust, evil war in Vietnam, and twenty billion dollars to put a man on the moon, it can spend billions of dollars to put God's children on their own two feet right here on earth<sup>3</sup>.

He also said that the presence of poverty in an affluent nation pointed to a need to consider a total restructuring of society:

... we honestly face the fact that the Movement must address itself to the question of restructuring the whole of American society. There are forty million poor people here. And one day we must ask the question, "Why are there forty million poor people in America?" And when you begin to ask that question, you are raising questions about the economic system, about a broader distribution of wealth. When you ask that question, you begin to question the capitalistic economy. And I'm simply saying that more and more, we've got to begin to ask questions about the whole society. We are called upon to help the discouraged beggars in life's market place. But one day we must come to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring. It means that questions must be raised. You see, my friends, when you deal with this, you begin to ask the question, "Who owns the oil?" You begin to ask the question, "Who owns the iron ore?" You begin to ask the question, "Why is it that people have to pay water bills in a world that is two thirds water?" These are questions that must be asked.

King was not speaking in a vacuum. Forty-seven years ago this month, when Lyndon Johnson had been in office only two months after the assassination of President Kennedy, he had made this call in his first State of The Union address:

This administration today, here and now, declares unconditional war on poverty in America. I urge this Congress and all Americans to join with me in that effort.

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<sup>3</sup>“Where Do We Go From Here?” Speech to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference August 1967

[http://www.writespirit.net/inspirational\\_talks/political/martin\\_luther\\_king\\_talks/where\\_do\\_we\\_go\\_from\\_here/](http://www.writespirit.net/inspirational_talks/political/martin_luther_king_talks/where_do_we_go_from_here/)

It will not be a short or easy struggle, no single weapon or strategy will suffice, but we shall not rest until that war is won. The richest Nation on earth can afford to win it. We cannot afford to lose it. One thousand dollars invested in salvaging an unemployable youth today can return \$40,000 or more in his lifetime<sup>4</sup>.

And so was created the Office of Economic Opportunity and from that sprang Head Start and VISTA and the Job Corps and Legal Services and the Community Action Program. But King's 1967 call for a guaranteed national income and housing went well beyond the War on Poverty

Some of the War on Poverty programs worked and some are still alive today. But they produced a political backlash in the 1970s and 80s, and it was a Democrat, Bill Clinton, who phased out most of welfare in the mid 1990s.

Did it have any effect? Maybe, but we certainly didn't defeat poverty. According to the census bureau, there were 43 million Americans below the poverty line in 2009, the largest number in the 51 years they have been keeping statistics. Of course, the US population has been steadily growing in this time period. The more meaningful measure is the poverty rate, the percentage of people living below the poverty line. By this measure, the Johnson War on Poverty may have had some effect. The percentage of Americans living in poverty is 14.3%, which is the highest rate since 1994, but is actually 8.1 percentage points lower than in 1959 when they first started keeping track. About a quarter of all African Americans and Hispanics are below the poverty line, whereas the rate for non-Hispanic whites is less than 9% and Asians at 12%<sup>5</sup>.

Poverty, in other words, has waned slightly since Dr. King spoke in 1967, but it is still very much with us. Dr. King was a man of many beautiful words, but also a man of action. One of his last projects was organizing a Poor People's Campaign. This was a campaign for an "economic Bill of Rights" which would guarantee to every person in America housing and an annual income. King was assassinated before he could see it through, but in May of 1968 demonstrators poured in to Washington and set up an encampment on the National Mall which they called Resurrection City. At its peak it had about 7000 demonstrators. However, amid the riots following King's death, the assassination of Robert Kennedy and the ongoing struggles around the war in Vietnam, the Poor People's campaign did not gain much political traction.

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<sup>4</sup>State of the Union Address January 8, 1964

<http://www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/johnson/archives.hom/speeches.hom/640108.asp>

<sup>5</sup>Source: U.S. Census <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/about/overview/index.html>

A guaranteed national income, guaranteed national housing. Those goals today seem so foreign from the political climate. Today we hear such a loud roar vowing to repeal the modest national health plan passed last year on the basis that it is socialist. We can only imagine the reaction if someone were to seriously revive the idea of a guaranteed national income or housing.

The problem is not that the needs of the poor have gone away since Dr. King was assassinated. They are just as present with us, and the gap between rich and poor has widened. The problem is that the terms of the debate have been seized by the wealthy.

Organization is power. The poor have no organization to speak for them. They are not unionized. They have no lobbyists. They have no lawyers. Legal aid lawyers represent individual poor clients, but they have long been restricted from bringing class actions and other legal devices on behalf of classes of poor people. Acorn, one of the most effective grassroots organizations for poor people, was shamefully slandered and dismantled through lies spread by unscrupulous operatives and repeated by national conservative media.

In the long view, we have missed the boat not once but several times. We did not give the slaves forty acres and a mule, we did not give them access to what Marx would call the means of production. President Lyndon Johnson declared war on poverty, but the war in Vietnam restricted his means of fighting it. Dr. King's life was cut short before he could do much on his program for guaranteed housing and a guaranteed income.

I said that starting with the death of King in 1968, there was a political backlash against the War on Poverty. Politicians have been able to exploit the public's distaste for anyone getting something for nothing, and this is coupled with barely disguised racism. Whether or not the welfare queen actually ever existed, she was a reliable political whipping post, and elected many a conservative politician.

Now you may be wondering whether this sermon is going to have anything to do with religion. I do have a religious point to make, and it is this. When we get down to the underlying reasons why the electorate in the United States will not support the welfare state measures, the safety net that all other advanced capitalist democracies have adopted, you find yourself looking at our old foe, Calvinism.

This Commonwealth in which we reside was founded as a City on a Hill by staunch Calvinists, and the whole country are their heirs. Calvinism holds that most of us are going to hell, and only the elect will be saved and it is predestined who those are. One sign that you are in the elect is that you have attained worldly success. So if you're poor, you get the double whammy of suffering your poverty in this life and eternal damnation in the next. More to the point, under Calvinism, as a social matter, it is a sin to be poor. And many politicians have been elected by running against the sin of poverty.

Unitarianism and Universalism rejected Calvinism; Unitarians argued that humans were not inherently deprived, but that each person would be saved on their own individual merit, which included a consideration of their life circumstances. If they were born into poverty, they could rise by force of character, but we should work to eliminate poverty so more people can rise. On the universalist side, if God is love and loves her children equally, it is cruel and unnatural for some of them to suffer in poverty. And if we are affirming and promoting the inherent worth and dignity of all persons, we should care about the indignities of hunger and homelessness.

Here's how Dr King put it when he gave the Ware lecture at the UUA General Assembly in 1966:

“All I'm saying is this: that all life is inter-related, and somehow we are all tied together. For some strange reason I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be. This is the inter-related structure of all reality. John Donne caught it years ago and placed it in graphic terms, ‘No man is an island entire of itself, every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.’ He goes on to say, ‘any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, therefore send not to know for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee.’<sup>6</sup>”

It may make economic sense for the government just to give money and housing to poor people; they would spend it and stimulate the economy. But Calvinism is alive and well, and it makes no more political sense today than it did in 1967. Today there is debate and struggle around how the government will reduce the deficit without raising taxes or cutting spending, and the fear is we will not be able to fund the entitlements in the present law such as Social Security and Medicaid, so there would be few politicians of any party willing to entertain the idea of tacking on another level of entitlements.

And yet it makes sense that if poor folk just had a stake, a hand up, they could pull themselves out of poverty. And people do this all the time. Part of the subprime mortgage crisis that almost put the economy onto the rocks two years ago was sparked by loans to homebuyers who had never qualified for mortgages before. While all kinds of carnage ensued, there must have been some of those first-time homebuyers who made it.

The more important question is whether we care and why. Here in Chatham and

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<sup>6</sup>Ware lecture May 18, 1966 at Hollywood, FL  
[http://archive.uua.org/news/2005/050115\\_ware66.html](http://archive.uua.org/news/2005/050115_ware66.html)

Harwich, about 2% of the population lives below the poverty line. The masses of poor people are in distant cities that many of us moved from when we moved here. While we certainly have problems of substance abuse, and occasional violence and theft, by and large the problems of the inner city are out of sight and out of mind.

I don't have a plan for eliminating poverty in this country, but I do think it's something we ought to be talking about. The government guaranteed income and housing for which Dr. King called is only one way to approach the problem. Right here and now, some of you are working on pieces of the problem like affordable housing, hunger and homelessness relief. What ideas do you have?

Dr. King's most famous speech is built around the phrase "I have a dream." Last Thursday night in Tucson, President Obama echoed King's speech, and challenged us all to dream:

"... our task, working together, is to constantly widen the circle of our concern so that we bequeath the American Dream to future generations. (Applause.)

They believed -- they believed, and I believe that we can be better. Those who died here, those who saved life here -- they help me believe. We may not be able to stop all evil in the world, but I know that how we treat one another, that's entirely up to us. (Applause.)

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That's what I believe, in part because that's what a child like Christina Taylor Green believed. (Applause.)

Imagine -- imagine for a moment, here was a young girl who was just becoming aware of our democracy; just beginning to understand the obligations of citizenship; just starting to glimpse the fact that some day she, too, might play a part in shaping her nation's future. She had been elected to her student council. She saw public service as something exciting and hopeful. She was off to meet her congresswoman, someone she was sure was good and important and might be a role model. She saw all this through the eyes of a child, undimmed by the cynicism or vitriol that we adults all too often just take for granted.

I want to live up to her expectations. (Applause.) I want our democracy to be as good as Christina imagined it. I want America to be as good as she imagined it. (Applause.) All of us -- we should do everything we can to make sure this

country lives up to our children's expectations. (Applause.)

Martin Luther King Jr. dreamed a vision which he and we have come to call the beloved community. We are a long way from there, but it is vital to maintain the dream. Whether we receive our inspiration from Jesus or the Seven Principles or Buddha, our faith calls us to work towards the beloved community, and in addition to overcoming racism and homophobia and war, to overcome the crippling effects of poverty and the great gap between rich and poor. Amen.

Reading

Special Field Order 15 – General William Tecumseh Sherman<sup>7</sup>

In the Field, Savannah, Georgia, January 16th, 1865.

I. The islands from Charleston, south, the abandoned rice fields along the rivers for thirty miles back from the sea, and the country bordering the St. Johns river, Florida, are reserved and set apart for the settlement of the negroes now made free by the acts of war and the proclamation of the President of the United States.

II. At Beaufort, Hilton Head, Savannah, Fernandina, St. Augustine and Jacksonville, the blacks may remain in their chosen or accustomed vocations -- but on the islands, and in the settlements hereafter to be established, no white person whatever, unless military officers and soldiers detailed for duty, will be permitted to reside; and the sole and exclusive management of affairs will be left to the freed people themselves, subject only to the United States military authority and the acts of Congress. By the laws of war, and orders of the President of the United States, the negro is free and must be dealt with as such....

III. Whenever three respectable negroes, heads of families, shall desire to settle on land, and shall have selected for that purpose an island or a locality clearly defined, within the limits above designated, the Inspector of Settlements and Plantations will himself, or by such subordinate officer as he may appoint, give them a license to settle such island or district, and afford them such assistance as he can to enable them to establish a peaceable agricultural settlement. The three parties named will subdivide the land, under the supervision of the Inspector, among

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<sup>7</sup>From "Reconstruction: the Second Civil War" on "The American Experience" PBS  
[http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/reconstruction/40acres/ps\\_so15.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/reconstruction/40acres/ps_so15.html)



themselves and such others as may choose to settle near them, so that each family shall have a plot of not more than (40) forty acres of tillable ground, and when it borders on some water channel, with not more than 800 feet water front, in the possession of which land the military authorities will afford them protection, until such time as they can protect themselves, or until Congress shall regulate their title. The Quartermaster may, on the requisition of the Inspector of Settlements and Plantations, place at the disposal of the Inspector, one or more of the captured steamers, to ply between the settlements and one or more of the commercial points heretofore named in orders, to afford the settlers the opportunity to supply their necessary wants, and to sell the products of their land and labor.