

## Beyond Charity

Few will remember how Martin Luther King, Jr., lived his last birthday, as he turned 39 on January 15, 1968. We remember his "I Have a Dream" speech and that King worked for civil rights. We'll remember a letter from Birmingham jail and maybe a march from Selma or maybe even the Montgomery bus boycott. But we don't seem to remember that on his last birthday, King was working on poverty. According to accounts of the day retold by [Jesse Jackson](#) and [Martin Luther King III](#), King spent the day working on a campaign that he hoped would force Washington and the American public to acknowledge and resolve the problem of poverty for people of all races, religions and backgrounds in the United States. The Poor People's Campaign was the agenda for the day, with a short break for birthday cake.

The Poor People's Campaign reached out to poor whites, many of whom felt most threatened by the civil rights movement's successes in black equality, as well as impoverished migrant farm workers who harvested the nation's food and Native Americans who languished on reservations. Injustice anywhere, King said, was a threat to justice everywhere.

In a [speech in Grosse Pointe, Michigan](#), less than a month before his assassination, King spoke of unemployment statistics that belied the long-term unemployment in the black community. But he made clear that employment was not turning out to be a ticket out of poverty. "The problem of unemployment is not the only problem," King said. "There is a problem of underemployment, and there are thousands and thousands, I would say millions of people in the Negro community who are poverty-stricken – not because they are not working, but because they receive wages so low that they cannot begin to function in the main stream of the economic life of our

nation. Most of the poverty-stricken people of America are persons who are working every day, and they end up getting part-time wages for full-time work."

King's words, spoken almost 50 years ago, are still true today. In his book, *The Working Poor*, journalist David K. Shipler writes how the chain of events that lead a person into poverty are so tightly interwoven that one seemingly slight development might just be the one to lead a person over the edge. He illustrates how a run-down apartment can exacerbate a child's asthma, leading to an attack that forces a mother to call an ambulance, which generates a medical bill that cannot be paid, which ruins a credit record, which hikes up the interest rate on an auto loan, which forces the purchase of an unreliable used car, which jeopardizes the mother's punctuality at work, which limits her promotion and earning capacity, and which ultimately confines her to poor housing. Those of us who would blame the poor for not making the right decisions – for not 'getting their act together' – are unfamiliar with the risky, vicious circle. But ask the day laborer, the teenage single mother, or the toothless man who buys a bottle of Jack Daniels with the money he's made from recycling three bags of cans at the grocery store. They know all about it.

So what does this all have to do with us Unitarian Universalists? We certainly talk about these things, about social justice, and we more-or-less all know what that means. Things should be more equal. The disadvantaged should be less disadvantaged. No one should be hungry. No one should be homeless. The sick or injured should be cared for. Education should be available to everyone. We say, "Isn't it awful that in such a wealthy country, some people are poor or hungry or have to go without healthcare or good education?" And whomever we are talking to says, "Yes, it's awful." I have found myself in these kinds of conversations, with UUs and with others. And I certainly know that we have tried to do our part and make a difference –

donating to the food pantry, sending contributions to various non-profit organizations working against poverty, volunteering at Christmas Outreach or with the new Isabella County Restoration House efforts for the homeless.

Yet recently, I have found myself deeply challenged, first in my thinking and then in my heart. When Nelson Mandela died on December 5<sup>th</sup>, there was much written about his life and his work. One of the items I read was from a speech he gave at the G8 summit in 2005. "Like slavery and apartheid, poverty is not natural. It is man-made and it can be overcome and eradicated by the actions of human beings. And overcoming poverty is not a gesture of charity. It is an act of justice. It is the protection of a fundamental human right, the right to dignity and a decent life. While poverty persists, there is no true freedom." Overcoming poverty is not a gesture of charity. It is an act of justice.

This certainly got me thinking – and reading - about the difference between charity and justice. Doug Muder, a frequent UU World columnist, contends that charity and justice are very different models. He contends that a charitable worldview doesn't critique the way the world works; it just tries to mitigate the unfortunate results. It keeps a food pantry open, it provides a soup kitchen, it establishes a homeless shelter; it's like putting a bandaid on the problem. In contrast, a justice-focused worldview does critique the system. It asks why the poor don't have food. It asks how the difference between rich and poor came about. It asks how the system that leads to this result justifies itself. It asks us to check our assumptions and think again, and then it asks us to act.

So...how did my heart get challenged? Well, it happened when I volunteered for the Christmas Outreach project this past December. I signed up to be an escort to people as they did their Christmas shopping from the multitude of new and used items

donated by the community of Mt. Pleasant – winter coats, boots, hats, mittens; jeans; other clothing; linens and blankets; and toys. My job was to push their shopping cart as they stopped at each station, hand their card listing their needs (ages, sizes, etc.) to the person staffing the station to get them their items or for them to pick out what they wanted for the children/people on their needs list, get the card back with the indication that this station had been checked off, and then escort them to the next station. It was a long process, and I only ended up escorting two people during an almost three-hour shift, as they carefully made their decisions and as the line of shoppers was very long and slow-moving.

During the course of those almost three hours, my heart got heavier and heavier with very uncomfortable and unsettling thoughts and feelings. This situation didn't feel good. When I go shopping, who requires that I have an escort? Who tells me that I have to go in a certain order? Who requires that I have to hand in a card with my needs on it so someone else can find my items? Who tells me that I can have two of these used items from these tables and one of the new ones from these tables? No one, of course. Now, don't get me wrong. I understand that this Christmas Outreach is an act of good will on the part of all those who organize, contribute and volunteer for this project, including myself, but what struck me as I participated in it was "At what cost to the dignity of these people?" It felt charitable, but not just.

I have felt the same way as I have volunteered at the homeless shelter. Who tells me what time lights have to be out, and who wakens me in the morning at 7:00 am so I can be ready to get on the bus to go to a soup kitchen for my breakfast? Who requires that in order for me to smoke a cigarette, I have to ask a volunteer to escort me outside so that I can get in when I am done? No one, of course. Again, don't get me wrong. I understand that this homeless shelter project is an act of good will on the part of all

those who organize, contribute and volunteer for this project, including myself, but what struck me as I have participated in it is “At what cost to the dignity of these people?” It felt charitable, but not just.

I was, and have been, profoundly unsettled by these thoughts and feelings. Right after I finished my stint with the Christmas Outreach, I contacted Rev. Joe, asked to talk with him, and we talked for quite a while. I thought I had understood poverty; after all, I had lived it for a year in Colorado. While I wrote my dissertation, I consciously lived for a year with no income other than that which I could create by finding odd jobs when the bills for rent, electricity and heat came in the mail – cleaning rain gutters, raking, mowing, weeding, babysitting, etc. I ate Ramen noodles for multiple meals; I didn’t treat myself to an ice cream or a movie. I had even pushed myself to ask the questions of what would it be like to have children in these conditions, not being able to buy them an ice cream cone or presents at Christmas. One thing I did realize was that there was an end to my year; once I finished I would not have to choose to live like this. But what if that weren’t the case? What if I couldn’t see the end of this way of living?

I have used this experience to better teach my future middle level teachers. I teach a diversity class in which one of the diversities we explore is the notion of children and families in poverty. One of the ways we explore it is through own their stories; in small groups, they share what their experiences growing up were during their middle school years based on the socio-economic status of their families. One of the students shared about a family history assignment she had been given in her ninth grade history class. She said, “I made the entire thing up. If I had to write about a family vacation, I had to write about how I didn’t go on any vacations, and I wasn’t going to write that.” Another shared about a Valentine’s Day in fourth grade. She said,

“All the other students’ parents got them really cool valentines to hand out with cookies or candy, glitter, and all kinds of shapes. I had the typical Valentine’s cards that I thought were fun -----until getting to school.”

Reflecting on what it was like to hear these and many other stories, another of my students wrote: “It’s when we get a chance to compare our ‘life stories’ with one another in class that I believe we truly start to understand what diversity is. Listening to every one’s experiences has opened my eyes and allowed me to realize that as much as I didn’t think I was, there have been times when I’ve lived in the bubble of assumption that everyone shared the same experiences I did. Can we truly learn about the biases and assumptions we carry within ourselves without learning about other ways of living and thinking?”

Another part of my teaching is to give my students the opportunity to engage in a poverty simulation. It is designed to help participants begin to understand what it might be like to live in a typical low-income family trying to survive from month to month, to sensitize participants to the realities faced by low-income people. While my purpose is to help them think about their teaching, it goes beyond that. One student wrote: “I always thought that people who resorted to crime such as stealing or selling drugs were just low-life people who didn’t try to get a job, but getting a job is HARD! I constantly got denied, and not until the fourth week of the simulation was I able to receive a job. Cheating the system as far as selling drugs, stealing items, stealing to sell, sitting on the streets asking for money, all makes sense now because it’s quicker and sometimes easier access to money. Also, growing up in a city that had very high drug use, I have always assumed that people collecting welfare were cheating the system by using their money not on food but rather to buy drugs or alcohol, and it upset me to know that was where my tax dollars were going. However, during the poverty

simulation, the very first thing I ran to do was collect any social service benefits I could receive, and not even those were enough to pay my rent or food for a month which opened up my eyes A LOT. I also couldn't believe the choices that I was forced to make, like paying for transportation passes for three people, or letting my children roam the streets or stay at home alone so I didn't have to provide them with transportation passes as well." She concluded with this: "learning about the life of poverty has not only made me very sensitive to the lifestyle of those in poverty, but also to other lifestyle choices that I am probably still ignorant of, so without making judgment, I need to continuously question myself in consideration for several reasons behind their lifestyles choices. I wish I could provide everyone with the opportunity to learn about the lifestyle choices of those around them, but not for reasons of pity or excuses for their choices; I want people to know this for the simple fact of respect. Agreement upon lifestyle choices is not necessary; however, respect is."

My student used the word "respect." My volunteering has always been characterized by the respect I feel for those less fortunate than me. But my experiences with the Christmas Outreach project and the homeless shelter project these last couple months have led me to look deeper. I now deeply understand the difference between a charitable worldview and a justice-focused worldview. And I now more fully understand UU minister Tom Schade's hope for 2014 that Unitarian Universalist congregations move from service to solidarity.

I cannot speak for the congregation, but I can speak for myself. I'm going to try to listen even more to the stories of others. I also know I have a lot to learn. I must do my homework to truly understand the systems that make it difficult for people to be able to live in dignity, the same right to dignity and a decent life that Nelson Mandela spoke about. I must educate myself well about the issues of low-wage workers,

unemployment benefits, declining social services, immigrants, Medicaid expansion, food stamps, etc. And I want to learn to do what Tom Schade urges Unitarian Universalists to do: to “stand up again and again for and with the people who are being made victims of the present order.” My first act will be to respond to the encouragement by the Michigan Unitarian Universalist Social Justice Network (MUUSJN) to contact my state senators and representatives regarding the use of the projected state budget surplus of \$971 million dollars announced by Governor Snyder in his State of the State message last Thursday evening. I hope you will join me.