

**Dear Martin,
Rev. Don Southworth
ERUUF
January 14, 2007**

Dear Martin,

Please forgive the informality of my salutation. I did not have the privilege of knowing you when you were alive. I was only 11 years old when you were killed. I lived in San Francisco, far away from the South where you were changing the course of history. Most people call you Dr. King today and as someone who people sometimes call Reverend, I understand the respect and dignity that is afforded such a title.

But you have become for me, and many others, someone who stands on the same sacred ground as Jesus, Buddha, Gandhi and Mohammed. Now I know of course you would bristle at such a suggestion, especially since Jesus and Gandhi were your mentors and inspiration, but your name, Martin, and your legacy stand in the prophetic Parthenon of history as deservedly as any person who has ever walked this earth.

Unfortunately there are other reasons to compare you with Jesus. You, like Jesus and so many other prophets, were killed because of your radical message. Your words, like those of Jesus, are selectively followed and misinterpreted by most of us. Too many people today pick and chose the words and the message you left us that best matches their political and religious beliefs.

Some people tell us that if you lived today you would be an opponent to affirmative action and that you would swell in pride at the that so many of the dreams you challenged our country with on that hot August afternoon in Washington, DC over 43 years ago have been realized. Others, in their passionate and righteous concern for justice, have seemingly forgotten how important faith, nonviolence, and trust in a loving God were to creating a fair and just world. Your words about peace and love, forgiveness and service, poverty and the silence of those who prefer the status quo, are too challenging, too radical for most of us to heed.

Where would you stand on the issues of same gender marriage, the war in Iraq, the growing gap between the haves and the have nots, the role of religion in government, and global warming? How I wish you were here today to offer your prophetic voice to our struggles to live and do right. How I wish your example of non-violent protest and your unequivocal commitment to peace were on our television sets every night. How I wish your wisdom, your courage, your inspirational leadership and your words from the sixties could be translated for these fearful days of the early 21st century.

On a more personal note, I want to say thank you. Thank you for the life you lived and for the example you were for loving, forgiving, serving and giving

one's life to something bigger. Thank you for showing me a way to deepen my relationship and commitment to justice, goodness, to hope, to love, to God.

I would not be a minister if it were not for your words, your challenges, to live and to die for something that makes a difference today, tomorrow and forevermore. Your words inspire me to love more deeply, forgive more often, practice peace more widely, and to speak, and more importantly, act for justice for those who society has forgotten, more passionately than I am wont do.

I sometimes imagine that you are sitting on my shoulder when I step into my pulpit whispering affirmation and love into my ear. You tell me to speak the truth with love, you challenge me to reach deeper into my soul so that I can articulate, in my own words, a vision of justice, of peace, of forgiveness, of love that those who hear me can live more fully. Most days I fall far short of what I wish I could say, most days I fall short of the love, the forgiveness, the peace that your words have taught me can be true. On those days when I realize my failings and how far my reality is from your vision, I find comfort and hope in your words once again, and I remember that the fight for peace and justice is a long battle with setbacks each and every day.

The immortal words you wrote on that napkin in the Birmingham jail are as challenging, as prophetic today as they were the day you wrote them. As a minister who leads a congregation I am haunted by your prophecy that "the

contemporary church is often a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. It is so often the arch-supporter of the status quo. If the church of today does not capture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authentic ring, forfeit the loyalty of millions and be diminished as an irrelevant social club with no meaning.”

My congregation, like most I know, cares about making connections with each other and focuses most of our energy internally. But I know they do not wish to be known as a social club. I know that they do not want to be irrelevant in a world where too many people have become so enamored with their personal salvation that they have forgotten your call, and the call of prophets throughout history, to serve and love others. And yet Martin it is so hard to balance the quest for personal spiritual growth and taking care of ourselves and those closest to us, with active engagement in the world and speaking and fighting for justice for all.

Hope, peace, love, service, forgiveness, justice. Too often we use these words as platitudes and dreams that we never truly believe will come true. You showed us how to make them come to life. Your legacy and your words echo in our ears every January when we celebrate your birth. But by making you an icon, a person who we celebrate for three days and then put back in our history books, we have forgotten – perhaps because we fear we do not have what it takes to make your words come true – the message and example you left behind. Too many of us

-both young and old – have been seduced by our materialistic culture and are not willing to make the sacrifices for others that your life showed us.

I will do my best to remember each and every day. I will do my best to get on my knees, if need be, to invoke the power, the faith, the courage to make your vision come true just a little more each day. And I will keep asking you to stay on my shoulder as I invite others to make your vision of a world awash in peace, justice and love come true.

On the day you gave the eulogy for one of our Unitarian Universalist martyrs, the Rev. James Reeb, who was killed in Selma, Alabama when he answered your call to march for civil rights, you invoked these words from Romeo & Juliet to describe his short life,

And if he should die,

Take his body, and cut it into little stars.

He will make the face of heaven so fine

That all the world will be in love with night.

I hope you know that the stars your life left behind have been lighting the sky and illuminating the darkness for millions each and every night since the day you died. You have made the face of heaven so fine that when I look at the “beautiful stars as they bedeck the heavens like swinging lanterns of eternity”, I

find the comfort, inspiration and hope to live another day and to try again to make your dream come true.

We shall overcome. We shall be free. We shall live in peace. One day.

With thanks and love,

Your faithful disciple and hopeful partner in peace, Don

CLOSING WORDS

The words of Martin Luther King, Jr.

We are prone to judge success by the index of our salaries or the size of our automobiles, rather than by the quality of our service and relationship to humanity... We shall overcome.

An individual has not started living until he can rise above the narrow confines of his individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity... We shall overcome.

I have the audacity to believe that people everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality and freedom for their spirits.

I believe that what self-centered people have torn down, other-centered people can build up.

We shall overcome.

Go in peace.