

## WHERE ARE THE KEYS TO THE KINGDOM

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Alex Alexis needed to get a new passport the other day, according to a recent article in the New York Times.<sup>1</sup> His ex-wife and three children lived in his native land, Haiti. He hadn't heard a thing about his family and needed to go find them. He found himself pouring his heart out to Carline Keil, a Creole speaking aide to the one Haitian born Brooklyn councilman, Mathieu Eugene. Carline, too, had not heard from her relatives in that country newly devastated by the earthquake. It wasn't her expertise to field this kind of catastrophe, as hundreds of calls and countless visits from Haitian New Yorkers flooded the office looking for some news, some glimpse of home, some sense of balance in these days of horror and loss. The seismic shift did not just happen in the land of Haiti, it happened in the hearts and lives of millions, and continues as people regroup and recover in the rubble of their days.

So she does her best with full heart: listening, learning, calling who she knows, calming the many she just met, giving herself a breather, a moment to weep or sigh or utter, "oh my gosh, oh my gosh."

In the sermon on the mount, what is often thought of as Jesus' platform for his ministry, the grounding for his faith in humanity's spiritual evolution, he speaks of ways of being that will usher in the kingdom.

Jesus began this sermon with this affirmation: "blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." What is translated as poor in spirit, is actually a concept that means humble, not putting oneself forward inappropriately, not

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<sup>1</sup> Kareem Fahim. "A Councilman's Aide Extends a Lifeline All the Way to Haiti", NYTimes, Friday, January 15, 2010, pp.A18-19

imposing our selves onto the moment but being open to what is before us and what is within us and what can teach us. It means being in the moment of shared being with a fullness of heart....a key to the kingdom.

Carline Keil met this day with a fullness of heart, and, had the courage of true compassion, suffering with these strangers who entered the office.

Now the kingdom of God or heaven is not a piece of celestial real estate, it is a state of being, a way of knowing and relating that we all can come to when we realize the fullness of our natural interdependent being.

We have yet to fully realize this living power within us: to be fully conscious of our being and tend it with love. There are times when we can recognize the potential, when we feel its presence, and times when we have teachers who are closer to that knowing and able to guide our way.

Dr. Martin Luther King lifted up this understanding in these words: “Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. This is the interrelated structure of reality.”<sup>2</sup>

For Unitarian Universalists the kingdom manifests in world community with peace, liberty and justice for all, respecting the interdependent web of all existence and the inherent worth and dignity of every being.

After awhile, Mr. Alex’s brother walked in and told him that all three of his family had died when their house collapsed. Overwhelmed with the impact of this news, Alex collapsed on the floor. Paramedics were called while others received news

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<sup>2</sup> [http://thinkexist.com/quotes/martin\\_luther\\_king,\\_jr/](http://thinkexist.com/quotes/martin_luther_king,_jr/)

or regretful lack of information. While others managed their shock in their own way.

By the time the paramedics arrived, Alex had revived and many tended to his needs of water and solace, silence and steadiness of care until he was ready to leave.

Dr. King reminds us: “Life's most persistent and urgent question is, 'What are you doing for others?'.... The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy.”<sup>3</sup>

At the end of the day, Mr. Alexis returned to the office and thanked Ms. Keil for her assistance. She offered to walk him to his car. “I’m o.k., ma cherie,” he said. Of course there is a long road ahead for Mr. Alexis, for Ms. Keil, for Haiti, for the world to heal this brokenness, but on that day, in that small office, in one borough, a bit of the kingdom was made manifest. It is not an end product. It is a relational power, and is created by the humble, courageous willingness to be self respecting and other regarding persons. This is a key to a just and compassionate world.

Martin Luther King named this relational power as “agape”, the Greek word for universal love. “Agape means understanding, redeeming good will for all men,” King wrote, “It is an overflowing love which is purely spontaneous, unmotivated, groundless, and creative...It is the love of God operating in the human heart.

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<sup>3</sup> [http://thinkexist.com/quotes/martin\\_luther\\_king,\\_jr/](http://thinkexist.com/quotes/martin_luther_king,_jr/)

Agape is not a weak, passive love. It is love in action... He who works against community is working against the whole of creation.”<sup>4</sup>

How is it that we are still unable to see that we are intricately bound to one another? It is astounding that we remain disconnected from one another, willfully isolated from the ripple effect of our actions and disjointed in our priorities for a healthier life.

This is caused by habituation. We behave in a certain way until it becomes habit – until we do not even notice that we are making a choice – until we think we must live in this way, that any other way is fraught with danger or unworthy of our consideration. We habituate to war because we believe that it is the only way to get what we want in a divergent world. We habituate to competition because we have created for ourselves a hierarchy of being. We habituate to belief systems and the defense of them, to prejudices and the assumed safety within them, to body disciplines and the physical benefit from them. Habituation is value neutral – it is not a good or bad thing in itself – but it is something to be aware of; that what we do creates habit and we choose what we become.

We choose what world we want to advocate. Every day of our lives.

As Unitarian Universalists we are called to habituate justice, equity and compassion – to make it second nature in our lives and so an inspiration, an encouragement to all we meet in our ways and walking. That’s not something that happens once or for all time. It takes a tending and a nurturing of spirit. It takes gentle reminders and well timed wake up calls. It takes sowing seeds and cultivating health. We come together to gain insight from different perspectives

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<sup>4</sup> Excerpts from the essay “An Experiment in Love” by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., taken from [A Testament of Hope](#), James Washington, editor

and ways of being, to embolden projects of love and justice and to grow in understanding of life in its majesty and mystery.

We cannot do this alone. We cannot do this without an open heart. We cannot do this without courage for the new. We cannot do this without love of truth. We need all these keys to the kingdom. Spirit. Heart. Courage. Love and Truth. (Where are the keys to the kingdom? I'm standin' at the door and I wanna come in)

“The role of the church,” Dr. King preached in 1966, “is to free people, people who are slaves to prejudices, slaves to fear. The church is called to free those that are captive... You see, the church is not a social club,” he continues, “The church is not an entertainment center. The church has a purpose. The church is dealing with ultimate concern.”<sup>5</sup>

We are here to manifest ultimate concern, to enter in and live it in our lives...to know it in our hearts. Blessed are the poor in spirit: not to seek to control but to open to the more that is there and find ourselves in it. We can know when our consciousness is expanding – sometimes its uncomfortable, but somehow we know we belong. Sometimes its unnerving, but somehow we know we are in the right place. And sometimes its a surge of joy and we know there is so much more than we can imagine and yet, somehow, we are a part of it. We can know when our hearts hold more than they did before, when our strength of life is shared and it does not diminish us. We then know the unity and love we glimpse in moments belongs to no one and resides in everyone.

“Whether we call it an unconscious process,” Dr. King offered, “an impersonal Brahman, or a Personal Being of matchless power and infinite love, there is a

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<sup>5</sup> Ebenezer Baptist church, 1966

creative force in this universe that works to bring the disconnected aspects of reality into a harmonious whole.”<sup>6</sup>

This is the stuff of a just and compassionate world. It is what happens when we meet each other on a plain of understanding, in the risk of compassion, through the strength of mutual regard. It is about returning to the knowledge of our mutual worth. It is about finding once again ourselves in the other. It is about seeing what we always knew underneath our defenses, that the sacred formula of our lives, the justice in our lives, is shared power.

When that is the ground from which we move and have our being, we no longer put up with abuses toward ourselves or any other. We no longer honor hatred or appease anger. We do not accept another’s unwillingness to see us. We find our strength with those who would come to a mutual place willing to learn, willing to make room, willing to find shared power.

(Where are the keys to the kingdom? Open the door and walk right in)

Sometimes dramatic confrontation is what is asked of us to help transform the world, but more often than not, it is the daily affirmation of our faith in a thriving, justice centered world that brings that possibility to life. These affirmations can happen throughout our ways and walking.

The simple witness of reading the name tag of the grocery store cashier while you are buying food and addressing her or him by name can be as powerful as marching in front of cameras. Maybe even more so, for you don’t know what’s going on in that cashier’s life.

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<sup>6</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., as excerpted in A Testament of Hope, James Wahington, editor, p.20

The steady work of volunteering at a soup kitchen can be as transforming as laying down in front of bulldozers to stop misguided construction. Maybe even more so, for you do not know what that hungry person has to offer the world.

The willingness to reach out your hand in comfort or forgiveness, in support or solidarity can be as important as speaking at a gathering of thousands. Maybe even more so, for you do not know the extent of the healing energy that comes forth from your caring touch.

The quiet contribution of your time and resources to an organization that promotes the kind of world you want to see can be just as necessary as the waving of banners at a demonstration. Maybe even more so, for you do not know what abundance will flow from that act of commitment.

People all over the world are focused on helping Haiti during this overwhelming time. There are many ways that people will assist. One new style of contribution is proving very successful. It is the text call for donations to the Red Cross. Over 5 million in two days has been raised because of a simple format and plea for affordable contributions. This affirms that a multitude can help and is valued for their participation, that together we can move mountains...alone we can't move at all.

This form of giving has been going on for years with the Chalice Lighters of JPD. Three simple calls a year, for an affordable amount spread out by the many to create a powerful source of support to our faith communities. We can live the interdependent web, believe in its strength by applying ourselves to the network of support. And it can be done on line. It takes a minute or two to sign up.

That is one of the opportunities we can give each other to build our faith communities, to spread the work of ultimate concern. In our faith communities, we can model the movement towards justice not only through corporate action but through personal contact, training ourselves toward a deeper compassion and an ever expanding ability to hear each other's journey. We can model a loving and just society by encouraging a sense of dignity and compassion, by challenging ourselves to right relationship. And we can speak out, when injustices are clear; we can gather our strength to honor life and dismantle destructive forces, expressed in fear, greed, bigotry and violence. We can recognize what is not justice when we recognize each other. We can give each other the opportunity to do this work.

It is important to remember that we are all evolving together. We do not all need to be extraordinary to make a difference. Each gesture of kindness, each expansion of perspective, each moment of forgiveness, each prevention of cruelty, each inclusion of other brings the whole fabric of being closer to a dynamic harmony that upholds us all. And bit by bit we will then transform the world. (Open the door and walk right in).

Get rid of the need for the perfect answer, release the load of the entire world and look at what loving action you can do right now. In company with Carline Keil as she struggles in the office and cannot do it all, take what loving action you can see before you.

Your heart knows what to do. Your wisdom is waiting for you. It's time to bring yourselves to this aching world...in honor of Dr. King and the many many spiritual teachers in and of our lives. So may it be. Amen.