

The Importance of Principles

by
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“The thinking of principled people makes for justice; the plots of degenerates corrupt.” (Proverbs 12:5)

When I first proposed doing this sermon topic, the old expression: “If you stand for nothing, you will fall for anything” came to mind. So I researched quite thoroughly trying to find who to attribute that quote to, but it has been said in so many different forms over the centuries, no one person gets the attribution. However, Malcolm X apparently made it a regular part of his ministry, because it is attributed to him in various forms throughout the years. And one source brought me to one of his later and most prominent speeches, *The Ballot or the Bullet*, given in 1964. It was only a month after he had left the Nation of Islam to follow his own path in the Muslim faith that he gave this speech at King Solomon Baptist Church in Detroit, where two thousand people – including some of his opponents -- turned out to hear him speak. He was trying to draw a distinction between those who, like himself, were for separation and others, like Martin Luther King, who were for integration. And yet he was attempting to unite them as fighters for freedom, with a common cause of civil rights, which it was his intention to rightfully name Human Rights and seek proper redress from the UN. He said: “[Y]ou think that integration will get you freedom; I think that separation will get me freedom. We both got the same objective, we just got different ways of gettin' at it.”

The day after his Detroit speech, Malcolm X embarked on an overseas tour that included a life- changing pilgrimage to the

Muslim holy city of Mecca. Known as the Hajj, the pilgrimage must be carried out at least once in a lifetime by every able-bodied Muslim who can afford to do so. The racial diversity he experienced in the Middle East, especially among Muslims, led him to discard his strict notions of black separatism for a wider, more inclusive movement against white supremacy and colonialism. In the summer of 1964, Malcolm X announced a new effort, the Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU). (Forward to Bullets or Ballots speech, Middlebury.edu)

So while in his *Ballot or Bullet* address he had proclaimed:

I believe my religion is my personal business. *[applause]* It governs my personal life, my personal morals. And my religious philosophy is personal between me and the God in whom I believe, just as the religious philosophy of these others is between them and the God in whom they believe. And this is best this way. Were we to come out here discussing religion, we'd have too many differences from the out start and we could never get together.

It was his personal faith and personal life experiences that caused him to embrace a new direction and new tactics to seek the common objective of all those who place human rights above principles of supremacy of any kind. His “hope and courage in the face of fear” of change was evolving. The concept of white allies had not yet been created in 1964, but it is the common cause of economic oppression among the American electorate that is allowing people of all races to see the need to unite and form allegiances to serve a greater good. Young people tend to see this more clearly than the older generations, who have grown comfortable in their political and religious affiliations, but the young are also too often divorced from a set of clear principles to unite them in their common cause.

The Occupy Wall St movement was a primarily youth driven movement that was pointing out the societal ills of the extreme wealth and income inequality in our nation, and it has sparked a great deal of academic and political exploration of what this divide has wrought. But as I read Malcolm X's *Ballot or Bullet* speech, I found myself recognizing an economic principle in his critique of the American experience of his community and his assertion at the time that the solution was black nationalism.

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The white man, the white man is too intelligent to let someone else come and gain control of the economy of his community. But you will let anybody come in and control the economy of your community, control the housing, control the education, control the jobs, control the businesses, under the pretext that you want to integrate. Nah, you're out of your mind.

I would substitute rich man or corporatist for white man in X's assertion, because it is an essential economic principle that the masses generate the demand for production of surplus, and also represent the essential labor of the means of that production and should therefore seek to have a stake in benefits and wealth generated by that production, even as history shows us that there is at least a risk of, if not an inherent principle of greed imbedded in every capitalist with the ownership of the surplus production. We have too often as a nation allowed our greed to blind us to the needs of others. And sometimes even blinded to our own needs.

In our contemporary economy of America, where we consume primarily from businesses operated by massive monopolistic corporations that make black men of us all, enslaving us to an increased production standard that does not have the

accompanied living wage attached, or the human right of housing and healthcare assured by our government, denied us by their political owner donor status. And in exercising the 5th principle of “the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large”, I have spoken at length of the need for political and economic reform to seek a more perfect union of “Justice, equity and compassion in human relations,” the 2nd principle of Unitarian Universalism.

When we “lose sight of our unity, our single garment of destiny,” we neglect the “inescapable network of mutuality.” Malcolm X needed to see the common plight of racially diverse Muslims, in the Middle East, to recognize the full strength of mutuality with King.

It is through universal policies that benefit all people and universal statements of principle that can speak to all people that we allow an ability to unite us in our human condition and see ourselves in the plight of others. But Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr., while seeking the same objective, were approaching it from differing rhetorical perspectives. While Malcolm’s appeals were grounded in highlighting a common truth of discrimination that caused him to speak to and seek to educate only his people as the ultimate path to justice and equality; Martin’s appeal was to the nation as an audience, black, white and brown alike, in a common effort to highlight discrimination and its debilitating effects, yet driven by a foundation of seeking to inspire excellence in the individual as a means to integrating our way to justice and equality.

In an address to students at Barratt Junior High School in Philadelphia on October 26, 1967, King opens with a question: “What is in your life’s blueprint?” as his address to these young students is meant to offer fatherly guidance to those at “the most important and crucial period of [their] lives.” He asserted to these

young individuals “that doors are opening to each of you. Doors of opportunities opening to each of you that were not open to your mothers and to your fathers. And, the great challenge facing you is to be ready to enter these doors as they open.” And so his brief address was intended to inspire these students to have faith in their futures and to understand that “what you do now and what you decide now, at this age may well determine which way your life shall go.” Abridged versions of this Blueprint for Life address have been made into lesson plans and core curriculum exercises meant to pass on King’s wisdom and inspire new generations to understand the principle of “somebodiness.”

King challenges them to be the master of their destiny:

“Now each of you is in the process of building the structure of your lives, and the question is whether you have a proper, a solid and a sound blueprint.” (MLK) And as a congregation we are examining the blueprint of our continued existence, the foundation of our traditions, the principles of our faith and community and the blueprint for our growth and development.

Number one in your life’s blueprint, should be *a deep belief in your own dignity, your own worth* and your own somebodiness. Don’t allow anybody to make you feel that you are nobody. Always feel that you count. Always feel that you have worth, and always feel that your life has ultimate significance. (Martin Luther King, What is Your Life’s Blueprint, 1967)

Those of us familiar with the 7 principles of Unitarian Universalism won’t have any difficulty recognizing the echoes of our first principle in his phrasing: “The inherent worth and dignity of every person.” While King is using the phrasing to particularly empower the dignity and worth of a group of people who have endured historical oppression and intentional undermining of their self

worth, it is founded in a humanist principle of equal dignity and worth inherent to the cause of equality and justice in the human condition. In contemporary philosophies and political rhetoric specificity is often sought, but there is beauty in the intentionally vague, but elevated phrasing of our first principle, because it holds a universal sentiment that can be applied in a multitude of specific situations that will not alter the strength of its truth.

Speaking of the particular stigma of the negro, King encourages the youthful audience to not “be ashamed of your color. Don’t be ashamed of your biological features. Somehow you must be able to say in your own lives and really believe it, I am black but beautiful. And, believe it... “ I remember this powerful expression “black is beautiful” being used regularly in the early 70’s when I was in grade school, and have often wondered why this concept is not still embraced and used to empower the African American community. “Black lives matter” has replaced it as a rallying cry, and it is an important phrase, because it highlights the need to proclaim the equal dignity and worth of a community of lives that continue to experience the degradation and ramifications of structural racism, which too often treats them as if their lives were expendable. But it is a phrase that comes more from the perspective of Malcolm X than King, as it highlights the oppression, without elevating the human spirit. Black IS beautiful in all its many forms, and the slogan helps to provide self worth to every individual that struggles with colorism as well systemic racism.

King continues: “Secondly, in your life’s blueprint you must have as a basic principle the determination to achieve excellence in your various fields of endeavor.” I have little doubt that all of us at some point in our lives have had this principle instilled in our consciousness; be it from our parents or teachers, or perhaps even a boss seeking to generate the full value of whatever labor they pay us for. It is a good principle in life and appropriate in

King's blueprint address, because it is intended to counteract the old stereotypes of the "lazy shiftless negro" that has been perpetuated since the days of slavery and plays a role in systemic bigotry of the school to prison pipeline, that accounts for the disproportionately high representation of people of color in the criminal justice system. Oprah has frequently spoken of the need for her to work harder and strive for excellence, simply to get the opportunity that is given so easily to others who are not black. Working two and three times harder just for a chance to prove their inherent dignity and worth is in itself unjust and it is necessary that be pointed out. I suspect, however, that Malcolm X might resent such rhetoric, because it was intended to empower a path of integration, when he meant to empower a separate and particular belief in the community's ability to rise being found only when they support each other exclusively. This is still the foundation of the Nation of Islam, to which he owed his renewed life blueprint.

Martin Luther King supports his assertion for personal excellence by quoting Unitarian minister and renown essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson: "If a man can write a better book or preach a better sermon or make a better mousetrap than his neighbor, even if he builds his house in the woods, the world will make a beaten path to his door" (1871). Beyond seeing it as a possible reference to his good friend Henry David Thoreau who almost literally did just that; or recognizing it as a familiar quote used to encourage a pursuit of excellence of any kind; I find that it might ring hollow to those who have studied the sociological reality that the mediocrity of the white man is too often rewarded far beyond the excellence of the black man or woman of any color. These were the lessons of Malcolm X and the foundation of critical race theory that has been singled out as a destructive force in our society of late. But if we are following the 4th Principle of "a free and responsible search for truth and meaning," then we cannot deny the facts of racism and what it has wrought in our society, any more than we

can deny the success of particularly exemplary people like Oprah, or those called out in King's Blueprint of Life address: "from an old slave cabin of Virginia's hills Booker T. Washington rose up of to be one of America's great leaders. . . From a poverty stricken area of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Marian Anderson rose up to be the world's greatest contralto . . . From crippling circumstances there came a George Washington Carver to carve for himself an imperishable niche in the annals of science. . ." And he further calls out "star[s] in the athletic sky. . . Jackie Robinson . . . and Willie Mayes . . . with their powerful bats and their calm spirits. [Or] Jesse Owens with his fleeting dashing feet. . . Joe Louis and Muhammed Ali with their educated fists. All of them came to tell us that we can be somebody."

He understood the importance of these particular examples, because he knew then, if you could see it, you could be it.

King then demonstrates his own exemplary and educated sensibility by casually quoting 18th century English poet William Cowper and integrating his words with the lyrics of 18th century minister and hymn writer Isaac Watts seamlessly uniting and universalizing their sentiments. " 'fleecing locks and black complexion cannot forfeit natures' claim. Skin may differ, but affection dwells in black and white the same.' (William Cowper) And, 'if I were so tall as to reach the pole then grasp the ocean at a span I must be measured by my soul. The mind is a standard of the man'(Isaac Watts) " (*What is Your Life's Blueprint?*, MLK, 1967).

King insists on placing core values of Western civilization into the blueprint for life that he is recommending to these black youth, not because he is preaching white supremacy, or the supremacy of their culture, as Malcolm X might assert, but because it highlights principles and voices of individuals throughout time that are speaking to the historical divisions and the need for equality and

justice for all. It is from this highly educated perspective that Dr King asserts:

Finally, in your life's blueprint, must be a commitment to the eternal principles of beauty, love, and justice. Don't allow anybody to pull you so low as to make you hate them. Don't allow anybody to cause you to lose your self-respect to the point that you do not struggle for justice.

However young you are, you have a responsibility to seek to make your nation a better nation in which to live. You have a responsibility to seek to make life better for everybody. And, so you must be involved in the struggle for freedom and justice.

As a trained minister, the son of a minister, Martin has the benefit of a strong and principled upbringing. He comes into prominence with a doctorate degree in systematic theology, which undoubtedly rested in the articulations of old white men. Malcolm, on the other hand, was a bright student who excelled in school, but gave up on the school system when he was encouraged in the 8th grade to be a carpenter, rather than a lawyer. While King encouraged 8th graders in his address to take pride and pursue excellence in whatever profession falls to them, making stirring pronouncements to "do a good job and do that job so well that the living, the dead or the unborn couldn't do it any better."

If it falls your lot to be a street sweeper, sweep streets like Michelangelo painted pictures, sweep streets like Beethoven composed music, sweep streets like Leontyne Price sings before the Metropolitan Opera. Sweep streets like Shakespeare wrote poetry. Sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will have to pause and say: Here lived a great street sweeper who swept his job well.

Malcolm X might have resented the implication that students of color should accept their “lot,” or be held to the standards of any white man, King particularly warns against being willing to “set out to do a good Negro job.” Including proclamations to not:

. . . set out to just be a good Negro doctor or a good Negro lawyer, or a good Negro school teacher, a good Negro preacher. A good Negro barber or beautician. A good Negro skilled laborer. For if you set out to do that you have already flunked your matriculation exam for entrance into the university of integration.

The nation of Islam had no such interest in integration. Though Malcolm X had formally left NOI by his *Ballots or Bullets* address in 1964, he admitted to being heavily influenced by its teachings. And while I do not agree with a path exclusively of separation, I do share his philosophy of local community and micro economics.

. . . we have to become involved in a program of reeducation, to educate our people into the importance of knowing that when you spend your dollar out of the community in which you live, the community in which you spend your money becomes richer and richer, the community out of which you take your money becomes poorer and poorer.

When we follow this path, be that in a community of color, or some small suburb in fly over country, we condemn ourselves to be forever subservient to those who control the wealth. Malcolm warns his audience that when they accept these conditions:

. . . the Man is becoming richer and richer, and you're becoming poorer and poorer. And then what happens? The community in which you live becomes a slum. It becomes a ghetto. The conditions become rundown. And then you have

the audacity to complain about poor housing in a rundown community, while you're running down yourselves when you take your dollar out.

But you don't have to be black to recognize this old dodge of separation and suffer the fate of oppression offered by the owner class. Malcolm X continues:

. . . not only do we lose by taking our money someplace else and spending it, when we try and spend it in our own community we're trapped because we haven't had sense enough to set up stores and control the businesses of our community. The man who is controlling the stores in our community is . . . a man who doesn't even live in the community. So you and I, even when we try and spend our money on the block where we live or the area where we live, we're spending it with a man who, when the sun goes down, takes that basket full of money [to] another part of the town.

Though these words were crafted for a particular audience for a particular purpose of a self-proclaimed black nationalist known for seeking justice "by whatever means," they are as universal to the human condition and economic truths as anything spoken by King, the most famous advocate of nonviolent civil disobedience.

Malcolm didn't have the benefit of a stable childhood, as Martin Jr did. They both had Baptist ministers for fathers, but Malcolm's father died when he was only six and by the age of eleven his mother was institutionalized leaving him and his siblings to go into foster care. So King had the luxury of representing the exemplary ability of the individual, and follow Emerson's notions of self reliance and preach for inherent self worth. When X, conversely, took that symbol as his last name, because he understood that his story was more representative of the community he led. He too preached self worth, but in the exclusive context of elevating his community and seeking unity among a particular constituency.

His Black Nationalist upbringing and life experiences led him to have less faith in such a thing as white allies, but King had schooled among liberal thinkers and experienced first hand how those willing to stand beside him in his fight for justice need not be black to be as interested in “The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all”(6th Principle).

In the here and now, we need both these voices to understand where we are now and how to create “Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part” (7th Principle). This is a project for the nation as well as congregations like our own. For no international corporation is going to put the environmental and economic well being of any community over their pursuit of profit. They have a fiduciary responsibility to their shareholders, constantly seeking larger dividends. If our goal as a nation is to secure an achievable *pursuit of happiness* for our people, then we have much to learn from both these American leaders; and as a congregation in an idyllic New England community seeking: “Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth”(3rd Principle) then we must remember that acceptance sometimes entails tolerance of those who think differently than we do. It is not an easy path, particularly if it appears that others are not interested in your particular message. However, if we can adhere to universal principles that benefit and speak to everyone equally, then we can hope that in time we will be heard and will thrive accordingly.

Let our congregation be like “sunlight” to our broader community.

As Martin Luther King said: “Hatred and bitterness can never cure the disease of fear, only love can do that.” Malcolm X’s bitterness is justified by his own life experiences as well as centuries of oppression, but King recognized that leading a movement from that center is not productive, because it plays into the negative stereotype of the angry black man. But we have the power to

“offer hope and courage in the face of [media driven] fear,” to “recognize in all prophets a harmony, in all scriptures a unity”. We must empower our community to “begin again in love” to sing a “hymn of love”, with a “melody of freedom” from economic strife and human bondage.

"We intend to expand [the freedom struggle] from the level of civil rights to the level of human rights."

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today, this country can become involved in a revolution that won't take bloodshed. All she's got to do is give the black man in this country everything that's due him, everything. [applause]

I hope that the white man can see this. 'Cause if you don't see it you're finished.

Dr. King offered three critical points in which to add in our life's blueprint: A deep belief in your own dignity, your worth, and your own somebodiness, the basic principle of excellence in all of our fields of endeavors, and lastly have a commitment to the eternal principles of beauty, love, and justice.

What were Martin Luther King's 3 main goals?



King sought equality and human rights for African Americans, the economically disadvantaged and all victims of injustice through peaceful protest.

Inescapable network of mutuality single garment of destiny For losing sight of our unity

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The melody of freedom hope and courage in the face of fear

Begin again in love our greed has blinded us to the needs of others

Hymn of love high cause of greater understanding

Recognize in all prophets a harmony, in all scriptures a unity

