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### **On Power**

Rev. Mary Gear

Olympia Unitarian Universalist Congregation

*We explore the spiritual theme of “power” on this weekend when we celebrate the life and work of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.*

**Reading:** An excerpt from [How We Show Up](#) by Mia Birdsong.

The American Dream version of success can also damage our ability to relate to others. In an article from the *Atlantic* called “Power Causes Brain Damage,” John Useem cites the work of Dacher Keltner, a professor of psychology at UC Berkeley, who found that people in positions of power become “less adept at seeing things from other people’s point of view.” And what is the American Dream if it is not attaining power? Useem goes on to relay findings from McMaster University neuroscientist Sukhvinder Obhi, who found that power “impairs a specific neural process, ‘mirroring’ that may be the cornerstone of empathy. The more successful we become, the harder it may be for us to connect with others not only because we’ve developed the habits of toxic individualism in order to succeed, but because we have rewired our brain.

### **Reflection on Power Part I**

Last Christmas Eve, Pope Francis lamented that peace in this world is blocked by social forces such as “attachment to power and money, pride, hypocrisy, falsehood.” The Pope called out those “ravenous” for wealth and power who exploit the vulnerable in a world dominated by war, poverty and consumerism. A difficult holiday message in a challenged world.

These past few weeks in the US we’ve watched—it’s been hard to ignore! We’ve watched some of our national elected officials engage in a power struggle, sorting out who has power and how much, who is willing to share power and who isn’t, who is willing to concede power and under what terms. It was dramatic; it wasn’t pretty.

Today's reading from Mia Birdsong suggests that power corrupts us. It makes us less connected, less empathetic, more isolated.

You might know the quote from the 19th century British politician Lord Acton, "Absolute power corrupts absolutely," meaning that as a person's power increases their moral compass is skewed and their moral sense of obligation to others diminishes.

Our spiritual theme for the month of January is "power." The ideas I've mentioned so far reflect the common understanding in our culture that power is a negative thing; immoral, dangerous, harmful. Yet, the American Dream of success—more power, more stuff, well, just more—the myth of the American Dream pushes us to view power as necessary to get ahead, to be successful, to attain the dream. What a paradox, a mixed message, and an impossible situation. No wonder we have a confused relationship with power that makes some of us want to deny having power at all. Author Alice Walker said, "The most common way people give up their power is by thinking they don't have any."

Last fall we began together an exploration that will go through June. For this congregational year, we selected a theme to guide our focus and offerings for worship and religious education for all ages. The theme is: Building Beloved Community with a focus on anti-racism and the practice of coming together again, in-person, online, and in covenant.

To repeat: Building Beloved Community with a focus on anti-racism and the practice of coming together again, in-person, online, and in covenant.

Our monthly spiritual themes for the year are to help us explore all parts of that theme. Last Fall we dove into the themes of welcome, covenant, and accountability. Coming up are liberation, commitment, trust, and vision.

I included power as a spiritual theme because we can't address building beloved community and the justice work of anti-racism if we don't talk about power. In fact, we can't understand each other and how we are as humans without addressing power. Power is part of every human relationship and interaction. Racism, oppression, marginalization are all about power.

Neuroscientist Sukhvinder Obhi, mentioned in our reading, says this: power is "your ability to influence the states of other people. Sometimes that is qualified by influence through rewards and punishments, or through the control of resources. You can add qualifiers to it, but fundamentally, it's about your ability to influence the states of others."

Obhi views power at the individual level, the power one person has to influence another person. I would venture to say that's the view of power that most of us have, especially those of us raised in the individualism of

American culture: how much power do I have to get what I want and need from others? Safety, food & shelter, belonging, love.

I think there is also a bigger view of power—the power of us, together. This is the power of people who join together, work together for a common goal. Like this faith community joined together by vision and mission, the words that we say at the start of every Sunday worship service. The power of us together is essential for justice, equity, and transformation.

**Reading:** An excerpt from a speech given by The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. titled "Where Do We Go From Here?" delivered at the 11th Convention of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in Atlanta, GA on August 16, 1967.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SsvSq5\\_vbL4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SsvSq5_vbL4)

Text: One of the great problems of history is that the concepts of love and power have usually been contrasted as opposites, polar opposites, so that love is identified with a resignation of power, and power with a denial of love.

Now, we got to get this thing right. What is needed is a realization that power without love is reckless and abusive, and that love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is love correcting everything that stands against love.

### **Reflection on Power Part II**

On that hot August day in 1967, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. stood before his colleagues and gave his summary of the state of the union. He spoke about the many successes for equal rights since the Southern Christian Leadership Conference was formed 10 years earlier. He spoke of SCLC chapters forming across the South in large cities and small towns. He told of a robust education effort to help black citizens know and understand their rights and obligations as voters, along with voter registration drives. He spoke of housing development and tenant union organizing, boycotts and job development programs. He spoke of Chicago, Cleveland, and Atlanta as well as Grenada, Mississippi.

And King spoke about the current state of the struggle for equality and the work yet to be done, saying “we still have a long, long way to go before we reach the promised land of freedom.”

He outlined this as the first step for “where do we go from here”:

First, we must massively assert our dignity and worth. We must stand up amid a system that still oppresses us and develop an unassailable and majestic sense of values. We must no longer be ashamed of being black.

An assertion of dignity and worth sounds a lot like the first UU principle.

King went on to say that the next step was to “organize our strength into economic and political power.” He said:

Now the problem of transforming the ghetto, therefore, is a problem of power, a confrontation between the forces of power demanding change and the forces of power dedicated to the preserving of the status quo.

In this speech, King offered a simple definition of power. He said: “Power properly understood is nothing but the ability to achieve purpose. It is the strength required to bring about social, political, and economic change.” He suggested that power is morally neutral—it is needed to get things done. And it is needed to get positive change—justice—done.

In his speech, King asserted that philosophers and religious scholars through the years have misunderstood power, pitting power and love as opposites. They have said love is power resigned, and power is love denied. In order to love, we have to deny that power is present or at play, an impossible thing since power is in every human interaction. And, that the use of power is always without love.

King’s radical suggestion is that love and power are intertwined, and both are required for justice: love keeps power working for good and power keeps love strong. We need both in order to create the world we dream about, the Beloved Community.

King was powerful, and that’s part of why he was so dangerous. He was a black man who refused to believe that he was powerless or that his community was powerless. He used his power to inspire a nation to justice, and he threatened the way things had been. He was a powerful man who used nonviolent strategies grounded in compassion in order to bring about social change. King embodied power and love, both. Just like the still, small voice that spoke to Elijah, power doesn’t need to be loud or forceful; love and power together are strong.

Our Unitarian Universalist theology is based on interconnection. Because we are interconnected, we already have the power to influence each other. We can recognize that interconnection and use our power for good -- or not. We choose.

For those of us with more power, our job is to share it and empower others. Toni Morrison said this:

I tell my students, 'When you get these jobs that you have been so brilliantly trained for, just remember that your real job is that if you are free, you need to free somebody else. If you have some power, then your job is to empower somebody else. This is not just a grab-bag candy game.

Morrison was speaking to her students at Howard University, primarily students of color, imploring them to not forget that they were once without as much power.

For those of us who are white in this culture, we are born with power because of our skin color. Ours is a culture that favors white skin and certain ways of being. Those of us who are white Unitarian Universalists are called to use our power for justice. That may mean sharing our resources, our time, talents and treasure. It may mean using our influence to inspire change in ourselves and others. It may mean stepping back to allow others to exercise their power as leaders. We are called to use our power to empower others.

This weekend as we celebrate the life and legacy of Dr. King, I hear his message through the years that power is a tool that everyone has access to. Everyone has some power, some more than others. Tools can be used for good or for evil. Power can be used for oppression or for justice, for racism or for equity, for marginalization or for transformation. Dr. King invited us, implored us, inspired us to use our power for the common good. Those of us with privilege have the power to choose. We can honor Dr. King's legacy and answer his call -- or not. We can choose to build a beloved community—or not. We can build a new way—or not.

How will we choose?