YES WE CAN: WORKING FOR THE DREAM

A sermon preached on 18 January 2009 by Revd Richard Boeke (retired Unitarian minister, Secretary of the World Congress of Faiths) in the chapel of Harris Manchester College, on the eve of Martin Luther King Day and the inauguration of Barack Obama as President of the United States.

Martin Luther King, Jr., told us, “So long as a man has a dream in his heart, he cannot lose the significance of living.”

He told us, “If a man hasn’t discovered something that he will die for, he isn’t fit to live.”

The night before Martin was murdered in Tennessee, he told us, “I have been to the mountain top and I have looked over, and I have seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you, but I want you to know that we as a people shall reach the Promised Land. So, I’m happy tonight, I’m not worried about anything: I’m not fearing any man.” (3 April 1968).

At his funeral in Atlanta, the text from Genesis was, “Behold, let us kill the dreamer and see what becomes of his dream.”

Martin and I both were born and raised in Atlanta, Georgia. But in the segregated south, we never saw each other. Atlanta had no Black police. The black community had no vote. They lived in ghettos. There were no Black students in Georgia Tech or in the University of Georgia. There were no Black public officials. Martin’s father was M. L. King, Sr., pastor of the Ebenezer Baptist Church, all Black, just as my Baptist church on Peachtree Road was all White.

One year ago, on 20 January 2008, at Ebenezer Baptist Church, Barack Obama used words from Martin Luther King Jr, to tell us that “UNITY IS THE GREAT NEED OF THE HOUR.” He took us back to story of Joshua entering the Promised Land, and being blocked by the walls of Jericho. But God told the people to stand together and march round the city. And on the Seventh Day, the walls came tumbling down.

Obama went on to say: “There are many lessons to take from this passage, … my mind went back to the very beginning of the modern Civil Rights Era. Because before Memphis and the mountaintop, before the bridge in Selma and the March on Washington, before Birmingham and the beatings. … On the eve of the bus boycotts in Montgomery, at a time when many were still doubtful about the possibility of change, … and at times mistrusted each other, King inspired with words not on anger, but of an urgency which still speaks to us today: UNITY IS THE GREAT NEED OF THE HOUR.

“King understood that if just one person chose to walk instead of ride the bus, those walls of oppression would not be moved. … but if a few more women did what Rosa Parks had, the cracks would start to show … if enough Americans were awakened to injustice, perhaps that wall would come tumbling down, and ‘justice would flow like water, and righteousness like a might stream’.

“Unity is the great need of the hour, … not because it sounds pleasant or because it makes us feel good, but because it’s the only way we can overcome the essential deficit that exists in this country.
“I’m not talking about a budget deficit. … I’m talking about a moral deficit. I’m talking about an empathy deficit. I’m talking about an inability … to understand that we are our brother’s keeper, we are our sister’s keeper, that in the words of Dr. King, we are all tied together in a single garment of destiny.

“Dr. King led this country through the wilderness. … He spoke not just to the children of slaves, but also to the children of slave owners. … He led with words, but he also let with deeds. … He led by marching and going to jail.” He led by taking a stand against the war in Vietnam, knowing it would diminish his popularity … Dr. King understood that unity cannot be won on the cheap; that we have to earn it through great effort and determination.

Obama has taken the lesson of unity to heart. In his campaign, a million volunteers reached out to two hundred million Americans. 11 million email addresses were reached by messages from a dozen leaders. People were asked to invest their five or ten or thirty dollars to the cost of the election. Many have criticized the cost. Yet those five & ten dollars were investments that inspired millions to get out and vote. Many have criticized Obama for inviting an Evangelical to give the invocation at the inauguration. The Evangelical stands for many good causes, but opposes gay marriage. For the benediction, Obama has chosen a civil rights leader who supports equality for gays and lesbians. “Unity is the great need of the hour.”

In choosing his cabinet, Obama has learned from a new book on Abraham Lincoln titled A TEAM OF RIVALS. Like Lincoln, Obama has picked several rivals like Hilary Clinton to be members of his cabinet.

Last month I was at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington. In the 1930s, the Daughters of the American Revolution, the DAR, would not allow a Black Woman to sing in Constitution Hall. Eleanor Roosevelt resigned from the DAR, and arranged for Marian Anderson to sing at the Lincoln Memorial. In 1963 with a friend, I drove all night from Massachusetts to join the March on Washington. A quarter million Americans heard the man who been jailed in Birmingham tell us, I HAVE A DREAM.

Obama is a worker for the dream.

“Hold fast to dreams,  
For if dreams die,  
Life is a broken winged bird  
That cannot fly.” (Langston Hughes)

In the spirit of the words of Isaiah which inspired Martin King, Obama dreams: “Every valley shall be exalted and every mountain and hill shall be made low … And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.”

He comes into power in the midst of a world torn apart by violence and fear. In the midst of the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression of 1929. In the midst of millions on both sides who believe that “the war on terror” must be a fight to the death.
The open wound of GAZA and ISRAEL has brought millions of us back to marches like the protests against the Vietnam War. Marches like the million of us who marched in London, crying to stop the invasion of IRAQ.

Now, as Obama becomes President, headlines read that the British Foreign Secretary says, “THE WAR ON TERROR WAS A MISTAKE” which may have caused more harm than good. … the West cannot “kill its way” out of the threats it faces.¹ I envision a cartoon showing “President Bush: hero of Civil Rights. His follies helped elect Obama.”

What happened in the past few years is a reminder that leaders can make a difference for good or ill. Too many “good people” avoid politics as a “dirty business.” They cite the words of Lord Acton: “Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power tends to corrupt absolutely.” To which the Unitarian theologian James Luther Adams replied: “Lack of power tends to corrupt. And absolute lack of power tends to corrupt absolutely.”

Empowerment is one of great themes of Barack Obama’s book, DREAMS OF MY FATHER, a spiritual autobiography. A Professor of Classics calls Barack “Novus Homo,” a new man, “The new Cicero.”² At law school, Obama was the first African American to be editor of the Harvard Law Review. On graduation, a publisher gave him an advance to take a year off and write his autobiography. To me, that year, in which he focused on his own life, was crucial in his development. Barack summed up that story in these words:

“I am the son of a black man from Kenya and a white woman from Kansas. I was raised with the help of a white grandfather who survived the depression to serve in Patton’s army in World War II, and a white grandmother who worked on a bomber assembly line at Fort Leavenworth while he was overseas. I’ve gone to some of the best schools in America and lived in one of world’s poorest nations.”³

Barack seems right out of James Michener’s book, HAWAII. Michener speaks of “the Golden Man,” a product of both East and West. Barack, born of two races, starts school with Muslims in Indonesia, plays basketball in Hawaii, seeks “roots” in Kenya, is a “community organizer” in south Chicago.

Barack means “blessed.” To a few he is “the Messiah,” who will lead us out of all our troubles. But in his speeches is very clear. He cannot do it. He says, YES, WE CAN. We can do it. He is conscious of the “power of organization and the organization of power.”⁴ He views his task not as taking power, but to empower. Michelle Obama says of her husband: “He is not first and foremost a politician. He’s a community activist exploring the viability of politics to make change.”⁵

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¹ “War on Terror was a Mistake, says Miliband” – The Guardian, 15, 01, 2009, p. 1
³ Ibid, p. 11
⁴ James Luther Adams, UU Theologian who taught at Chicago and Harvard.
Obama’s activism is the spirit of Gandhi’s “Truth Force.” It is the spirit of Edwin Markham’s words:

He drew a circle to shut me out:
Heretic, Rebel, a thing to flout.
But love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle that took him in.

While Obama is not a Unitarian, his grandparents had Unitarian sympathies. After the election, Obama attended his Grandmother’s Memorial Service at the Unitarian Church of Honolulu.

In his inclusiveness, Obama breathes the spirit of Oneness that is the essence of our Unitarian faith. He teaches not the oneness of individualism, or of “Only One Way” religion, but a “this world” Christianity, cherishing a loving healing Jesus, not a mythic judge coming soon to bring a judgment day. An article in the Jewish publication Tikkun, tells us, “Obama has actually thought through at a new pitch what it means to be religious…”

To organize for Oneness, start with a community. As a community activist in Chicago, Obama found that faith-based communities, churches, were the groups he could work with to bring about social change. Not just Christian Churches, but with all faith groups that seek justice and the vitality of spiritual oneness.

Alice Walker, author of THE COLOUR PURPLE, wrote these words to Obama: “You have no idea, really, of how profound this moment is for us, the black people of the southern United States. … But seeing you delivering the torch that so many others before you carried … is almost more than the heart can bear. … I would advise you to remember that you did not create the disaster that the world is experiencing and you alone are not responsible for bringing the world back to balance. A primary responsibility … is to cultivate happiness in your own life. Make a schedule which permits sufficient time for rest and play … Because finally it is the soul that must be preserved. All else might be lost, but when the soul dies, the connection to Earth, to peoples, to animals, to rivers, … also dies.”

Alice Walker points to Obama’s special message of hope to religious liberals: That a religious life, keeping the dream, can effect change today. But to do this, we must give up some of our individualism and become team players. Obama’s team playing in basketball is a powerful illustration of this.

“Unity is the great need of the hour.” Whether we start in Britain or America, or Pakistan or Israel, we are called to stop the blame game and accept accountability together.

We shall live with the “Audacity of Hope”. As Martin Luther King said the night before he was murdered, “I may not go there with you, but I know we as a people shall get to the promised land.” …

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6 For the “Smiling Jesus” of early Christian icons, see Saving Paradise, by Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Parker, Beacon Press 2008.
YES WE CAN …

Readings: Isaiah 40, verses 1-5, 28-31
M.L. King, Jr., “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” p. 1
Poems by Langston Hughes, “Hold Fast to Dreams,” “What Happens to a Dream Deferred?”
“I’ve Known Rivers”