

Sermon: The Weight of a People (MLK Sunday)

For: All Faiths Unitarian Congregation

By Min. Alberita Johnson Jan. 14, 2024

How many of you remember Jack Lalanne? And of course how can we forget the workout video craze with Jane Fonda and the flamboyant Richard Simmons. Well I don't know about you all, but I enjoyed the group workouts with Jane and Billy more so than Jack and well I guess me.

Somehow I was inspired more within a group even if it was on my TV screen. I worked out often and began dieting. I read books, and magazines, regarding physical health, purchased other workout videos and was in great physical health. I also began to write, read and do a little meditation more often that helped me to improve my emotional health and well being.

I did not realize it at the time but I was doing the heavy lifting of physical and emotional health and welfare. However I was neglecting my spiritual or deeper self health and welfare. This, my friends, was not a good thing. Some of you may feel the same way. Without a strong focus and commitment to our spiritual, our deeper self we can become empty.

As we celebrate the African American Hero the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. today I am reminded of the burden he carried, physically, emotionally, and spiritually for a nation of people who so desperately needed him.

What in a character of a man would have him say yes, and know that in doing so would place a target on him, his family and those connected to him. In fact it may be a death sentence for them all. What disciplines would benefit such a person to make that commitment?

Today, we will explore what it takes to bear the weight of a people.

In 1968 there were at least 20 million African American living in the United States, and things were not so good. The civil rights movement was shifting to the black empowerment movement and the country was torn once again over race.

And along came Martin Luther King Jr. He was born and named Michael King Jr. on Jan. 15, 1929 at his sunrise and assassinated at his sunset on April 4, 1968 as Martin Luther King Jr., just one day after his I Have a Dream speech.

According to my research, Martin began to prepare in 1947, at the age of 18 when he chose to enter the [ministry](#). He studies at Morehouse a HBCU in Atlanta GA, under the mentorship of its president, [Baptist](#) minister [Benjamin Mays](#), who he would later credit with being his "spiritual mentor".^[75] King had concluded that the church offered the most assuring way to answer quote "an inner urge to serve humanity". You see, his "inner urge" had begun developing, and he believed he would be a "rational" minister with sermons that were "a respectful force for ideas, even social protest."

...and protest he did! And led a few hundred thousand along with him.

Imagine with me if you will, King as a youth of 18 years of age. Still round chubby face, slim body well mannered. He appeared well balanced, not too big, not too small. And was physically fit as he began his journey in ministry. Although he was no stranger to ministry, having been brought up in the church. His namesake, **Martin Luther King Sr.** (born Michael King; sunrise December 19, 1899 – sunset November 11, 1984) was an African-American Baptist pastor, missionary, and an early figure in the Civil Rights Movement.

However due to his church upbringing Martin Jr., early on decided ministry was not the road for him, however in my opinion a calling cannot be ignored. And MLK did not instead he managed to reconcile his ought with traditional Baptist ministry with what he called rational ministry to include sermons that were eloquent, respectful for ideas, ideals and social protest.

Martin was prepared, an astute student and learned quickly he was exposed to great leaders, preachers, teachers and was spiritually mature and incisive with an ability to pierce where others were unsuccessful.

Martin was ready to carry the burden of a people, who needed him. He was a new face, a new voice, a leader that until the timing was perfect was a Baptist Minister, in Atlanta GA. The national public, nor news media, nor politicians saw him on the radar. But he drew the attention of the black leadership and clergy and when called upon to act he took action.

You see my friends it is easy to say you are going to do something, but it is altogether different to actually do whatever that something is. Again to quote MLK, when he decided to answer the call with a YES, he said, quote, " His "inner urge" had begun developing, and he believed he would be a "rational" minister with sermons that were "a respectful force for ideas, even social protest." This he said at 18 years of age and he

went on to become a Minister and social activist and the preeminent leader of the [American civil rights movement](#) from the mid-1950s until [his assassination](#) in 1968. His guidance was fundamental to the movement's success in ending the legal [segregation](#) of [Black Americans](#) in the South and other parts of the United States. He rose to national prominence as a leader of the [Montgomery bus boycott](#) in 1955–56 and later as the head of the [Southern Christian Leadership Conference](#), which pursued civil rights through nonviolent tactics, such as the [Selma March](#) (1965) and the massive [March on Washington](#) (1963), at the culmination of which, King, an immensely gifted orator, delivered his iconic "[I Have a Dream](#)" speech. He was awarded the [Nobel Peace Prize](#) in 1964 and is commemorated by the [Martin Luther King, Jr. National Memorial](#) in Washington, D.C.

This type of leadership and commitment under the constant threat of assassination for him and his loved ones, in my opinion could not have been accomplished without physical, mental, emotional and most importantly spiritual disciplines. Which I believe was and continues to be necessary to lead a people, a nation, even a family.

We all understand the importance of good health, physically, mentally and emotionally. But for MLK Jr., and many other great people spiritual disciplines are tantamount to their being and purpose and cannot be discounted or ignored.

So how did MLK prepare himself to carry the burden and lead a people such as the African Americans of slave descent. In the face of tremendous odds.

From what I can ascertain, by images and articles he was physically fit, from the education he received he was mentally fit, and from what I witnessed and accounts from those connected to him he was emotionally fit. But today we will explore his spiritual fitness and upkeep.

Spiritually fitness is most important, as it is like the wind, the air we breathe and most times it is unnoticed. Until there is a problem. And then we may find time for prayer, meditation and other practices.

You see spiritual disciplines and rituals are sacred to the individual, here are a few of the disciplines that MLK practiced that I believe helped him to bear the weight of a people. This list or practices can be found in William O. Paulsell's classic book ***Rules for Prayer***, which is often included as a must read in seminary.

The MLK holiday is the perfect time to reflect on the spiritual practices that he, one of the most famous civil rights activists, practiced to remain grounded and connected to his God.

According to Patheos researchers, MLK King may not have called these practices a rule, but they are practices gleaned from his writing. And are useful to consider if you are thinking of creating your own personal Rule of Prayer. According to Paulsell, King used and encouraged others to use these practices.

1. Meditate daily on the life and teachings of Jesus
2. Live in the manner of love
3. Pray daily to be used by God
4. Sacrifice personal wishes
5. Perform regular service for others
6. Stay in good bodily and spiritual health
7. Pray for the oppressor

This morning as we celebrate the life and legacy of MLK, may we too glean from William O. Paulsell's classic book ***Rules for Prayer*** and purpose in our hearts to practice spiritual disciplines. That we know and understand can help us carry our own burdens and those we care for.

Won't you join with me today and honor MLK by making a commitment to spiritual practice, and do the heavy lifting so when our time comes we will be ready. It can be as simple as walking meditations or sitting in silence. I believe we all know what calls to us, we simply have to lean in.

I close today with a short quote from MLK's. I have a dream speech shared August 28, 1963 at the National Mall in Washington DC, to demand equal justice for all.

And it reads, Quote:

“So let freedom ring from the prodigious hilltops of New Hampshire. Let freedom ring from the mighty mountains of New York. Let freedom ring from the heightening Alleghenies of Pennsylvania. Let freedom ring from the snow capped Rockies of Colorado. Let freedom ring from the curvaceous slopes of California.

But not only that, let freedom ring from Stone Mountain of Georgia. Let freedom ring from Lookout Mountain of Tennessee. Let freedom ring from every hill and molehill of Mississippi. From every mountainside, let freedom ring, and when this happens, when

we allow freedom ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and gentiles, Protestants and Catholic, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!"

May it Be So, Ashe