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In his speeches and sermons, Dr. King often started out reminding his audiences of the gratitude he had for living in the particular moment of time in history. He had a refrain he often repeated comparing the Civil Rights to other defining moments of history—the building of the great cities of Ancient Greece, the Renaissance movement in Europe, Lincoln's deliverance of the Emancipation proclamation, and Martin Luther's 95 theses. He had a gift for bringing a historical resonance to each moment of the movement, and infusing the gathered bodies of people listening to his words with a sense of individual power and dignity needed for ordinary poor and working class people to people to carry out the extraordinary struggles of nonviolent resistance—the boycotts, walk outs, and strikes. We remember him as if his life and ministry were such a long time in the past, but we know it wasn't. Murdered at 39, coincidentally the age of your minister, if he were alive today, he would have turned 90 on Tuesday, a birthday now shared by my one year old daughter, Liv.

I often wonder what Dr. King would think about this moment in history, particularly this week. I can imagine him gazing out with shame upon a selectively crippled federal government, he might calmly remind us that working for no wages is akin to slavery. I can imagine him looking out with pride upon a sea of red shirts and umbrellas, thousands of teachers picketing in front of their schools in the rain, with a vision for public education that includes practical demands like smaller class sizes, more counselors, nurses and fair wages. King would remind us that whether we are private school parents or we live in Pasadena or Altadena, we must all get involved in fighting for the future of public education in California. I imagine him gazing with delight upon not one but two marches over the weekend, an Indigenous Peoples March on Friday and the Women's March on Saturday, which rose above controversy and division and brought together thousands of people in an intersectional movement. King would remind us that we don't just march for ourselves, but for each other.



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It would not escape Dr. King that nonviolent means of protest still remain our most potent tactics for social change. I think he would particularly want us to focus our attention fully on the power of strike. Strike is a tactic used by workers and unions to interrupt business as usual by withholding labor as a leveraging tool in bargaining to meet worker demands. A strike is often used as a last resort after all other negotiating options have been exhausted. It is only used at a time when the present conditions of a group of workers or constituents become so dire that a disruptive intervention must be made on behalf of the future. The most effective strikes in history have been those which began with one sector of workers, but then inspired other industries and ordinary citizens to become involved in solidarity efforts.

Before his murder, King's organizing efforts were with Memphis Sanitation workers on strike for safe working conditions and wages. In fact, his murder was intricately connected to his organizing the sanitation workers strike into a city-wide walk out. Memphis was among the most racist cities in the country, governed by a white supremacist Mayor Henry Loeb. The police force was comprised of KKK members who enforced racist policies and turned a blind eye to the sanitation workers plight. The racist fear of black organizing was real and Loeb refused to recognize the sanitation workers union or their demands. In February of 1968, two black sanitation workers were killed by a malfunctioning truck. The sanitation workers union voted to call a strike, and the garbage began to pile up. After 11 days, workers petitioned the City Council for their labor demands, and were granted them. But the racist mayor rejected the City Council's vote and instead escalated the situation by using tear gas and intimidation to subdue nonviolent protesters. Still the strike went on, and the will of the community became stronger to unite. This is when King got involved at the invitation of his colleagues Rev. James Lawson (still in Los Angeles today) and Bayard Rustin, who encouraged black leaders and white people of conscience to join the picket lines. All of the local high schools and colleges got involved and nearly a quarter of the picketers were white. King knew that the organizing had reached a flashpoint, and called for the biggest



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tool in the strike toolbox- a city wide work stoppage, where everyone in Memphis would walk off the job for sanitation workers. After a delay due to snow, on March 28th, nearly 22,000 students skipped school to participate in the peaceful strike. But the mayor escalated violence again, this time chasing the crowd to the Claiborne temple, then tear gassing inside the sanctuary and clubbing protesters as they attempted to escape. Mayor Loeb then declared martial law and brought in 4000 National Guard troops to subdue the strike. Organizers asked King to come and address the beleaguered sanitation workers, still striking in the snow, the rain, and under threat of violent retaliation with their signs that said "I AM a Man." It was on April 3rd that King returned to deliver what would be his final speech— I've Been to the Mountaintop. It was in this speech that King made clear that this strike was so much bigger than just sanitation workers, than just Memphis, it was about the grip of racism on our nation's governance and the dignity of workers everywhere.

That next evening, King was murdered on the balcony of his hotel as he left for dinner. In the midst of this national tragedy, the cause pressed on--Coretta Scott King, Union Leaders and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference led 42,000 people on a march through Memphis, demanding that the Mayor concede to the Union's request. It was only two weeks later that the Mayor finally honored the City Council's approval of the sanitation workers' conditions. Another strike had to be threatened, however, for the promised conditions to actually be followed through.

The only way for one group of workers to win is through a collective awakening of our interrelatedness—we must wake up to how we rely upon the labor and services of others and deeply value the integrity of other people's work and their wellbeing. We must understand ourselves in the words of poet John Donne, as a "part of the main." King called this a kind of "dangerous unselfishness."



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Let's listen to the words of his final speech:

"Now let me say as I move to my conclusion that we've got to give ourselves to this struggle until the end. Nothing would be more tragic than to stop at this point in Memphis. We've got to see it through. And when we have our march, you need to be there. If it means leaving work, if it means leaving school, be there. Be concerned about your brother. You may not be on strike, but either we go up together or we go down together. Let us develop a kind of dangerous unselfishness."

On this cusp of the day we celebrate King's legacy, may we be inspired to develop a kind of dangerous unselfishness which moves us into a place of solidarity. As the teachers strike on, let us bind ourselves to a vision of public education for California that serves our kids today and is sustainable for generations to come. Let us advocate for our government workers and civil servants that their labor be respected and compensated. And let us march on, not just for ourselves, but for one each other. For we are not islands, but all a part of the main. In the words of Unitarian Universalist minister Theodore Parker used so often by Dr. King, the arc of the moral universe is long, but indeed, it bends towards justice.



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Reading #1: (adapted for inclusive language)

For Whom the Bell Tolls John Donne

No one is an island, entire of itself;

everyone is a piece of the continent,

a part of the main.

If a clod be washed away by the sea,

Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were,

as well as if a manor of thy friend's or of thine own were:

any one's death diminishes me,

because I am involved in humankind,

and therefore never send to know for whom the bells tolls;

it tolls for thee."

READING #2

At the Annual Unitarian Universalist General Assembly of Congregations, a distinguished lecturer is chosen to address the gathering. In 1966, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. addressed the General Assembly with his lecture "Don't Sleep Through the Revolution." King had deep relationships with Unitarian Universalists, going back to his days in seminary at Boston University, where he was a frequent visitor to the Arlington Street Church. I invite you now to listen to the words of Dr. King, from his lecture "Don't Sleep Through the Revolution."

I'm sure that each of you has read that arresting little story from the pen of Washington Irving entitled *Rip Van Winkle*. One thing that we usually remember about the story of Rip Van Winkle is that he slept twenty years. But there is another point in that story which is almost always completely overlooked: it is the sign on the inn of the little town on the Hudson from which Rip went up into the mountains for his long sleep. When he went up, the sign had a picture of King George III of England. When he came down, the sign had a picture of George Washington, the first president of the United States. When Rip Van Winkle looked up at the picture of George Washington he was amazed, he was completely lost. He knew not who he was. This incident reveals to us that the most striking thing about the story of Rip Van



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Winkle is not merely that he slept twenty years, but that he slept through a revolution. While he was peacefully snoring up in the mountains a revolution was taking place in the world, that would alter the face of human history. Yet Rip knew nothing about it; he was asleep.

One of the great misfortunes of history is that all too many individuals and institutions find themselves in a great period of change and yet fail to achieve the new attitudes and outlooks that the new situation demands. There is nothing more tragic than to sleep through a revolution. And there can be no gainsaying of the fact that a social revolution is taking place in our world today. We see it in other nations in the demise of colonialism. We see it in our own nation, in the struggle against racial segregation and discrimination, and as we notice this struggle we are aware of the fact that a social revolution is taking place in our midst.

Victor Hugo once said that there is nothing more powerful in all the world than an idea whose time has come. The idea whose time has come today is the idea of freedom and human dignity, and so all over the world we see something of freedom explosion, and this reveals to us that we are in the midst of revolutionary times. An older order is passing away and a new order is coming into being.

I would like to suggest some of the things that the church must continually do in order to remain awake through this revolution.

First, we are challenged to instill within the people of our congregations a world perspective.

All I'm saying is this: that all life is interrelated, and somehow we are all tied together. For some strange reason I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be. This is the inter-related structure of all reality. John Donne caught it years ago and placed it in graphic terms, "No man is an island entire of itself, every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main." He goes on to say, "any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in humankind, therefore send not to know for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee." This realization is absolutely necessary if we are to remain awake in this revolution.