

ABRAHAM, MARTIN, JOHN AND DRU

by Mark Ritchie, excerpted from sermon delivered January 2008

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This coming year, as part of our church's 150th anniversary celebration, our sesquicentennial, we'll have a chance to learn more about our founders and about the contributions of our church members over the years. We'll also have a chance to look ahead to plan how to best honor these gifts through our actions today and investments in the future.

Anniversaries and birthdays are often important opportunities for reflection and re-dedication. This January 15th, for example, is the [80th] birth date of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Millions of Americans will pause to honor the dreams and accomplishments of Dr. King and of the modern civil rights movement. This very special national holiday is one of the most important opportunities that we have each year to reflect on the fundamental goals of our nations – liberty and justice for all. It is also a chance to measure how we are doing in terms of being good stewards of these ideals reflected in the promissory notes -- as Dr. King called them -- the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and the Bill of Rights.

This past year, as I have grappled with many of the “nuts and bolts” issues of voting and elections – I have been especially mindful of Dr. King and all who died for the right to vote – the right that protects all other rights. ...

Dr. King's birthday is also an opportunity to place his life within a broader perspective. ... He had a deep appreciation of the power of history to help sustain movements in the midst of difficult struggles. One of Dr. King's most famous quotes, often used to shore up hope and commitment, was borrowed from one of his most important intellectual mentors, Unitarian Minister Theodore Parker who spoke about his belief in the eventual victory of the abolitionist movement in this way *“The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”*

Rev. Parker was also one of President Abraham Lincoln's important sources of inspiration. Parker was the first to use the phrase “of all the people, by all the people, for all the people” that Lincoln adapted for the Gettysburg Address. Dr. King was especially mindful of the special role that President Lincoln played in re-affirming the principles of freedom and equality as core national values ...

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Lincoln and King faced similar challenges in their struggles. Both had to convince millions of Americans to recognize our failure as a nation to fulfill the promise of freedom – and they faced the daunting challenge of convincing an overwhelmingly white society to take huge personal risks to consciously address these shortcomings. Lincoln had to convince millions to risk their lives in battles. King had to convince millions to abandon the perceived advantages of privilege and whites-only voting.



*Mark Ritchie, Minnesota
Secretary of State and First
Universalist Church of
Minneapolis member*

While Lincoln chose to inspire the nation by looking back and drawing on the revolutionary ideas of our nation's founders, Dr. King reached forward – talking about his dreams – of that day when people would be judged by their character not their color. He dreamed of black and white children playing together in a world where the promise of America was achieved.

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Our sesquicentennial provides an excellent opportunity to pause and remember all that we have inherited from those who've come before us, and to carefully consider how we're doing in our stewardship of these gifts. We have been blessed by so much from our parents, elders, and ancestors – including physical things like schools, roads, and hospitals – and their ideals and beliefs about the common good, mutual respect, and civic engagement.

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As part of our church's 150th activities we are planning events where we all can have the opportunity to learn more about our history and about some of those inspiring folks who created and have sustained our spiritual community, like John and Dru Cummins.

John and Dru came to our church 45 years ago, in 1963. John served this church as our senior Minister until his so-called retirement in 1986. Dru served this church and our denomination at all levels — local, national, and international — as president of the UU Women's Federation and serving as a trustee on the UUA board. Together they helped our church community move forward in our work for social justice. John, Dru, and many others from our church were active in the civil rights movement, including a special trip by John to march with Dr. King in Selma In 1964. Throughout their ministry they helped bring our church community into a powerful role in support of the civil and human rights at home and peace around the world. We will learn more about John, Dru and so many more members of our church over the next year.

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The gifts that we have received from those who have come before us – like this church, Lakewood, the ideas of religious liberty, and our spiritual community – have sustained us in times of trouble and helped us find the courage to meet the challenges of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Abraham and Martin inspired our nation to advance the cause of freedom. John and Dru have sustained our community and inspired many others to advance the cause of social justice. Each were special but each were just ordinary people, like you and me, who answered the call to extraordinary service. Each of us here this morning will have that opportunity again and again in our lifetime – to answer the call to extraordinary service.

May this spiritual community and the love that surrounds us provide the courage we need to say yes – to say yes when called to fight for liberty and justice for all and yes to honoring the past by investing in the future. Abraham and Martin are gone, but John, Dru and all of us are still here and working for a more perfect Union, for a more just world – for today, and for times we shall never see.

Thank you for being the spiritual community that gives me the courage to yes when called to serve, to invest, to lead.

Thank you.

CONVERSATION STARTERS

How are we doing in our stewardship of the gifts our ancestors blessed us with?

What can we do this new year, alongside new leadership, to invest in a more perfect and just world?