

Drum Major for our Times
UUF

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January 15, 2017

In 1968, Martin Luther King Jr., gave a sermon called, "Drum Major Instinct". It was adapted from a sermon given 16 years earlier by a white, Methodist preacher, J. Wallace Hamilton, called Drum Major Instincts".

Now, some 50 years later, I'm adapting Martin's sermon for you today. His sermon was intended to encourage his congregation to seek greatness. I too want to encourage us, and you as individuals to greatness. And like Martin, I want to encourage you to greatness by being of service, by manifesting love in the world.

His sermon began by citing a passage in the book of Mark. He then pulled it apart to explain that that passage described basic human nature. I've chosen to spare you and me an exercise in exegesis (biblical interpretation). Suffice it to say, James and John, in the reading, sought to lay claim to a place of supreme honor, at Jesus's side; one at his right hand, the other at his left hand. They saw Him as the new king of Israel.

They not only wanted to be near him, but to also be seen and respected for their lofty position. King acknowledged that our natural reaction would be to condemn their selfishness. But he cautioned not to move so fast. He told them they should first search their own hearts. He told them "we too have those same basic desires for recognition, for importance. That same desire for attention, that same desire to be first."

He told them "deep down within all of us [there is] an instinct. It's a kind of drum major instinct...a want to be important, to surpass others, to achieve distinction, to lead the parade". While Freud thought sex was the dominate impulse, Martin, agreed with the psychologist Alfred Adler.

Adler believed "this quest for recognition, this desire for attention, this desire for distinction is the basic impulse, the basic drive of human life". The preachers named it the "drum major instinct". King argued that the motivation to "keep up with the Jones", to surpass the Jones, is an example of this instinct.

He said the cry of an infant is in service of being first. And it continues in the form of wanting to be first in line. We've all seen it. Kids get themselves in trouble at school, pushing and shoving, scrambling to be first. It carries over into adulthood, this desire to be first in line... at the grocery store, the first into the open parking spot or first through the toll booth.

Our desire to be well dressed, or to be particularly un-well dressed, can reflect a need for distinction. The cars we buy, the homes we buy can be a way to separate ourselves from family...a step up in the world. We can use these things as a way to claim inclusion and status of a certain tier in life. The drum major instinct.

To be seen, to be seen and recognized is often behind our interest in joining clubs, organizations, even congregations. UUs are of a particular ilk! Even if no one else believes it, we tend to believe we are special. We think of ourselves as independent---we think for ourselves. We don't get hoodwinked by all that gobbly-gook those other religions force upon people. We are open minded and rational. We are the good ones.

King tells us "there comes a time that the drum major instinct can become destructive." Let me be clear, I'm not trying to equate UUism with the destructive aspects of the drum major instinct.

But it is important to recognize that this instinct, that King tells us we all have, can be destructive. "If not harnessed, [this instinct can] become a very dangerous, pernicious instinct". If it isn't harnessed, he says, it causes one's personality to become distorted.

The ego problem of boasting, or a need to constantly prove how much we know, is an example. To engage in activity that ultimately is used to get attention, is another. [I doubt any of us know anyone like that]. Unharnessed, this drum major instinct can lead to snobbish exclusiveness; a thinking that one is better than another. King calls this a perverted use of the drum major instinct.

At this point, I want to riff, I want to solo for awhile. I don't want my words to be attributed to King.

There's somethin' goin' on out there! I tell ya, there's somethin' goin' on. I hear people talking, people are saying there's somethin' goin' on out there in the world: Brexit, the alt-right in Germany, France, the US and elsewhere. There's somethin' goin' on about exclusiveness, superiority, my wants and needs are more important than yours. I am more important than you.

Anti-immigration. Anti- Muslim. Anti-Mexican, anti-transsexuals, anti-voting rights. There's somethin' goin' on. Is it merely a "me first" issue? Is it only, "I want to be at the front of the line"? Or is it more sinister than that? It feels more like a yearning for purity, a manifestation of belonging to the "in" group; the group with power-over. The group that wants to retain the comfort of the way "things are supposed to be"; that has the right to define "how things are supposed to be". There is a demeaning associated with these things. The drum major instinct, unharnessed.

Fake News has become a popular phrase of late. Who gets to decide what is fake and what is real news? And how do we know? This is a territory ripe for the drum major instinct to take over. And I fear it is generally the perverted form.

I believe the concept of fake news has been around for a long time now. Although it hasn't been called that. Fox news has been brilliant in advertising itself as "Fair and Balanced". It's rather like "pro-life". The clear implication is that if you are not "pro-life, you must be anti-life or pro-death. What great branding!

If we are, fair and balanced, then everyone else, by implication, is unfair and out of balance. Those, who are deemed unfair and unbalanced have been given a unifying name, they fit under a single umbrella---mainstream media. If it's not mainstream media, then is it ?? exceptional, extraordinary or uncommon media? The drum major instinct has beaten that drum long and hard.

There's somethin' goin' on out there. People are saying...

People are saying, the US congress refused to consider the President's nominee for the Supreme Court; just simply refused! People are saying, the North Carolina congress voted to redefine and constrain the newly elected governor's scope of office, the power of the governorship. Could it have anything to do with who has the power; who's needs are to be met and whose are to go unmet? Could it have anything to do with who's a Republican and who's a Democrat?

People are saying, the Russians are behind cyber attacks against our presidential electoral process. The fundamental element of our democracy. People are saying, they sought to influence the outcome, who was elected. People are saying, the president elect has connections to the Russian government. I'm not saying it, people are saying it.

Martin Luther King says that the drum major instinct affects nations as well. In 1968, he said "what is wrong in the world today is that the nations of the world are engaged in a bitter, colossal contest for supremacy....If somebody doesn't bring an end to this suicidal thrust that we see in the world today, none of us are going to be around, because somebody's going to make the mistake through our senseless blunderings of dropping a nuclear bomb somewhere. And then another one is going to drop."

Martin went back to his biblical story about James and John...and Jesus. He told his congregation that in that story, Jesus reordered priorities, he transformed the drum major instinct from selfish wants to something much more important. He said Jesus, in essence, told James and John to keep the instinct to be important, to want to be significant...but don't distort it, don't pervert it. It's a good instinct if used well and wisely.

In essence, Jesus said, "Keep feeling the need for being first. But I want you to be first in love. I want you to be first in moral excellence. I want you to be first in generosity. That is what I want you to do."

King said that new definition was a definition of greatness. What he liked most about reframing the drum major instinct is that it allowed everyone to be great. Everyone could be important, everyone could be recognized. Everyone could be of service, everyone could serve.

I ask that you seriously consider how you can be of service to this world, this nation, this city, this congregation...to Unitarian Universalism's principles and values? I ask because I want to encourage you to greatness.

Martin Luther King ended his sermon titled Drum Major Instinct with these words:

“Yes, if you want to say that I was a drum major, say that I was a drum major for justice. Say that I was a drum major for peace. I was a drum major for righteousness. And all of the other shallow things will not matter. “

If I can help somebody as I pass along,

If I can cheer somebody with a word or song,

If I can show somebody he's traveling wrong,

Then my living will not be in vain.

If I can do my duty as a Christian ought,

If I can bring salvation to a world once wrought,

If I can spread the message as the master taught,

Then my living will not be in vain.”

You don't have to believe in Jesus or God to be moved to service. All you need is “a **want to feel important**”, a **want** to feel like you make a difference. Then... go about living your life. All you gotta do is go about living a life that makes a difference.

Amen