

A Spiritual Social Justice Alphabet Inspired by Dr. King

- Amanda Udis-Kessler, January 18, 2010

Rather than tell personal stories, I'd like to do something a little different today. In reflecting on Dr. King's work and words, I'd like to suggest the kinds of actions and values I imagine he would be calling us to today. And since we're at an institution of higher education, I thought it would be good to go back to basics and consider King's invitation to spiritually grounded social justice work in light of the alphabet.

Audacity: We are called to base our social justice work on the audacity of Dr. King's belief that "peoples everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality and freedom for their spirits." We are called to welcome Dr. King's audacity into our lives and actions.

Authority: We are called to act for justice in the world with the authority of all that is good, right, and holy undergirding us. Social justice is a human matter, and a holy matter.

Beloved community: We are called to build beloved community, to struggle together towards humane and mutually respectful interactions, to let our individual strengths work jointly on behalf of our ideals, even as we support each other through our frailties.

Compassion: We are called to care for those in pain and to let our activism and spiritual growth be shaped by their needs. We are called to develop a preferential option for the poor – both the economically poor and those who are disempowered in other ways.

Dignity: We are called to live with dignity and to honor the inherent dignity and worth of all people. If we live with identities for which we are dehumanized, devalued, exploited or oppressed, it is especially important that our activism reflect our understanding of our own dignity. If we live with identities for which we are privileged, or that cause us to exist in structurally exploitative relationships with others, it is especially important to take up activism that reflects our understanding of the dignity of the oppressed.

Empathy: We are called to have open hearts, even hearts that break, if a broken heart is necessary to let the world in. We are called to experience fully both our righteous indignation at social injustice and our deep sorrow at the suffering resulting from such injustice.

Forgiveness: Even as we strive to be our best selves and invite others to be their best selves, we are called to forgive ourselves for our failings and others for theirs. We are called to humbly seek reconciliation where possible, since only forgiveness and reconciliation will allow us to build a world that is in any meaningful way different from the one we have inherited.

God: We are called to let our activism and indeed our entire lives reflect whatever we understand to be holy. We are called to let the spark of divinity within us meet that same spark in others, whether they are like or unlike us, and wherever they may fall on the spectrum of inequality.

Hope: We are called to keep our hope alive, even when all possibilities of change seem to be gone. We are called to live into the future, refusing all temptations of despair.

Inclusivity: We are called to treat everyone with radical welcome, and to reject the boundaries that have been used so successfully to develop and maintain inequality. We are called to uncouple difference from devaluation, and to rejoice in the diversity of humanity.

Joy: We are called to delight, to gratitude, to celebration, to wonder, and to awe. We are called to a movement for social change that is fueled by music and dancing, by the pleasure of good company, by poetry, and by all the evidence, human and otherwise, of what is good around and within us. We are called to welcome opportunities to celebrate life and to improve the world so that everyone can celebrate life without being diminished by the misery of poverty or the pain of inequality. We are called to say yes to human flourishing, yes to life, and yes to that spark of holiness within us all.

Justice: We are called to remember always our goals of equality, fairness, and access. We are called to create a world where we share life's burdens and opportunities as justly as possible.

Kindness: We are called to treat ourselves and each other well, to remember that no one is without their own struggle, and to unflinchingly choose generosity over cruelty.

Love: We are called to love without restriction, starting with ourselves, continuing on to those who are easy to love, then to those who are difficult to love, and finally even to those who hate us. Understanding that we cannot do these things perfectly, we are called to work on developing our love as a spiritual discipline.

Memory: We are called to honor the memory of those who have gone before, to know and keep alive their joys and sufferings, and to learn from their work once they have passed on.

Nonviolence: We are called to reject violence in our social justice work, and to cultivate hate-free minds and hearts. We are called to treat ourselves as non-violently as we would treat others.

Optimism: We are called to be of good heart, to act as though the arc of the universe can indeed be bent toward justice if we work together to so bend it.

Peace: We are called to be peacemakers, to demonstrate the power and beauty and joy of peace, and to model how to live peacefully among those who are different from us. We are called to recognize always that peace is the means to the end, not just the end itself.

Persistence: We are called to stay in the struggle, to work and rest and work again, and to envision ourselves as part of a much larger movement for a truly humane world in which the flourishing of all beings is a goal worth struggling for.

Questioning: We are called to remain skeptical about received wisdom, especially any received wisdom that justifies or legitimates social inequality. We are called to challenge authority when it is visibly used to injure people, even if society has granted that authority legitimacy.

Risk: We are called to risk our comfort, to stand for what we believe even when this involves making sacrifices.

Service: We are called to serve humanity, to go into the world, and to be the one who says, “Here I am! Send me!”

Thinking: We are called to engage our minds on behalf of our social justice work, both in carrying out productive analysis and in developing meaningful tactics and strategy that are appropriate to the situations in which we find ourselves.

Understanding: We are called to put ourselves in the positions of those who oppose our goals, to comprehend why they respond as they do. We are called to be patient with those who consider themselves our enemies, and to try to win them over rather than simply winning out over them.

Unity: We are called to work effectively together, to be one multiracial movement that crosses lines of many sorts in our shared goal of a people at peace in a free and just society.

Values: We are called to ground our work in our values and to never forget that human well-being comes first in a morally sane world.

Vision: We are called to keep the dream alive, to believe in the mountaintop, to share with each other our wildest hopes and to live the vision now. As the prophet says, where there is no vision, the people perish; we are called to keep the people from perishing.

Wisdom: We are called to reject short-sightedness and impatience, and to keep a sense of perspective about our individual roles in a much larger movement. Those of us in advantaged or powerful positions are called to learn from the wisdom of the oppressed and disempowered. Those of us in disadvantaged or devalued positions are called to honor our own wisdom and act self-caringly from wisdom rather than self-destructively from despair.

Xenophilia: We are called to appreciate the stranger and to take steps to bring the stranger into our world. We are called to make the strange familiar, and also to make the familiar strange so that the taken-for-granted aspects of social inequality become as shocking and disturbing to us as they really should be.

Youth: We are called to bring the next generation into the justice struggle, to welcome their passion, insights, and fearlessness, and to give thanks that the work we have continued will continue on further in them.

Zeal: We are called to bring our best energy to social justice work, to approach it with passion and delight, to be boundless in our love and tireless in our commitment. We are called, most simply, to make Dr. King’s dream a reality because there is no better way to honor the man whose life we celebrate today.