

The Year is 2069: What *in the world* have we done?

Talk delivered by Ruha Benjamin

January 21, 2019

Princeton Clergy Association Multifaith Service
to Commemorate the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr

Good evening! It is such a pleasure to gather with everyone here tonight. Old friends, new acquaintances, and so many wonderful people who I recognize as striving to foster a Beloved Community in the Kingian tradition, in Princeton and beyond.

Please join me in extending a huge thanks to the Princeton Clergy Association for their dedication over many years to building authentic connection and coalition in our town. We wouldn't be under this roof tonight without their efforts.

Many thanks also to our hosts, Rev. Bill Neeley and the incredible staff of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Princeton for opening their doors, including all the energy they poured into making this evening possible. It is truly my honor to be in conversation with you – and I do mean conversation – *Are you with me?*

And as we begin, I should clarify that there are no clergy in the Bahá'í Faith, one of the core principles being the “independent investigation of truth.”¹ So please know that what I share is not an authoritative Bahai view but, rather, reflections that grow out of my personal interpretation of the Bahá'í Writings, my experience as a Black woman in this country, and my knowledge as a social scientist who has studied questions of race and inequity for nearly 20 years.

And if I had to sum up what I've learned over this time period is that *The Facts Alone Will Not Save Us*. The deep investments that many people in this nation have in maintaining white supremacy and other forms of oppression run DEEP, and will not simply be transformed with more science and better data. Nothing short of a “revolution of values,” in King's words, can lead to a necessary “shift from a thing-oriented society to a person-oriented society.” *The facts alone will not save us*.

The more I've been steeped in the facts of inequity and injustice, the more I've come to understand the power of IMAGINATION. Take, for instance, THE FACT that New Jersey has the worst Black/White youth incarceration disparity rate in the country. That even though Black and White kids commit most offenses at similar rates, a Black child is 30 times more likely to be incarcerated than a White child. And presented with these facts, people make up all kinds of stories about why those Black kids deserve it! It lets them sleep at night.

In fact, a recent study shows that when White Americans were presented with these disparities, they expressed MORE punitive views, electing to support policies that contribute directly to this crisis of caging people. *So, the facts alone will not save*.

What this says to me, is that we have to foster a radically different imagination not only about WHAT IS (that is, how we perceive our current reality) but also about What Is POSSIBLE (as the foundation for how we shape our FUTURE reality). IMAGINATION, in short, is a battlefield. A site where warring values -- bigotry versus unity, inequity versus justice, denigration versus dignity -- FACE OFF. So come, imagine with me...

The Year is 2069. At the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, a group of high school students are sitting across from a group of indigenous elders. The students are listening intently. Reflecting earnestly. Taking notes even. As they learn about that shameful era known as the Time of Walls, Wars, and Prisons.

One of the elders explains to the youth, “This is indigenous land. We are not supposed to have walls here. We never did. For millennium. Before anyone else came here. We never had walls. We never had a prison. We always took care of our elders. We took care of our children. We always provided for them. We taught them right from wrong.”²

These words, uttered three days ago by Nathan Philips of the Omaha Nation as he held back tears following a set of confrontations on the National Mall, are instructive on multiple levels.

For starters, it reminds us that we, too, are on unceded indigenous land. And so, I ask you to join me in acknowledging the Lenape Nation on whose traditional territory we are gathering, their elders past and present, and future generations. And we commit ourselves to beginning the process of dismantling the ongoing legacies of settler colonialism – of which Walls, Wars, and Prisons are symptomatic.

This latest display of settler arrogance by students attending a RELIGIOUS school no less, reminds us how often religion is used as a technology of division and oppression, hatred and superiority, rather than concord and liberation, love and humility. And this might be blasphemous to say at a multifaith gathering, but if THAT behavior is the product of religious training, I really think the world would be a much better place without religion!

The Year is 2069. And people of all ages and backgrounds are found chanting, “Build That Bridge! Build That Bridge!” They wear hats and t-shirts with the popular but longish refrain, “Make the Entire World Great for the First Time!” They reject the racial, religious, and political dogmas of old. They’re not impressed by platitudes and promises. Faith fortifies but does not divide them.

They are knowledge seekers. The young ones, *especially*, are not simply into resume building, but world-building. They understand in THEIR BONES that their own wellbeing is intimately connected with the wellbeing of others. They do not work ON BEHALF of the “less fortunate.” They are transforming the very idea of FORTUNE. Not only wealth and resources, but RESPECT and DIGNITY flow in abundance, not monopolized by a few at the expense of the many.

The year is 2069. Once we can IMAGINE it, we can ENACT it.

As I look around the room at your radiant faces, I think of this kind of gathering as a CLEARING, like you might find when you're walking through the woods. In this wilderness of confusion, greed, corruption, ignorance, and violence – every news cycle telling of some new low – YET *here we are!* Clearing a different way forward. Here, in this space, we give ourselves permission to imagine an alternate reality, more just and loving than the present. And we refuel ourselves for the work of making this vision REAL.

Those of you who know me, know I love Toni Morrison's work. And this idea of the Clearing actually comes from her novel, *Beloved*, which I'm assigning as homework for everyone here! For those of you who've read it, you will recall my favorite scene, when Baby Suggs Holy calls those enslaved on the plantation into a Clearing in the woods. The year is 1856.

In that Clearing, she shouted, "Let the children come!" and they ran from the trees toward her. Let your mothers hear you laugh," she told them, and the woods rang. The adults looked on and could not help smiling. Then "Let the grown men come," she shouted. They stepped out one by one from among the ringing trees. Let your wives and your children see you dance," she told them, and ground life shuddered under their feet. Finally, she called the women to her. "Cry," she told them. "For the living and the dead. Just cry." And without covering their eyes the women let loose.

It started that way: laughing children, dancing men, crying women and then it got mixed up. Women stopped crying and danced; men sat down and cried; children danced, women laughed, children cried until, exhausted and riven, all and each lay about the Clearing damp and gasping for breath. In the silence that followed, Baby Suggs, holy, offered up to them her great big heart.

She did not tell them to "clean up their lives" or go and "sin no more." She did not tell them they were "the blessed of the earth," its inheriting meek or its glory bound pure. She told them that the only grace they could have was the grace they could IMAGINE. That if they could not see it, they would not have it. "Here," she said, "in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard..."

As with the Clearing in *Beloved*, I invite us to mix up—laughing, dancing, weeping, and loving hard—creating a sacred space in this wilderness, as we reflect on how Dr. King's message continues to speak to the freedom struggles of our day.

And let me clear, by "Dr. King's message," I'm not talking about the water-downed, feel-good sound bites that get trotted out once a year, the platitudes that say nothing and everything when excised from the broader context of movement building. King's popularity in death matches only his persecution in life!

Rather, the message I'm talking about is the DEEPLY DISCOMFITING diagnoses he and his comrades made of our nation. A dangerous diagnosis because it connected different forms of oppression (racism, militarism, and economic exploitation). A message that implicated how we treat one another AND how systems of power treat us all. A diagnosis that exposed our OUTSIDES and our INSIDES to careful examination.

In this way, King's approach resonates powerfully with the Bahá'í teachings which say, 'We cannot segregate the human heart from the environment outside us and say that once ONE of these is reformed everything will be improved. We are ORGANIC with the world. Our INNER LIFE molds the environment and is itself also deeply affected by it. The one acts upon the other and every abiding change in the life of humanity is the result of these mutual reactions.'

I interpret this to mean that we cannot expect society to change, if we all stay the same. A new kind of world, requires new kind of people to build it. When we give lip service to ideals without striving mightily to practice these attributes in our own lives, it's like polishing our shell, but refusing to hatch. It LOOKS pretty, *sure*. But the point is to stretch ourselves, to grow, to come alive with possibility! To BREAK open our hard exteriors so that we can really live. And most times that don't look cute. Have you seen a chick that's just hatched?!

The struggle for justice is about laws and policies, just institutions and social structures, YES. But it also entails LIVING justly. And not only in how we treat others. But also, in how we understand ourselves. A capacity to think our own thoughts, feel our own hearts, exercise our God-given potential without the tyranny of external forces robbing us of that ability.

Consider how Bahá'u'lláh, the Prophet-Founder of the Bahá'í Faith, describes it:

The best beloved of all things in My sight is Justice; turn not away therefrom if thou desirest Me, and neglect it not that I may confide in thee. By its aid thou shalt see with thine own eyes and not through the eyes of others, and shalt know of thine own knowledge and not through the knowledge of thy neighbor. Ponder this in thy heart; how it behooveth thee to be. Verily justice is My gift to thee and the sign of My loving-kindness. Set it then before thine eyes.

Let's pause on that for a minute. Because when you really think about it, the implications of this vision of Justice are truly staggering! "By its aid thou shalt see with thine own eyes and not through the eyes of others..." Think of all the things that prevent us from doing this. The very institutions that purport to be purveyors of knowledge and news, distort our very ability to know things on a basic level:

The ingredients listed on food. The history taught in text books. The headlines popping up on your phone right now. Even the medical advice of a doctor who you should be able to trust, but who's receiving perks from Big Pharma. Everything, from media to schools to healthcare, will have to be re-imagined and reorganized with justice at its core, because right now they prevent us from seeing and knowing the truth.

Speaking of truth, Bahá'u'lláh explains that, "Truthfulness is the foundation of all human virtues." This, too, has far-reaching implications!

Ours is a society, we mustn't forget, that is constructed upon a fundamental UNtruth—devised to reconcile the fact that our nation's founders conceived this as a 'cradle of democracy' AND at the same time a graveyard for millions of people bounded in chattel slavery, colonialism, and genocide? And so, the way our nation chose to *reconcile the unreconcilable*—CRADLE and

GRAVEYARD—was to create the FICTION OF RACE as the thing that would hold these two processes together, by deeming some people INHERENTLY inferior and incapable of freedom.

Slavery then gave way to three more systems of racial domination—Jim Crow segregation, Ghettoization, and hyper-incarceration, a modern form of legal bondage that is UNPRECEDENTED in its severity among all nations of the world! Not even China incarcerates as many citizens as we do and they have a billion more people to work with. Nor does any other country destine ex-felons to wear a BADGE OF DISHONOR to their grave in the way that our system does. Barring every pathway people might use to rebuild their lives – jobs, housing, and education.

Taken together, institutions of racial domination are predicated on a fundamental Untruth, that some people’s lives are more expendable than others and flies in the face of Bahá’u’lláh’s admonition,

Know ye not why We created you all from the same dust? That no one should exalt himself over the other. Ponder at all times in your hearts how ye were created. Since We have created you all from one same substance, it is incumbent on you to be even as one soul, to walk with the same feet, eat with the same mouth and dwell in the same land, that from your inmost being, by your deeds and actions, the signs of oneness and the essence of detachment may be made manifest.

Think of it like this: the oneness of humanity is like the law of gravity. You don’t have to “believe” in it, for it to impact you. Climb up on this roof and jump. You will feel the effects of gravity whether or not you accept it as true. We have erected an entire society that denies the principle of the oneness of humanity in its stubborn adherence to racist dogmas, AND YET! we all feel the effects of that denial.

People who study population health use a somewhat morbid indicator of what they call “Excess Death.” With it, they predict how many unnecessary lives are lost within any time frame, usually a year. We all die eventually, but the questions they ask are, “At what age? With what degree of suffering? With what degree of preventable illness?”

What they’ve found is that African Americans die earlier and have higher rates of many chronic diseases than whites. In a national study they found over 83,000 excess deaths per year in the Black community alone. One Harvard epidemiologist explained it in these terms: it’s the equivalent of a major airliner filled with Black passengers falling out of the sky every single day, every year. 83,000 excess deaths.

So, what this body of research is saying-- is that racism gets under our skin and in to our bodies? Not just through a vigilante’s 9mm shotgun as in the case of Trayvon Martin but through the everyday stress and strain of living in a society in which your life is valued less.

BUT, and here’s the kicker! If White Americans comprised their own country, they are still much worse off than less affluent populations around the world. Whether its infant mortality or drug addiction, the so-called HAVES in our society are also feeling the gravitational pull of

inequity, which eventually brings everyone down, not just the obvious targets of racist policies and practices.

Which brings us back to Dr. King's message. If I had to come up why he posed such a threat, WHY the powers that be needed to shut him up, WHY our nation tries to tame his message with holidays and statues and scripted reverence, it is because he powerfully connected the many different forms of oppression that stifle human potential, and showed how it affects our insides and outsides.

A true reckoning with the implications of his message propels social movement by connecting all kinds of people whose lives are impacted by Racism, Militarism, Economic Exploitation, and more.

In fact, it was when he began mobilizing a Poor People's campaign that his threat level grew: *Why is it, he asked, that people have to pay water bills in a world that is two thirds water? A dangerous question for those enriched by extracting value from any and everything. Why is it that people have to pay water bills in a world that is two thirds water?* Today, King's question reverberates through the work of activists demanding clean water in Flint, Michigan.

Why is it that people have to pay water bills in a world that is two thirds water? His question reverberates through the work of indigenous Water Protectors in Standing Rock, who will be the first ones impacted when the Dakota Access Pipeline breaks. The first, but not the last. *Why is it that people have to pay water bills in a world that is two thirds water?* A simple but radical question.

The word "radical" simply means to get to the ROOT of something. And King had a radical diagnosis of society, not settling for surface symptoms, but focused on underlying pathologies.

In his eulogy for the four little girls blown up by white supremacists in Birmingham's 16th Street Baptist Church, King connected the INTOLERABLE brutality of that single act to the TOLERATED brutality of everyday racism, saying "We must be concerned not merely about who murdered them, but about the system, the way of life, the PHILOSOPHY which produced the murderers."

King's diagnosis was NOT EPISODIC, but systemic, as he powerfully connected spiritual with material maladies, urging both religious and scientific approach to justice: "Science investigates; religion interprets," he said, "Science gives man knowledge which is power; religion gives man wisdom which is control. Science deals mainly with facts; religion deals mainly with values. The two are not rivals. They are complementary."

In this way King is echoing another core teaching of the Bahá'í Faith, which was first articulated in the mid 1800s: that religion, without science, degenerates into superstition and fanaticism, while science without religion becomes merely the instrument of crude materialism. Given that our social ills take on so many different forms, so too must be our proscriptions for change. And so, I leave you with this final proposition:

If inequity is woven into the very fabric of society,
Then each twist, coil, and plait is a chance for us to weave
New patterns, practices, and politics.
The vastness of the problem will be its undoing,
Once we accept that we are PATTERN MAKERS.

The Year is 2069. And the children and grandchildren of those gathered in this Clearing tonight, are experimenting with new patterns of thought, new patterns of action, weaving a different TAPESTRY of community life,³ a more vibrant social fabric that warms us all, that leaves no one out in the cold, that imbues the smallest of acts -- how we see one another, smile at one another, welcome one another -- and encompasses the largest institutions, from education, healthcare, media and more.

No longer do they mimic the way things have always been done. They are pattern makers! WE are pattern makers... threading justice, beading equity, sewing love into everything we do.

The year is 2019, so let's do this!

¹ For more info: <https://www.bahai.org/beliefs/>

² Interview: https://www.instagram.com/p/Bsy9_7WFDQO/#author_ka_ya11

³ A Rich Tapestry: <https://www.bahai.us/a-rich-tapestry/>