

**“Dreaming Beyond Reason”**  
**January 16th, 2022**  
**Rev. Laurel Gray and Amanda Hall**

**Pt. 1 Amanda Hall**

To quote activist Mariame Kaba, *hope is a discipline*. It’s something we have to practice. So, let’s practice.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. dreamed his dreams out loud. His speeches were rousing and emotional and oh-so-quotable. But he was also undeniably practical. Two years after the Civil Rights Act was passed, he [wrote in the Atlantic](#) that Black Americans, quote: “have benefited from a limited change that was emotionally satisfying but materially deficient.” Unquote. Economic justice is freedom work, and Dr. King fought for it.

As we heard in our reading from his 1966 Senate hearing, one of Dr. King’s political visions was a guaranteed income. Most versions of this policy involve the government giving people cash directly, on a regular basis, without work conditions or restrictions on how to spend it. It’s sometimes called Universal Basic Income, and if you’re familiar with it there’s a good chance it’s because Andrew Yang ran on it in the Democratic primaries. Guaranteed income is an idea that’s bounced in and out of the American political consciousness over the last century or so, without ever getting too far off the ground; some studies were run in the Midwest in the 1970s, but then faulty data analysis and a loss of interest sent it back into dormancy.

I first learned about universal basic income in 2017, when it was a quirky, “future-hacking idea” that was gaining traction in Silicon Valley. The tech industry started to worry it was getting too innovative, and soon it would automate away all

the jobs that currently allowed its customers to afford their gadgets. Income from the government was a neat solution. It became a side interest of mine that I would read about in off hours, imagining its potential as a solution to present problems rather than industry's anticipated ones.

It was January of 2020 when I decided to change careers and become a universal basic income researcher. I did not expect to see the government giving people unrestricted cash in my lifetime. Exactly one guaranteed income experiment was underway in the US. My ambition was to while away in obscurity, leaving academic fossils for policy-makers of tomorrow to eventually dig up. Maybe someday, in a different world that I couldn't quite envision, Dr. King's guaranteed income could re-enter the conversation.

Two months later, COVID economic impact payments hit millions of bank accounts. People needed cash, and they got some. It wasn't perfect and it wasn't enough. But it was tangible. It gave modern precedence to the government giving people cash, and that cracked open a window of opportunity that nobody could have anticipated.

This week I started my internship at the Center for Guaranteed Income Research, which opened December of 2020. Over two dozen guaranteed income pilots programs are underway in cities across the country, with more to follow. By sheer serendipity, I'm finishing my policy degree exactly as this unlikely, unthinkable idealistic policy is getting a real chance.

It's not easy to know how to practice hope. One technique that I find reliable, though, is to imagine I have one arm stretched forward in time and one stretched backward, and to look at the hands I'm chaining together. I am small, but that chain is long, and my power and will is keeping it intact. This helps me practice a hope that is flexible. It's a commitment to vulnerability, connectedness, and the expansiveness of possibility. It's scary and it opens me up to disappointment, but it reminds me that I'm not alone.

## **Pt. 2 Rev. Laurel Gray**

And indeed you're not alone. The practice of hope - remaining open to possibility and believing that more is possible - it requires a degree of faith. Faith that we are indeed connected and so our participation in the work of justice making is tied to that great fabric of history, that chain of lives linking past to present to future. So let's talk about faith and its role in the civil rights movement.

In 1966, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King attended our annual conference - General Assembly - to deliver the Ware lecture, which is the keynote address given to our entire denomination. All of the past Ware lectures are available online - last year Stacy Abrams and Desmond Meade gave the Ware lecture.

When Dr. King addressed those gathered in 1966, he spoke of the importance of the church.

“the church has a great responsibility because when the church is true to its nature, it stands as a moral guardian of the community and of society. It has always been the role of the church to broaden horizons, to challenge the status quo, and to question and break mores if necessary”

He laid out in great detail the ways racism impacts resources - noting things like the differences in how much school districts spent on Black students and how much they spent on white students; how the unemployment rate disproportionately affected Black people, and on. He spoke about the presence of Unitarian Universalists in the civil rights movement, and his own experience of attending the Arlington Street Church when Rev. Dana Greeley was the minister.

The Rev. Rosemary Bray-McNatt tells the story of meeting Coretta Scott King, who was delighted to learn that she was in seminary to become a UU minister. Rev. Bray-McNatt wrote that she was surprised by this response, by the respect and delight that King showed, and by what followed.

“Oh, I went to Unitarian churches for years, even before I met Martin,” King said, explaining that she had been, since college, a member of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, which was popular among Unitarians and Universalists. “And Martin and I went to Unitarian churches when we were in Boston.”

Rev. Bray-McNatt continues:

What surprised and saddened me most was what she said next. Though I am paraphrasing, the gist of it was this: “We gave a lot of thought to becoming Unitarian at one time, but Martin and I realized we could never build a mass movement of black people if we were Unitarian.”

Of all the books and essays I had to read to become a UU minister, I’ve never forgotten this story, this little known fact that MLK was almost a UU.

It’s a magical and yet piercing fact, one that I don’t think I’ll ever shake, one that beckons us towards a deeper and more grounding faith.

In his essay “Pilgrimage to Non-Violence” in 1960, Dr. King wrote, “Liberalism failed to see that reason by itself is little more than an instrument to justify man’s defensive ways of thinking. Reason, devoid of the purifying power of faith, can never free itself from distortions and rationalizations.”

I know the word “faith” sometimes sets off the suspicion meters of Unitarian Universalists - it’s a word that conjures visions of omnipotent Gods and old creeds in many - which is unfortunate, because it’s a powerful concept.

When I think about faith as a Unitarian Universalist, it feels like a counterbalance to reason, not because it’s unreasonable, but because it assumes a kind of humility that sees the universe as mysterious and powerful and creative. Faith says, “this is beyond my understanding, beyond my imagining.”

Liberalism can so often be driven by a sort of protective cynicism which holds that

only we see how bad things are and know how to fix everything - or maybe we don't even know how to fix it, but at least we know how bad things are.

And what I love so much about Amanda's story is that the shift towards accepting guaranteed basic income has accelerated beyond anything she imagined because of things she could never have predicted.

Optimism and cynicism are both born of our attempts at reason and a belief that we know what will come - for good or for ill. But life isn't reasonable. And it isn't fair.

It's a brittle system, reason. I can see why MLK didn't think it would sustain Black people through the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s.

We need the purifying power of faith, he said. And I agree, all these decades later, we need faith to sustain us.

Because faith asks that we suspend the belief that we alone might know the answer. Faith asks that we remain open to what life brings and allow ourselves to be awe-struck and humbled and moved. Faith asks that we align ourselves with some ultimacy beyond ourselves.

Maybe you call that God, or maybe you call it love, or creativity, or the great ecosystem of life. Whatever the words, the dynamic is one in which we are only a small part of the great unfolding, not the fortune tellers of what will come.

So often MLK day is saturated with a kind of cute-factor - filled with quotes about how only love can drive out hate, but with no real substantive embodiment of that ideal.

And in this month of thinking about how we live with intention, I wonder what it would be like if we Unitarian Universalists held faith in our interconnectedness above our love of reason.

This is in fact one of the key questions that is being raised as we reconsider our seven core principles. I attended the weekend workshop in December in which UUs from all over the country and world gathered to consider how the principles at the core of our covenant might change for the better.

I remember someone saying that we cannot be committed to “reason beyond reason.” Another said that the task of interdependence is to unlearn isolationism - that great myth bound up in the American dream that tells us the world is fair and we just need to work hard enough, competing with our neighbor to assure our personal success.

Faith in our interconnectedness would mean both that we need to be accountable for our impact on others and it would mean that we alone are not responsible for saving the world from all that ails us.

It would actually mean that we don't even have the capacity to really know how to save the world, because it is so much more dynamic than any one mind can hold. But it also means we can align ourselves with love for our neighbor, we can show up, we can tend to the world around us with the faith that our care is part of the great multitudes of care in this world, faith that we are tied to a single garment of destiny.

I wonder, in the complexity of life right now, I wonder if that faith can ground us, help sustain us through the struggle of being human. In the words of Dr. Collymore, “I want a religion to live by. I want a faith to work by.”

May it be so. Amen.