

## **Sermon: Necessary Humanity (Laurel)**

So often on this Martin Luther King, Jr Sunday we focus on that sanitized story of MLK as a civil rights leader and activist, one that lets us stay comfortable.

We'll talk more about the honest history of Unitarian Universalism and the civil rights movement the first Sunday in February, but today we're going to get practical. We know that racism is wrong, but we don't often talk about how it works, the mechanisms by which racism and racialized violence becomes possible. So that's what we're going to do today, because it matters that we have the tools to understand racism so that we might thwart it. So that we, too, might be a threat to the system of prejudice.

There are three primary concepts we're going to cover that are all interlocking: moral injury, dehumanization, and moral exclusion. These are important because they are the mechanism by which racism functions, so our awareness of them and ability to resist them are key. After we go through the definitions, we'll talk about how our Unitarian Universalist principles are, blessedly, in direct opposition with dehumanization and moral exclusion.

Let's start with moral injury so that we can understand why dehumanization and moral exclusion are necessary if one group is going to subjugate another.

Moral injury is something that has mostly been studied in soldiers and veterans. In the book "Soul Repair: Recovering from Moral Injury After War" the authors define it this way: "moral injury is the violation of a moral agreement [we have] with [our] own internal world, [our own] moral identity" (87). Unlike PTSD, which they describe as being "a breach of trust with the world," moral injury is a breach of trust with our most deeply held moral beliefs. So it's an internal breach of trust.

Moral injury comes from the haunting choices people are forced to make in impossible situations. It's the consequence of violating our most deeply held moral codes.

So what does that have to do with dehumanization?

The social researcher Brene Brown writes about this in her blog and in the book “Braving the Wilderness;” here she’s paraphrasing David Smith, the author of *Less Than Human*:

“dehumanization is a response to conflicting motives. We want to harm a group of people, but it goes against our wiring as members of a social species to actually harm, kill, torture, or degrade other humans. Smith explains that there are very deep and natural inhibitions that prevent us from treating other people like animals, game, or dangerous predators. He writes, “Dehumanization is a way of subverting those inhibitions.”

Michelle Maiese, the chair of the philosophy department at Emmanuel College, defines dehumanization as “the psychological process of demonizing the enemy, making them seem less than human and hence not worthy of humane treatment.”

Dehumanization is the way out of moral injury, because it is a process by which a group’s humanity is stripped away, such that our moral codes no longer apply to them. We see this clearly with war propaganda that portrays certain groups of people as animals or monsters. That process of dehumanization is a necessary step in order to engage in violence without violating our own moral code as humans.

Brown continues, “Maiese explains that most of us believe that people’s basic human rights should not be violated—that crimes like murder, rape, and torture are wrong. Successful dehumanizing, however, creates *moral exclusion*. Groups targeted based on their identity—gender, ideology, skin color, ethnicity, religion, age—are depicted as “less than” or criminal or even evil. The targeted group eventually falls out of the scope of who is naturally protected by our moral code. This is moral exclusion, and dehumanization is at its core.”

So we have:

- moral injury, which is a kind of trauma inflicted by violating our own moral code that makes us question our own humanity
- dehumanization, which is the process of defining a certain group as

subhuman

- moral exclusion, which is the outcome of dehumanization, in which our moral codes no longer apply to a certain group and it becomes possible to engage in acts of violence without experiencing moral injury

Do you see how these three mechanisms interlock to create a functioning system?

I find this frame helpful because it explains the dilemma of people who hold to their prejudices beyond any seeming reason. Because what happens if we reverse this system?

Take the civil rights movement and that indelible image of Ruby Bridges walking to school surrounded by the violent rage of white people who wanted their school to remain segregated.

If the white people in that image accepted that Ruby Bridges was human, fully and equally, she would no longer be outside the bounds of their moral code, which would mean that every violent thing they have done to a Black person is a violation of their moral code as humans.

So the choices are to hold furiously to their racism or experience the profound internal violence of moral injury as they come to account for the ways they have violated the laws of their own humanity. That's one hell of a choice, right? It becomes a choice between preserving their connection to their own humanity or acknowledging the humanity in someone else.

So what does this have to do with Unitarian universalism? I think it's pretty clear that dehumanizing anyone based on their identity is fundamentally at odds with an ethic of love and a covenant to care. That's maybe the easy part of universalism.

Now I want you to consider someone whose violence is on a scale that is beyond imagining, who embodies what you might call evil.

Is that person still human? Would you treat them as human or would you support using their own tactics against them? This is where universalism gets hard.

Because if we say that humanity is inalienable, that a person is a person no matter who they are or what they do, if we say that dehumanization is completely off the table, then we have to treat even the most violent person with humanity. And that's really hard to swallow. But it's also important.

Because to say that we're universalists and we make a promise to affirm everyone's humanity, and then add in a footnote that we'll abandon our promise if that other person is violent enough or evil enough, then our ultimate allegiance is not to humanity it's to violence. If we're willing to negotiate after some impossible threshold of violence has been met, the thing that fundamentally informs our choices is not our commitment to humanity, the thing of ultimate power to inform our choices is violence.

A covenant of universalism, a love ethic like we talked about last Sunday, means that there is nothing another person can do that will get me to abandon my promise to treat everyone as human. That's about me, it's about my actions and they're not for sale, no matter your violence. Do you hear how powerful that is?

When we see all the dehumanization in the world it's easy to feel overwhelmed, to feel like nothing we do matters, so rooting down into this place of power is an act of loving resistance. Because when we are rooted down into that place that will not barter away another person's humanity, then we refuse the process of dehumanization, we make it impossible to get to the place of moral exclusion, so no one is ever having to choose between their own humanity and someone else's.

So language matters. The way that we talk about people matters.

When we hear someone call another group of people monsters and we say "they're human,"

when we hear someone call a group of people animals or say that they deserve to be exterminated and we say "they're human,"

when we refuse to let dehumanization take root,

we're interrupting the very process that made lynching and slavery and genocide possible.

So yes, we remember the legacy of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. today, but let us remember it honestly, let us put it back together each moment with our own resistance, with our own refusal to say anyone is ever less than human. As he preached may we live:

...caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied to a single garment of destiny.

*Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.*

There are some things in our social system to which all of us ought to be maladjusted.

*Hatred and bitterness can never cure the disease of fear; only love can do that.*

We must evolve for all human conflict a method which rejects revenge, aggression, and retaliation.

*The foundation of such a method is love.*

This is our covenant.

Amen.