

Bending the Moral Arc

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One of the more popular quotations often attributed to Dr. King is, “The moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” He said it many times. He used the sentiment to gird up the strength and resilience needed for long journey of justice-making. To the weary and threatened activists of his day, he was saying that morality is on their side, and that history is on their side, and that there is always a reason for hope, for in the end, the human story is one that heads toward justice.

That doesn't mean that the journey itself isn't dangerous. It doesn't mean that every justice journey is victorious in the short term. It doesn't mean that injustice won't harm and kill people. No, “the moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice,” does not ignore the pain and despair that can come with making justice in a profoundly unjust world. Instead, in an implicit way, it includes that pain and despair while lifting up a vision of what not only can be, but is coming. It says that we are headed toward a place of justice, and for King that would have been justice for everyone. No matter what happens now, that's where we are headed, and that's where we should keep moving.

It seemed to be a profoundly important part of this faith, for his final public address echoed its meaning. On April 3, 1968, Dr. King concluded a speech at the Mason Temple in Memphis by saying,

And then I got into Memphis. And some began to say the threats, or talk about the threats that were out. What would happen to me from some of our sick white brothers? Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land! And so I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man! Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!

The next day he was assassinated in Memphis, where he had gone to march with and support sanitation workers; garbage men, who were striking for a decent wage and safe working conditions. He knew his life was in jeopardy then and there because it had been his whole life; in the myriad ways that black lives didn't systemically matter then and don't systemically matter now, as well as in the specific ways that his life, as a civil rights leader, was constantly threatened by those sick white brothers.

His life was always threatened, and so while he wished for a long life, he knew that that was far from being assured for him. Therefore he kept his faith in the Promised Land and his feet moving toward it for as long as he could. He was bent toward justice, and preached that history was as

well, and proclaimed that the moral way to live was to move toward that same place; that Promised Land. To be moral was to envision the Promised Land and to move toward it. To be moral is to move toward that place of justice for all.

For it's not enough for the moral arc to bend toward justice. We have to bend with it. We have to arc with it. We have to move, and speak, and sing, and pray, and serve with it. The vision itself is what gives up hope, but that hope becomes profane if we substitute it for movement; if we hold hope but never act. Then that hope is just some naive narcotic that paralyzes us with visions of a happy place while suffering and injustice is in the real world. Then, no matter how wonderful our vision or well-aligned our principles are, in action, we are closer to complacent than anything else. We may pray a good prayer, or talk a good principle, but there's no real movement in our morality, and so it's not actually moral.

This aligns with the life of the person who first preached those lines about the moral arc of the universe being long but bending toward justice. That person is frequently thought to be Dr. King, but it was Theodore Parker, a Unitarian minister in the 19th century who first penned that sentiment. He was a transcendentalist and great orator but was known best for being a radical abolitionist who was one of the secret funders of John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry and who housed and helped people escaping slavery on the Underground Railroad, often using the church study to conduct that support. He is one of the truly great ministers in our history. And in 1853, a sermon of his published in which he preached:

Look at the facts of the world. You see a continual and progressive triumph of the right. I do not pretend to understand the moral universe, the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways. I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight; I can divine it by conscience. But from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice. Things refuse to be mismanaged long. Jefferson trembled when he thought of slavery and remembered that God is just. Ere long all America will tremble.

King paraphrased that longer sentiment into the words with which we are more familiar today. And forty years his death, President Barack Obama would be elected and decorate the Oval Office with a rug that had that phrase embedded upon it. Interestingly, President Obama would also choose to embed the rug with the phrase "government of the people, by the people, and for the people," frequently attributed to Abraham Lincoln because he said it in the Gettysburg Address in 1863.

But that was also Theodore Parker, who regularly used that phrase in his preaching and writing. He was likely building off of earlier definitions of democracy, but he popularized the expression during Lincoln's rise. A key difference is that Parker included the word "all," before the word people: a government of all the people, by all the people, and for all the people." That "all" was dropped by Lincoln, which made the expression more lyrical but less absolute than what Parker intended.

Parker believed you had to make the "all" explicit; otherwise "some" would continue to be enriched by democracy while many would continue to be impoverished or enslaved by it. He was right then and he's right now. And lastly, while we're on Parker, he was one of the earliest

American clergy to endorse suffrage, or a women's right to vote. And spiritually, as far as we know, he was the earliest American preacher to refer to God as "Father" and "Mother." That may not sound terribly radical to us now, but in his time that was a visionary shift in the theological imagination. Parker is someone from our history to read and get to know, today.

You can think of this train of thought as one in which Parker ponders what King proclaims. Parker says: "But from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice." King says, "It bends toward justice." Our prophecy is reticent; King's is bold. We should keep working on that. King proclaims that the moral arc bends toward justice and through his life, words, and action, urges us to move with it. Parker certainly moved with it too, in ways considered radical in his day, even if his language was more transcendental than that of an activist. And they both share a vision of the Promised Land, a commitment to moving toward it, and the inclination to encourage others to head in the same direction.

That is our direction today as well, on this Martin Luther King, Jr. weekend, and every day hereafter. We have to move, bend, and arc toward justice in every way that we can. And not just justice, but also love and mercy and everything that we envision being a part of the Promised Land. We have to build among each other and especially with the stranger, the world of which we dream, which happens by moving together in the arc of love and justice and mercy. And this doesn't mean that we have to be orators like King, or scholars like Parker, or activists like the great leaders of today, or hold tremendous power in any particular institution. We just have to be people moving with justice and love and mercy right where we are: in our lives, in our relationships, and in our communities. We start have to be just and loving and merciful right where we are, and then just spread out a little, bit by bit.

We go to one rally and stand in the back and become part of the group's energy for justice. We write one letter to one politician and voice one concern for people who are struggling. We make one trip, with one bag of groceries to the community food pantry, and we take one hour to shovel one walk, one time, of that older neighbor who has trouble doing that sort of thing after the snow falls. We call them one time while the roads are slick to see if they need something from the store because we're heading there anyway. We write one letter of gratitude to someone for doing something that serves others and let that gratitude and goodness and hope and positivity feed them and us.

We are just and loving and merciful one time, and then one more time and then one more time, because that's how goodness works. It feeds on itself. Always, it becomes more and more until it is a way of life, and we find that our lives are arcing with justice no matter what else happens. No matter how profane corrupt power is; no matter how vulgar and inhumane its expressions are, how greedy its policies, and how deadly are the outcomes of its immorality, we are, in small ways, living lives that arc with justice and love and mercy. We're doing what we can do. And our small ways add up and become something large; something unstoppable; something that blesses beyond even the scope of our vision. Our small ways become a moral movement that brings justice and love and mercy to everyone, everywhere, for whatever vision we hold of the Promised Land, in this faith, it has to be a land of no borders; a land for everyone.

And though a sense of hopelessness is always tempting, we are too busy moving with justice to fall in its trap. We are too busy doing good things, and connecting with good people, and working with neighbor and stranger to build the Promised Land here and now to be hopeless. For we have seen the goodness in on another. We have praised its power to bless lives with love and kindness. We have leaned into that goodness for strength and resilience; we have let it carry us and we have joined with others to carry loads too heavy for one. We know that fundamental goodness to be true; to be real; and to be more powerful in the end than every evil thing. And though winds of hatred sometimes roar, we will nevertheless persist in moving and arcing and bending with love and justice and mercy. We will seed and serve it with all of our lives. With our small ways that become an unstoppable force, we too will be able to see the Promised Land, and to move toward it, whether we ever get there or not. We will arc in its direction, and spend our lives in its service, in ways small and large, every day.

May it be so, and Amen.