



# High Country Unitarian Universalist Fellowship

## Summit County, Colorado

Celebrating life in community  
in the beautiful mountains of Colorado!

**January 21, 2018**  
**Monthly Touchstones Theme**  
**Justice**  
**Service Leader: Pat McShane**

**Sunday Services, 4:00 pm weekly**  
Fellowship Hall  
Lord of the Mountains  
Lutheran Church  
56 Highway 6, Dillon, CO 80435  
(Services are not held in the  
months of October and May)

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## The Audacity of Hope The Necessity of Justice

*Rev. Kirk Loadman-Copeland*

### Educating Racists

At his confirmation hearing for the position of Attorney General of the United States in January 2017, Jeff Sessions declared, "I am not a racist." On January 14, 2018, President Trump again argued, "...I'm not a racist. I am the least racist person you have ever interviewed."

In reflecting on those statements by two different people separated by a year, my response was the same, "How do you know?" I ask this knowing, that as a child, I was expected to become a racist.

I grew up blue-collar poor in the 1950s and 60s in the Homewood-Brushton neighborhood of the city of Pittsburgh. My mother, sister, and I shared a small, poorly built house on a dead-end, unpaved alley with my grandmother and uncle. It consisted of two floors with a living room and a kitchen on the first floor and two bedrooms on the second floor.

Pittsburgh is the setting for ten August Wilson plays called *The Pittsburgh Cycle*. Each play focuses on a decade beginning with 1900. His Pulitzer Prize-winning play, *Fences*, was set in the 1950s. The central character, Troy Maxson, was a garbage collector who learned to play baseball while in prison for killing a man during a robbery. His hopes of playing major league baseball were thwarted because of the color line in baseball. He

could only play in the Negro leagues on teams like the Homestead Grays or Pittsburgh Crawfords. This and other insults left him bitter and filled with rage.

The play takes its name from a fence that Troy's wife, Rose, wants him to build around their yard. Her desire for the fence is not to keep others out, but to keep the family, the one's she loves, safe inside.



I saw the play in 1989 at the Pittsburgh Public Theater. In December 2016, we took our daughters to see the film adaptation directed by and starring Denzel Washington. I wanted them to understand where I grew up.

I attended Crescent Elementary School through the fifth grade. In a 1959 class photo, out of 28 children, four were white, the rest black. Looking back this was surprising since I thought that the ratio of whites to blacks was about 50-50. I got along with everyone, except for the occasions when my sister got into an argument with some black girls and told them that her brother was going to beat them up. I would end up in a fight after

**Our Mission:** It is the purpose of the High Country Unitarian Universalist Fellowship [HCUUF] to be a community filled with love, beauty, and compassion. We are committed to freedom of opinion, expression, and spirituality. We seek to be of service to each other, our families, our larger community, and our natural environment.

school with a black boy who was defending the honor of the black girls, but it wasn't my fight. In the cauldron of overt racism on the alley where I lived, I was a misfit.

In high school, I got into an argument with my mother and step-father. They were upset with my non-racist position about who should get a hypothetical job, a black person or me. I said that the person who was the most qualified should get the job. If the black person was more qualified, he or she should get the job. They were appalled with my position. They believed that being white should confer inherent advantage.

I "met" Malcolm X in high school when I read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* in 1965. This *Book of the Month Club* selection written by Alex Haley was based on extensive interviews conducted over two years with Malcolm. It has sold millions of copies.

In understanding similarities and differences among Malcolm, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Barack Obama in terms of their political attitudes, it is important to understand their backgrounds.

## Malcolm X

Malcolm's family home was burned down when he was four, and his father, a Baptist minister and black nationalist activist, may have been murdered in retaliation for speaking out for African-American rights, although both the fire and the death were judged accidents by the authorities. Malcolm was six when his father was killed.

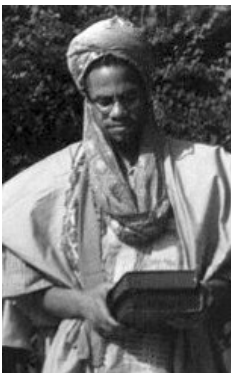
His mother was born in Grenada in the British West Indies. Her father was white, so she and her children were mixed race. She was committed to a state mental hospital when Malcolm was thirteen because the stress of caring for her family was overwhelming. He and his six siblings were separated and placed in foster homes or juvenile institutions. He dropped out of high school at the age of fifteen. Malcolm's child-

hood was defined by poverty, brutality, and experiences that would fuel his hatred of whites.

In 1946, at the age of twenty, Malcolm went to prison for larceny and breaking and entering. At the encouragement of his brother, Reginald, he became a member of the Nation of Islam while in jail. It was then that he changed his name from Malcolm Little to Malcolm X because "Little" was the name of a slave holder. Perhaps as importantly, he began reading extensively, starting with a dictionary and expanding his vocabulary. Following his parole in 1952, Malcolm became one of the organization's most influential leaders.

In March 1964, he broke with the Nation of Islam. Later that month, he met with Martin Luther King, Jr. for the first and only time as both men attended a US Senate debate on the Civil Rights bill.

In April 1964, Malcolm X traveled to Mecca to participate in the pilgrimage called the Hajj. Following that he traveled to Africa, one of three visits to that continent. He converted to Islam and adopted the name Hajj Malik el-Shabazz.



The impact of the Hajj was profound. In a letter while on this pilgrimage, he wrote, "There were tens of thousands of pilgrims, from all over the world. They were of all colors, from blue-eyed blondes to black-skinned Africans." He continued, "Despite my firm convictions, I have always been a man who tries to face facts, and to accept the reality of life as new experience and new knowledge unfolds it. I have always kept an open mind, which is necessary to the flexibility that must go hand in hand with every form of intelligent search for truth." Malcolm concluded,



"In the words and in the actions and in the deeds of the 'white' Muslims, I felt the same sincerity that I felt among the black African Muslims of Nigeria, Sudan and Ghana. We are truly all the same (brothers)...."

Always committed to justice for blacks, this experience resulted in a new outlook and hope for the future.

Malcolm's work was cut short. On February 14, 1965 his home in East Elmhurst, New York was firebombed. Luckily, he, his wife, and four daughters were not injured. A week later, at a speaking engagement at the Audubon Ballroom in Washington Heights, Malcolm was assassinated by three members of the Nation of Islam. They were later apprehended and convicted.

## Martin Luther King, Jr.

Martin Luther King, Jr.'s journey was quite different. His college-educated middle-class family was shaped in the tradition of the Southern black ministry. His father, maternal grandfather, and several other relatives were Baptist preachers. King grew up on Auburn Avenue (aka "Sweet Auburn") in a black neighborhood in Atlanta that was home to prosperous black businesses and black churches. Still, he was not immune to racism in the South, nor was his childhood idyllic. His father often beat him and King, who suffered from depression, attempted suicide twice, once in response to the death of his beloved maternal grandmother when he jumped out of a second-floor window of his home.

Having skipped two grades in public school, King enrolled at Morehouse College at the age of 15, attended graduate school at Crozier Theological School, and earned a Ph.D. at Boston University's Divinity School.

Unitarian Universalist minister Rosemary Bray McNatt was once interviewed by Coretta Scott King to co-write her autobiography. While not selected, Scott King told McNatt, "Oh, I went to



Unitarian churches for years, even before I met Martin. And Martin and I went to Unitarian churches when we were in Boston.” She concluded, “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.” Coincidentally, Barack Obama’s mother and maternal grandparents attended Unitarian churches as did Obama when he lived with his grandparents in Hawaii for one year when he was younger and then throughout high school. Later he would attend black churches in Chicago and Washington, DC.

Interest in Malcolm was reignited in 1992 with the release of Spike Lee’s film, *Malcolm*, starring Denzel Washington. It was released in the wake of the riots in LA following the brutal police beating of Rodney King.

### **Dream or Nightmare?**

Black theologian James Cone, author of *Martin, Malcolm & America: Dream or Nightmare*, said that King’s vision sprang from “the American Dream,” while Malcolm’s came from the “nightmare” of racial oppression that he had experienced in the north.

According to Cone, “King was a political revolutionary. Malcolm was a cultural revolutionary.” He notes that, “Malcolm changed how black people thought about themselves. Before Malcolm came along, we were all Negroes. ...Malcolm, ...helped us become black.”

King was an apostle of love and integration, while Malcolm was the principal spokesman for black pride and separatism. Over time, however, they began moving toward each other philosophically. As already noted, Malcolm was transformed by his pilgrimage to Mecca, which redeemed him for many whites for his earlier racist rhetoric.

As John Blake writes, “During the last three years of his life, King became more radical. He talked about eliminating poverty and providing a guaranteed annual income for all U.S. citizens. He came out against the Vietnam War, and said American society would have to be restructured.”

King realized that the black freedom struggle was actually “exposing the evils that are deeply rooted in the whole structure of our society.” “It reveals,” he said, “systemic rather than superficial flaws and suggests that radical reconstruction of society itself is the real issue to be faced.”



### **Barack Obama**

Both King and Malcolm influenced Obama.

Obama, like Malcolm, is biracial and his father was generally absent from his life. Unlike either King or Malcolm, Obama was raised in the white homes and culture of his mother and maternal grandparents.

Growing up, as he struggled to come to terms with his own identity, Obama read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. In his book, *Dreams from My Father*, Obama wrote that he admired Malcolm’s “repeated acts of self-creation.” He added that, “The blunt poetry of his words, his unadorned insistence on respect, promised a new and uncompromising order, martial in its discipline, forged through sheer force of will.” Most meaningful to Obama was the book’s recounting of Malcolm’s redemptive journey as it culminated in the final year of his life.

Obama said, “I think that what Malcolm X did, though, was to tap into a long-running tradition within the African-American community, which is that, at certain moments, it’s important for African-Americans to assert ...their worth. . . . That affirmation that I am a ...[person], that I am worth something, I think was important. And I think Malcolm X probably captured that better than anybody [else].”

These sentiments were reflected by Omid Safi, a Professor and Director of

the Islamic Studies Center at Duke University, who wrote, “‘Who taught you to hate yourself?’ I was 18 years old when I first read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. Up to that point in my life, I had not encountered people of color here in America who talked like him, thought like him, and stood up like him. ....

“Coming from a recent immigrant family, we were taught to fit in, blend in, perform our ‘American-ness’ by chasing the gospel of success. When called upon, we were to talk about America as a land of opportunity and dreams. But here was this beautiful and bold black prince, standing up to white exploitation, asking in a strident tone: ‘Who taught you to hate the texture of your hair? ...the color of skin ...?’”

When Obama entered the White House, he returned a bust of Winston Churchill to the British government that was on display in the Oval Office. He replaced it with a bust of Martin Luther King, Jr.

### **A Dream Deferred, Again**

The lives of Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and Barack Obama intertwine around issues of race, hope, and justice. Theodore Parker, a 19<sup>th</sup> century Unitarian minister, first spoke of bending the moral arc of the universe toward justice, which King beautifully paraphrased in 1958. All three men knew that hope without justice is demoralizing. Justice without hope may satisfy the letter of the law, but not the spirit. We need hope to believe that this moral arc can be bent, and justice to keep bending it.

Many people thought that with the election of Barack Obama in November 2008 that King’s dream was being realized, that Malcolm’s commitment to justice was at hand, and that the audacity of hope of which Obama had written would usher in a post-racial reality.

In retrospect, that was terribly naïve. At times it seems as if the Civil War is still being waged, and perhaps it is. It is clear that racism persists in America.

### **I’m not a racist!**

### **How would you know?**

We do not talk about race enough in

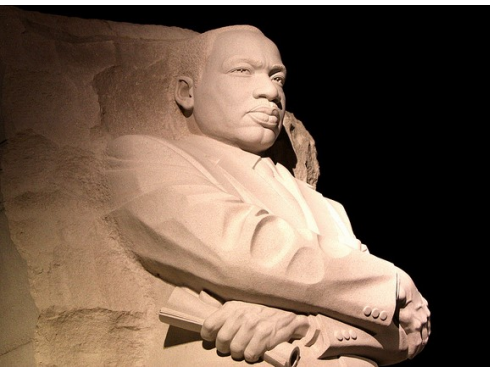


America, divided as we are into our racial and political clans. I believe that being born white in America with the attendant privilege that goes with it makes it easy to miss the pervasiveness of racism, and difficult, perhaps, to surface our deeper feelings around race.

Before we adopted our first daughter from China, we explored the real possibility of adopting a young brother and sister who were black. Their mother was dying on the hospice program where I was a chaplain. During the weeks that this was under serious consideration, I began noticing racist behavior in many places where I had previously been oblivious to it. Fortunately, the children's grandmother finally agreed to take them in. This experience, however, is the reason that when someone says, "I am not a racist," my response is "How would you know?" It is why, when I think of myself, all I can safely affirm is to be "less racist than some."

### **The Audacity of Hope, The Necessity of Justice**

In his speech in October 2011 at the dedication of the MLK memorial on the mall in Washington, DC, Obama said,



"It is right that we ...lift up Dr. King's "I Have a Dream" speech—for without that shining moment, without Dr. King's glorious words, we might not have had the courage to come as far as we have. Because of that hopeful vision, because of Dr. King's moral imagination, barricades began to fall and bigotry began to fade. New doors of opportunity swung open for an entire generation. Yes, laws changed, but hearts and minds changed, as well."

But Obama also cautioned, "at this moment, when our politics appear so

sharply polarized, and faith in our institutions so greatly diminished, we need more than ever to take heed of Dr. King's teachings. He calls on us to stand in the other person's shoes; to see through their eyes; to understand their pain. He tells us that we have a duty to fight against poverty, even if we are well off; to care about the child in the decrepit school even if our own children are doing fine; to show compassion toward the immigrant family, with the knowledge that most of us are only a few generations removed from similar hardships."

Hope and justice. These are two principles in securing the common good, and neither is ever certain. If we have the audacity to hope, then we will also have the courage to keep bending the moral arc toward justice. May it be so.

### **Photo Credits**

Page 1: Fences, <https://www.cineseries-mag.fr/sorties-dvd-blu-ray/sortie-dvd-blu-ray-fences-denzel-washington-102638/>

Page 2: Malcolm X, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Malcolm\\_X#/media/File:Malcolm\\_X\\_March\\_26\\_1964\\_cropped\\_retouched.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Malcolm_X#/media/File:Malcolm_X_March_26_1964_cropped_retouched.jpg)

Page 2: King and Malcolm X, [https://smhttp-ssl-62992.nexcesscdn.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/mlkandmalcolmx\\_300.jpg](https://smhttp-ssl-62992.nexcesscdn.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/mlkandmalcolmx_300.jpg)

Page 2: Malcolm X & the Hajj, <https://genius.com/Malcolm-x-letter-from-mecca-annotated>  
...Page 2: Martin Luther King, Jr., <https://www.whitehouse.gov/articles/martin-luther-king-jr-model-american-patriot/>

Page 3: Obama speaking, <https://www.thenation.com/article/barack-obama-refuses-to-be-a-lame-duck-president/>

Page 4: Martin Luther King, Jr. memorial, by Gage Skidmore, March 10, 2013 (CC BY 2.0), <https://www.flickr.com/photos/gageskidmore/8555476950>