

I am deeply grateful to Marian Dornell and all of you at the Center County Unitarian Universalists for being willing to listen and even *asking me to speak* my thoughts this morning. I have been trying for some time to make sense and find some meaning in the Greensboro experience, fractured and disjointed as it is by murder, firings, jailing, love and loss, lived in the midst of impoverishment, black liberation and American empire-building.

And this morning, coming as it does a week after the celebration of the birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King you have given me the chance to examine our odd Greensboro story using that particular framework.

Some of you know my story, some don't. In November, 1979, 11 years after the death of Dr. King, my husband Mike Nathan, a pediatrician who treated Black babies in a federally-funded community health center on the South side of Durham, North Carolina, was shot in the head and killed along with 4 of our friends. It happened in broad daylight in the middle of the street in a Black neighborhood in Greensboro, NC. The murderer was part of a car caravan filled with 40 Ku Klux Klansmen and American Nazis. Four tv stations cameras videoed the shootings. Yet nearly 30 years later, after 3 separate trials, none of the murderers have spent any time in prison for the killings and most of you have probably never heard of the Greensboro Massacre.

Mike and I had a 6-month-old baby, Leah, and we were caring for Mike's disabled elderly mother, Esther. I had quit medicine though I was trained as a doctor at Duke University and the University of Virginia. I had been inspired by our friends, Jim Waller, Sandi Smith, Bill Sampson and Cesar Cauce to work in a factory, at a minimum wage job, in order to organize workers into unions and for broader social change for

socialism. The work was hard and tedious, I was inexperienced and the workers were cynical and intimidated. I did not accomplish much, unlike Jim and Bill and Sandi and Cesar, who were able, through patience, hard work and humility, to build unions that challenged the textile and hospital industries in the area, probably the reason that they were targeted and killed.

The moment that we looked at the bodies on that November morning most of us there knew that it had been a set-up and the police had to have been involved. Though we had a police permit for our protest march to be followed by a conference against the KKK and racism, there was not a single policeman to be found. Unless... unless you counted the 2 in the unmarked car that had followed the Klan and Nazis all the way across town from their gathering site; OR the paid police informant who had recruited the KKK and Nazis to come to Greensboro, oversaw the loading of guns into their trunks and back seats and then led them to where we had gathered, a place impossible to find except with the use of the map on our parade permit, which had been given to him two days before by the police.

There were no police to protect us, but there were police throughout the Klan and Nazi plans for violence. Higher, federal echelons had their stamp as well, with the Klan informant discussing his work with local FBI officials. The Treasury Department's Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms undercover agent in the Nazis attending all of their planning meetings.

The Greensboro Massacre was a set-up, with parallels in Alabama some fifteen years prior, where police promised Klansmen 15 minutes uninterrupted in order to beat

senseless freedom riders on the buses they traveled. The outsiders doing the job, the “uniforms” standing aside while the job was done.

And just as with those examples, even though the Greensboro killings were videotaped by professionals, it was predetermined that no Southern jury would send the killers to prison. In not just one but two separate trials first by the state, then by the Reagan Justice Department, all white juries acquitted the Klansmen whose tales were thoroughly contradicted by the tv tapes, but whose stories were much more palatable to those white jurors than those of the “race-mixing, communist victims”.

In 1985 we victims won a federal civil rights suit on our own terms proving that 2 police, the police informant and the KKK and Nazi shooters were responsible for Mike Nathan’s death. The City of Greensboro paid the judgment which was divided up among those who suffered loss of loved ones and injuries.

Those victims who could returned the money to the Greensboro Justice Fund – about \$70,000 out of the original \$150,000 – and it became a small foundation to support those small, isolated, difficult to fund, impoverished groups in the South fighting to establish social justice.

In the 20 years after its reincorporation, the Greensboro Justice Fund gave away over a half million dollars to groups that won unions and living wages for farmworkers, that established police civilian review committees in towns where black men had been killed by officers for decades with impunity, that prevented the execution of an innocent retarded black teen for a murder he didn’t commit, and supported the victims of Katrina as the developers did everything they could to wipe out the Black community that the flood did not destroy. We were there for Native Americans around the South who

demanded that their heritage not be further sullied with racist “Squaws and Braves” sports mascots. We helped poor communities that refused to see their children play on top of toxic dumps. We backed the nascent grassroots civil liberties and peace movement after September 11, 2001, when the Bush administration transformed our grief into war, torture and a closed imperial government.

We took up the responsibility shifted to us by those who died from Southern bullets on Southern soil: Mike Nathan, Sandi Smith, Jim Waller, Cesar Cauce, Bill Sampson, *and* the thousands of others lynched over the centuries, may nameless

We are proud of where we took our grief and our anger. But both still burned in us, reflecting the deep injustice of those who died without full recognition of the extent of the crime of November 3, 1979. No police had ever been fired or even demoted, no apology issued by officials.

We wanted to reopen the investigation and we sought to do so. But by historical accident we found partners in those who had overseen the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, who wished to use Greensboro as an experiment, a launching pad to implement the South African-style concept of Transitional Justice in this country.

As in all of life, the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Project was not what I expected.

We had no official support – the City voted along race lines to denounce the process – and had to fight every step of the way to carry out the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission. But from 2004 to May, 2006 as local men and women came to testify about their experience in that deeply segregated, class-molded society in

Greensboro I learned that my experience was a part of history, *it was not just my pain*. I learned that an 8-year old Black girl was told by her father who swept floors in the courthouse was told not to go outside on that day, November 3, 1979, because he had heard in those city halls that the KKK was coming to town. I found that after the killings the police had tried to confiscate the videos that recorded the murders but, fortunately, brave members of the press had refused to give them up. (I am sure that if they had been successful, not only would the KKK never have been tried, but probably my own friends would be in jail today.) I found that African Americans and whites throughout the town were intimidated from speaking out, from organizing against this atrocity by police “calls” and “visits” that threatened their mortgages and their livelihoods.

The report by the Commission was delivered in May, 2006. It found “the single most important element that contributed to the violent outcome of the confrontation was the absence of police.” It called for deep revisions in police and City approaches to the Community, changes that have yet to occur and are still the subject of ongoing organizing in Greensboro.

I didn’t learn who was behind it all. I suppose, to this day, that it was the mill-owners and their security professionals who discussed their “problem with the commies” over drinks at the Country Club with the higher-ups in the police and the FBI, who themselves knew that their KKK informant might be able to take care of the situation and knew that on that day, November 3rd, we would be sitting ducks.

But you know what? The Truth and Reconciliation process tamped down the urgency of my questions. The process itself reoriented me and my friends to other more profound social and historical questions, posed much more forcefully and clearly by Dr.

King than by just about anybody else in our society. The most fundamental, rock-bottom presentation is this: how do we humans clean up our historical act and make a livable, mutually respectful and sustainable world with each other?

I recently read a wonderful speech about Dr. King by another giant of the civil rights movement, Dr. Vincent Harding, who both worked with Dr. King and also came to Greensboro late in his life to support the 25th Anniversary march in November, 2004 when the City Fathers were trying desperately to destroy the Truth and Reconciliation Process.

In this speech, Dr. Harding said that there is a regrettable tendency for our country to remember only 1963, “our tremendous fixation on the Martin Luther King of the March on Washington, of ‘I Have a Dream’ -- magnificent, beautiful oratory, but not quite to the point for the twenty-first century.”

Dr. Harding says, though, that Dr. King’s own choices actually prevent us from leaving it there in reverential triumph of that moment on the Mall for the choruses of “We Shall Overcome” to fill the airwaves and satisfy us with what we have accomplished against racism. Yes, we have done some things. No, the restrooms and kitchens no longer say “Whites” and “Colored”, but Black mothers and fathers still do not have jobs at a living wage where their physical and mental safety is assured. And though little black and white children can hold hands in greater safety than in previous times in the past, those little black boys are 5 times as likely to find themselves in prison in their lifetime as are their little white friends, will earn only 75% of their white friend’s wages and will be twice as likely to be unemployed in the present recession.

Dr. King could have taken an academic position after “I have a dream” and certainly after his Nobel Peace Prize. He could well have been giving beautiful, inspiring speeches today from his endowed chair at Harvard.

But he didn't. Instead, after taking on what should have been the hardest thing in American society in the 50's and 60's – Jim Crowe and the violent legacy of African-American slavery in the South – he attacked economic segregation, going North to demand fair housing on Chicago's South side, facing more threats and rocks and garbage from the white citizens of the “Enlightened North”.

And after that he took on the Vietnam War, creating the natural bridge from African Americans lynched in Mississippi across the ocean to the Vietnamese peasants that we carpet bombed and burned with napalm, saying that those bombs had to end for freedom to begin.

And he forged a vision of poor and oppressed peoples across this country – Black, white and Latino, coming together in their poverty, low wages and dispossession to determine their own future. He died, in Memphis, in support of garbage workers striking literally against being tossed on the dung heap of our country. He said, "I choose to identify with the underprivileged ... I choose to identify with the poor ... I choose to give my life for the hungry ... for those who have been left out of the sunlight of opportunity ... I choose to live for and with those for whom life is one long, desolate corridor with no exit sign. This is the way I'm going. If it means suffering a little, I'm going that way. If it means sacrifice, I'm going that way. And if it means dying for them, I'm going that way, because I heard a voice saying, do something for others." He was murdered.

We would say he didn't have to continue. But he *did* have to, because oppression and suffering existed and he knew it and those who suffered were part of his family and therefore there was a moral imperative to act.

It was that moral imperative, that willingness to do that which is not acceptable, not comfortable and certainly not easy that I found when I encountered the Southern movement in the later 1970's. There was heroism that echoed from the grave of the martyrs that captured me and my friends and called us to do more than we would have ever imagined possible or reasonable to define a deeper morality. I am glad to have marched and chanted for justice with those who carried King's and Malcolm's legacy in their veins: Joyce and Nelson Johnson and Sandi Smith.

But marching in triumph was only the first step. According to Dr. Harding: "Those of us who want to create a twenty-first century marked by justice and compassion in this nation need a hero who is not always triumphant -- who also works in the shadow times of fear, tragedy, betrayal, and death... not a plaster-of-Paris somebody on top of a pedestal."

In Greensboro, we lost. They died. Our movement was broken. We were made pariahs in part for our true mistakes – arrogantly calling the KKK names, talking about armed self-defense when we didn't have any and honestly weren't prepared to have any. We were students for god's sake.

And that is where we look to Dr. King, for the next step, the courage to continue despite the fear of the unknown and the guilt for our mistakes. The courage of Cicero, of the Riverside Church, of Watts where he was taunted and had rocks thrown by young Black men angry with what they perceived as "go slow" when their lives could not wait.

The realization that we are a small part of a history and if that history is ever going to mean more than human suffering, we have to figure out how to do our job a little better than we thought we had to do it.

That requires not just courage, but humility and honesty.

And that was the gift that was reinforced for us in Greensboro by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. We were able to take our moment in time in the late 70's and have a whole bunch of folks tell us what we did right and what we did wrong and how their lives fit into it and were affected by it. And we were able to answer back:

- Yes, racism and bigotry and KKK and Nazi violence is wrong. All white people in this country must know and appreciate the long and violent history of slavery and Jim Crow and appreciate what all people – men, women, black, white, Latin and Asian – have offered and will offer to this diverse country of ours.
- Yes, the dignity of a safe job at a living wage with health care for all fought for by Jim, Bill, Cesar, Sandi and Mike must be central to the quest for human rights, respected by all, and neither police nor paramilitaries can enforce for industry their demand for profit in the face of an oppressed work force.
- And yes, we who fight against oppression must take on a full understanding of Dr. King's message of love and non-violence for all. For in the humility that comes inseparably from such a stance flows understanding that will allow us to bring all who suffer into the fold and defeat those who rely on guns and bombs.
- And, yes, we must fight against all oppression and injustice. Dr. King showed us the how and the why to pursue that moral imperative, and now it is up to us.

Looking around at the political landscape of 2008, we sure do have a lot of opportunities how to flex those moral muscles in this 21st century. Torturing men with Muslim names and brown skin. An illegal invasion in Iraq where we deliberately don't even bother to count the civilian deaths. Lying for another time in Iran about nuclear weapons so that we can have another chance to invade another country whose oil we covet. Over two million in prison in our own country, most for non-violent crime, many for racially-rigged crack-cocaine-ballooned sentences. Violent scapegoating of undocumented Latino workers whose crime is that they want to do a job and feed their families now that NAFTA has taken their farms. Global warming to kill millions while George Bush's EPA does everything it can to keep us spewing carbon from our tailpipes. AIDS wiping out generations on the continent of Africa while pharmaceutical companies profits fill their coffers.

Over 40 years ago Dr. King decided he had no choice. *Do we have a choice?*

Will we make mistakes? Most certainly. Will we cry? Undoubtedly. Will we learn?

You betcha. Will we rest in peace. I think so.