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**Brothers in the Beloved Community:
The Friendship of Thich Nhất Hạnh and Martin Luther King Jr.**

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The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was born in 1929, and if he were still alive today, he would be celebrating his ninety-fourth birthday. I am always shocked to remember that **he was only thirty-nine years old when he was assassinated**; that's five years *younger* than I am.

I'm also holding in my heart that January 22nd will be the **one-year anniversary of the death of Thich Nhất Hạnh**—beloved peace activist, Buddhist teacher, and author of more than 100 books. On this MLK Weekend, I would like to spend some time reflecting on the transformative friendship of Dr. King and Thich Nhất Hạnh, and its paradigm-shifting impact on the world. If you are curious to learn more, I recommend the book titled **Brothers in the Beloved Community: The Friendship of Thich Nhất Hạnh and Martin Luther King Jr.**, by Marc Andrus.

By the way, the family name *Thich* is title given to Vietnamese Buddhist monks when they are ordained into their newly chosen Buddhist family—or *sangha*. The Vietnamese custom is to refer to him by his “dharma title” Nhất Hạnh. But neither Nhất nor Hạnh, which approximate the roles of middle name and given name, was part of his birth name.

From our contemporary perspective in 2023, a friendship between these two renowned world leaders for peace and justice may seem obvious. But almost sixty years ago, when they first corresponded, it was **highly unusual for a Vietnamese**

Buddhist monk and an American Baptist preacher to forge a friendship, especially when their two countries were entangled in a prolonged war (8).

Their first contact was on **June 1, 1965**, when Nhất Hạnh wrote an open letter to Dr. King about the approaching two-year anniversary of headlines around the world reacting to a photograph of a Vietnamese Buddhist monk lighting himself on fire. That monk had self-immolated while sitting upright in a calm, meditative lotus position. A number of other monks also self-immolated over the next year (17).

The Western press almost universally described these acts as “suicides” and interpreted them as a protest of the war. But the letters the monks left behind said clearly that **their intention was to call attention to the South Vietnamese regime’s repression of Buddhism by making an ultimate sacrifice to compassion** (17-18).

Due to its graphic content, I’m not going to show you the photo of the actual self-immolation, but it is widely available if you want to google it. And I encourage you to consider that it is neither inappropriate nor voyeuristic to do so. Thich Nhất Hạnh felt that the photograph of the actual moment of self-immolation was so important that he made it the cover of his 1967 book *Lotus in a Sea of Fire*. President John F. Kennedy said of that photograph, **“No news picture in history has generated so much emotion around the world as that one.”**

So, why did Nhất Hạnh reach out to King in *June* 1965, *two years* after the first self-immolation? As Dr. Scott shared with us in her recent sermon, King generated his own “headlines seen ‘round the world” in March 1965 by leading the Selma to Montgomery marches. Watching Dr. King’s campaign in Selma made Nhất Hạnh think that if anyone in the West would be able to understand the Buddhist monks’ actual intent, it might be King.

Nhất Hạnh’s letter is only a little over 1,000 words. It’s widely available online, and is worth reading in full. To share only a few highlights:

The self-burning of Vietnamese Buddhist monks in 1963 is something difficult for the Western Christian conscience to understand. The Press spoke then of suicide, but in the essence, it is not. It is not even a protest.... **To say something while experiencing this kind of**

pain is to say it with the utmost of courage, frankness, determination, and sincerity.... The monk who burns himself has lost neither courage nor hope; nor does he desire non-existence. On the contrary, he is very courageous and hopeful and aspires for something good in the future....

I believe with all my heart that the monks who burned themselves did not aim at the death of the oppressors but only at a change in their policy. Their enemies are not man. They are intolerance, fanaticism, dictatorship, cupidity [greed], hatred and discrimination which lie within the heart of [humankind]. **I also believe with all my being that the struggle for equality and freedom you lead in Birmingham, Alabama... is not aimed at the whites but only at intolerance, hatred and discrimination....**

In writing to you, as a Buddhist, I profess my faith in Love, in Communion and in the World's Humanists whose thoughts and attitude should be the guide for all humankind in finding who is the real enemy of [humanity]. (18-21)

This letter gives you an early sense of why Thich Nhất Hạnh became a world-renowned spiritual teacher, so let me say a little about his background. How did he come to be not “your average Vietnamese Buddhist monk” in the same way that Dr. King was “not your average American Christian pastor.”

Thích Nhất Hạnh was born in 1926 in Vietnam. He went through all the traditional scholarly training and study necessary to be ordained in the Vietnamese Zen Buddhist tradition, which you'll sometimes see called Thiền. But I'll let you in on an open secret—all the following different words are transliterations for the same concept: “meditation”:

- Vietnamese: *Thiền*
- Japanese: *Zen*
- Chinese: *chán*
- Sanskrit: *dhyāna*
- Pali: *jhāna*

For our present purposes, here's the important part: when his monastic training was complete, which in itself is very rigorous, Nhất Hạnh didn't take the usual path of considering that training sufficient. As a young man, he studied world literature at Saigon University, went to graduate school at Princeton University, and was a popular visiting faculty member at Columbia University in New York City in 1962 and 1963 (27).

Likewise, King was educated in the West, but was also deeply informed by Ghanaian nonviolent activism, itself deeply grounded in Hinduism.

These complementary mutual influences from both the East and the West helped form both men into global spiritual teachers.

There is a lot to say about the resonances between the worldviews of King and Nhất Hạnh, but allow me to highlight three points in particular.

First, **interdependence**: Both King and Nhất Hạnh lived out of their deeply felt experience that this reality in which we find ourselves is not composed of a bunch of separate, isolated units; rather, **they recognized that everything—very much including each one of us—is deeply interconnected. Everything is One.**

If you look closely, **all of reality is a verb; nothing is a noun. It's process and relationship all the way down.** I have shared this perspective in a few quite different previous Sunday services, most recently last month in a sermon titled "[How William James Can Save Your Life': Peak Spiritual Experiences, Psychedelics, & Consciousness Research.](#)"

Our UU [Seventh Principle](#) describes this Oneness concept as "Respect for the *interdependent web* of all existence of which we are a part." Nhất Hạnh called it **interbeing**. In fact, this view was so central to his philosophy that in 1966 he founded a new international Buddhist community of monks, nuns and laypeople called the Order of Interbeing, which continues to thrive today (139).

Similarly, Dr. King often wove variations of this core spiritual concept into his writings and speeches:

In a real sense **all life is inter-related. [We] are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.**

Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be.” (49)

African ubuntu philosophy articulates this concept of unity as, “I am because we are.” The first of the two deep resonances that helped forge a mutually transformative friendship between King and Nhất Hạnh was their shared sense that reality is deeply interdependent.

A second deep resonance in their worldviews is their shared conviction that a fully-realized spiritual journey includes not only deep inner *contemplation*, but also compassionate *action* toward co-creating a better world. As Cornell West prophetically said, “Intimacy and tenderness is what love feels like in private, but *justice* is what love looks like in public.”

In Nhất Hạnh’s 1967 book which I mentioned earlier — *Lotus in a Sea of Fire* — he coined the term “**engaged Buddhism**,” emphasizing that — rightly understood — Buddhism is not only about what happens on your meditation cushion, but also about who and how you are out in the world, in your daily life, about how you show up for social justice (146).

Dr. King was significantly influenced by the intersection of three similar movements which were similar to what Nhất Hạnh called *engaged Buddhism*:

- The first is **prophetic Black church Christianity**, which has always been more oriented to activism and social change than most historically white churches;
- Second is the **social gospel of liberal Christianity**, which teaches that Jesus’s message was about much more than changing the lives of individuals. Jesus was always interested in changing social systems, structures, and institutions to become more loving and caring for all;
- Third is **Gandhi’s practice of nonviolent resistance** ([Dorrien 21](#)).

So far we have explored two resonances between King and Nhất Hạnh. A first resonance is their shared experience of the deep nature of reality, which King best described with the word “*interdependence*,” and which Nhất Hạnh named “*interbeing*.”

A second resonance is their shared conviction that a mature spirituality includes both contemplation and action toward co-creating a better world. King’s foundational

spiritual concept was “the nonviolent Social Gospel,” while Nhất Hạnh named his concept “engaged Buddhism.”

A third deep resonance is that all these interrelated concepts are manifested in what Dr. King called *beloved community*. Similarly, Nhất Hạnh famously said that, “The next Buddha will be a *Sangha*” (162). In other words, we should not wait for some individual teacher to save us. Instead, our hope lies in co-creating communities that center authentic spiritual growth, multicultural beloved community, and peaceful actions for justice — not unlike what many other progressive movements are trying to co-create, include us here at UUCF.

To say more about the transformative influence that Dr. King and Thich Nhất Hạnh had on each other, let me give you a few last relevant points, one from each of the final years of King’s life.

Recall that in **1965**, Nhất Hạnh and King corresponded for the first time. The next year, in **1966** in Chicago, they met *in person* for the first time. Nhất Hạnh said, **“We had a discussion about peace, freedom, and community. And we agreed that without a community, we cannot go very far”** (107). You’ll either burn out or be a voice crying in the wilderness with no influence.

Moving ahead one more year, in **1967** Dr. King, who was a past recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize, wrote a public letter to The Nobel Institute. Here is an excerpt, but the [full letter](#) is short and well worth reading in full:

I do not personally know of anyone more worthy of the Nobel Peace Prize than this gentle Buddhist monk from Vietnam.... I know Thich Nhất Hạnh, and am privileged to call him my friend....

The history of Vietnam is filled with chapters of exploitation by outside powers and corrupted men of wealth, until even now the Vietnamese are harshly ruled, ill-fed, poorly housed, and burdened by all the hardships and terrors of modern warfare.

Thich Nhất Hạnh offers a way out of this nightmare, a solution acceptable to rational leaders.... **His ideas for peace, if applied, would**

build a monument to ecumenism, to world brotherhood, to humanity.

(111)

Sadly, the Nobel Peace Prize was not awarded to anyone in either 1966 or 1967.

But in that same year of 1967, King and Nhất Hạnh did meet again in person, this time in Geneva, Switzerland. Here's Nhất Hạnh's memory of that final meeting:

Dr. King was staying on the eleventh floor; I was on the fourth floor. He invited me up for breakfast. On my way, I was detained by the press, so I arrived late. He had kept the breakfast warm for me and had waited for me. I greeted him, "Dr. King, Dr. King!"

"Dr. Hanh, Dr. Hanh!" he replied.

We were able to continue our discussion on peace, freedom, and community, and what kind of steps America could take to end the war. And we agreed that **without...a happy, harmonious community, we will not be able to realize our dream.**

I said to him, "Martin, do you know something? In Vietnam they call you a *bodhisattva*, an enlightened being trying to awaken other living beings and help them move toward more compassion and understanding." I'm glad I had the chance to tell him that, because just a few months later he was assassinated in Memphis. (118)

Mere days after King's assassination he had been scheduled to attend a retreat with Nhất Hạnh at the Abbey of Gethsemani led by Thomas Merton, but that third in-person meeting was not to be (150).

The morning after learning the news, Thich Nhất Hạnh said:

I did not sleep last night.... They killed Martin Luther King. They killed us. [Don't miss that pronoun of interdependence: *us*.]

I am afraid the root of violence is so deep in the heart and mind and manner of this society. They killed him. They killed my hope....

This country is able to *produce* King but cannot *preserve* King.... He made so great an impression in me. This morning I have the impression that I cannot bear the loss....

I make a deep vow to continue building what he called ‘the beloved community,’ not only for myself but for him also. (121)

The title of Dr. King’s final book, published in the last year of his life, is formed from two profound questions: ***Where Do We Go from Here? Chaos or Community?*** (15). The past few years have sometimes felt like we might be collectively choosing chaos; our era has sometimes been called the **“Great Unraveling”** (171). But all the chaos and unraveling we are all now experiencing also has the potential to open up new spaces where profound positive growth and change can happen — even if can be a scary time here in the middle where we don’t yet know how the story will end.

Previously, we’ve explored how this Great Unraveling has the potential to be harnessed into what the environmental activist and Buddhist Joanna Macy has called the **“Great Turning”** (168-169). (See my previous sermon titled, “Widening Circles & Active Hope: Joanna Macy’s Work That Reconnects.”) To say more about this Great Turning, and tie together some themes from previous Sunday Services, consider this chart:

UUCF	MLK	bell hooks	Triple Bottom Line	Buddhism:
	<i>“Triple Threats”</i>	<i>“master’s house” - Audre Lorde</i>		3 Poisons (Antidotes)
Spirituality <i>I → we</i>	Materialism	Capitalist	Profit	Greed/ Attachment (Generosity)
Beloved Community <i>collective liberation</i>	Racism	White Supremacist	People	Delusion/ Ignorance (Wisdom)
Justice <i>(power over v. with)</i>	Militarism PPC: Ecological devastation	Patriarchy	Planet	Hatred/ Aversion (Love)

To go deeper and further explore some things that can lead to this Great Turning both now and on future Martin Luther King, Jr. Weekends, I invite you to do two things:

Read, watch, or listen to the sermon Dr. King preached precisely one year before his assassination, titled "**Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence**" (widely available online) in order to discern the profound lessons he offered, and how we may be called to respond in our current personal, national and global contexts.

Then read Thich Nhất Hạnh powerful poem, "**Call Me by My True Names,**" also widely available online, and spend some time in mindful contemplation of what actions you are called to take.