“Malcolm X – Old and New”

Sunday, February 3, 2013
Rev. Bruce Southworth, Senior Minister
The Community Church of New York Unitarian Universalist

Readings

(1) Manning Marable was a Professor of History, Public Affairs and African American Studies at Columbia University and a friend of our church attending a variety of community issue-oriented events over the years. He had severe lung disease, received a double-lung transplant in 2010, with what he called a “full recovery.” Sadly, he died in the spring of 2011 from pneumonia, a few days before the publication of his Pulitzer Prize winning biography: *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention.*

Manning Marable had been struck over the years by various inconsistencies and omissions in the vastly popular *Autobiography of Malcolm X* published in 1965. He saw the need for a scholar’s history of his life and ideological development, of the details of his involvement with the Nation of Islam and the reasons for his leaving, and of his travels to Africa and the Middle East in the last year of his life… a need for all this, plus an understanding Malcolm X’s spiritual journey.

Manning Marable concludes this magnificent detailed biography:

Malcolm’s strength was his ability to reinvent himself, in order to function and even thrive in a wide variety of environments…. (p. 479)

Malcolm’s person journey of self-discovery, the quest for God, led him toward peace and away from violence.

But there is one more legacy that may shape the memory of Malcolm: the politics of radical humanism…ff. (and in James Baldwin’s estimation) “that’s the truth about Malcolm: he was one of the gentlest people I have ever met.”

A deep respect for, and a belief in black humanity was at the heart of this revolutionary visionary’s faith. And as his social vision expanded to include people of divergent nationalities and racial identities, his gentle humanism and antiracism could have become a platform for a new kind of radical, global ethnic politics. Instead of the fiery symbol of ethnic violence and religious hatred, as al-Qaeda might project him, Malcolm X should become a representative for hope and human dignity. At least for the
African-American people, he has already come to embody those loftier aspirations. (p. 487)

(2) Here in our Church in 1962 at a Sunday night Forum, he and civil rights activist Bayard Rustin debated one another. Rustin accused him of emotionalism, and Malcolm X responded,

When a man is hanging on a tree and he cries out, should he cry out unemotionally? When a man is sitting on a hot stove and he tells you how it feels to be there, is he supposed to speak without emotion? This is what you tell black people in this country when they begin to cry out against the injustices that they’re suffering. As long as they describe these injustices in a way that makes you believe you have another 100 years to rectify the situation, then you don't call that emotion. But when a man is on a hot stove, he says, "I'm coming up. I'm getting up. Violently or nonviolently doesn't even enter into the picture – I'm coming up, do you understand?" (Goldman in BLACK LEADERS OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY, p. 315)

(3) Malcolm X concludes his autobiography this way:

I want you to just watch and see if I'm not right in what I say: that the white man, in his press, is going to identify me with "hate" (after I am dead).

He will make use of me dead, as he has made use of me alive, as a convenient symbol of "hatred" -- and that will help him to escape facing the truth that

... all I have been doing is holding up a mirror to reflect, to show, the history of unspeakable crimes that his [the white] race has committed against my race....

Yes, I have cherished my "demagogue" role. I know that societies often have killed the people who have helped to change those societies. And if I can die having brought any light, having exposed any meaningful truth that will help to destroy the racist cancer that is malignant in the body of America-- then, all of the credit is due to Allah. Only the mistakes have been mine. (381)
At age 16, Malcolm Little worked for the New York, New Haven and Hartford Railroad selling sandwiches, coffee, candy, ice cream and cake up and down the aisles of the "Yankee Clipper" as it traveled between Boston and New York. He was the best "sandwich man" they had seen in a long time cajoling, catering to and entertaining his white customers.

However, neither Malcolm Little nor his co-workers expected him to last long. He was a wild young man, tall and thin, outspoken, and given to profanity. He reports in his autobiography,

Profanity had become my language. I'd even curse customers, especially servicemen; (the year was 1942) I couldn't stand them. I remember that once, when some passenger complaints had gotten me a warning, and I wanted to be careful, I was working down the aisle and a big, beefy, red-faced cracker soldier got up in front of me, so drunk he was weaving, and announced loud enough that everybody in the car heard him, "I'm going to fight you...." I remember the tension. I laughed and told him, "Sure, I'll fight, but you've got too many clothes on." He had on a big Army overcoat. He took that off, and I kept laughing and said he still had on too many. I was able to keep that cracker stripping off clothes until he stood there drunk with nothing on from his pants up, and the whole car was laughing at him, and some other soldiers got him out of the way. I went on. I never would forget that – that I couldn't have whipped that white man as badly with a club as I had with my mind. (p. 77)

Did this happen in fact? Or was this in Malcolm's imagination as he spoke with Alex Haley who recorded and described his life story.

Even if it is not factually true, it is trustworthy regarding the power and self-understanding of the extraordinary pilgrim soul of Malcolm X.

Manning Marable’s richly detailed biography reveals much about his subject. Malcolm X’s older brother Wilfred described one of their childhood games this way:

“When a group [of children] would start playing, [Malcolm] would end up being the one that was leading.” When the local white children played in the woods behind the Little’s property, “Malcolm would say, ‘Let’s go play Robin Hood.’ Well. We’d go back there, and Robin Hood was
Malcolm. And these white kids go along with it – a Black Robin Hood.” (Marable, p. 33)

This morning I revisit the life of Malcolm X, marked by chapters of reinvention…something some of us may also need to do from time to time as we grow our souls. For him, it was a movement from trickster and hustler, to polemical outsider, to transformed religious leader and even bridge-builder, insistently challenging injustice – racism to be sure, but also economic exploitation.

I am reminded that a profound part of Malcolm X’s life was a spiritual journey. For him, it was a spiritual journey from survival and rebellion, to dogmatism and fanaticism, and then to critical consciousness; from apathy to activism, from sectarian isolation to possibilities of wider community, from hatred of whites to Islam’s universalism…as he declared, “the True Believer recognizes the Oneness of all Humanity.” (Marable, p. 311)

Malcolm X was a brilliant provocateur, who used his mind and words as a whip to lash racist white America.

As a minister of Elijah Muhammad’s Lost-Found Nation of Islam, he habitually spoke of the anger of African Americans and described himself as the angriest black man in America. The so-called Black Muslims, a term he tried to avoid, believed that all whites were devils and that blacks in America needed their own separate state, if they were not to be assisted in returning to Africa to create a new nation.

In the early 1960s, he had become a celebrity – a frequent guest on talk shows and on the lecture circuit. Only Senator Barry Goldwater was in greater demand than Malcolm X.

Throughout his life, he concentrated on two primary themes to which he constantly returned.

First of all, he spoke about black pride. He affirmed black heritage and black self-determination… freedom to be oneself, to think for oneself and then to judge and to act for oneself.

The second theme was to say loud and clear that America was decisively shaped by racism, and it was time for black Americans and white Americans to wake up.

Malcolm X, although personally a peaceful person, often moved to the extremes.

He repudiated the notion of progress in civil rights. “You don't stick a knife in a man’s back nine inches,” he would say "and then pull it out six inches and say you're making progress. It's dangerous to even make the white man think we're making progress while the knife is still in our backs, or while the wound is still there, or while
even the intention that he had is still there." (Goldman, p. 316) He only later began to see any benefits of gradual reform on the way to revolutionary change.

This distinction between self-defense and advocacy of violence was largely lost upon white America, and Malcolm X knew what power he had in his words, what fear he conjured in most of white America when he told them that white America had been planting the seeds of its own destruction. (Clarke, 166) He was a product of America, he said, and what could he do if white America did not like the crop that was coming up?

For me, it was fascinating to read from an FBI report the following evaluation:

MALCOLM has a strong hatred for the "blue eyed devil," but this hatred is not likely to erupt in violence as he is much too clever and intelligent for that… he is of high moral character. (Marable, p. 139)

When his perspective radically shifted toward toleration and pluralism in racial and religious matters near the end of his life, he discovered that his image as a black militant calling for insurrection could not be easily overcome. He said of the newspapers that his image "was created by them and by me. They were looking for sensationalism, for something that would sell newspapers, and I gave it to them." (Goldman, p. 316)

When asked to comment upon an incident that might have erupted into a riot except for his deft control of the crowd, when it had been observed that he had the power to start or to stop a riot, he answered tartly, "I don't know if I could start one. I don't know if I would want to stop one." It was the kind of comment he relished, even at times after his embrace of traditional Sunni Islam, and his break with the Nation of Islam. (AUTOBIOGRAPHY, p. 396)

Turning to some of the details of his life, Malcolm Little, was born in Omaha, Nebraska on May 19, 1925, the fourth of six children. His father was a Baptist minister and an ardent supporter of Marcus Garvey and his Black Nationalism and separatism.

His father died when he was six, either in a trolley car accident or a racial assault… which of the two is unknown. His mother struggled to raise the six children in the midst of her depression. We learn as well that at certain periods growing up, the family was desperately poor, and the children at times were starving and malnourished.

When at age 16 he moved to Boston to live with a half-sister, the very bright, high achieving middle-schooler had lost focus, direction and motivation, in part discouraged by racist white foster parents and teachers. Malcolm Little invented a new life for himself with various jobs such as shining shoes, as a busboy at the Parker House, sandwich man on the railroad, a numbers runner, a low level marijuana dealer, gambler, aspiring ladies’ man, and dishwasher. By age 17, in 1942, moved to Harlem.
Ever attentive to image and the impression he made, when he was called for military service in June of 1943, he went to the induction center, describing it this way:

I costumed like an actor... I frizzled my hair up into a reddish bush of conk [and addressed a white soldier] “Crazy-o.” ... [Wearing a zoot-suit, he was] pulled from the induction line [and]... was interrogated by a military psychiatrist to determine his fitness to serve. Malcolm rambled incessantly before whispering in the psychiatrist's ear, “I want to get sent down South. Organize them... [black] soldiers, you dig? Steal us some guns, and kill us crackers!” (Marable, p. 59)

He was quickly rejected as unfit for duty.

From time to time, he was a petty thief and con man. He was finally arrested, tried and convicted for burglary in 1946 in Boston. With his reddish hair, and some childhood years in Michigan, he had become known as Detroit Red. However, in the state prisons in Massachusetts, his combativeness, refusal to do prison labor, challenges to the guards, and constantly cursing God earned him the nickname Satan.

During his six years in various Massachusetts penitiendary, Malcolm was seldom penitent, but two momentous events happened toward reinvention.

A long-time inmate, twenty-years older than he, befriended him, and encouraged him to employ the time he had to start learning and become an educated person... at least that much he could control. Malcolm was stunned to see an educated black man, with such breadth and depth of knowledge, powerful verbal skills, such curiosity and discipline, and analytic perspective. Somehow, that passion took hold, and Malcolm followed the man's tutelage. He studied among other things, English and penmanship, elementary German and Latin, linguistics and etymology, and Buddhism.

He “devoured” writings of W. E. B. Dubois, Carter Woodson, Immanuel Kant, Nietzsche, Herodotus, and Mohandas Gandhi, plus American history with stories of Nat Turner and other slave rebellions, and world history which traced European colonial imperialism.

The other influence was from several of his brothers who had joined Elijah Mohammad’s Nation of Islam, then a very small pseudo-Islamic cult focusing on Black Nationalism and separatism. Out of prison in 1952, he visited Elijah Mohammad in Chicago, joined the movement, and took the name Malcolm X. He soon trained for ministry under him. Within a year, in 1953, the FBI has opened a file on him. He rose rapidly as he was successful in revitalizing mosques in Philadelphia and New York, and starting new ones in Boston, Hartford, Springfield, MA, and Atlanta. Membership increased rapidly under his leadership.
He was twenty-nine years old, a Muslim minister, an ex-con, formerly a hustler, and drug-dealer, all of which he would remind his listeners with significant embellishments about his criminal career.

With his skills, he became the evangelist of the “Black Muslim” movement. Following Elijah Mohammad, he taught black dignity and the need for black-white separation. This rejection of the notion of integration was startling, profoundly challenging and unsettling in the late 1950s. He further challenged American Christianity, white and black, as a fundamental lie, because it allowed such racism to exist.

He was attacked as a hate-monger, black supremacist and fanatic. John Henrik Clarke more accurately calls his teaching that of black pride, black redemption, and black reaffirmation. (xviii)

He married in 1958 to Betty X, a Muslim, and they had six daughters. Driven by his work, their relationship was strained at times.

In December of 1963, Malcolm X was suspended from the Nation of Islam by Elijah Mohammad, in part because of internal family jealousies and disenchantment with the publicity that Malcolm X received. Malcolm X had also learned and was upset about Elijah Mohammad’s affairs and children born by at least six of his secretaries, which violated Islam’s strict morality.

The split became permanent in March of 1964 when Malcolm X organized a new Moslem Mosque of his own, as well as the Organization for Afro-American Unity as a political arm, which would seek to take the civil rights struggle in this country to the United Nations as part of the international struggle for human rights.

After several trips to Africa where he built ties with African leaders, and a pilgrimage to Mecca in 1964, Malcolm X underwent a spiritual rebirth, now a Sunni Muslim. He embraced historic Islam, and he moved away from a narrow dogmatism to a more universal view of human nature. He still called for black unity and self-defense, but he now allowed that some cooperation with whites might be possible, although most whites still remained racist.

He repudiated Black Nationalism in terms of separation, and began to identify the struggle in global terms, noting that blacks are not a minority on the global scale, and far outnumber whites. He also stressed the need for a cultural and educational revolution. (Clarke, xxii) In addition, he began to argue that racism was not simply a social problem or a moral problem but one that had to do with power. And, he would argue that blacks should take power “by any means necessary.”

On February 21, 1965, he was assassinated in the Audubon Ballroom at 166th and Broadway by followers of Elijah Muhammad. Manning Marable lifts up other
conspiracy theories, which include powerful arguments about involvement by the N.Y. police department. Thirty thousand honored him by visiting the open casket.

Malcolm X has come to represent many different things to many different people, but his legacy certainly must include the personal example of one who transcended the difficulties of his early years.

And it must include the clarity with which he read "the book" on white America loud and clear. As an insistent witness for the prosecution, as one biographer has called him, Malcolm X was ruthlessly honest and uncompromising, stinging in debate, lifting up anger and rage held by so many, and frightening in his fearless tenacity.

Then that hate was transformed by Islam’s vision of one Human Family. (Marable, p. 370)

He was winning victories of the soul, and today certainly white America has absorbed too little of his insight into the character of racist America. He knew then that racism is not simply a matter of racial prejudice, but prejudice combined with power that is used to destroy people. Prejudice plus power.

Who was Malcolm X? He was, first and foremost, as any of us would aspire to be, his own person.

He became a spokesperson and a source of hope for many, by his personal transformation... a remarkable reinvention.

He was a messenger of pride and affirmation and a witness for the prosecution against racist white America, and was emerging as a critic of the abuses of capitalism.

His good friend Ossie Davis called him "Our Shining Black Prince" at his funeral and afterwards spoke about him this way:

"Malcolm ... was refreshing excitement; he scared hell out of the rest of us, bred as we are to caution... But Malcolm kept snatching our lies away. He kept shouting the painful truth we whites and blacks did not want to hear from our housetops. And he wouldn't stop for love nor money.... However much I might have disagreed with him from time to time, I never doubted that Malcolm X... was always the rarest thing in the world... a true man.

So much is left to be done so that each can live in dignity and freedom. Malcolm X dedicated his life to a profound cause and died in its service. For a brief moment, America’s racism stood half-exposed like the drunken soldier on the train, whom Malcolm had whipped with his mind.
His Islamic faith that he discovered in Mecca on his pilgrimage served him well, and perhaps it is only service that paves the way for fulfillment for any of us.

Of the many virtues of Islam, it occurs to me that Malcolm X came to understand its keen insight about so-called original sin.

“Original sin” in Islam is considered to be our forgetfulness, forgetting that we are part of something sacred, all of us, and thus we are all sisters and brothers, all of us. That was part of the message he was embracing at the end of his life.

James Cone, Professor of Systematic Theology at Union Theological Seminary, and early proponent of Black Liberation theology, wrote about both Dr. King and Malcolm X this way... with spiritual guidance for us in our lives:

... it is important to emphasize that Martin and Malcolm, despite the excessive adoration their followers often bestow upon them, were not messiahs. Both were ordinary human beings who gave their lives for the freedom of their people. They show us what ordinary people can accomplish through intelligence and sincere commitment to the cause of justice and freedom. There is no need to look for messiahs to save the poor. Human beings can and must do it ... (our)selves. (Malcolm and Martin, p. 315)

In these still troubling and troubled times, ordinary people can reinvent our society and heed Malcolm X's words:

I'm for truth, no matter who tells it. I'm for justice no matter who is for or against. I'm a human being first and foremost, and as such I'm for whoever and whatever benefits humanity as a whole. (AUTOBIOGRAPHY, Malcolm X)

Ordinary people, sometimes need some reinvention; sometimes just a bit of tweaking; or remembering... ordinary people ... like each one of us – like me and like you.