



# UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK  
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**Messages from the Mothers of Martin Luther King, Jr.,**

**Malcolm X, and James Baldwin**

**#WeWantVotingRights**

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[frederickuu.org](http://frederickuu.org)

Our Unitarian Universalist living tradition is a big tent that draws from six diverse sources. Our 2nd Source is the **“Words and deeds of prophetic people which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love.”** And I would like to invite us to trace some of the strong evidence that such transformative, prophetic people, like today’s best leaders, were not born into a cultural vacuum. People, communities, and experiences form us all, and pastreverberations flow in fascinating ways from generation to generation.

As part of my own preparation for Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day this year, I’ve been thinking a lot about such influences, even as I read a recent book titled ***The Three Mothers: How the Mothers of Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and James Baldwin Shaped a Nation*** by Dr. Anna Tubbs. Dr. Tubbs has a Ph.D. in Sociology from the University of Cambridge.

In the cases of Alberta King (mother of Dr. King), Berdis Baldwin (mother of James Baldwin), and Louise Little (mother of Malcolm X), it is important to remember, in Tubbs’s words, that,

Their lives did not begin with motherhood.... **Long before their sons were even thoughts in their minds, each woman had her own passions, dreams, and identity.** Each woman was already living an incredible life that her children would one day follow. (6).

And despite each mother living to witness the deaths of their famous sons, they each also persisted afterward in continuing to build the better world we dream about (8).

And although there would be a lot of value in reading three separate biographies about each of these women, it is also intriguing to explore, through Tubbs's book, the many fascinating parallels in their six different lives: "Louise, Berdis, and Alberta were all born within six years of each other, and their famous sons were all born within five years of one another" (9). And in each of these women's lives "**we find a manual on how to survive and persist in a country that stacks all the odds against you**" (198). For our purposes, I will have to limit myself to a few representative glimpses, but I recommend Tubbs's book for those who want more details. At only a little more than 200 pages, it's quite accessible.

Let's begin with Louise Little. One of the foundational episodes in Malcolm X's life happened when she was pregnant with him. It was 1925 in Omaha, Nebraska. One evening a Ku Klux Klan mob surrounded their home, yelling racist insults. They were targeting her husband, but he was out of town. She went out onto the porch, told them she was alone with her three young children, then went back inside and shut the door. The men broke windows and yelled further, but eventually left (85-86). As some of you may recall, ***The Autobiography of Malcolm X begins with this formative event*** (164).

Each day when her children came home from school, Louise asked them what they had learned from their white teachers; then she would supplement those lessons with the perspectives of Black historians, and with stories about the experiences of oppressed groups fighting for freedom and equality in this country and around the world (129-130). If Louise Little were alive today to witness the controversies around Critical Race Theory, the 1619 Project, #BlackLivesMatters, and more, one of her messages for us would be to **maintain courage in the face of White Supremacist**

**threats, and to always keep learning how to tell our history better—from an anti-racist perspective that centers the experiences of oppressed groups.**

Turning to the life of Berdis Baldwin: she was a gifted writer herself, and always wanted to perform her prose (58, 137). When she noticed a similarly strong creative bent in her son, she made sure he always had books to read, and made financial sacrifices to be able to take him to plays (93). No doubt due to their mutual love of writing—and each other—Berdis and James maintained an almost daily written correspondence throughout his life, and he dedicated many of his works to her (153).

Beyond her influence on her famous son, Berdis’s creative, activist legacy echoes through many of her other descendants today, some of whom have likewise become artists in their own right. If she were alive today, one of her messages to us would be that **even in the midst of many systemic oppressions, much good can come from carving out time and space for art, creativity, and beauty.**

And at the deepest level, those who knew Berdis best said that the core message they received from her was *love*, which was also at the heart of James Baldwin’s greatest works. At Berdis’s celebration of life in 1999, her grandson spoke these words in her memory: “Birdie’s song thundered against their beating hearts: **Love one another, love one another, teach your friends to love one another.** How we struggled to sing like our Berdis” (196).

In contrast to Berdis and Louise, who remain relatively less famous, Alberta King was already widely recognized as early as the late 1950s as a “mother of the movement” (155). She was a powerful influence on many people through the years—as an activist, musician, and music teacher (186).

Her son remembered that as he was growing older and becoming more aware of racism, among the most crucial lessons he received from his mother were her reminders that: **“You are as good as everyone”** (100). And if Alberta were still alive today, those words would be among her core messages for us. Those words—“You are as good as everyone”—resonate deeply with our UU First Principle, “The inherent worth and dignity of every person.” And as the lives of both Alberta King and her son remind us, recognizing the intrinsic value of every human being is a powerful starting place for the work of justice.

As we continue to reflect on the lives and legacies of these three mothers for how they can inspire, encourage, and embolden our own work for peace and justice today, may we learn to be, in Tubb's words, **“as loud as Alberta's choir, as consistent as Berdis's love, and as strong as Louise's fight”** (219).

And as important as these messages are, on this Martin Luther King, Jr. Day weekend, it feels crucial not to stop there. I want to encourage us all to keep going—to trace further the ways Alberta's powerful song for justice, Berdis's consistent love, and Louise's strong fight have rippled down through the generations to this very moment.

Because Martin Luther King, Jr. Day Weekend is tomorrow, I will narrow our focus for now to the King family. Alberta gave birth to Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1929, and if he were alive today, he would be celebrating his ninety-third birthday. Just as a point of comparison, **Dr. King was born the same year as the television journalist Barbara Walters and the actor Christopher Plummer.** Plummer died only last year, and Barbara Walters is still with us in retirement. However, these comparisons remind us that Dr. King's prophetic activism for peace and justice tragically ended far too early.

For that reason, it is all the more important to confront what the anti-racist historian Ibram Kendi has called “the second assassination of Dr. King” ([The Atlantic](#)). The first assassination was the one-time event that ended Dr. King's life in 1968, more than fifty years ago. **The second assassination is the ongoing attack on Dr. King's legacy.** Kendi details the many instances in which Dr. King's words are regularly taken out of context, in order to cynically whitewash King's meanings, water down his messages, misappropriate his words, and entrench the status quo of racial inequality. In short, **the “nightmare of racism is being presented as his dream”** (*ibid*).

One of the flagrant examples of this dynamic is increasing awareness that “Those who distort King's dream are now also distorting [Critical Race Theory](#), and distorting Critical Race Theory to distort King” (*ibid*).

So much ink has been spilled in the media to explain Critical Race Theory that I am not going to spend our time going into depth on that now. Suffice it to say that the subject of **Critical Race Theory is being used cynically to undermine the work of**

**anti-racism.** So on this Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday, want to be sure to focus our attention, in Dr. King's words, on what "the fierce urgency of now" calls us to do ([NPR](#)).

Even a cursory study of Dr. King's life and legacy makes it clear that, **if there is one 'most important thing' we can do in this present moment to carry on the work that Dr. King started, it is to strengthen voting rights.** Our UU [5th Principle](#) spurs us to embrace once more the "The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large."

And here's where I want to invite us to notice the reverberations that flow, first from Alberta and the Rev. Martin Luther King, Sr., to Martin Luther Jr. and Coretta Scott King, and now into the King descendants still with us today.

I'll mention three vivid examples, starting with Dr. Bernice King (1963 - ), the youngest child of Martin and Coretta King, who is the current CEO of The Martin Luther King, Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change. Bernice King said the following about this year's King holiday observance:

All of us must collectively use our various commemorations and our platforms on that particular day to do what Dr. King would do. My father would speak and act in a way to ensure that this nation lives up to its promise of democracy by putting pressure on our United States Senate to bypass the filibuster. And **instead of taking the King holiday off, they should make it a *day on* to pass the Voting Rights Act now.** ([YouTube](#)).

Likewise, tomorrow, Martin Luther King III (1957 -), the oldest living child of Martin and Coretta King, will be leading a march in D.C. for voting rights. In his words, there should be "**No celebration without legislation....** We're directly calling on Congress not to pay lip service to my father's ideals without doing the very thing that would protect his legacy: pass voting rights legislation." His sentiment dovetails with Kendi's call to resist the "second assassination of Dr. King." It is hollow to claim to celebrate Martin Luther King, Jr. Day if we fail to carry on working toward a key aspect of what he dedicated his life to: securing and protecting the equal and unimpeded right to vote for all adult U.S. citizens ([The Washington Post](#)).

Importantly, we don't have to speculate about what Dr. King would have thought about the filibuster, since his views are on the record. Back in 1963, he said: "The tragedy is that we have a Congress with a Senate that has a minority of misguided senators who will use the filibuster to keep the majority of people from even voting" ([The Washington Post](#)). The same racist dynamics of the past are playing out again today.

To carry on Dr. King's legacy, the King family and many other social justice activists are calling on the Senate to pass two key pieces of legislation:

1. **The Freedom to Vote Act**, which includes "automatic voter registration, protecting and expanding vote by mail..." ([When We All Vote](#)).
2. **The John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act**: "Today, we are seeing history repeat itself as states across the country pass voter suppression laws that limit access to voting, impose harsher voter ID laws, reduce polling place availability, and make it difficult to cast absentee ballots. The John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act responds to current conditions in voting by restoring the full protections of the original, bipartisan Voting Rights Act of 1965" ([When We All Vote](#)).

This week's UUCF E-newsletter, which is linked in the center of our homepage, includes multiple ways to advocate for voting rights, and to make Martin Luther King, Jr. Day a day "on"—for justice.

I should also be sure to name, as anyone following recent headlines is aware, that the current state of affairs in trying to pass voting rights is infuriating to say the least. But continuing to press for the passage of voting rights legislation remains vital for the health of our democracy, and there may well still be a vote this Tuesday. There's a link right on the [uuthevote.org](http://uuthevote.org) homepage that makes calling your senators easy.

As I move to my conclusion, I want to share with you one final example of how the legacy of these three mothers with which we began continues to ripple down even unto the fourth generation. Thirteen-year-old Yolanda Renee King (2008 - ) is Alberta King's great-grandchild, and the first and only grandchild of Dr. King and Coretta Scott King. Recently—and eloquently—Yolanda told [The Washington Post](#):

My grandmother said “every generation has to earn its freedom,” but I want my generation to secure freedom for all those that come after us. This is our moment to rise up and protect our voting rights. Young people have always been at the forefront of change, and we won’t stop pushing until we get this done.

May it be so.

To come full circle, I will give the final words for now to Dr. Tubbs, from the end of her book *The Three Mothers*. Taken together, the lives and legacies of these three powerful black women:

teach us that we [each] possess inherent worth, and that we must recognize that worth in each other. We are likely very different from one another, but we can still offer each other affirmation and guidance. **We must take pride in ourselves, in our children, and in our shared mission for each person to be granted the basic right to live life with dignity, happiness, and recognition.** (221)