

“First Story: Worth and Dignity”

A Reflection by Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull
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Just two months ago we celebrated once again the birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. We speak the name of this 20th century prophet in tones of reverence. Yet, we are reminded that “it is easier to pay homage to prophets than to heed the direction of their vision.” The direction of Dr. King’s vision was ever in the prophetic tradition of compassionate justice. On April 4, 1968, the day of his murder, he was in Memphis, Tennessee. His purpose in going there was to stand in solidarity with sanitation workers in their protest against appallingly low wages and intolerable working conditions.

How vividly I remember that time – the horrendous deaths of the sanitation workers in Memphis that served as the catalytic event for the protest, the April 3, “I’ve been to the mountain speech,” and the shattering news of the following day, with national television networks playing and replaying the scenario of King standing with his friends on the balcony of the Lorraine Hotel when the shots rang out. Dr. King was dead, but the power of his vision, as so eloquently proclaimed in his speech the night before, is as needed as ever thirty-eight years later:

“Let us keep the issues where they are. The issue is injustice. The issue is the refusal of Memphis to be fair and honest in its dealings with its public servants, who happen to be sanitation workers.”

The affirmation of worker worth and dignity is as lacking in our own time as in King’s. For me, the status and stereotypes of sanitation workers distill this concern. It was brought home to the core of my soul in the early light of dawn, September 26, 2001.

I had spent the night at Ground Zero, as a chaplain in one of the four sectors into which the area was cordoned off. Throughout the night I listened and prayed with firemen, police officers, crane operators, asbestos technicians, structural engineers, and FBI agents. Arriving early the previous evening, I had assembled with other chaplains – Unitarian Universalist to Assembly of God to rabbis and imams – to lend spiritual care to the caretakers of a city in shock, a city still hoping against hope for rescues. The mood was an acute mixture of helplessness and hope, and most of all, waiting, waiting.

Walking back toward St. Paul’s Chapel a few hours after sunrise, my chaplain’s hardhat readily visible, I spotted a crew of sanitation workers. With a rush of horrified awareness, I walked up to them and thanked them for the work they were doing. “It really feels good to hear that,” they said. One fellow looked at me with a tired smile. “Clean souls rest easy, Reverend. Clean souls rest easy.”

I was humbled.

In lower Manhattan, after the events of September 11, 2001, eight hundred sanitation workers labored in rotating 12-hour shifts, around the clock, the same harrowing schedule as the surviving firefighters. It is not surprising that the sanitation workers are sometimes referred to as “New York’s strongest,” given the risk and toxicity of their job. As to the risk in those days and nights after the collapse of the Towers, everyone who worked “downtown” put aside the fear of more building collapses. As to toxicity, the sanitation workers, the crane operators, and the firefighters came as close as anyone to direct contact with the lethal debris. It was the job of the sanitation workers to transfer it to the Fresh Kills landfill, which received the last of it on July 29, 2002. Over those nine months, sanitation workers hauled roughly 1.4 million tons of the toxic debris. The dust and air at Ground Zero has been likened to “a ground-level municipal incinerator that smoldered for months” burning “the most heavily computerized buildings in the world,” not to mention the rank odor of death that any of us who worked there inhaled with reverence.

Then again, “Clean souls rest easy. Clean souls rest easy.”

Let us keep the sacred work of Dr. King alive as we honor, long after his death, the amazing grace of some of the most marginalized workers in our midst.

Sources:

<http://www.thekingcenter.org/mlk/bio.html>

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop,” speech delivered in support of the striking sanitation workers at Mason Temple in Memphis, TN on April 3, 1968 – the day before he was assassinated. License to reproduce this speech granted by Intellectual Properties Management, 1579-F Monroe Drive, Suite 235, Atlanta, Georgia 30324, as manager for the King Estate. <http://www.afscme.org/about/kingspch.htm>

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