

You may have heard the famous statement by the prominent pastor and civil-rights activist, **Martin Luther King, Jr.**, that “**I’m convinced that we shall overcome because the arc of the universe is long but it bends toward justice**”. King was paraphrasing a statement by another prominent pastor and anti-slavery activist of a century earlier, **Theodore Parker**:

**“I do not pretend to understand the moral universe; the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways; I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight; I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice”.**

Both King and Parker expressed this as a statement of ‘**faith**’: They “divined it by **conscience**”, not by the “experience of **sight**”. But neither of these activists thought that “faith” meant sitting back and relaxing while the God of the “moral universe” delivered justice to humanity.

Recent unrest over the death-by-strangulation of George Floyd has stirred up large sections of the “moral universe” – or at least the “**moral earth**” – to demand justice. It remains to be seen how many policies and practices, of how many police departments, will be transformed in meaningful and lasting ways from watching those agonizing 8 minutes and 46 seconds of Floyd’s death.

These have been **demonstrations** – not riots. In the first few days, some people took advantage to loot and burn. As was true in the **riots** in the 1960’s and in 1992, non-violent civil rights leaders and (this time) relatives of George Floyd pled for peace. Even traces of violence worked against their message for justice and peace.

The reason I **know** that Martin Luther King and his organization opposed the violence in the 1960s riots comes from two “non-violence” training sessions I underwent in my seminary days and early ministry.

The first was in North Carolina in 1964 with a civil rights group affiliated with King. We were being trained one evening in non-violent responses in a black church, when a lookout near a church window called our attention to a pickup truck which had been slowly circling the block of the church – with several men in the truck bed in full **KKK** attire. The **KKK** man sitting on the tailgate with a shot gun was identified to us as the Deputy Sherriff. We continued our training in non-violent responses -- with a new urgency!

The **second** non-violence training was in **Chicago**, after the start of the **July 1966** Chicago race riot. Mayor Daley had just called in the National Guard to line the major streets where there had been rioting the night before. King's group was working in Chicago that year. I was pastoring a Church of the Brethren church in Chicago. **King** put out a call for **black and white clergy** to come that afternoon for training and an assignment.

King **trained** us in non-violent responses and **assigned** each of us to wear clerical collars and to walk **one mile** of one major riot-torn street -- to walk on the sidewalk on one side, between the National Guard in the street and potential rioters in homes and on porches. Then we were to cross the street and walk the mile back on the other sidewalk, until about midnight. King was equally concerned about provocations from **rioters** and from the **National Guard**. There was no rioting that evening or afterwards – not until 21 months later when King was killed in Memphis. King could not stop THAT riot!

Thankfully things have **changed** in many good ways since 1968 for African Americans – in self-image, education, housing, voting, and economics. But one thing remains the same: Almost every riot and demonstration of the past 55 years in America has involved the police – sometimes **causing** or at least implicated in the triggering events. May this be a time when those difficult relations are worked out! **Our** call is to **work with** “the moral universe” for justice and peace and love! Amen.

~Bill Faw