

19 January, 2009
Martin Luther King Day/
Eve of Inauguration

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TODAY is a good day to celebrate the achievements of Martin Luther King, Jr. Let me say that again. Today is a GOOD day to remember this man, to rejoice in his legacy, for today this nation is not merely talking about his legacy. We are on the verge of living it. This is, as people keep telling us, an historic occasion.

For too long, Martin Luther King has been a man more admired than emulated. He has been given every honor in our national lexicon. Just about every schoolchild in the United States can quote bits of his sermons and speeches. We know that he had a dream. We know that he dreamed of a time we would be judged, not the color of our skin, but by the content of our character. We know that he did more than dream. We know that he worked to bring about a future in which every person in this country, black and white, rich and poor, would have equal status under the law. We know that he developed a theory of non-violent resistance which resulted in the extension of civil rights to every person in this country, at least on paper. He has his very own national holiday, when many of us don't have to go to work. He has his very own named cloister in National Cathedral in Washington DC. Most of us would call him a prophet. In the calendar of our denomination, the Episcopal Church, he is honored as a saint.

And yet, we'd rather talk about him than live as he lived. For many of us, King embodies an heroic form of service that seems too demanding, too all-encompassing, a little frightening. We live in a culture which spends a lot of time thinking about boundaries. We learn the rudiments of self-care. We are told that our continued effectiveness in the field depends on how well we maintain our health and that of our families. But boundaries, self-care, and family do not really seem to fit in the world of Martin Luther King. When you're sitting in a jail cell rather than reading your child to sleep, that's not self-care. When committees are meeting at all hours in your living room and bombers are prowling outside your porch, that's not good observance of boundaries. When you're gunned down on a street before you're forty years old, and you see it coming and do nothing to prevent it, that's not the life most of us wish to have. King reminds us of the truth embodied in our religious traditions: that sometimes it is only the daring act, the crazy risk, that marks you as human and sane.

Martin Luther King blazed like a fire into a country that was trapped in stagnation. Old patterns of division had come to shape our nation, our cultures, and we could not muster the energy, the vision, the courage to overcome them. Black people and white people used separate facilities, patronized separate restaurants, lived separate lives. Many cities had separate black quarters, with black businesses, black residents, black musicians, black baseball teams. Many of these areas were thriving communities, but the truth is that when you can't leave it, even a thriving community feels more like a prison or a ghetto.

King was able to overturn the old order because he was able to see and to articulate that it was deadening, not only for black people, but for white ones as well. Inspired by the life and work of Gandhi, he developed a form of non-violent resistance which aimed to rip the blinders from our eyes and force us to confront the full horror of the system we had chosen. He wrote, "Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks so to dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored. My citing the creation of tension as part of the work of the nonviolent resister may sound rather shocking. But I must confess that I am not afraid of the word 'tension.' I have earnestly opposed violent tension, but there is a type of constructive, nonviolent tension which is necessary for growth. Just as Socrates felt that it was necessary to create a tension in the mind so that individuals could rise from the bondage of myths and half truths to the unfettered realm of

creative analysis and objective appraisal, so must we see the need for nonviolent gadflies to create the kind of tension in society that will help men rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism to the majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood.” (*Letter from a Birmingham Jail*)

King wrote those words from the Birmingham Jail. In the woods around Birmingham, there grows a rare kind of pine tree. Like any pine, it produces cones, and the cones mature and open and shed seed on the ground. And the seeds fall and germinate, and begin to grow, until they are about a foot tall, fuzzy green stems with long, long needles, and no side branches at all. Then they stop. They can remain stuck for years, never growing any more, until there is a forest fire. But when fire sweeps through the woods, burning down the old trees and clearing the way for new life, that heat releases something in those little trees, and they surge into new life, growing and sprouting branches, and reaching toward the sun.

King’s direct action became such a fire. Inspired by his words, people marched and students sat at lunch counters and rode buses, and children went willingly to jail. Inspired by his words, people faced down dogs and fire-hoses and angry mobs, and other people looked at the carnage and dared to ask themselves, “What in God’s name have we become? Is this what we wish to be?” And our country changed. We rejected stagnation. We refused to remain separate. We dared to dream again of what we could be. King appealed to “the better angels of our nature,” and we remembered that we had them, and dared to summon them home.

I entered kindergarten in Alexandria, Virginia in 1973. I did not know that my own town had locked the doors of their schools to prevent integration. I did not know that children only a few years older than I had needed to learn their alphabet at home. I did not know that my home state had met the philosophy of Dr. Martin Luther King with a philosophy of its own: Massive Resistance. All I knew was that when I went to school, there were lots of kids and we played together. So easily, so easily, the old order fell. So easily, we could learn to be human beings together.

But the truth is that after his death, we stopped. Along with the dream, there was devastation: riots, death, and stagnation. We achieved a new, uneasy balance, and we stayed there. O, every once in a while we still heard the old siren-song of possibility, we still heard the dim rustling of those angels’ wings, but that sound became dim indeed. Sociologists use a “segregation index” to assess the level of integration present in a society. Under apartheid, for example, South Africa’s score was 90, meaning that 90% of people of color would need to move in order to achieve a balanced racial distribution. In the year 2000, most of America’s large cities achieved scores well over 80. (Elizabeth Gudrais, “Unequal America,” *Harvard Magazine*, 2008) Cities like Detroit, Camden, and Newark are not places where hope flourishes. Even as more and more persons of color have achieved positions of leadership in our industries and our nation, people of color overall continue to experience severe disparities in wealth, educational opportunities, and access to good healthcare. The struggle for economic justice, which was the one which cost King his life, has not been won. Despite the efforts of people of good will, many of these problems have become intractable: stubborn, intransigent, hard to move. We are in danger of accepting that things are the way they are.

The poet Langston Hughes asked,

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up

like a raisin in the sun?

Or fester like a sore--

And then run?

Does it stink like rotten meat?

Or crust and sugar over--
like a syrupy sweet?
Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

My friends, we stand here in 2009 with the answer to Hughes' question: sometimes, it blossoms. Sometimes, it remains dormant for a long time, until a new round of heat burns away the old order and it comes to life and bears fruit. Sometimes, reality confronts a weary and cynical world and seems to offer us our dreams again, whole and shining, if only we have the courage to reach out and grasp them. Sometimes, someone looks at us and says three simple words: "Yes we can."

The Hebrew Scriptures tell us that when Moses led the people of Israel out of bondage in Egypt, the first attempt to enter the Promised Land was not a success. The Hebrews crossed the Reed Sea; they crossed from civilization to desert, and then they sent spies into the new land, to see what manner of homeland they had been promised. And the spies came back and reported, saying "It is a land flowing with milk and honey. Its fruit is rich, and its harvests are plentiful. And yet, its towns are strong and its cities are fortified and the people who live there are like giants, and beside them we seemed to ourselves like grasshoppers. In short, we are afraid." (Num 13:27-28, 33, translation mine) And God heard their words, and God closed the door to that land, and for forty years the people wandered in the wilderness, until all that generation had died off; only then could they enter the Promised Land. It took forty years for the people of Israel to learn to be free. It took forty years to shake off the habits of slavery, to see that they were not smaller than other people, that they were not weaker than other people, to cast off the habit of shame. It took forty years for the people of Israel to overcome their tribal divisions and come together as one people -- for only together, as one whole community, could they enter the land God intended for them.

Forty years after the death of Martin Luther King, another young orator has given us back that chance. When Barack Obama takes oath tomorrow as the first black president of the United States, we will see and know that the people of this nation, black and white together, have begun to learn to put off the habits of tribe and easy division, and to honor one another as men and women made in the image of God. We will stand, like the Hebrew people, on the bank of the River Jordan, looking across at the fields of Promised Land.

But we will not know, until we try to cross, whether we are ready to enter. We will not know, until those shores seem as close to a child of Camden, to a child of New Brunswick, as they do to a child of privilege. We will not know, until we have picked up Dr. King's challenge and refused to wear any longer the blinders which let us look upon degradation and inequality of opportunity and accept them, until we have taken the stuff of the future into our own hands, and refused to let go of the dream.

The historian Taylor Branch records that Dr. King spent an average of fifteen hours crafting his sermons. (*Parting the Waters*) I was surprised when I read that, because, listening to his recordings, reading his writings, he always made it seem so easy. He was so gifted that I had assumed he could just sit down and dash a sermon off quickly, that the words which seemed so inevitable when he spoke them had just come. And it's true, he was that gifted. Once or twice in a generation do we find a person who can use words the way Martin did. But King did not let his giftedness get in the way of his success; he knew that the way to achieve excellence was by nurturing the gift, giving it the time it needed, putting in the hard work to let it flourish.

His example challenges our addiction to what is easy. We, as a culture, have lost our appetite for grappling with what is troubling, or difficult, or intractable. But poverty and race and disparities

in healthcare and education are not going to vanish on Inauguration Day. They are not even going to vanish because a group of smart people in the White House decide to try some new policies. Like segregation of old, they will begin to vanish only when we come together as a people and decide that *we won't live this way any more*. We will no longer live in cities where it's dangerous to walk on the streets. We will no longer pretend that other people's children matter less to God than our own. We will no longer waste the talents of large numbers of men and women in our jails and our prisons. The gifts we squander may be the very ones we need to live.

When you are operating on a patient, you know that sometimes, the patient will not make a full recovery. Sometimes, he or she will be stuck on a wheelchair, need to be connected to machines, lose the ability to articulate her personhood. But that's not what you aim for. You aim for health. You aim for full restoration. You aim to foster a life of dignity for a human being.

And that is the choice we are given today, my friends, today and every day, for the truth is, we make that choice in everything we do. It's just that on historic occasions, it seems clearer what we are being asked to do. So, can we move together into a world where we stand together? (I say: yes, we can.) Can we reject the politics of shame and division, and move together into a world defined by promise and by hope? (I say: yes, we can.) Can we act together to reject a status quo which denies some people the opportunity to develop and use their gifts? (Yes, we can.) Can we become Dr. King's "nonviolent gadflies" who refuse to turn away from the needs of others? (Yes, we can.) Can we work together to make a world in which every child in this city dares to hope and knows how to dream? (Yes, we can.) Can we cross the River Jordan and begin to build the Promised Land? (Yes, we can.)

But will we?

Will we?