



“Working for the Health of Our Land”

January 2010 Martin Luther King Jr. Commemoration

Now, it should be incandescently clear that no one who has any concern for the integrity and life of America today can ignore the present war. If America's soul becomes totally poisoned, part of the autopsy must read: Vietnam. It can never be saved so long as it destroys the deepest hopes of men the world over. So it is that those of us who are yet determined that America will be led down the path of protest and dissent, working for the health of our land.

*Martin Luther King Jr. Beyond Vietnam—A Time to Break Silence
Riverside Church, NY April 4, 1967*

A year ago, on January 20, 2009, Barack Obama became the first African American President of the United States, the day after the nation celebrated the 80th birthday of Martin Luther King Jr.

The connection between these two men, separated by time and history, was everywhere that cold January day when Barack Obama took the oath of office on the steps of the Capitol Building built generations earlier by slaves.

Commentators, poets, T-shirts, buttons, bags and placards proclaimed the inauguration as the fulfillment of the long struggle to full citizenship for African Americans and, perhaps, an opportunity for our country at long last to move beyond the scourge of racism.

Giving voice to this new mood, President Obama said:

We remain a young nation, but in the words of Scripture, the time has come to set aside childish things. The time has come to reaffirm our enduring spirit; to choose our better history; to carry forward that precious gift, that noble idea, passed on from generation to generation: the God-given promise that all are equal, all are free, and all deserve a chance to pursue their full measure of happiness.”

President Obama went on to explain that the full measure of happiness was a world at peace. He said, “As the world grows smaller, our common humanity shall reveal itself; America must play its role in ushering in a new era of peace.”

A year later that new era of peace seems far away. Turning promises into policies has proven more challenging than any of us imagined. The words President Obama used to describe the world we faced a year ago continue to describe the present moment.

“That we are in the midst of crisis is now well understood. Our nation is at war, against a far-reaching network of violence and hatred. Our economy is badly weakened, a consequence of greed and irresponsibility on the part of some, but also our collective failure to make hard choices and prepare the nation for a new age. Homes have been lost; jobs shed; businesses shuttered. Our health care is too costly; our schools fail too many; and each day brings further evidence that the ways we use energy strengthen our adversaries and threaten our planet.”

President Obama acknowledged that these crises are made the more difficult by "a sapping of confidence across our land -- a nagging fear that America's decline is inevitable, and that the next generation must lower its sights."

One year later the nagging fears persist. The country finds itself enmeshed in two wars and an increasingly unstable world.

Passing on the Wisdom

In the face of these challenges, this year's MLK commemoration is an opportunity to look beyond the images of the civil rights movement. It is an opportunity to ask what wisdom needs to be "passed on from one generation" to the next. What do the life and words of Dr. King have to tell us about the challenges we face today?

MLK struggled for more than equal rights. He spoke to and as the conscience of America. He understood that, year-by-year, decade-by-decade, we were becoming a country on the wrong side of history. In his speech denouncing the Vietnam War, he said:

"Increasingly, by choice or by accident, this is the role our nation has taken, the role of those who make peaceful revolution impossible by refusing to give up the privileges and the pleasures that come from the immense profits of overseas investments. I am convinced that if we are to get on the right side of the world revolution, we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin the shift from a thing-oriented society to a person-oriented society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights, are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered."

In the last years of his life, as cities burned at home and bombs continued to fall in Vietnam, Dr King talked of the need to transform the structures of our society as we transformed ourselves. He saw that we, the people, had come to embrace a culture of violence that had begun with the founding of our country and the assault on Native Americans and the enslavement of Africans. Step by step that violence had become normal.

Now it echoes not only on the battle fields of Iraq and Afghanistan but on the streets of our cities and in the homes and schools where too often terror reigns in the places that should provide sanctuary, love and joy.

The Pursuit of Peace

As Dr. King deepened his call to justice, he called on us to think beyond our own narrow interests. "Every nation" he said, "must now develop an overriding loyalty to mankind as a whole in order to preserve the best in their individual societies."

A true revolution of values, King said, "will lay hand on the world order and say of war, 'This way of settling differences is not just. This business of burning human beings with napalm, of filling our nation's homes with orphans and widows, of injecting poisonous drugs of hate into the veins of peoples normally humane, of sending men home from dark and bloody battlefields physically handicapped and psychologically deranged, cannot be reconciled with wisdom, justice, and love. A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death.'"

Dr. King concluded by warning that

"If we do not act, we shall surely be dragged down the long, dark, and shameful corridors of time reserved for those who possess power without compassion, might without morality, and strength without sight."

For nearly a decade we have watched our country staggering down this "long dark and shameful corridor."

Dr. King understood that war is a brutalizing process, that it corrupts not only those who fight it but those who stand by and allow it to continue. It erodes our souls.

This year on January 19, 2010 we urge you to take the opportunity to explore Dr. King's wisdom and how you can help restore the soul of our nation by becoming involved in the creation of peace.

We encourage you to:

- Read and discuss together the Beyond Vietnam speech in your school, university and place of worship. What insights do you draw from it for today?
- Join and organize efforts to bring an end to military conflict abroad and the use of violence at home.
- Invite friends over for an evening discussion about the war. What can we do together to create a way to peace?
- Invite veterans who are working to end the war in Iraq and Afghanistan to speak in your schools, neighborhood associations and places of worship.
- Work with neighbors and friends to create Zones for Peace in your city around schools, churches and in neighborhoods.
- Dr. King believed that through our united efforts we have the capacity within us to make the world anew.

America, the richest and most powerful nation in the world, can well lead the way in this revolution of values. There is nothing except a tragic death wish to prevent us from reordering our priorities so that the pursuit of peace will take precedence over the pursuit of war. There is nothing to keep us from molding a recalcitrant status quo with bruised hands until we have fashioned it into a brotherhood.

Prepared by the Steering Committee of the
BELOVED COMMUNITIES INITIATIVE
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Beloved Communities: Growing our Souls is an initiative begun in 2004 to identify, explore and form a network of communities committed to and practicing the profound pursuit of justice, racial inclusivity, democratic governance, health and wholeness, and social / individual transformation. It is informed by the 1965-68 visionary thinking of Martin Luther King Jr., combined with indigenous cosmology and social ethics. *Please visit...*

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