

Martin Luther King and His Legacy

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This weekend we celebrate once again the birthday of one of the great social and religious leaders of our nation's history, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Although I was a generation removed from King's time, his words and deeds have echoed through the years to have a profound effect on me. Few ministers, particularly liberal ministers, have had such a far reaching impact upon our culture and society. He is an inspiration to us even now.

Perhaps Dr. King's greatest speech came at the feet of the Lincoln Memorial when he laid out his dream for America. It was a dream that encompassed the north and the south, people of all races and economic backgrounds. He talked about judging each other not by the color of skin but by the content of their character. I probably do not need to recite this speech to you—it has entered the canon of great American writing on our values as a country and as a democracy. I have a dream. Notice that King does not reprimand anyone, doesn't overtly try to push or coerce anyone into thinking the same way he does. He simply lays

out a vision and lets people align themselves around that vision. He painted a picture of what that dream was, and it was so compelling that people were moved to action. People still remember that dream forty years later.

King's dream was about unity. That we cannot think of each other as being of separate groups, or at least not completely separate. Because when those divisions take hold too strongly, then inevitable one group becomes "us" and the other becomes "them". Soon the "them" isn't considered equal, and their basic humanity is diminished. This division of the country along racial lines was the impetus for Martin Luther King's public ministry and his leadership in civil rights.

Unity. It is a hard message to preach after so long a history of division. Slavery engulfed our nation for hundreds of years. To treat a human person as if they were an object, a piece of property to be traded and sold is a philosophy that was far too pervasive at our nation's founding. While some of the greatest writing on freedom from oppression was produced, and a nation when to war for that freedom, the brutal and violent history of slavery, the ultimate division between the races, climbed toward its apex. The White House and the Capital Building in Washington DC, symbols of freedom and democracy to the world, were built using the labor of slaves.

When slavery was finally abolished, the legal division of the races was dissolved. However the division of hatred in the minds and hearts of Americans continued. The law can say one thing, but no one can legislate the emotions of a nation's citizens. Even after the civil rights laws again attempted to correct society by demolishing the institutions of Jim Crow and segregation, there was still that hatred, that division; that sense that we are "us" and they are "them." Flight to the suburbs left many great American cities in urban decay and poverty. One of the most dramatic was the city of Detroit, just a few counties over from where I grew up. To drive to Detroit from where I lived, a small town southwest of the City, was as if you were passing into different countries. The suburbs were filled with expensive houses and mansions and parks. But then you crossed some line, unknown and invisible to me as a visitor to that place, and you were in a ghost town of vacant lots, crumbling buildings, and a few people walking the streets. Mind you that these two worlds were just a few blocks away from each other along the very same highway. But they may as well been separate planets. The division between the "us" and the "them" seemed total. Like Job, the people of this community seemed to say, "If only my anguish could be weighed and all my misery be placed on the scales! It would surely outweigh the sands of the seas..."

It is tempting to have that be the extant of the story isn't it; that the history of race in America is a series of catastrophes. Certainly no one

can deny the things I have just outlined. They happened and we can never forget. However, I submit to you that they are not all of the story, not the story in its totality. There is more to say and more to remember than just these negative things. For after each of them, slavery, Jim Crow, and urban poverty, there is a response; a moment when our American democracy tries to improve itself. A moment when we step up and make a quantum leap forward by expanding the definition of the “us” and reducing the number of people and moments when we call someone “them.” For slavery it was Lincoln’s Emancipation. For Jim Crow it was the Civil Rights movement under the leadership of Martin Luther King and others. For urban decay and poverty...well the solution has yet to be found. But it is hard not to conceive that Barack Obama’s election, and his inauguration this Tuesday, is not a significant step in that direction.

Race has been such a divisive issue for so long. Barack Obama stands as a symbol of unity; a product of that dream articulated by Dr. King so long ago. In ways even he has acknowledged, this comes from his ancestry. His mother was from Kansas, how much more down home American can you get? Yet his father is from Kenya; intelligent, exotic, and distant. Two different worlds smashed together to form his very existence. Add to this an upbringing in Hawaii and Indonesia, college in Los Angeles, New York, and Cambridge Massachusetts, not to mention the life learning organizing on the hard streets of the south side of

Chicago, and you find a leader who carries with him so many perspectives, so many ways to view the world, that it is impressive. Unbeknownst to me at the time, I used to live in the same neighborhood as Barack Obama. He is not that far away from where I went to seminary. I have heard from friends that you cannot walk through some portions of Hyde Park, blocks at a time in fact, without being stopped by the police to produce ID and state where and why you are going somewhere. Hyde Park is actually the most racially integrated place I have ever lived, where blacks and whites live close by in relative harmony. No wonder the Obamas have lived there for so long.

Sadly not everyone on the south side of Chicago has expressed racial harmony. During the election Obama's minister, Rev. Jeremiah Wright made news when some of his sermons damning America were made public. Oddly enough this was just six months after Wright had been the keynote speaker at the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association annual meeting at the General Assembly in Portland Oregon. Obviously this was before he was a household name. He was quite impressive and affable; one of the better speakers we have had I thought. His message to the Unitarian Universalist ministers that day was that there are real cultural differences between races, but that this should be viewed as a richness, a difference that enhances by contrast. He went on to talk about how he had managed to bring together a congregation of many cultures, races, and economic backgrounds.

Sadly, he seemed not to be preaching that message to his church every Sunday; as the news channels demonstrated to us over and over and over again. So on March 18, 2008, just a bit north of us in Constitution Hall in Philadelphia, Barack Obama gave what has come to be known as the “More Perfect Union” speech. After his election, his campaign strategists admitted that this was the moment when they were the most nervous that they could lose. It was truly an amazing speech. If you have not seen it or need to remember it; look it up on YouTube.

In that speech, with the Democratic nomination still in the balance, Obama talks about race, politics, his own experiences, and connects them all together by showing how it all comes back to the key issues of health care, the economy, and the war. He talks about the role of government being active in helping people, that there is a positive role it can play. And yet he is also a big believer in personal responsibility. In another speech he once said that “Government cannot turn off the TV and make your kids do their homework.” Such a commonsense response. Yet he straddles the best of the Democrats—their answer being that government should help people, and the best of the Republicans—their answer being that people should take responsibility for themselves; and combines these in a pragmatic response. In the “More Perfect Union” speech he takes this approach of seeing both sides. He explains to us the anger and bitterness of the African-American experience and then explains the anger and bitterness of white

America's experience. He also makes room for women and Hispanics too. Like Dr. King, he just lays out a vision—he doesn't rebuke one side and the expense of the other, and even says as much when he criticizes the view that, "Prosperity is a zero sum game. You only win when I lose." I happened to watch the Jon Stewart show that night. And one of his comments stuck out in my mind. In an uncharacteristic moment of seriousness, Stewart said, "There on a Tuesday afternoon in Philadelphia, someone talked to Americans about race as if they were adults." How true.

For Obama it never seems to be a zero sum game. That is why race in America has been so divisive and dysfunctional most of the time. Obama concludes his speech by saying that Rev. Wright was wrong not because he was angry, but because he did not acknowledge that progress had been made. Wright was still back there with Job asking, "What strength do I have, that I should still hope? What prospects, that I should be patient? Do I have the strength of stone? Is my flesh bronze?"

When there has been oppression and hatred in our land, eventually and often too slowly, there has been a response by our democracy; a movement toward our ultimate values. Obama says that our Union may not be perfect, but it is perfecting itself with each step forward. Wright spoke as if our country was static. It is not static. Change is inevitable and therefore hope is always possible.

African Americans were justly proud of Barack Obama when he was elected President. White Americans were also proud of course. Sure, some of that pride was probably the soothing of some white guilt for the long years of slavery and racism. But it was more than just that. It was the pride that came from having this man represents us to ourselves and to the world. Regardless of one's party, you cannot deny that America's standing in the world has been diminished. Certainly this has been the case on the economic and military fronts. But perhaps more disturbingly it is our name, the pride in who we are, that has been diminished throughout the world. The notion that we are this arrogant country that barges in and wrecks the party with our poor manners and callous demeanor, has stuck with us for some time now. Military and economic power does not make right, nor is it permanent. The British can attest to this.

When I lived in Japan there was a series of incidents in which the Marines based on the island of Okinawa abused some of the civilians that lived there. Some of the victims were as young as 12. Everyone was shocked and horrified by these events, particularly from a group of soldiers. In the days following, I started to get a sense of why Canadians sew their flag on everything they own. It was not too easy being the American. Oddly enough, in some way, I felt like I represented the nation and the culture to the people I met, my friends and classmates. I was no official envoy, but I knew that if I were to disregard Japanese

culture and trumpet my own I would create an image of our country that would be profoundly negative. This was not always easy, particularly when I saw women being treated as inferiors on a fairly regular basis. But I had never been ashamed of my own culture and country as I was when I had to go talk to one of my dorm mates who was from Okinawa. Thankfully she was very understanding; I could not apologize for the actions of people I had never met just because they happened to come from the same country I did.

It is that shame that I will never forget. Shame and fear are emotions that destroy our self-esteem. They are acids that dissolve our soul. They are the currency of racism. I am proud of Barack Obama not only because of his race, but because of who he is. An intelligent man who sees all sides of a problem, and yet has an amazing sense of calm. A man who mixes that intelligence with a strong sense of empathy for others. A man who seems capable of actually judging you not by the color of your skin but by the content of your character. That is the man I want representing me to the world, regardless of what color he is. That is the kind of man we as Americans can be proud of. Barack Obama seems to be living out Dr. King's dream.

Toward the end of his "More Perfect Union" speech, Obama says, "These problems will not end with one election cycle and certainly not with my candidacy as imperfect as it is." This is an excellent point. I hesitate to say this, because I do not wish to throw cold water on the

party. We as a nation should celebrate a new president; especially when there is little to celebrate these days. But we must not forget that symbolism, while stirring and powerful, is not enough. It is not enough to elect the first black president in our history. What is important is what this man will do, the legislation he will sign, the executive orders he will issue, the policies he will create. There is a pragmatism to governance that we cannot overlook. The man can give a rousing speech, but can he actually get the things done that he needs to get done? That in the end is what truly matters. That Rick Warren is giving the invocation at the Inauguration is symbolism. Granted it is a mixed symbol; either of unity between conservatives and liberals or of betrayal of gays and lesbians. I leave it to you to decide which one it is. My point is simply that it doesn't matter very much. Keep your eyes on the prize, as they used to say in Dr. King's day. I am far more interested in actual legislation that will reduce discrimination against gay, lesbian, and transgendered people than I am about who gave what prayer when. At the end of the day, the stakes are too high. Obama has to prove himself still.

By doing so he will have extended Dr. King's dream. I think Obama becoming President is just the first step. A necessary, but not sufficient, condition as a philosopher might say. But we cannot fall into Rev. Wright's trap by being too cynical about change. The truth is that we as a nation have come very far since Dr. King gave that speech, and

this Tuesday President Barack Obama is sure to give a doozy of his own.
So let us celebrate that progress achieved and dream of what is yet
possible. Amen Blessed Be.