

## REMEMBERING MLK!

These last couple of months and at least the next couple of years look to be some hard times for liberals, minorities, immigrants, women, and the poor. Sometimes there is a reaction to progress and change. Sometimes it seems we must take two steps back for every step forward. We live in a nation that has made significant progress from the days of Slavery and even from the days of Jim Crow laws. We live in a nation that benefitted greatly from the struggle for Civil Rights. We live in a nation that has made progress toward the ideals of justice and liberty, has made progress in treating all citizens better. And yet, we live in a nation where the wealth and salaries of those at the top continue to grow while the wages of most workers are stagnant or declining. The dismantling of the admittedly flawed Affordable Care Act will almost certainly take health insurance away from millions of Americans in order to benefit just a few of the wealthiest in our nation.

On what would have been the birthday of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., how can we honor his memory without calling for a renewed effort to bring justice and equality for all Americans?

I like to remember Dr. King through his own words, the prophet calling for justice, peace, and civil rights! In December of 1956, Dr. King told the 1<sup>st</sup> Annual Institute on Non-Violence and Social Change in Montgomery, that:

*“We must blot out the hate and injustice of the old age with the love and justice of the new. This is why I believe so firmly in nonviolence. Violence never solves problems. It only creates new and more complicated ones. If we succumb to the temptation of using violence in our struggle for justice, unborn generations will be the recipients of a long and desolate night of bitterness, and our chief legacy to the future will be an endless reign of meaningless chaos.”*  
(from King’s address before the First Annual Institute on Non-Violence and Social Change, Montgomery Alabama, December 1956, in I Have A Dream, ed. James M. Washington, p.21)

In June 1957, in an address at UC Berkeley, King said:

*“...there are some things within our social order to which I am proud to be maladjusted and to which I call upon you to be maladjusted. I never intend to adjust myself to segregation and discrimination. I never intend to adjust myself to mob rule. I never intend to adjust myself to the tragic effects of the methods of physical violence and to tragic militarism. I call upon you to be maladjusted to such things.”*

(address at UC Berkeley, June 4, 1957, in I Have A Dream, ed. James M. Washington, p.33)

In the 1963 Book, *Why We Can't Wait*, King asked:

*“Of what advantage is it to the Negro to establish that he can be served in integrated restaurants, or accommodated in integrated hotels, if he is bound to the kind of financial servitude which will not allow him to take a vacation or even to take his wife out to dine? Negroes must not only have the right to go into any establishment open to the public, but they must also be absorbed into our economic system in such a manner that they can afford to exercise that right.”* (*Why We Can't Wait*, p. 136)

From the Birmingham jail in April 1963, King wrote white religious leaders who were counseling patience and advising that he wait for change:

*“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable web of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial “outside agitator” idea. Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere within its bounds.”* (p. 77)

Also in his letter from the Birmingham jail, Dr. King said:

*“I must make 2 honest confessions to you.... First, I must confess that over the last few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not the White Citizens Councilor or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate who is more devoted to ‘order’ than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice” ... “Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection.”* (from *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, April 16, 1963, in I Have A Dream, ed. James M. Washington, p.91)

From 1955 until his assassination in 1968, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was at the front of the civil rights movement. During those years, he alone insured that change came with a minimum of violence from blacks. King powerfully articulated the reasons that the hypocrisy of segregation must end before the United States could live up to the values of liberty and equality. King also spoke against the Vietnam War and in 1966 agreed to serve as co-chair of Clergy and Laity Concerned about Vietnam. At a meeting of Clergy and Laity Concerned at the Riverside Church in New York City in April of 1967, Dr. King said:

*...a few years ago...it seemed as if there was a real promise of hope for the poor—both black and white—through the poverty program...Then came the buildup in Vietnam and I watched the program broken and eviscerated as if it were some idle political plaything of a society gone mad on war, and I knew that America would never invest the necessary funds or energies in rehabilitation of its poor so long as adventures like Vietnam continued to draw men and skills and money like some demonic destructive suction tube. So I was increasingly compelled to see the war as an enemy of the poor and to attack it as such.*

*Perhaps the more tragic recognition of reality took place when it became clear to me that the war was doing far more than devastating the hopes of the poor at home. It was sending their sons and their brothers and their husbands to fight and to die in extraordinarily high proportions relative to the rest of the population. We were taking the black young men who had been crippled by our society and sending them eight thousand miles away to guarantee liberties in Southeast Asia which they had not found in southwest Georgia and East Harlem.*

In comments that also seem especially relevant in a world of globalization, dominated by mega multi-national corporations, endowed with corporate personhood, King went on to say:

*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 investment.*

*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, materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered.*

*A true revolution of values will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies...A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death...*

*We must move past indecision to action. We must find new ways to speak for peace in Vietnam and justice throughout the developing world—a world that borders on our doors. 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.*  
(from Dr. King’s address to Clergy and Laity Concerned at the Riverside Church in New York City on April 4, 1967 in I Have A Dream, ed. James M. Washington, pp. 137-151)

Martin Luther King, Jr. was a visionary leader, a modern prophet calling for justice. He was committed to the highest values of honor, justice, equality, and acceptance. He was a spiritual and religious man, finding comfort, encouragement, and empowerment in the life and teachings of Jesus. He was also a wise and worldly man, seeing that equality must not put blacks over whites, but rather bring all persons to the status of equals. Dr. King’s efforts brought our nation to a new place.

While accepting the Nobel Peace Prize in Dec. 1964, Oslo, Norway, King said:

*Civilization and violence are antithetical concepts. Negroes of the United States, following the people of India, have demonstrated that nonviolence is not sterile passivity, but a powerful moral force which makes for social transformation. Sooner or later, all the peoples of the world will have to discover a way to live together in peace, and thereby transform this pending cosmic elegy into a creative psalm of brotherhood. If this is to be achieved, man must evolve for all human conflict a method which rejects revenge, aggression, and retaliation. The foundation of such a method is love.*

Over the last 8 years as I have watched the grace, intelligence and integrity of President Barack Obama, and the ways that so many in our nation have blocked every effort he has made to make our society better, I have become convinced

that Obama has done more to help us live out the dream of MLK than anyone since MLK was assassinated. As we prepare to watch the transition of power at the end of this week, I would like to close by sharing some of Obama's words, excerpts of the final speech of his Presidency shared in Chicago this past Tuesday (1-10-17):

*This is where I learned that change only happens when ordinary people get involved and they get engaged, and they come together to demand it.*

*After eight years as your President, I still believe that. And it's not just my belief. It's the beating heart of our American idea -- our bold experiment in self-government. It's the conviction that we are all created equal, endowed by our Creator with certain unalienable rights, among them life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. It's the insistence that these rights, while self-evident, have never been self-executing; that We, the People, through the instrument of our democracy, can form a more perfect union.*

*What a radical idea. A great gift that our Founders gave to us: The freedom to chase our individual dreams through our sweat and toil and imagination, and the imperative to strive together, as well, to achieve a common good, a greater good.*

*... our progress has been uneven. The work of democracy has always been hard. It's always been contentious. Sometimes it's been bloody. For every two steps forward, it often feels we take one step back. But the long sweep of America has been defined by forward motion, a constant widening of our founding creed to embrace all and not just some.*

*... After my election, there was talk of a post-racial America. And such a vision, however well-intended, was never realistic. Race remains a potent and often divisive force in our society. Now, I've lived long enough to know that race relations are better than they were 10, or 20, or 30 years ago, no matter what some folks say. You can see it not just in statistics, you see it in the attitudes of young Americans across the political spectrum.*

*But we're not where we need to be. And all of us have more work to do. If every economic issue is framed as a struggle between a hardworking white middle class and an undeserving minority, then workers of all shades are going to be left fighting for scraps while the wealthy withdraw further into their private*

*enclaves. If we're unwilling to invest in the children of immigrants, just because they don't look like us, we will diminish the prospects of our own children — because those brown kids will represent a larger and larger share of America's workforce. And we have shown that our economy doesn't have to be a zero-sum game. Last year, incomes rose for all races, all age groups, for men and for women.*

*So if we're going to be serious about race going forward, we need to uphold laws against discrimination — in hiring, and in housing, and in education, and in the criminal justice system. That is what our Constitution and our highest ideals require.*

*But laws alone won't be enough. Hearts must change. It won't change overnight. Social attitudes oftentimes take generations to change. But if our democracy is to work in this increasingly diverse nation, then each one of us needs to try to heed the advice of a great character in American fiction — Atticus Finch, who said “You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view...until you climb into his skin and walk around in it.”*

*For blacks and other minority groups, it means tying our own very real struggles for justice to the challenges that a lot of people in this country face — not only the refugee, or the immigrant, or the rural poor, or the transgender American, but also the middle-aged white guy who, from the outside, may seem like he's got advantages, but has seen his world upended by economic and cultural and technological change. We have to pay attention, and listen.*

*For white Americans, it means acknowledging that the effects of slavery and Jim Crow didn't suddenly vanish in the '60s, that when minority groups voice discontent, they're not just engaging in reverse racism or practicing political correctness. When they wage peaceful protest, they're not demanding special treatment but the equal treatment that our Founders promised.*

*... Our democracy is threatened whenever we take it for granted. All of us, regardless of party, should be throwing ourselves into the task of rebuilding our democratic institutions. When voting rates in America are some of the lowest among advanced democracies, we should be making it easier, not harder, to vote. When trust in our institutions is low, we should reduce the*

*corrosive influence of money in our politics, and insist on the principles of transparency and ethics in public service. When Congress is dysfunctional, we should draw our congressional districts to encourage politicians to cater to common sense and not rigid extremes.*

*My fellow Americans, it has been the honor of my life to serve you. I won't stop. In fact, I will be right there with you, as a citizen, for all my remaining days. But for now, whether you are young or whether you're young at heart, I do have one final ask of you as your President — the same thing I asked when you took a chance on me eight years ago. I'm asking you to believe. Not in my ability to bring about change — but in yours.*

*I am asking you to hold fast to that faith written into our founding documents; that idea whispered by slaves and abolitionists; that spirit sung by immigrants and homesteaders and those who marched for justice; that creed reaffirmed by those who planted flags from foreign battlefields to the surface of the moon; a creed at the core of every American whose story is not yet written: Yes, we can.*

*Yes, we did. Yes, we can.*

*Thank you. God bless you. May God continue to bless the United States of America.*

Thank you, President Obama, and thank you, Dr. King for giving us words to believe, ideas and possibilities and dreams toward which we can aspire, hopes to hold onto even in the most difficult times! Like prophets of old, you remind us who we are and what we are called to do! May our lives and work continue the work of justice and compassion to which you each dedicated your lives!

So May it Be! Shalom, Salaam, Blessed Be, Namaste, and Amen!