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OPINION

Honoring King, Gandhi and Mandela

Their lives show us what is possible

BY MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN

Last month, all across the world people joined together to mourn former South African president and freedom fighter Nelson Mandela. There was a deep shared sense of loss at the passing of one of the rare human beings who truly helped change the world.



Mandela suffered extraordinary hardships, spent 27 years in prison, including 18 on Robben Island under the harshest conditions, and walked out ramrod straight, unbowed, full of a spirit of reconciliation, and offering a hand of peace and hope. He became the first Black President of his country and transformed the way we view leadership and our individual human ability to make the impossible possible.

One of his legacies we can help realize and sustain is the Nelson Mandela Children's Fund, whose mission is build-

ing a child rights movement and changing the way South Africa treats children and youths. Their work includes supporting children orphaned by the AIDS pandemic, empowering children with disabilities, and promoting youth leadership.

The fund describes how Nelson's Mandela's last wish was to build a children's hospital in Johannesburg to serve all children of southern Africa regardless of race, socioeconomic status, or ability to pay. The Nelson Mandela Children's Hospital will be Mr. Mandela's legacy and lives by his creed that "a society's soul is revealed by how it treats its children." I hope we all support this fund and hospital campaign.

In his acceptance speech after being awarded the 1993 Nobel Peace Prize, Mandela said this about the promise of a new South Africa: "At the southern tip of the continent of Africa, a rich reward [is] in the making, an invaluable gift is in the preparation for those who suffered in the name of all humanity when they sacrificed everything . . . This reward

will not be measured in money. Nor can it be reckoned in the collective price of the rare metals and precious stones that rest in the bowels of the African soil we tread in the footsteps of our ancestors. It will and must be measured by the happiness and welfare of the children, at once the most vulnerable citizens in any society and the greatest of our treasures. The children must, at last, play in the open veld, no longer tortured by the pangs of hunger or ravaged by disease or threatened with the scourge of ignorance, molestation and abuse."

Mandela's commitment as a leader to South Africa's children was the extension of a principle that has governed leaders of traditional communities for generations: If the children are well, then all of us are well.

In his presidential inaugural address, Mandela expanded on his simple vision for all of South Africa's families: "Let there be justice for all. Let there be peace for all. Let there be work, bread, water and salt for all. Let each know that for each the body, the mind and the soul have been freed to fulfill themselves."

President Mandela's words echo Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Nobel Peace Prize speech where Dr. King said: "I have the audacity to believe that peoples everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality and freedom for their spirits," words now etched in stone on the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial in Washington, D.C.

In September, a statue of Nelson Mandela was unveiled in front of the South African Embassy on Massachusetts Avenue in Washington. Close by on the same Avenue is a beautiful statue of Mahatma Gandhi. Amidst all the monuments to wars and military leaders in our nation's capital, we now have lasting testaments to three great prophets of nonviolence and peace to guide our actions at this inflection point in our nation's and world's history.

The lives of Martin Luther King, Mahatma Gandhi, and Nelson Mandela show us what is possible. Let's don't just celebrate and mourn them. Let's follow them.

Marian Wright Edelman is president of the Children's Defense Fund.

Dr. King's Lessons for Climate Justice

A beloved community in which we are all interconnected

BY JOSÉ-ANTONIO OROSCO

Fifty years ago, Martin Luther King Jr. won the Nobel Peace Prize. One of the most striking aspects of his acceptance speech is the hope he expressed in humanity's ability to overcome war. This was no mere idealism on his part.

Less than five years earlier, the world had come to the brink of thermonuclear destruction because of Cuba. The United States and Soviet Union eventually diminished their threats and, in 1963, signed and ratified an agreement to end the open-air nuclear testing that was blanketing the planet with radioactive fallout. These were small steps, but to King, they indicated that human beings were capable of cooperation, even in the face of something as horrendous as the suicide of the human race.

Today, the annihilation of humanity looms again as a possibility because of climate change. In 1964, King could not



have imagined the particular features of global environmental destruction that we now face. Yet, he had reflected carefully on the forms of action needed to avert mass extinction before, so his work can still be useful today in thinking about directions for the climate justice movement.

First, King reminds us to think in terms of the "beloved community" in which we are all interconnected. That means that the injustices that we experience are also intertwined. For many climate activists, thinking about racism, sexism, or poverty are side issues; after all, if there is no habitable earth, then those problems won't really matter. King cautioned against the view that injustices could be divided into neat isolated silos.

The world, he said, faces the danger of the "evil triplets" racism, militarism, and materialism. These are inter-related features, he thought, that are at the root of wars of aggression, such as Vietnam, against distant peoples for control of natural resources needed to maintain the luxuries of a few.

Climate change activists today need to acknowledge the overlapping systems of injustice that make some people vulnerable to climate damage much more immediately. It will be poor countries, largely in

the Global South, that will suffer the most from environmental degradation of air, water, and soil.

In the US, extreme weather -- as we have already seen with Hurricanes Katrina and Sandy -- will disproportionately affect economically fragile areas, usually made up of historically marginalized communities: indigenous people, people of color, immigrants, the elderly, and LGBTQ people. Climate justice activists will need to build alliances around these diverse issues, and develop the ally capabilities to listen to, and lift up, the voices of disenfranchised people.

In his last years, King wrote about the forms of activism that were needed to confront the evil triplets. He warned activists not to get trapped by the usual mix of demonstrations and protest that were hallmarks of the early Civil Rights movement. With these forms of direct action, King believed the movement had fallen into "crisis thinking," that is, reacting to injustice after it had already appeared.

Complex justice would require mass protests, but it also meant getting out in front of social problems, and building alternative civic and economic structures so that people would not have to rely on problematic state or corporate institutions. He called for organizing

neighborhoods and creating diverse networks of allies that could support one another. A glimpse of this kind of activism came about when Occupy organizers provided assistance in the wake of Hurricane Sandy in 2012.

Achieving climate justice, then, will mean not only protests against this pipeline or that shipping port, but also working to connect local community gardens, alternative currencies, free libraries and medical clinics, into thick webs reaching across urban and rural areas. This kind of organizing will enable widespread skill sharing and mutual aid, but also deliver a message that was dawning at the height of the Occupy movement: another world is possible, and there are many across the world who desire to work together to build it.

King believed we had it within us to avoid mutually assured destruction; he also thought we were developing the insights and activist resources to radically align our world to the moral arc of the universe. The climate justice movement might become the place where we prove him right.

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