

OPINION

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Thank You Dr. King, We Will Carry On

The profound impact he had on my life

BY MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN

I first heard Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. speak in person on April 19, 1960 during my senior year at Spelman College. Dr. King was just 31 but he had already gained a national reputation during the successful Montgomery bus boycott five years earlier. The profound impact on me of hearing Dr. King that first time is evident in my diary where I repeated long portions of his speech that had vibrated the chords of my freedom- and justice-hungry soul. It is not often that great leaders and great turning points in history converge and sweep us up in a movement.

Dr. King became a mentor and friend. Many children today have come to see him as a history book hero — a larger-than-life, mythical figure. But it's crucial for them to understand Dr. King wasn't a superhuman with magical powers, but a real person — just like all the other ministers, parents, teachers, neighbors, and other familiar adults in their lives today. Although I do remember him as a great leader and a hero, I also remember him as someone able to admit how often he was afraid and unsure about his next step. But faith prevailed over fear, uncertainty, fatigue, and sometimes

depression. It was his human vulnerability and ability to rise above it that I most remember. "If I Can Help Somebody Along the Way" was his favorite song.



Dr. King's greatness lay in his willingness to struggle to hear and see the truth; to not give into fear, uncertainty and despair; to continue to grow and to never lose hope, despite every discouragement from his government and even his closest friends and advisers. He would say: "Take the first step in faith. You don't have to see the whole staircase, just take the first step." That first time I heard him at Spelman he told us to always keep going: "If you cannot fly, run; if you cannot run, walk; if you cannot walk, crawl. But keep moving. Keep moving forward."

Ten years ago I wrote a letter to Dr. King in my book "The Sea Is So Wide and My Boat Is So Small: Charting a Course for the Next Generation." I rewrite just a small part of it here:

Although you have been gone 50 years, you are with me every day. We have made much but far from enough progress in overcoming the tenacious national demons of racism, poverty, materialism, and militarism you repeatedly warned could destroy America and all of God's creation. So I wanted to write you a letter on what we have done and still have

to do to realize your and America's dream. What a privilege it was to know, work with, and learn from you in the struggle to end racial segregation, discrimination, and poverty in our land.

Just as many Old and New Testament prophets in the Bible were rejected, scorned, and dishonored in their own land in their times, so were you by many when you walked among us. Now that you are dead, many Americans remember you warmly but have sanitized and trivialized your message and life. They remember Dr. King the great orator but not Dr. King the disturber of unjust peace. They applaud the Dr. King who opposed violence but not the Dr. King who called for massive non-violent demonstrations to end war and poverty in our national and world house.

They applaud your great 1963 "I Have a Dream" speech but ignore the promissory note still bouncing at America's bank of justice, waiting to be cashed by millions who are poor and non-white. We now have more than 40 million people who are poor in America including more than 13.2 million children although our gross domestic product is more than three times larger than in 1968. And the income gap between rich and poor in the United States continues at historically high levels and higher than in every other wealthy industrialized nation.

But you struggled on as the civil rights leadership splintered,

as white Americans tired of black demands, and as the country became preoccupied with Vietnam. I marveled every night during the long Meredith March from Memphis to Jackson at your patient discussions with Stokely Carmichael and Willie Ricks and other SNCC leaders who wanted to exclude whites from the movement and push you to endorse all necessary means for change, including violence. You listened as they vented their justified frustrations about the slow pace of racial progress and you tried to reason with them, repudiating their proposed "Black Power" slogan and strategies without repudiating them. You taught me and others of your followers how to parse out the good from the not so good, and to always seek common ground. And when you had no immediate solution you gave others the courtesy of a respectful hearing.

In the years between Montgomery and Memphis, you listened, learned, grew, and spoke the truth about what you discerned, and resisted those who sought to ghettoize your concern for social justice and peace. After your opposition to the Vietnam War provoked a firestorm of criticism by whites, blacks, friends, and foes, you correctly asserted that "nothing in the commandments you believed in set any national boundaries around the neighbors you were called to love."

Black people told you to be quiet, not anger President Johnson

and jeopardize his support for civil rights and antipoverty efforts. White people told you to be quiet because you were not an expert on foreign policy, as if black leaders and citizens had no stake in a war tearing our nation apart and taking disproportionate numbers of lack children's lives, forgetting it was the "experts" that got us into this ill-fated war in the first place. Some contributors deserted you as you called not only for an end to the Vietnam War but for a fairer distribution of our country's vast resources between the rich and the poor. Why, they asked, were you pushing the nation to do more on the tail of the greatest civil rights strides ever and challenging a president who already had declared a war on poverty? You understood that our nation's ills went deeper ...

You blessed America with your rich faith, spiritual traditions, and prophetic preaching. You gave us your deep and abiding love and lifelong commitment to nonviolence. You shared your moral clarity and courageous truth telling. You left us your unrelenting commitment to justice for the poor and every one of God's children. You showed us the way through your example and call for massive nonviolent action in the service of justice and peace. And you gave us your life.

Thank you. We will carry on.

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

King's Dream Included Economic Equality, Too

Work to reshape America's values continues

BY JESSICAH PIERRE

The 50th anniversary of the day Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated was commemorated last week. Just after 6 p.m. on April 4, 1968, King was fatally shot while standing on the balcony outside his second-story room at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tenn.

American history rightly honors King as one of its most celebrated civil rights leaders. Growing up, I remember learning about his famous "I Have A Dream" speech.



My teachers always highlighted him as a peaceful, non-violent protester against segregation, and a preacher who promoted messages of love and justice for all.

He was all those things. But that's only one part of King's legacy.

King was actually very radical about his vision of change for America. He didn't just criticize segregation — he recognized the need for deep, structural changes to our entire economic and political system.

King identified three evils plaguing western civilization. In a speech at the National Conference on New Politics in 1967, King said the United States is suffering from "the sickness of racism, excessive materialism, and militarism" — a sickness that "has been lurking

within our body politic from its very beginning."

"We have diluted ourselves into believing into believing the myth that capitalism grew and prospered out of the Protestant ethic of hard work and sacrifice," King observed. But "the fact is capitalism was built on the exploitation and suffering of black slaves and continues to thrive on the exploitation of the poor — both black and white, both here and abroad."

King foreshadowed that if we maintain our exploitive economic and political systems, then we'd get not only racial apartheid, but economic apartheid as well.

He was right. Nearly 51 years after that speech, we're still heading in that direction.

A recent report from the Institute for Policy Studies found that just three people — Jeff Bezos,

Bill Gates and Warren Buffet — own more wealth than the bottom half of the country combined. "The Forbes 400 list altogether own \$2.68 trillion in wealth, more than the gross domestic product of Britain, the world's fifth richest country," the report notes.

On the other end of the spectrum, one in five Americans have zero or negative wealth. The proportion grows larger when we break it down by race, rising to 30 percent of black families and 27 percent of Latino families.

As much as we cite the vision that MLK laid out for America, decades later we've not moved in the right direction. Within the past year alone, we've seen GOP tax cuts siphon wealth from middle and working class Americans to the ultra-wealthy and big corporations.

And we've seen a proposed federal budget that increases military spending to a historic 61 percent of discretionary spending in 2019. Housing and community programs would receive a 35 percent cut, according to the National Priorities Project.

It's all there: racism, materialism, and militarism.

King called for a "radical redistribution of political and economic power" in order to end those three evils. Now is the time for this necessary radical change. We must channel MLK's revolutionary spirit into an effort to reshape America's values to ensure justice for all — "both black and white, both here and abroad."

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