

REMARKS OF GREG COLERIDGE AT MARTIN LUTHER KING COMMUNITY GATHERING

First Baptist Church, Dover, Ohio, January 15, 2007

The words and works of Martin Luther King, Jr. on civil rights are widely known, often referenced and deservedly praised. King's "I have a dream" speech and work with others to desegregate southern racist institutions, be they buses, lunch counters or schools, were visionary and inspiring.

However, they represent only a portion of his creeds and deeds. Focusing only on King's "I have a dream speech" minimizes him as a prophetic voice and actor for widespread social change and nonviolence. It also limits the lessons of his thinking to us today as we face a world of escalating war/occupation in Iraq and possibly elsewhere, a nation of forever-expanding gap between rich and poor, a country facing rising hunger and homeless once more, and a society that still has not come to terms with racism in its many institutional forms.

As stirring as the "I have a Dream" speech on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial was, it may not have been his greatest, his most important, his most disturbing to the status quo, or his most challenging to those who looked to him for guidance or inspiration.

Among the hundreds of talks, sermons, and lectures he offered during his life, there are two, often forgotten and buried, that are eerily prophetic and profoundly relevant to us today.

The first is his remarks at the ceremony following his acceptance of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964 in Oslo, Norway – one year after his "I have a Dream" speech. "Sooner or later," he said, "all the people 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, we must evolve, for all human conflict, a method that rejects revenge, aggression, and retaliation. The foundation of such a method is love." He continued, "The most pressing problem confronting humanity is the poverty of the spirit, which stands in glaring contrast to our scientific and technological abundance. This is apparent in the three terrible evils that have grown out of our ethical infantilism: racial injustice, poverty, and war, which are all intertwined. Nonviolence seeks to redeem this spiritual and moral lag, to secure moral ends through moral means. It is a weapon unique in history, which cuts without wounding and ennoble the one who wields it."

What is so extraordinary about these remarks? At least two things.

First, King very clearly and consciously linked three concerns, what he called "evils" – racism, poverty and war. He said they were "intertwined." To be intertwined is to be wrapped around each other, interconnected -- like a soup that has ingredients all mixed together and impossible, once mixed, to separate. Thus, to examine war or violence (whether in Baghdad, Iraq or Dover, Ohio) without addressing issues of poverty/income disparities and racial injustice is artificial – just as addressing racism void of examining poverty and violence or war is not based on reality.

Second, King's Nobel Prize speech lifted up love as the foundation of the method to counter the most pressing problem of all of humanity – the poverty of the human spirit –, which leads to revenge, aggression and retaliation. He said that nonviolence, both as an end and a means – a way of acting and living as well as a goal – are the spiritual and moral advancement needed to keep up with advances in science and technology. To King, acting nonviolently was the only way to achieve nonviolence in one's community, state, nation and world.

What is meant by nonviolence? Specifically, to King and others, it consisted of 6 principles:

1. Nonviolence is a way of life for courageous people.
2. Nonviolence seeks to win friendship and understanding
3. Nonviolence seeks to defeat injustice, not people
4. Nonviolence holds that suffering can educate and transform

5. Nonviolence chooses love instead of hate
6. Nonviolence believes that the universe is on the side of justice

The second talk King gave, not often publicized, more controversial but incredibly timely today, is his “Beyond Vietnam” speech delivered on April 4, 1967 in New York City – exactly one year to the day he was assassinated in Memphis.

In it, King for the first time spoke out against the Vietnam war – much to the chagrin of many of his supporters who felt that widening his message would dilute his civil rights work, who said “peace and civil rights don’t mix,” and who worried that his public views would anger many in Congress who shared his civil rights agenda but still supported the quagmire war.

He said, " ‘A time comes when silence is betrayal.’ And that time has come for us in relation to Vietnam.” He presented 7 reasons to oppose the war and to bring Vietnam “into the field of my moral vision.” He said, “Somehow this madness must cease. We must stop now. I speak as a child of God and brother to the suffering poor of Vietnam. I speak for those whose land is being laid waste, whose homes are being destroyed, whose culture is being subverted. I speak for the poor of America who are paying the double price of smashed hopes at home, and death and corruption in Vietnam. I speak as a citizen of the world, for the world as it stands aghast at the path we have taken. I speak as one who loves America, to the leaders of our own nation: The great initiative in this war is ours; the initiative to stop it must be ours.”

Thus, He challenged public policy makers to end the war. But he was also challenged people of conscience to act to end the war as well. Yet, opposing the Vietnam War wasn’t nearly enough. He challenged those that night in Riverside Church in New York City to go beyond.

“Now there is something seductively tempting about stopping there and sending us all off on what in some circles has become a popular crusade against the war in Vietnam. I say we must enter that struggle, but I wish to go on now to say something even more disturbing. The war in Vietnam is but a symptom of a far deeper malady within the American spirit, and if we ignore this sobering reality... we will find ourselves organizing "clergy and laymen concerned" committees for the next generation. They will be concerned about Guatemala and Peru. They will be concerned about Thailand and Cambodia. They will be concerned about Mozambique and South Africa. We will be marching for these and a dozen other names and attending rallies without end, unless there is a significant and profound change in American life and policy.”

How incredibly prophetic these words are.

He then observed that the United States was on the “wrong side of a world revolution.” Quoting JFK, he said, " ‘Those who make peaceful revolution impossible will make violent revolution inevitable.’ “ He continued, “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.”

To King, the rights of people needed to be placed front and center in our moral view, above the rights of property, profits, corporations, and technologies – to achieve peace and justice.

He spent considerable time laying out what he meant by this “revolution of values:”

“A true revolution of values will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies. A true revolution of values will soon look uneasily on the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth. A true revolution of values will lay hand on the world order and say of war, ‘This way of settling differences is not just.’ America, the richest and most powerful nation in the world, can well lead the way in this revolution of values.”

His prescription for violence and injustice is worth hearing.

“We must not engage in a negative anticommunism, but rather in a positive thrust for democracy, realizing that our greatest defense against communism is to take offensive action in behalf of justice. We must with positive action seek to remove those conditions of poverty, insecurity, and injustice, which are the fertile soil in which the seed of communism grows and develops.”

Permit me to substitute the word “terrorism” -- the major source of national fear today, for the word “communism” – the major justification for wars and perversions of national priorities in King’s time.

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This message is just as profound today.

He further stated: “It is a sad fact that because of comfort, complacency, a morbid fear of communism, and our proneness to adjust to injustice, the Western nations that initiated so much of the revolutionary spirit of the modern world have now become the arch antirevolutionaries. Our only hope today lies in our ability to recapture the revolutionary spirit and go out into a sometimes hostile world declaring eternal hostility to poverty, racism, and militarism.”

He called “for a worldwide fellowship that lifts neighborly concern beyond one's tribe, race, class, and nation is in reality a call for an all-embracing and unconditional love for all mankind. This oft misunderstood, this oft misinterpreted concept, so readily dismissed by the Nietzsches of the world as a weak and cowardly force, has now become an absolute necessity for the survival of man. When I speak of love I am not speaking of some sentimental and weak response. I am not speaking of that force which is just emotional bosh. I am speaking of that force which all of the great religions have seen as the supreme unifying principle of life. Love is somehow the key that unlocks the door which leads to ultimate reality.”

Nonviolence, King believed, was the means to enable love to flourish. This message is important for us today. Violence is seen as practical, realistic, sound, logical, mature. Nonviolence and love are pie-in-the sky, wishy washy, wishful, impractical, unrealistic, unsound, illogical, and immature.

Never mind that violence in Iraq has resulted in over 3000 US deaths...and counting. 655,000 Iraqi deaths...and counting. Over \$300 billion spent for an illegal, unconstitutional and immoral war and now foreign military occupation...and counting. Increased hatred by those in the Middle East...and counting. With no end in sight. Just like in Vietnam. Exactly whose beliefs are naïve? Wishful? Illogical?

Nonviolence as a means to resist oppression and violence with dignity, respect and love has been successful instruments of change throughout history. In our own nation’s history, the colonists en masse against the British occupiers used nonviolence. The Boston Tea Party, massive nonpayment of taxes, refusal to import British goods, nonpayment of debts, formation of the First Continental Congress (a nonviolent resistance organization) and widespread noncooperation against the British Empire, are but a few examples. Historian Gene Sharp, in fact, feels that “British power had de facto collapsed in most of the American colonies before a shot was fired...Rather than the war having speeded up independence, it may very well have postponed it.”

Following independence, nonviolence resistance was the backbone to many social movements in our nation – from ending slavery (traveling abolitionists in Ohio as well as underground railroad) to gaining women the right to vote, to ending child labor, to forming unions, to winning for workers the right to organize, to sit-down strikes, to acquiring social security, to winning gay rights, to banning above ground nuclear testing, to gaining environmental protections, to working for peace and justice in so many forms today.

Internationally, just in the last half-century or so, nonviolence has been used successfully by masses of

people with little if any formal training, in these places:

Indian independence in 1940's
Norwegian teachers fighting fascism in 1942
Ousting a Guatemalan dictator in 1944
Ending bus segregation in Montgomery, AL in 1956
California grape workers strike and boycott in 1965
Opposing military rule in Argentina in 1977-83.
Poland self-determination in 1980-89
South African boycott and ending of apartheid in 1980's
People power against Philippine dictator in 1986
Liberation of Czechoslovakia in 1989 ... and many other Eastern European nations
Latvian independence in 1991
Blocking Soviet hard-line coup in 1991
Removing Milosevic in Serbia in 1996
Gaining independence in the Ukraine and Georgia in the Rose and Violet revolutions in the 1990's.

The list goes on.

At the end of Beyond Vietnam, King said, "We are now faced with the fact, my friends, that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. In this unfolding conundrum of life and history, there is such a thing as being too late. We still have a choice today: nonviolent coexistence or violent co-annihilation. 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."

His words could have been spoken yesterday.

To honor the life and legacy of Martin Luther King is to do more than show up to once-a-year events held in his name. It's to evolve in our thinking and acting as he did:

-To make the connections and interconnections between issues and problems – especially between war and war making with issues of poverty/wealth and racism and other isms. They are all intertwined.

-To understand that change must begin with ourselves in how we treat other people (with love and compassion) – consciously separating people from their actions in our words and actions.

-To challenge unjust and violent institutions (both governmental and corporate) and policies fearlessly and courageously using nonviolence to do more than just protest but to resist, including resisting unjust laws and rules by nonviolent noncooperation and intervention. This must include protesting and resisting the Iraq war in all its forms, including further war funding. "Not one more death, not one more day, not one more dollar," should be our mantra.

-To promote alternatives to violent and unjust institutions – alternatives to war and violence, alternative social groups promoting diversity, alternative political structures that nurture self-governance/self-determination/democracy, and alternative economic institutions that promote community are sustainable and make transnational corporations irrelevant. In other words, it's not enough to oppose oppressive and violent acts, groups and structures at the macro level. We must create and nurture just and nonviolent alternatives at the micro level (in our own communities like right here and right now)... and by doing so involve people maybe for the first time in making important decisions that affect their lives.

In closing.

In one other talk, King said, "history will have to record that the greatest tragedy of this period of social transition is not the strident clamor of the bad people, but the appalling silence of the good people."

We don't have the luxury to remain silent in this important time. To do so is to be complicit with all that is life destroying. Rather, to speak out and to work with others for a change of values and of institutions where we are as well as elsewhere is the most important work any of us could hope for. Let us all take advantage of this wonderful opportunity.