

If Martin Luther King Were Alive Today by The Reverend Tony Perrino

On this 78th anniversary of the birthdate of Dr. Martin Luther King, I want to talk about what he might be saying if he were alive today. It is a subject on which I claim some insight. Dr. King and I were classmates at the Boston University School of Theology. (That gives you some idea of the age of this ancient mariner!)

During those years, he was regarded by the other seminarians as a bright and almost overly-serious scholar, bound for a teaching career. Few of us recognized his oratorical talent and potential for great leadership. It was after his graduation in 1954, when King turned down academic opportunities to accept a pastorate in Montgomery, Alabama, that he developed his skills as a preacher whose poetic eloquence could stir the hearts of his hearers. When, in 1958, he spoke at the Methodist Church I was serving in Detroit, he credited his southern congregation with teaching him the value of honest expressions of feeling. He didn't abandon his scholarly discipline, but recognized the sterility of theological abstractions which fail to feed the emotional needs of a hungry people.

Indeed, as I prepared these remarks, I could almost hear Martin saying to me, "So, Brother Tony, you're gonna speak to a Unitarian congregation, a fine group of intellectuals, "God's frozen people! Why don'tcha warm 'em up with some hand-clapping song?" I decided that would be an appropriate tribute, and with the help of Harry, who will play the tune through once, I invite you to stand and sing (and don't forget to clap your hands): "O, when the saints go marchin' in...."

Martin Luther King would have enjoyed that. He had a delightful sense of humor, which was seldom seen in his public life. He once said to me, quoting Gandhi, "There go my people. I must catch up with them, for I am their leader!" Only someone very confident in his own integrity could laugh at himself in that way.

King was very modest about his leadership role, once suggesting to me, with a quote from Shakespeare, that "some people have greatness thrust upon them." He was referring to the fact that, because he was the new minister in town, who hadn't yet antagonized anyone, he was chosen to head the bus boycott. But, the fact is, of course, that many persons would have been crushed by the weight of that challenge. He had the character strength to rise to the destiny-laden occasion.

It was Dr. King who inspired the sustained commitment to non-violent protest (for 381 days!) and made Montgomery a testing ground of its principles. Even when his home was bombed, he stood fast to his pacifist convictions and quieted the crowd that had gathered. Shortly after that event, they won their struggle and proved the wisdom, as well as the moral power, of his non-violent approach.

One last personal comment: when I saw Dr. King, after an attempt on his life, I asked if he were worried about being assassinated. He looked me right in the eye and said, "Tony, considering the many lives at stake, how can we not stand up for what we believe -- whatever the personal risk?"

Now, I want to imagine what Dr. King would be saying if he were alive today? I feel compelled to address the matter because in recent years there has been a tendency to trivialize the man and his message.

School children are taught that Dr. King was a great orator who led peaceful efforts to integrate Black people into our Society. That is true enough, but when the ceremony was held to proclaim his birthday a national holiday, it was the Marine Corps band that played "We Shall Overcome" while the bust of this advocate of non-violence was placed in the Capital rotunda. Not a word was spoken of King's consistent condemnation of militarism.

If we would truly honor Dr. King, we must begin by overcoming what historian Vincent Harding aptly described as "the massive, national amnesia concerning who that Black man was." So, I suggest we recall some of Dr. King's overlooked words: not merely the oft-quoted "I have a dream." speech but the more strident statements of his latter years.

In 1966 Dr. King voiced a commitment to the downtrodden of this world when he said, "I choose to identify with the underprivileged...." But, as he sought to fulfill that commitment, he encountered the complex web of vested interests determined to maintain the status quo and was led to broaden his concerns. (Perhaps he remembered a story we were told in seminary: about the pastor who was seen in a protest march and asked, "Why aren't you tending your flock?" The minister replied, "I am. Today I'm after the wolves who would devour them.")

Addressing the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in 1967 he proclaimed, "The problem of racism, the problem of the economic exploitation, and problem of war are all tied together!" These he called "the triple evils" which the freedom movement must address, seeking a total " restructuring of our society."

His last, public speech in Memphis on April 3, 1968, repeated the call to "make America what it ought to be" and expressed a long-held vision of the unique role of Black people in effecting the fulfillment of that dream. Only in the light of that magnificent obsession, that dual vision of achieving racial justice and thereby redeeming the soul of this nation, can we fully understand Dr. King's more radical statements. Only as we remember the whole of his vision can we appreciate his 1967 observation that "Something is wrong with capitalism as it now stands in the United States." He went on to say, "A radical redistribution of economic and political power is necessary if we are to meet the needs of the poor in America."

When we recognize these dimensions of Dr. King's vision, we can better understand his condemnation of the war in Vietnam. In spite of intense criticism, even from the civil rights establishment, King spoke out, declaring at one point, "Never again will I be silent on an issue that is destroying the soul of our nation and the lives of thousands of little children in Vietnam...."

So, he exposed what he called "the paranoid anti-communism which made mercenaries out of our jobless young men and sacrificed them to a militarism that threatens the future of the world." And though our current government would like to forget that he ever said it, his most compelling and still timely words were these: "A nation that continues, year after year, to spend more money on military 'defense' than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death!"

Now, having remembered the man as he really was, we can more accurately conjecture what Dr. King might be saying if he were alive today. There are so many thoughts that jump to mind. He might begin by reminding our President that the U.S. is still a Republic -- not an Empire -- and its leader does not possess the divine right of kings allowing him to set aside due process of law! (Even if he anoints himself "the decider") King might quote Benjamin Franklin, "Those who sacrifice liberty for security will eventually have neither liberty nor security!"

He would probably also point out that, in spite of the gains that have been made, Hurricane Katrina revealed that racism still exists in this nation. It is so obvious that, if the hurricane had struck New York City, instead of the predominantly Black New Orleans, the President and FEMA would have not waited three days to respond to the destruction. (Many are still waiting for relief more than a year later.)

And you can be sure that King would be championing the plight of the homeless poor of our nation whose numbers keep growing while governmental programs to assist them shrink. Children are going hungry and government officials wring their hands, saying, "welfare is bad for people; it makes them lazy."

Dr. King spoke to that stupidity long ago, and his words are still true and timely: "Whenever government provides opportunities and privileges for white people and rich people, they call it "subsidies" (i.e. necessary for the good of the economy?) When they do it for Negroes and poor people, they call it 'welfare.' The fact is that everybody in this country lives on welfare. Suburbia was built with federally subsidized credit, and the highways which take our white brothers out to the suburbs were built by federal money. The problem is that we have socialism for the rich and free enterprise capitalism for the poor," e.g. a Congress voting itself huge salary increases while waiting ten years before raising the minimum wage.

Dr. King was right: something is wrong with capitalism in America when we continue to subsidize arms manufacturers and pharmaceutical companies while children are allowed to starve! We reduce Medicaid payments and food stamp allotments to provide tax-cuts for the wealthy.

Especially relevant today: Dr. King might point out these staggering statistics: (provided by The National Priorities Project in Washington) for \$358 billion dollars we could build a \$100,000 house, place it on a \$40,000 piece of land, fill it with \$30,000 worth of furniture and give all this to every family in Kansas, Oklahoma, and Iowa! OR, for \$358 billion we could provide Health

care Insurance for the 46 million persons in the United States who do not currently have that basic protection against illness, and still have enough money left over to hire 6 million teachers for a year!

That is what \$358 billion dollars could accomplish, the immediate significance of which is the fact that, as of last week, our government will have spent more than \$358 billion (of your taxes) on an unprovoked war against Iraq! (and who knows how much more money and, more importantly, how many more lives will be wasted on that misadventure before the matter is finally resolved?)

If Martin Luther King were alive today, he would be thundering his outrage at such a preposterous misappropriation of our national resources and leading a march on Washington to tell our elected officials that we shall not tolerate such a paranoid allocation of our tax dollars. And to those who say it is a matter of survival, he would respond, "Survival of what?" If we unleash the terror of war - on a nation which has not attacked us, we are no better than the enemy we are supposed to be fighting!

If it is peace we pursue, the enormous military power we possess is irrelevant to the purpose we profess. Exercising its awesome destructiveness has only bred more hatred toward us and more terrorism, by fueling the Arab world's fear of U.S. imperialism. In the new Steven Spielberg film, "Munich" which he described as "a prayer for peace," the leader of a secret "hit squad" commissioned by the Israeli government to revenge the deaths of the Jewish Olympians killed by terrorists, discovers that "political murder, however justified, is less a solution -- than a virus -- which infects the attackers as much as the enemy." The best example of that fact are the atrocities committed by U.S. soldiers at Abu Graib. "We are supposed to be the good guys; but we aren't behaving like good guys?"

I am certain that Dr. King would feel great compassion for the victims of September 11. But he would remind us that hate begets hate and hurt begets hurt and violence only breeds more violence in this conflict-weary world. And the only way this vicious cycle ever stops is when people are able to set aside the "eye for an eye" mentality and cultivate an awareness of our common humanity. That does not mean surrendering to terrorism but confronting it with a more creative effort to deal with its root causes -- instead of engaging in the kind of chauvinism expressed by our Congressman, Virgil Goode. To equate the faith of Islam with its radical extremists is like equating Christianity with the Ku Klux Klan!

Faithful to the end of his martyred life to the principles of non-violent resistance, Dr. King would call us to that path of peace-making if he were alive today. And he would look you right in the eye and say, "Considering the lives at stake, how can you not stand up for what you believe -- whatever the personal risk." There are times when the patriot must fight for his country -- against the politicians who would betray its ideals! This, Dr. King would insist, is one of those times!

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