

"Where do we go from here?"

Written by Marian Wright Edelman NNPA Columnist
Tuesday, 03 September 2013 12:53

Child Watch

In a sense we've come to our nation's capital to cash a check. When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was the promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the 'unalienable Rights of Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.' It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked 'insufficient funds.' But we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation.

—Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., address at the March on Washington, August 28, 1963

As the nation celebrates the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington, many are discussing what Dr. King would say to the nation and world today and tell us to do. But his message to us today is as clear as it was 50 years ago if only we could hear, heed, and follow his warnings about what we need to do to make America America.

Just as Biblical Old and New Testament prophets were rejected, scorned, and dishonored in their own land in their times, so was Dr. King by many when he walked and worked among us. Now that he is dead, many Americans remember him warmly but have sanitized and trivialized his 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 nonviolent demonstrations to end war and poverty in our national and world house. They recite the "I Have a Dream" part of his August 1963 speech but ignore its main metaphor of the promissory note still bouncing at America's bank of justice, waiting to be cashed by millions of poor and minority citizens. And while we love to celebrate his dream and great oratorical skills, we ignore his fears and repeated warnings about America's misguided priorities and values. He worried that we were missing God's opportunity to become a great and just nation by sharing our enormous riches with the poor and overcoming what he called the "giant triplets" of racism, materialism, and militarism.

In his last Sunday sermon at Washington National Cathedral, Dr. King retold the parable of the rich man Dives who ignored the poor and sick man Lazarus who came every day seeking crumbs from Dives' table. Dives did nothing. Dives went to hell, Dr. King said, not because he was rich but because he did not realize his wealth was his opportunity to bridge the gulf separating him from his brother and allowed Lazarus to become invisible. He warned this could happen to rich America, "if we don't use her vast resources to end poverty and make it possible for all of God's children to have the basic necessities of life."

At Dr. King's death in 1968 when he was calling for a Poor People's Campaign, there were 25.4 million poor Americans, including 11 million poor children, and our Gross Domestic Product (GDP) was \$4.13 trillion. Today, there are 46.2 million poor people, including 16.1 million poor children, almost half living in extreme poverty, and our GDP is three times larger, and

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shamefully the younger children are the poorer they are. One in three Black and Latino children are poor. National wealth and income inequality are at near record levels while hunger, homelessness, illiteracy, fear, and hopelessness stalk millions of children and adults across our land who have been left behind in our economy. Isn't it time to ask ourselves again with urgency whether America is missing once again the great opportunity and mandate God has given us to be a beacon of hope and justice for the least among us, beginning with our children, who are the poorest Americans?

The day he was assassinated in Memphis Dr. King called his mother to give her the title of his next Sunday's sermon. It was "Why America May Go to Hell." In his 1967 book *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?*

Dr. King stated that America hadn't yet committed to paying the real price—in actual dollars and cents—of equality: "The practical cost of change for the nation up to this point has been cheap. The limited reforms have been obtained at bargain rates. There are no expenses, and no taxes required, for Negroes to share lunch counters, libraries, parks, hotels, and other facilities with whites."

But, he said, "the real cost lies ahead . . . The discount education given Negroes will in the future have to be purchased at full price if quality education is to be realized. Jobs are harder and costlier to create than voting rolls. The eradication of slums housing millions is far beyond integrating lunch counters." He said the price would be great but so would the rewards. It would all come down to our will: "The great majority of Americans...are uneasy with injustice but unwilling yet to pay a significant price to eradicate it."

That is the overarching issue our nation and every citizen must face today as we leave millions of children unprepared to become the competitive workers and military, education, economic, and diplomatic leaders of tomorrow.

In his last week of life, Dr. King said to a group of close friends: "We fought hard and long, and I have never doubted that we would prevail in this struggle. Already our rewards have begun to reveal themselves. Desegregation...the Voting Rights Act...But what deeply troubles me now is that for all the steps we've taken toward integration, I've come to believe that we are integrating into a burning house." "What would you have us do?" one shocked friend asked. Dr. King answered: "I guess we're just going to have to become firemen."

Dr. King knew then as we must know or learn today that our work was not done and that the successes of the Civil Rights Movement and integration were not alone doorways into a Promised Land. We were gaining access to a society riddled with poverty, inequality, violence, militarism, materialism, and greed. Dr. King made it very clear that he saw America and the world at a dangerous crossroads. A Civil Rights Movement stalled short of true equality without a parallel opening up of economic opportunity. Poverty at home and around the world that led Dr. King to call for nothing less than a national and worldwide revolution of values:

"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 civilization can flounder as readily in the face of moral and spiritual

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bankruptcy as it can through financial bankruptcy . . . A true revolution of values will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies. We are called to play the Good Samaritan on life's roadside; but that will only be an initial act. One day the whole Jericho road must be transformed so that men and women will not be beaten and robbed as they make their journey through life."

In our nation and world desperately hungering for moral example, change, and hope and leaders who put national and community good ahead of personal and political gain, Dr. King gave Americans a special charge: "A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death. America, the richest and most powerful nation in the world, can well lead the way in this revolution of values . . . There is nothing except shortsightedness to prevent us from guaranteeing an annual minimum—and *livable*—income for every American family. There is nothing, except a tragic death wish, to prevent us from reordering our priorities, so the pursuit of peace will take precedence over the pursuit of war. There is nothing to keep us from remolding a recalcitrant status quo with bruised hands until we have fashioned it into a brotherhood"—
and
sisterhood.

Fifty years later, we must not give up on building a just America that ensures a level playing field for every child and person. We must not let anyone tell us that our rich nation's vaults of justice and opportunity are bankrupt. And we must not tolerate any longer any resistance to creating jobs, jobs, jobs which pay enough to escape poverty, public and private sector, and providing the education and early childhood development supports every human being needs to survive and thrive. I hope we will commit ourselves on this fiftieth anniversary to building and sustaining a powerful transforming nonviolent movement to help America live up to its promises and forge the will to translate America's dream into reality for all. Let's honor Dr. King and save America's future and soul by hearing, heeding, and following our greatest American prophet.

Marian Wright Edelman is president of the Children's Defense Fund whose Leave No Child Behind® mission is to ensure every child a Healthy Start, a Head Start, a Fair Start, a Safe Start and a Moral Start in life and successful passage to adulthood with the help of caring families and communities. For more information go to www.childrensdefense.org.