

## Inauguration day: Continuing the dream

Written by Marian Wright Edelman  
Wednesday, 28 January 2009 17:25

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"Rosa sat so Martin could march. Martin marched so Barack could run. Barack runs so our children can fly!" From text messages to t-shirts, versions of this quote circulated everywhere during last year's historic presidential election. The popular message captured many people's belief that just like Mrs. Rosa Parks and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., President-elect Barack Obama is part of a historic legacy of trailblazers and leaders, each one taking a giant new step toward making a better nation for the next generation of Black Americans and all Americans.

Now all the excitement, hopes and dreams from the long election season led up to that powerfully symbolic moment, as President Obama took the oath of office one day after our annual national holiday celebrating Dr. King. As record-breaking masses of people gathered in Washington, D.C., to be part of this miraculous event on the Mall in our nation's capital, the day has a special emotional significance for those of us who were also here during the sweltering week in August 1963 when crowds marched on the Mall to listen to Dr. King tell us about his dream. The beautiful Black poet Elizabeth Alexander, who will become just the fourth poet in our nation's history to read at an Inauguration, was a one-year-old toddler in a stroller when her parents brought her to the March on Washington. As her mother, African American women's history scholar Adele Alexander, said last month, "The parallelism is fabulous there." Many people are feeling as if a piece of American history is coming full circle.

But Dr. King's dream isn't ending with President Obama's inauguration. Instead, President Obama now has the opportunity to take that dream to the next level. Dr. King's family has long urged that his birthday be celebrated with a day of service—a day on, not a day off. When President Obama called for the King Holiday to be a national day of service this year, he was following Dr. King's example with a call to action. It's time for all of us who have been inspired by both Dr. King and our nation's new President to answer that call and do our part in advancing the dream.

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In fact, when most people remember Dr. King speaking on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial during the March on Washington, they think about "I Have a Dream," because for 45 years those powerful words have been quoted all over the world. But too few remember or even know the central theme that began his speech that day: the bounced check America had written to its Black citizens. Dr. King said we had come to the nation's capital that day to cash a check America had written nearly 200 years earlier. He said that when our nation's founders wrote the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, they had created a promissory note that guaranteed all Americans the inalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. But instead of honoring that promise for Black Americans, America had defaulted and given us a bad check that had come back marked "insufficient funds."

Dr. King said those of us who had come to the March were there to cash our checks, because we refused to believe "the bank of justice is bankrupt" or that "there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation." He said we'd come to cash a check "that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice." Then in the next breath he said something that President Obama made a central theme of his own campaign: Dr. King said we'd "come to this hallowed spot" in our nation's capital "to remind America of the fierce urgency of now."

I certainly refuse to believe that our nation is bankrupt of justice and opportunity, and never will

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give up until our nation's professed commitment to justice for all results in ending poverty and hopelessness for millions of people struggling to get enough to eat, a place to sleep, a chance to make a living, and a good education for their children. President Obama said he ran for the highest office in the land because he refused to believe it either, and he also wasn't content to keep waiting for justice deferred. Like Dr. King, he believed in the "fierce urgency of now." Millions of Americans from all races and walks of life supported and voted for him because they feel the same way. This joyful, hopeful Inauguration Day is the first day of President Obama's opportunity as our nation's new leader to follow Dr. King's dream and begin putting those beliefs into action—and, in the words of poet Seamus Heaney, begin to make "hope and history rhyme."

Marian Wright Edelman, whose latest book is [The Sea Is So Wide And My Boat Is So Small: Charting a Course for the Next Generation](#), is president of the Children's Defense Fund. For more information about the Children's Defense Fund, go to [www.childrensdefense.org](http://www.childrensdefense.org).