

Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Dedication

Written by Marian Wright Edelman
Monday, 24 October 2011 12:59

We honor Dr. King today in stone. Let us honor him tomorrow and every day—for as long as it takes—with powerful, persistent voices and unrelenting nonviolent action to rescue his dream - America's dream - from the clutches of materialism, militarism, racism and poverty he warned would be America's undoing.

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 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 Lazarus and allowed him to become invisible. Calling for a Poor People's Campaign, he warned this could happen to America, the richest nation on earth. The day he was assassinated, he called his mother to give her his next Sunday's sermon title: "Why America May Go to Hell." He warned that "America is going to hell 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."

He called with urgency for a Poor People's Campaign in 1968 when there were 25.4 million poor Americans including 11 million poor children and our GDP was \$4.13 trillion. Today there are 46.2 million poor people including 16.4 million poor children and I've no doubt he'd be leading another campaign to end poverty and to create jobs and income for everyone in America. He would be dismayed that 20.5 million of our neighbors are living in extreme poverty including 7.4 million children who are the poorest age group in America. And the younger they are the poorer they are. One in four or 5.5 million infants, toddlers and preschoolers were poor in 2010, the years of greatest brain development.

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The number of poor children—16.4 million—living in the richest nation on earth exceeds the entire combined populations of Haiti and Liberia, two of the poorest countries on earth.

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The number of extremely poor children—7.4 million—in our nation is equivalent to the population of Israel.

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The number of poor children under five—5.5 million—exceeds the population of Sierra Leone.

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Children don't have any belts to tighten and face more and more cuts in survival programs. The New York Times reported in 2010 that almost six million Americans had no income—one in 50—and depended on Food Stamps to stave off the wolves of hunger. What has happened in America that we have normalized child and family poverty, homelessness and hunger—punishing innocents with federal and state cuts for budget deficits they did not cause while 279 current members of Congress (238 Representatives and 41 Senators) have pledged not to ask the wealthiest corporations and individuals to pay a dime in new taxes to restore some of the hundreds of billions they drained from taxpayer coffers that have nearly bankrupted our nation and torn asunder the lives and hopes and futures of millions of Americans?

Beginning today, let's honor Dr. King by our committed action to end child poverty and close the morally obscene gulf between rich and poor in our nation where the 400 highest income earners made as much as the combined tax revenues of 22 states. They don't need any more tax breaks and need to give back some of their unfair share of our nation's tax subsidies and bailouts to feed and house and educate our children and employ their parents.

Let's follow Dr. King by naming and changing the pervasive racial disparities, undergirded by poverty, that place one in three Black and one in six Hispanic boys born in 2001 at risk of prison in their lifetimes. Incarceration is becoming the new American apartheid and poor children of color are its fodder. Let's reroute our children into a pipeline to college and productive work to compete with children from China and India and enable our children to compete economically in a globalizing economy.

Let's honor Dr. King by speaking truth to power and demanding justice for the poor and vulnerable children with our voices and votes and powerful persistent nonviolent direct actions. Citizens of every race and income level must band together to bring our nation back from the brink of self destruction fueled by unbridled greed of the few and a military budget that dwarfs our early childhood development budget where the real security of our nation lies.

Let's honor Dr. King by stopping the resurgence of racial segregation in our schools, unfair treatment of children of color through zero tolerance school discipline and special education practices that push them out of school and towards prison. And we must stand together and resist efforts to undermine the hard earned right to vote which is the life blood of democracy. Let's not return to Jim Crow shenanigans that denied the right to vote to Blacks and other

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citizens and strangled our democratic processes far too long.

Let's honor Dr. King by building a beloved community in America where all have enough to eat, a place to sleep, and enough work at decent wages to support a family, buy a home, and raise children in safe neighborhoods.

Let's truly honor Dr. King by transforming our education system that sentences millions of children to social and economic death by failing to prepare them and our country for the future. That more than a majority of children in all income and racial groups and nearly 80 percent of Black and Hispanic children cannot read or compute at grade level in 4th, 8th, and 12th grades is a national catastrophe which will bring our nation down.

Let's honor Dr. King by ending the violent wars within and without that destroy lives, families, communities, and drain life giving resources on weapons of death rather than weapons of life. The guns that snuffed out Dr. King's life have snuffed out the lives of over 110,645 children since 1979. Every three hours a child or teen is killed by a firearm in the United States.

Let's honor Dr. King with our unrelenting efforts to ensure that "the bank of justice" is not bankrupted further and like him refuse to accept "there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of the nation." Let's send the bounced checks of jobs, quality education, food and early childhood development back to Congress and state capitols and tell them to refill our nation's insufficient bank accounts with transfers from the overflowing coffers of powerful corporations and individuals from unjust tax breaks and subsidies and to pay the long overdue promissory notes of justice and hope millions of children are waiting to receive from the crumbs of Dives' table.

The day after Dr. King was shot, I went into riot torn Washington, D.C. neighborhoods and schools urging children not to loot, get arrested and ruin their futures. A young Black boy about 12 looked me squarely in the eyes and said, "Lady, what future? I ain't got no future. I ain't got nothing to lose." It's time to prove that boy's truth wrong in our militarily powerful, materially rich but spiritually poor nation and to honor the sacrifice of this prophet of God who died to help redeem the soul of America.

It's now up to each of us to pick up the mantle of justice and lift high the torch of freedom for our

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children and grandchildren. Dr. King told and showed us what to do. Let's do it.

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.