



**CONSIDERING KING'S MARTYRDOM AND MESSAGE:  
LOSING ILLUSIONS AND GAINING TRUTH**

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The 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the martyrdom of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. calls for us not only to pause to pay rightful homage to him and the great gift of life he gave us, but it also calls for us to think in deep and soul-searching ways about the meaning of his self-sacrifice and how we have honored his legacy or let it wither along the way as we turned our attention to lesser things and helium-light thoughts about the way we should live, the nature and range of our responsibility to ourselves and each other and to those whose sacrifices are the source of any forward thrust we claim. And we must also ask ourselves have we allowed his message and meaning to be transformed into a media and made-for-museum ritual of remembrance, emptied of essential meaning and reduced to corporate commercials and self-deluding commentaries on racial reconciliation without the requirements of justice or struggle? Indeed, it is King himself who cautioned us against hoping for and declaring “a cheap victory in a climate of complacency” and out of fear or seeking favor, participating in the great betrayal of silence which ultimately leads to our social death. For he taught, “Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about the things that matter.”

In the year before his martyrdom, in September, King gave a speech at the American Psychological Association which speaks well to the ease with which society embraces illusions about itself and demands we embrace them also. He told them, as if he were speaking today, that though social scientists can aid us in the understanding of ourselves and society, “White society is in even more urgent need”. Indeed, he said “White America needs to understand that it is poisoned to its soul by racism”, and that “all too many White Americans are horrified

not with the conditions of (Black) life but with the product of these conditions—the (Black person) himself”. In a word, they are not horrified by injustice done to us in New York or New Orleans, in the schools, courts, streets, slums or prisons, but are horrified at the righteous anger we express, and the audacity not just to hope but also to resist injustice and oppression in its various forms.

King states that there is “little depth to the changes” they pretend is progress. For although White America as a whole has stopped some of its more outrageous raw-meat racism, he said, “that’s not the same thing as ordaining brotherhood” or “inaugurating justice”. King criticizes White Americans for racializing crime and talking about it outside of the social conditions that cause and feed it. He calls these socially-based crimes “derivative crimes” and argued that “they are born of the greater crimes of the White society”. And he challenged White society to stop violating laws themselves, committing violations which further deprive the poor, relax or fail to enforce building codes and regulations, let “police make a mockery of law”, deny “equal employment and education and provision for civic services”.

King’s criticism of the Vietnam War is clearly a criticism of the war in Iraq. The war, he said, has “played havoc with our domestic destinies. The bombs that fall in Vietnam explode at home”. Indeed, “it has frustrated development at home” and it tells especially the poor and needy, that society “place(s) insatiable military demands above their most critical needs”. Moreover, it has wreaked havoc on the lives and land of Vietnam, left countless youth dead, mutilated and maimed and “greatly contributed to forces of reaction in America”.

Anticipating not just Iraq, Afghanistan, Haiti, Palestine and the hellish horror chambers of Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo Bay and elsewhere, he notes that the war "has torn up the Geneva Accords . . . impaired the United Nations, . . . exacerbated hatred between continents and worst still between races". Thus, he said, it has only benefited and "strengthened the military-industrial complex" and "left our country politically and morally isolated in the world, where our only friends happen to be puppet nations...."

King rightfully identifies the hypocrisy of today which peddles hope while depriving us of a basis on which it could be founded and flourish. He states "What hypocrisy it is to talk of saving the new generation to make it a generation of hope—while consigning it to unemployment and provoking it to violent alternatives". He speaks of a need for a total initiative for giving youth hope against the deterioration into self-destruction, i.e., education, employment, housing beyond hovels and a massive national initiative to accomplish this. And almost as if he were anticipating a Katrina-like disaster, he noted that the country has the power to solve its problems, but seemingly not the will and so "the administration and Congress tinker with trivial proposals to limit cost in an extravagant *gamble with disaster*" (emphasis mine).

There is, King said, an urgent need "to create a wholesome Black unity and a sense of peoplehood while the process of integra-

tion proceeds". Here let me rush to say what King has said many times elsewhere that he is talking about integration in a structural sense of shared wealth and power. Moreover, a wholesome Black unity and an equally wholesome sense of peoplehood are indispensable to any and everything we do. And this, if I read King rightly, depends on our honoring our social justice tradition and struggle constantly to bring good into the world.

In this speech and several other places, King reminds me of Fanon in his belief in the beneficial effects of righteous struggle not only on our life-conditions and life-chances, but also on our conception of ourselves and the world. He notes that Black people have, thru struggle, "become aware of the deeper causes for the crudity and cruelty that govern White society's responses to their needs", and that our oppression was "not a consequence of superficial prejudice, but was systemic". In a word, it was not just a question of how we loved, but especially how we lived. Moreover, King noted that struggle frees us from illusions and teaches us truth. He says "the slashing blows of backlash and frontlash have hurt (Blacks), but they have also awakened (them) and revealed the nature of the oppressor". For "to lose illusions is to gain truth". And as our ancestors assure us, that truth, rooted in and rising out of our commitment and struggle for justice, will indeed set us free and open up a new horizon of history.