

PART I

Advancing the Conversation



Social Justice in Hard Times: Celebrating the Vision of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

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One of my favorite poems was written by one of my favorite poets, Angel Nieto (who also happens to be my husband) after attending a rally many years ago. I don't remember whether the rally was for peace in Central America or for the end of apartheid in South Africa or whether it was to continue Spanish-language programming at our local radio station or to demand bilingual programs in the town's schools. Regardless of the situation, the poem is about how we may become discouraged when we find ourselves doing the same thing year after year and yet see little apparent change. The poem, "Here we are again," describes how we sometimes feel like little more than whiffs of air, drops of water, or quiet whispers. But such whiffs of air, drops of water, or quiet whispers can become much more, as we're reminded at the end of the poem:

Here we are again
apparently invisible
and we look at
and recognize ourselves,
give each other strength
with our presence.
Do not lose hope, for,
apparently invisible,
we know that:
a hurricane is made of whiffs of air,
a flood comes one drop at a time,
whispers can create a clamor.

I think a lot about this poem because it's important to remember that our presence *can* create a clamor, our actions *do* make a difference. We need to be reminded of this fact more than ever before because these are hard

times for social justice. In spite of our country's phenomenal wealth, in spite of the many extraordinary resources and services we take for granted, in spite of the relative tranquility in which we live (because even though we're engaged in a war, most of us see it only on the evening news)—in spite of all these things, we are living in hard times when it comes to social justice.

As we commemorate the words and deeds and legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., we need to focus on this truth. Of course, we need to acknowledge that in the past half century our nation has made great strides in promoting the agenda of social justice. We would be blind not to see this. People of color, women, those who speak languages other than English as a native language, folks with disabilities, gay and lesbian people—all of these groups have benefited from the vision and courage demonstrated by African Americans and their allies in the civil rights movement. And we have *all* reaped the benefits, not just those who were thought to be the obvious primary heirs of the massive changes in policies and practices that resulted from the movement.

Several years ago Mel King, a former representative to the Massachusetts Legislature from Boston and originator of the Rainbow Coalition concept, used curb cuts as an example of how we all benefit from social justice: Curb cuts were originally demanded by those in wheel chairs and their advocates as a way to create more access to services and activities in our cities and towns. Today they are as common as curbs themselves. If we see curb cuts only as grudging concessions to a limited self-interest group, we are overlooking how countless other people who might never have thought to ask for curb cuts also benefit from them: parents and grandparents with baby carriages, kids on bicycles, people with shopping carts, the elderly who find them more convenient than the sometimes-too-high curbs that hamper

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their walking, and others simply too tired at the end of the day to use curbs.

The same “win-win” situation is true of other gains that have been made, although many times they have been reluctantly conceded. A case in point is affirmative action, which has benefited far more people than those it was expected to help. For example, a recent study examined the 350 largest and most diverse school systems in Texas and compared the achievement of White students with that of students of color. Researchers found that the achievement of students of color improved as a result of a higher percentage of teachers of color in their schools. This was not surprising to them. What *was* surprising was the positive relationship between the presence of teachers of color and the achievement of *White* students. In fact, the researchers discovered that when substantial numbers of teachers of color were present in a school, the impact on White students was even greater than it was for students of color (Meier, Wrinkle, & Polinard, 1999). So much for the conventional wisdom that Whites lose out when affirmative action is in place.

...these are hard times for social justice. This is because social and civic gains have never come easily—in our society or in any other—nor have benevolent leaders simply handed them down.

In spite of the fact that affirmative action has been abandoned in many places, we have still come a long way. In many ways our society today is dramatically different from what it was in 1950. And yet I persist in maintaining: These are hard times for social justice. This is because social and civic gains have never come easily—in our society or in any other—nor have benevolent leaders simply handed them down. The well-known words of Frederick Douglass remind us of this: “Power concedes nothing without a fight; it never has and it never will.” It is paradoxical, but not surprising, that the major social and civic gains in the United States have come about because of the actions of people who have believed the ideals enshrined in our Declaration of Independence and our Constitution but have not benefited from them. In other words, democracy has been forged not by the haves but by the have-nots of our nation. The changes that have extended civil rights to many groups and individuals have always been the result of the hard work, persistence, and demands of the have-nots in our society and of those who have stood shoulder to shoulder with them, and not, for the most part, of those who already enjoy these cherished rights. It is a

sad fact that some of the same people who enjoy these rights constantly refer to the glories of our democracy but at the same time are reluctant to share their privileges with others. In the aftermath of September 11, 2001, for example, the rights of immigrants are fast being eroded and Muslims, Arabs, or anyone else who “looks” suspicious (that is, like them) is under scrutiny.

Our civil rights are easily lost if we aren’t vigilant and it’s not just because of foreign terrorist threats but because of backsliding in our own society. A case in point is the struggle for integrated schools. The dream of integrated, harmonious schools where all students get an equal chance to learn are far from realized: A widely cited report on resegregation from the Civil Rights Project at Harvard University concluded that U.S. public schools are more segregated today than at any time in the past 3 decades, isolating African American and Latino students especially. In fact, Latino students now have the dubious distinction of being the most segregated students in terms of race, ethnicity, and social class (Orfield, 2001). Another example of rights that were won and are now being eroded is bilingual education. Bilingual education is under siege in many states and it has already been eliminated in several of these. As a result, the hard-won right to have children educated in their native language while they’re learning English is in jeopardy. Add to that the fact that all sorts of privatization schemes are assailing our public schools and that our urban public schools especially have been largely abandoned and we understand how much we’ve lost since the civil rights movement.

These examples typify why we’re living in hard times and why, rather than simply celebrating the magnificent legacy of Dr. King, we need to recommit ourselves to it. Allow me, then, to suggest three ways in which we can both struggle against the hard times we’re in at the same time that we honor Dr. King’s memory. I am a teacher and therefore my focus is on education. Because so much of the civil rights movement was characterized by the struggle for equal education, I think Dr. King would forgive me my parochialism when I speak mostly about children and teachers.

The First Way to Honor Dr. King is to Teach Our Children Well

In an article by Larry Brendtro and Martin Brokenleg (2002), the authors write about a Cree elder from Canada who shared with them one of the last conversations he had with his aging grandfather. “Grandfather,” he asked, “What is the meaning of life?” After a period of thought, the old man answered, “Grandson, children are the purpose of life. We were once young and someone cared for us, and now it is our time to care” (Brendtro & Brokenleg, 2002, p. 7).

It is indeed. And we show we care for our young by, among other things, teaching them well. Teaching is the responsibility not only of teachers but also of parents and families (who are the first and most important teachers) and in fact all of us, because what we believe and how we act are powerful models for our children, whether we're in a classroom or not. Teaching children well means teaching them the basics: how to read, write, and do math; how to use the computer and play instruments and do art; how to appreciate poetry and how to approach history; and, yes, even how to do well on tests, as long as this doesn't become our sole or overarching focus, as it has for too many school systems lately. But teaching our children well means other things as well: It means teaching them to become moral human beings, to care for others and for their environment, to be generous, to think beyond their own limited self-interests, to become involved in civic life. It means teaching them to serve their communities, giving of their time and energy and resources. And it means teaching them that living in a democracy is both hard work and a privilege that can be easily squandered.

Teaching our children well also means teaching them to be creative and critical thinkers and to understand the power that they have, individually and collectively, to change the world. This is an extraordinarily difficult task because it means that we must teach our children to question us; it means that, as teachers, we need to remain humble about our own knowledge and power. James Baldwin addressed this question squarely in a talk he gave in 1963 to teachers. He spoke about it as “the paradox of education” and he wrote,

The purpose of education, finally, is to create in a person the ability to look at the world for himself . . . But no society is really anxious to have that kind of person around. What societies really, ideally, want is a citizenry which will simply obey the rules of society. If a society succeeds in this, that society is about to perish. The obligation of anyone who thinks of himself as responsible is to examine society and try to change it and to fight it—at no matter what risk. This is the only hope society has. This is the only way societies change. (Baldwin, 1985, p. 326)

As we commemorate Dr. King's birthday, let's remember that teaching our children well means going beyond the conventions. For example, it's a good thing to see the words of Dr. King on the bulletin boards of our schools, words that 50 years ago would have been unimaginable in the halls of our public schools. Children need to know more than the fact that Martin Luther King had a dream, yet this is the extent of what most of them learn. Presenting Dr. King's entire life through one speech—as memorable and inspiring as it may be—gives children the false impression that we've already accomplished his dream, that we've “made it” and

that now we all share equally in the advantages of democracy. We all know that this is far from the truth.

A now classic article written by Jonathan Kozol in 1975, “Great men and women—tailored for school use,” illustrates this point. Drawing on textbooks in wide use at the time, Kozol documents how schools bleed the life and soul out of even the most impassioned and courageous heroes such as Martin Luther King. In the process of this “tailoring,” Dr. King and others are made both more boring and less believable. Because key and significant facts about them are omitted, the result is that children fail to learn, for example, that Dr. King was not only an antiracist but also that he condemned crass consumerism, the excesses of capitalism and militarism, and the Vietnam War. Not only did he say that he had a dream and that he wanted his children, and all children, to be judged by the “content of their character” rather than by the color of their skin but in a major speech concerning his stand against the Vietnam War—a speech that most children do not get to read or hear—he addressed the need for the redistribution of wealth. He said: “True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring” (King, 1968).

Dr. King also spoke about reprioritizing our national values when he said,

I am convinced that if we are to get on the right side of the world revolution, we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin the shift from a “thing-oriented” society to a “person-oriented” society. 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. (King, 1967)

Children need to know these things as well. When they do, they will understand the full context of Dr. King's dream, and that it is far from fulfilled.

A more recent treatment of the same topic as Kozol's article can be found in the thought-provoking book *Lies My Teacher Told Me* by historian James Loewen (1996). Addressing topics from the misrepresentation of Native Americans to the absence of women in the curriculum, Loewen reviewed the most commonly used U.S. history textbooks and found that they present history largely in a simple-minded, one-dimensional way that misses the opportunity to teach children to think critically, act morally, and understand our history in a more nuanced way than is currently the case. Loewen found that, although there may now be more brown faces in textbooks than before, the story they tell is still remarkably similar: void of controversy, our history remains a pabulum of heroic feats and unadulterated progress. But surely our young people deserve more than this.

An award-winning article by Herbert Kohl (1993) demonstrates how Rosa Parks, the mother of the civil rights movement, has been made palatable to the mainstream by portraying her in countless textbooks and stories not as a staunch civil rights crusader who consciously battled racist segregation, but rather as a tired woman who simply didn't have the energy to get up and surrender her seat on the bus (Kohl, 1993). But Rosa Parks didn't just happen to get on that bus and demand a seat: She was the secretary of the local NAACP and she had been prepared for the action she was to take through her training in civil disobedience at the Highlander Institute. In other words, she knew exactly what she was doing. In an interview many years later, Rosa Parks conceded that indeed she had been tired but not physically tired as much as tired of the abuse, tired of the inequality, tired of the injustice.

Teaching our students well means teaching them not only the glorious and heroic parts of U.S. history, but the complicated and unfair and disturbing parts of it as well. If we don't do this, how will they ever learn? Yet unless we do this, we end up with young people who get to college—those fortunate enough to even get there—uninformed of their history: Shocked at the internment of U.S. citizens of Japanese ancestry during World War II; distraught at the realities of chattel slavery; incensed about the lynchings they had never heard about and the fact that they were carried out against Americans of African descent but also against some Americans of Italian and Jewish descent; stunned when they first hear of U.S. imperialism; taken aback when they learn that Puerto Rico, in terms of its rights and privileges, is little more than a colony of the United States; and troubled when they learn of the ravages of racism in our history and the fact that it still exists, even in our own neighborhoods and town and cities. The schools' curriculum needs to address these issues.

Second, We Need to Remain Vigilant to Safeguard the Civil Rights We Do Have, and to Extend Them Even Further

Teaching our children well will mean nothing if we don't teach them about what rights they have and how they've come to be. You may recall a poll done several years ago that asked people on the street what they thought of a list of rights and whether they thought these rights should be granted to ordinary folk. A majority of respondents were unaware that the rights in question were actually our Bill of Rights, part of our very own Constitution. Unbelievable as it may seem, a great many of them thought the rights in question should not be given to ordinary citizens; some went as far as to say that the list sounded like a communist plot. It is a chill-

ing reminder of the fragility of our rights and of our responsibility to be vigilant in protecting them.

And maybe patriotism too is about much more than waving flags from our porches and cars and trucks. Maybe it's more about standing up for human and civil rights and social justice for *all* people, no matter their race or ethnicity or national origin or native language...

Unfortunately, too many people these days are willing to give away our civil rights. These are frightening times, of course, and we need to stand together in the face of terrorism. But I fear that in the name of patriotism, in the name of national security, in the name of national cohesion and loyalty, and most recently, in the name of the Patriot Act, we face the very real possibility of losing some of our most precious and hard-won civil rights. The point was forcefully addressed in an article by Nat Hentoff (2002). Writing about "The Patriotism Enforcers," Hentoff recalled the time in 1950 when Republican senator Margaret Chase Smith of Maine became the first member of Congress to publicly challenge Senator Joseph McCarthy's contention that those who disagreed with his version of patriotism were giving "ammunition to America's enemies," a similar charge made more recently by former Attorney General John Ashcroft. At the time, Margaret Chase Smith was the only woman in the Senate. She led six other senators in presenting a Declaration of Conscience to the rest of her colleagues in which she urged them to protect individual liberties from McCarthy and his cronies. Senator Smith said that those who enforce such shows of patriotism "are all too frequently those who ... ignore some of the basic principles of Americanism—the right to criticize, the right to hold unpopular beliefs, the right to protest, the right of independent thought." It took 4 more years for the Senate to censure Joe McCarthy.

Hentoff also cited a case concerning the right of students to refuse to recite the Pledge of Allegiance as an act of conscience, a case brought by Jehovah's Witnesses in West Virginia in 1943. In his majority opinion, Justice Jackson wrote in part:

Freedom to differ is not limited to things that do not matter much. That would be a mere shadow of freedom. The test

of its substance is the right to differ as to things that touch the heart of the existing order . . . If there is any fixed star in our constellation, it is that no official, high or petty, can prescribe what shall be orthodox in politics, nationalism, religion, or other matters of opinion, or force citizens to confess by word or act their faith therein.

This Supreme Court decision was handed down during our war against Hitler. The words are worth remembering, now more than ever.

Third, We Can Honor Dr. King's Memory and Have Hope in These Hard Times by Living Fully in Our Democracy

In the story of the Grinch, as all the Whos in Whoville and the Grinch himself found out, Christmas is not really about the presents and the food and the trees and ornaments; maybe, they discovered, it's about much more. And maybe patriotism too is about much more than waving flags from our porches and cars and trucks. Maybe it's more about standing up for human and civil rights and social justice for *all* people, no matter their race or ethnicity or national origin or native language; for Jews, Muslims, Christians, and others who believe differently as well as for atheists; for heterosexuals as well as gays and lesbians; for the educated and for those who haven't had the privilege of education. Maybe it's about standing up not just for the more privileged among us but about securing equal rights for the least privileged. This is the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King that we should honor and the best way to do this is by living fully in our democracy. This means exercising our right to select leaders who also cherish this legacy. We need leaders who remember this message and who strive to make certain it happens. We would do well to recall, especially in this time, that democracy is our greatest asset but one that we can't export without first living it fully in our own country. In the words of W. E. B. Du Bois, "Democracy cannot have a rebirth in the world unless it firmly establishes itself in America" (1985, 14a).

We need to be mindful that outside our country as well, our words and deeds sometimes are at odds: Although we proudly proclaim democracy and freedom as our greatest rights, until recently our U.S. Navy regularly bombed Vieques, an island off Puerto Rico, in spite of the fact that the bombing missions were condemned unanimously by the people of Puerto Rico as well as by politicians of every party on the island and by many civil rights leaders and other prominent citizens in the United States and inter-

nally. Whose security was being protected? Democracy for whom? We can ask similar questions concerning our presence in Iraq. If democracy is indeed worthwhile, and even attainable, then we need to make certain that what we say and what we do are compatible.

In 1956 Dr. King wrote about the challenge of facing a new age, an age characterized by turmoil and unrest and one that demanded that the civil rights promised by our society be extended to all. He said:

The urgency of the hour calls for leaders of wise judgment and sound integrity—leaders not in love with money, but in love with justice; leaders not in love with publicity, but in love with humanity; leaders who can subject their particular egos to the greatness of the cause (King, 1956).

The cause he spoke of was social justice for all our people. It is the cause enshrined in the halls of our monuments and documents. It is the cause of freedom and justice, a cause that for many is still far from reality. We may be living in hard times but we have the human and moral resources to turn those times around. Celebrating Dr. King's day with this thought to guide our minds, our hearts, and our actions is one way to do justice to his memory.

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