

## ***“Sleeping Through a Revolution?”***

**Martin Luther King, Jr. Sunday, January 15, 2012  
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Today on Dr. King’s birthday, I begin by returning to the opening images of Dr. King’s last Sunday sermon. It was on March 31, 1968. Four days later, he was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee. That sermon was titled, “Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution,” and it was offered at the Episcopal National Cathedral in Washington, D. C.

Dr. King began with a literary reference and an observation saying:

I am sure that most of you have read that arresting little story from the pen of Washington Irving, entitled “Rip Van Winkle.” The one thing that we usually remember about the story is that Rip Van Winkle slept twenty years. But there is another point in that little story that is almost completely overlooked. It was the sign in the inn, from which Rip went up in the mountain for his long sleep.

When Rip Van Winkle went up into the mountain, the sign had a picture of King George III of England. When he came down twenty years later, the sign had a picture of George Washington, the first president of the United States. When Rip Van Winkle looked up at the picture of George Washington, and looking at the picture he was amazed... he was completely lost – he knew not who he was. And this reveals to us that the most striking thing about the story of Rip Van Winkle is not merely that Rip slept twenty years, but that he slept through a revolution. While he was peacefully snoring up in the mountain, a revolution was taking place that at points would change the course of history – and Rip knew nothing about it: he was asleep. Yes, he slept through a revolution. And one of the great liabilities of life is that all too many people find themselves living amid a great period of social change and yet they fail to develop the new attitudes, the new mental responses – which the new situation demands. They end up sleeping through a revolution.

Now forty-four years later, the revolutions around the globe that King identified have only continued. He spoke about the technological revolution that has “made the world a neighborhood,” and “the challenge to develop a world perspective.” He spoke about the revolution in weaponry and arms. He spoke about a human rights revolution – what he called the “freedom explosion” here and around the globe, which was renewed so dramatically beginning last spring in Egypt and Libya and elsewhere.

Like Rip Van Winkle’s awakening to a new world, on the one hand, we too glimpse days of revolution to come: The Occupy movement with its helping our citizens

understand the longstanding economic inequalities of our nation. It beckons to new possibilities. It is a step – not a victory. This awakening is thrilling, a beautiful transformation not yet fulfilled with much drowsiness to be cast off still.

This morning as we celebrate Dr. King's birthday, I return to some of the basics of his witness. I do so because the stories of prophets need to be retold from generation to generation, the old and familiar needs to be made fresh, and the future depends upon the world we create.

As recounted about the Freedom Charter of the African National Congress adopted in 1955, "our struggle is a struggle of memory against forgetting."

Lest we forget, Dr. King, who is such an iconic figure in the area of social justice, was deeply grounded in matters of the spirit. He would speak of the interior resources he had found, which are equally available to us in our lively, daily interactions with beauty and pain.

Basic to understanding Dr. King's life and work is to know that he was trying to help us to wake up: Foremost to our spiritual strength. And in the realm of social injustice, he was inviting us to hone a critical consciousness, to live on the margins of complicity, to shape a community of resistance and courage, and to create coalitions of conscience – to find companions in growing our souls and building the Beloved Community.

It was in 1967 at the Riverside Church that Dr. King expanded his critique of our culture beyond the civil rights struggle. He identified what he called the triple threats of racism, militarism and materialism.

Racism, militarism and materialism.

Racism, militarism and materialism....

This morning, I offer brief reports, a checking in on these three, plus just one other of the many continuing threats to our social fabric and our best selves.

### ***The Beloved Community & Racism***

On this question of racism and the false social construct of race, anthropologist Ashley Montagu called race "a contemporary myth... [our] most dangerous myth."

One good thing is that we have this company here who knows this, understands it.

James Baldwin, almost 50 years ago in 1963, in his book *THE FIRE NEXT TIME* made this plea, which I offer as text and theme for this morning: "If we – and now I mean the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks, who must, like

lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of others – [if we] do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world.”

I like his modesty and his vision. We – just maybe we here – can be among the “relatively conscious.” To be sure some of us are profoundly awake and conscious, but the vision of a bias free society, with fair and just institutions, the vision of capacity for personal change and social change depends on the work of not the enlightened, not the powerful leader/teacher/messiah, not upon the pure, but only upon the “relatively conscious” – ordinary pilgrims of faith like you and me.

Part of trying to be the Beloved Community – that community of mutual respect and aid – means that we cannot deny white supremacy, our history, our legacy, and our failures as a nation. King observed, “It is an unhappy truth that racism is a way of life for the vast majority of white Americans, spoken and unspoken, acknowledged and denied, subtle and sometimes not so subtle – the disease of racism permeates and poisons a whole body politic. And I can see nothing more urgent than for America to work passionately and unrelentingly – to get rid of the disease of racism.”

Derrick Bell when he spoke here a few years ago on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Brown v. Board of Education noted progress but also wondered about the substrate of American reality. Here that day he said, “Our decades-long effort to end segregation and, we hoped, racial discrimination in all its forms, proved to be the equivalent of deleting a program icon from our computer desktop. The icon disappears but the program remains on our hard drive.”

Which leaves us with Baldwin’s question, “Can we, beginning here, and moving outward, handful that we are ‘insist on, or create, the consciousness of others?’”

All this is part of the work of building the Beloved Community....

### ***The Beloved Community & War***

Next among the triple threats is Militarism.

King’s position on non-violent protest and peace-making did not make him a “doctrinaire pacifist” but clearly an ardent advocate of nonviolent means of settling conflict. In that last Sunday sermon, he lifted up the challenge “that we must find an alternative to war and bloodshed. Anyone who feels, and there are still a lot of people who feel that way, that war can solve the social problems facing [hu]mankind is sleeping through a revolution.”

With regard to militarism, Dr. King’s vision of the Beloved Community included honoring the role of the United Nations. In his last sermon the night before he was assassinated on April 4, 1968, he warned that war plays “havoc with our domestic destinies... Not only that,” he said – and this was in 1968 – “it has put us in a position of

appearing to the world as an arrogant nation... We have alienated ourselves from other nations so we end up morally and politically isolated in the world.”

What is the body count? I keep forgetting... denial is not a river in Egypt. So, I look it up: In Iraq, 601,027 have died between 2003 and 2006 according to a *Lancet* survey, and Reuters computes that 1,033,000 died between 2003 and 2007.

And we do know, “The war in Iraq has meant the death of more than 4,400 US troops and come at a cost of more than \$700 billion.” (Ramzy Baroud, “Iraq War Declared Over, but War Party Persists”, quoting a CBS report, 12/2011, p. 6)

And how do we overcome numbness, awaken, to staggering figures... feel some measure of this tragedy of our times?

Are the thousands of civilian casualties in Afghanistan truly acceptable? Estimates range from 17,611 to 37,208, and most agree that these are under-estimated.

Again, as Dr. King said in 1968: “... it has put us in a position of appearing to the world as an arrogant nation.... We have alienated ourselves from other nations so we end up morally and politically isolated in the world.”

### ***The Beloved Community & Materialism***

Racism... Militarism... and ... Materialism.

A cartoon I saw recently in *Z* magazine displays what appears to be a very well off gentleman in a pinstriped suit, sitting in an easy chair at his home with a martini in hand, and opulent drapes over the window looking upon a nice backyard lawn. He is speaking to a boy with a backpack, seemingly receiving his father’s counsel. “The rich get richer. The poor get poorer. Everything else is just hype.”

The “Doctor” in front of Martin Luther King Jr.’s name was not an honorary one, but an earned degree – a Doctor of Philosophy in Systematic Theology from Boston University. As a theologian and preacher, Martin Luther King, Jr. often spoke about misplaced faith.

King illustrates with the incident in which Jesus called the rich man a fool, but not because of his riches. He was a fool because he did not realize his dependence on others. King observed, "In a real sense, all life is interrelated. All ... are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.... I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be. This is the interrelated structure of reality... The rich man tragically failed to recognize this." (*Strength To Love*, 70)

You don't have to accept King's personal God to affirm with him that the rich man "like ... (so many men and women of our times), ... (can become) so involved in big

affairs and small trivialities that ...we forgot God" (73); or for the non-God folks in our midst, we forget our core, transcendent values.

"Big affairs and small trivialities" - and then do you forget?

King, the theologian, says we have misplaced faith in human self-sufficiency, in human **independence, instead of interdependence**. A narrow materialism misses the point and the power of the human spirit.

He counsels, *Do not expect to have faith for midnight hours, the strength to love, if you put faith in secondary things.*

Dr. King spoke about the moral ground of the Beloved Community, and he continually affirmed "we are all made of the same basic stuff... molded in the same divine image.... In a real sense, all life is interrelated. The agony of the poor impoverishes the rich; the betterment of the poor enriches the rich. We are inevitably our brother's [and sister's] keeper; [we are one family.] Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly."

The Occupy Movement, one of its graces, is that it seems to be awakening so many in our nation... planting seeds of reformation, if not revolution... with bank regulation, consumer protection, and so much more being fought against by legions of lobbyists.

### ***The Beloved Community and Civil Liberties***

Racism... Militarism... Materialism.... Just a word on one other matter crystallized by Senate Bill 1867, the National Defense Authorization Act, and by a Justice Department secret memo that authorized President Obama to kill secretly a US citizen abroad, which he did in ordering the death of Anwar Al-Awlaki last September. Al-Awlaki, a U. S. citizen, was in Yemen, and apparently was an unsavory and "dangerous character", but with no ties or even allegations of ties to Al-Qaeda or the Taliban, against whom Congress did authorize the use of military force. Nor was he ever subject to any trial or conviction of a terrorist crime.

David Cole, a Georgetown University law professor, argues, "As American citizens, we have the right to know when our own government believes it may execute us (and others) without a trial." Acknowledging that in war people are killed, he maintains that in a democracy the state's power to kill must be subject to "democratic deliberation and debate." ("Killing our Citizens Without Trial," *New York Review of Books*, 11/24/11, pp. 27-28)

Bill Quigley of Loyola Law School and the Center for Constitutional Rights offers 19 examples of the ways in which President Obama's policies have "affirmed, continued, and expanded almost all of the draconian domestic civil liberties intrusions

pioneered under the Bush administration.” (“Criminalization of Dissent and Militarization of the Police,” Z, 1/2012, pp. 4-6)

### ***Sleepy?***

Were King here today, what an exercise to speculate in that way (!), King too would still be giving a wakeup call to “the fierce urgency of now.” King would also remind us that there is no new world order – only the same old imperialism.

As much as King has been honored for his leadership in the social arena, I have also found deep, abiding spiritual resources in his writings and speeches – tools, guideposts, clues about how to be creatively maladjusted.

If your temperament does not impel you immediately in that direction, or if your spirits are weary from the struggle, or if your faith finds you in one of those difficult times of inertia, perhaps forgetful of those things that lead to hope and courage, try to remember that we are of the same stuff, ... all of us, with all the ethical obligations of kinship that lead us out of our solitary selves, out of conformity that kills the spirit.

Much of what King says is the ordinary wisdom of spiritual growth. King appeals to each of us to take stock of our lives – and to be careful, mindful, about misplaced values.

### ***King: A NEW DEFINITION OF GREATNESS***

Dr. King – like me, you – had his flaws, yet in his ordinary humanity, he still is able to offer lessons for life: day-to-day wisdom of challenge and blessing.

So many lessons, and I close with his “new definition of greatness” – one of the abiding truths that blesses and sustains, that offers me hope and courage.

For us... greatness? Let’s stay awake amid the revolutions around us. Let’s keep it simple.... and so often that is how we live in fullness and beauty that is ours to claim.

Martin Luther King, Jr. offered so much, but here is one takeaway.

... everybody can be great. Because everybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and your verb agree to serve. You don't have to know about Plato and Aristotle to serve. You don't have to know Einstein's theory of relativity to serve. You don't have to know the second theory of thermodynamics in physics to serve. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love. And you can be that servant....

(A TESTAMENT OF HOPE *The Essential Speeches and Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, Harper and Row, 1986, ed. James Melvin Washington, p. 265-6)

Do you give yourself to something larger than yourself? Perhaps to the divinely human possibilities of the Beloved Community, to Love, to God, to Life, or to the creative spirit within every one of us?

Do you keep before yourself the important things, resisting the everyday seductions of patriarchy, racism, materialism, militarism and authoritarianism?

In closing, Dr. King:

Make a career of humanity.... [You can be that servant...] You will make a greater person of yourself, a greater nation of your country, and a finer world to live in....

*Everybody can be great because everybody can serve.*

## Reading

The reading today comes from a recent speech by Bill Moyers printed in *The Nation* magazine (1/22/07). It is titled "A New Story for America", and he reflects upon the power of story, of narrative vision, in helping us define ourselves as a nation and as a people. He acknowledges that recent history has seen the dominance of a cruel, laissez-faire, individualistic capitalism that has not been held accountable "for the good of the whole." He invokes the prior stories of a people seeking the commonweal, the common good, a story of freedom that "reaches back (as Moyers says) across the Great Depression, the Civil War and the American Revolution, all the way back to the Mayflower Compact." (14)

Bill Moyers, television journalist and cultural critic, adds, "There's no mistaking that America is ready for a change. One of our leading analysts of public opinion, Daniel Yankelovich, reports a majority want social cohesion and common ground based on pragmatism and compromise, patriotism and diversity... [and] The wreckage ... by elites is all around us." (12)

He continues, "Some stories doom us. In *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*, Jared Diamond tells of the Viking colony that disappeared in the fifteenth century. The settlers had scratched a living on the spare coast of Greenland for years, until they encountered a series of harsh winters. Their livestock, the staple of

their diet, began to die off. Although the nearby waters teemed with haddock and cod, the colony's mythology prohibited the eating of fish. When their supply of hay ran out during a last terrible winter, the colony was finished. They had been doomed by their story.

“Here in the first decade of the twenty-first century the story that becomes America's dominant narrative will shape our collective imagination and hence our politics. In the searching of our souls demanded by this challenge, those of us in this room and kindred spirits across the nation must confront the most fundamental progressive failure of the current era: the failure to embrace a moral vision of America based on the transcendent faith that human beings are more than the sum of their material appetites, our country is more than an economic machine, and freedom is not license but responsibility – the gift we have received and the legacy we must bequeath.

“In our brief journey here we are on a great journey. For those who came before us and for those who follow, our moral, political and religious duty is to make sure that this nation, which was conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that we are all created equal, is in good hands on our watch.”

He goes on to invoke the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Unitarian Minister and abolitionist Theodore Parker, among those I would call “creatively maladjusted”. Moyers continues:

“It is only rarely remembered that the definition of democracy immortalized by Lincoln in the Gettysburg Address had been inspired by Theodore Parker, the abolitionist prophet. Driven from his pulpit, Parker said, ‘I will go about and preach and lecture in the city and glen, by the roadside and field-side, and wherever men and women may be found.’ He became the Hound of Freedom and helped to change America through the power of the word. We have a story of equal power. It is that the promise of America leaves no one out. Go now, and tell it on the mountains. From the rooftops, tell it. From your laptops, tell it. From the street corners and from Starbucks, from delis and from diners, tell it. From the workplace and the bookstore, tell it. On campus and at the mall, tell it. Tell it in the synagogue, sanctuary and mosque. Tell it where you can, when you can and while you can – to every candidate for office, to every talk-show host and pundit, to corporate executives and school children. Tell it – for America's sake.”(17)