



## REREADING KING IN CRITICAL TIMES: MAPPING AND MAKING OUR WAY FORWARD

*Los Angeles Sentinel*, 01-13-22, p.C-1

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**T**HIS IS A REVISITING AND REREADING OF DR. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s life, work and legacy, and another attempt to extract from the enduring relevance of his insight and experiences, lessons by which we can better live our lives, do our work and wage our righteous and relentless struggle for good in the world. It is a reaffirmation of our honored ancestors' teaching that "to do that which is of value is forever. A person called for by his work does not die, for his name and work are raised because of it." And so, it is with Nana Martin Luther King, Jr.

In these critical times which unavoidably raise the pressing questions of mapping and making our way forward regardless, a thoughtful rereading of Dr. Martin Luther King's historical speech, "Where Do We Go From Here?" offers us an excellent point of departure. Given in 1967 at the height of the Black Power period of the Black Freedom Movement, it reflects the tenor and tension of the times, a righteous rebellion of youth, a year we of Us designated as the "Year of the Simba Wachanga," the Year of the Young Lions of Us, and others similarly engaged in radical and revolutionary resistance to the established order.

It is his last address as SCLC president and some argue his most radical. For he not only defends the integrity, dignity and ultimate worth of Black people, but also questions the very structure and functioning of U.S. society and calls for a radical critique and transformation of its capitalist, racist and militaristic character. He also wrote a book of the same title.

Dr. King tells us in his address that if we, today, are to know where we should go from here in the troubled times, ice-cold climate, and cruel and mean-spirited spaces in which we live and struggle, "We must first honestly recognize where we are now," i.e., at a persistent, deep disadvantage of wealth, power and conditions of life in relationship to Whites, those who dominate. He asserts that "Of the good things in life (the Black person) has one half of those of Whites." King then cites a list of what we now call "disparities" in housing, income, employment, infant mortality, education, support for education, college enrollment, and other areas which disadvantage, disable

and often dispirit us. And he concludes, "When we view the negative experiences of life, the (Black person) has a double share." "This is where we are," he states, in this "system that still oppresses us" in varied ways. And only by righteous and relentless struggle can we end what Malcolm called our nightmare and reconceive and achieve what King called our longed-for dream.

So, the question becomes where do we go from here, what is to be done, how do we map out and make a way forward in our struggle for liberation, justice and other goods in this country and the world? The first step forward, King tells us, is *a reaffirmation of our identity, dignity and worth as a people*. Thus, Dr. King says, "First we must stand up amidst a system that still oppresses us and develop an unassailable and majestic sense of values. We must no longer be ashamed of being Black," but embrace it in all its historical, ethical, spiritual, cultural and aesthetic meaning. King speaks of the language and treatment to inferiorize Black people, deny their contribution and strip them of their personhood and peoplehood. It is a process and practice, he says, of "cultural homicide," a cultural killing of Black persons and people which is "as old as the earliest history books and as contemporary as the morning's paper" and must be resisted.

In the ugly and inferiorizing face of this deculturalization and dehumanization, Black people must resist and achieve a "psychological freedom," standing up, declaring ourselves as we are—a people of "dignity and honor" with a "rich and noble history," second to none and certainly no less sacred. Thus, King says, "Yes, we must stand up and say, 'I'm Black and I'm beautiful' and this self-affirmation is Black (people's) need, made compelling by the White man's crimes against (them)." And he warns that this cultural grounding and self-affirmation is indispensable and that "any movement for (Black) freedom that overlooks this necessity is only waiting to be buried."

Secondly, Dr. King tells us that "Another basic challenge is to discover how to organize our strength in terms of economic and political power." For "Indeed one of the great problems that

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the (Black person) confronts is his (her) lack of power.” Careful to define power in positive and compelling ways in the period of Black Power, King assures the timid and threatened that “power properly understood is nothing but the ability to achieve purpose,” and in the context of the Black Freedom Movement is an ethical goal and capacity. “It is the strength needed to bring about social, political and economic changes” directed toward freedom, justice and other good in the world. Here King is speaking of the need to join and build organizations and institutions, structures that house our aspirations and advance our interests as a people and then unite these structures into an overarching Movement for freedom, justice, equity and power over our destiny and daily lives.

Dr. King knows that if we are to claim respect for the humanity and dignity of a person, we must be concerned that they live lives of decency which honor this dignity. Thus, he also stresses the need to struggle for our economic security, a context in which “the dignity of the individual will flourish” and people will be able to improve and push their lives forward in positive and productive ways. In this regard, he argues for a guaranteed annual income and full employment for economic security and as a protection against “dislocations in the market,” “the prevalence of discrimination,” and “constant or frequent unemployment against our will.” He also advocates “new forms of work that enhance the social good.”

Dr. King does not discuss political power here, but in his book *Where Do We Go From Here: Community or Chaos*,” develops his ideas about this. He rejects funded programs as power and calls for our diligent work “to organize our strength into a compelling power so that government cannot elude our demands.” This, he reminds us, requires not only our own organization and Movement, but also coalitions and alliances with

other oppressed, progressive and struggling people.

Finally, King having urged us to avoid hate and violence, tells us that in all our strivings and struggle, ultimately, we must “honestly face the fact that the Movement must address itself to the question of restructuring the whole of American society.” We must question the existence of millions in poverty in the midst of such riches, the inequitable distribution of wealth, the monopoly on resources, and the cold calculus of a capitalism that puts profit above human life and the well-being of the world. Furthermore, it is not only capitalism we must confront, but also two other “inter-related evils,” racism and militarism. For, he says, “When I say question the whole society, it means ultimately coming to see that the problem of racism, the problem of economic exploitation and the problem of war are all tied together.”

**H**e concludes calling us to battle, motivated by a commitment to freedom, love of justice, and the nurturing of a “divine dissatisfaction” until victory is won. It will be a divine dissatisfaction with and well-won victory over unfreedom, injustice, uncaring, hypocrisy in high and low places, poverty, economic insecurity, political non-participation and powerlessness, warmongering, police violence and racism in its raw and disguised forms. He confesses that “the road ahead will not always be smooth.” There will be rocks, twists and turns, frustration and fatigue, setbacks, shattered dreams and heartache. But no matter how difficult and painful the struggle is, we must continue to push and move forward “with an audacious faith in the future,” respecting the sacrifices of those before us and the demands of our history, as reflected in the Black National Anthem and realizing that “the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice.”▲

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