

Martin Luther King Jr's Philosophy and its Relation to the ACTS Mission  
Presentation to Quantico Base  
Organized by the MC Human Resources Department  
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I am honored to have been invited to speak today in recognition of Martin Luther King, Jr. What I found to my amazement is that his vision is also a large part of the vision of Action in Community through Service (ACTS), of which I am the Executive Director. I have to admit when Paula contacted me to speak to you, I wasn't sure that I had the background to reflect on Martin Luther King's life and his vision or how to connect his vision to the work of ACTS. It seemed a stretch. Here is a man who is regarded as America's pre-eminent advocate of nonviolence and one of our greatest nonviolent leaders in world history. But then selfishly, I realized that the challenge to make this presentation also created the opportunity for me to learn more about Martin Luther King, Jr. than what I knew through some of his speeches and short essays I have read in the past.

What I decided to do was read the Autobiography of Martin Luther King Jr. edited by Clayborne Carson. I wanted to read how he saw himself and how he came to be the symbol for a whole movement of nonviolent change to create equality not only for the black people, but for anyone who is disenfranchised. What I took away from reading King's own words were three main observations. First, he was a man who, although thrust into a leadership role to end segregation, strived to remain humble and always kept in mind that he alone was not the source or summit of the social changes made to ban segregation, address economic disparity and promote international peace. I'm not sure what he would think about being only one

of two non-presidents to have a national holiday dedicated in his honor, but based on his writings, I'm sure he would want this day to provide a forum to continue work toward solving problems created through the triple evils of poverty, racism and militarism through nonviolent action and thereby creating what he calls "the Beloved Community".

My second observation is that his greatest source of strength came from his Christian faith. He was further inspired by the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi. Through his studies at Morehouse College, King came to understand that his Christian faith could not be limited to preaching on Sundays, but that it had profound power to create social change. He was torn in two directions at his graduation-academia or ministry. He was inclined to go into education, but he decided to accept an offer to become a pastor in Montgomery, Alabama; and lucky for us he did. He had the ultimate role in educating a nation on the lesson of basic human dignity. He had the gift to condense great philosophical thought from various sources into a practical form of action. When you read his six principles of nonviolence and the six steps of nonviolent change, one can say that here is a concrete way to move forward. Not that it is easy, but it does provides an outline and practical information. How many of us would read and reflect on the Bible, study Ghandi's teachings of nonviolence and the views of social evil by the philosopher Reinhold Neibuhr and be able to condense those ideas to what ultimately became the focus for nonviolent social change in the United States?

My third observation is that Martin Luther King did not just "talk the talk" but he "walked the walk". Actually, after I wrote that line, I realized that he

did actually walk the walk in the most segregated cities in America to lead the way to change. The nonviolent Freedom Marches were powerful messages because they created great havoc. Many people know that he worked with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in the south, but he also worked extensively in Chicago. Why Chicago? He said that “it is reasonable to believe that if the problems of Chicago, the nation’s second largest city [at that time], can be solved, they can be solved anywhere.” The emphasis was on ending the slum conditions, which was “the prototype of those chiefly responsible for the northern urban race problem.” His leadership style was not an academic experience, but a lived experience, so much so, that he moved his family to the Chicago island of poverty known as Lawndale- the worst of the worst. The conditions were so deplorable that he noticed a change in his own children’s behavior in only a few days of living there. It reminded him again of the conditions which make a ghetto an emotional pressure cooker. He was surrounded by people that said that the nonviolent movement would not work in the North. The problems were too complicated and much was different than in the South. King remained resolute. He believed that the nonviolent movement would work. The riots of 1966 greatly discouraged him, but he and the devotees of nonviolence persevered.

What gave King the courage to continue the work of nonviolent social change despite threats to himself and his family? He saw the result of the violence from those in power that did not want change. He lost several friends and saw people killed as a result of their nonviolent marches and sit-ins. One of the stories from his autobiography that made an impression on me was his reflection on the Bible verse about the Good Samaritan. If you

remember, this is the parable the Jesus tells about the injured man lying on the road after he had been attacked by bandits. First a Priest goes by, but doesn't stop to help, then a Levite goes by and doesn't stop and then finally a Samaritan goes by and he does stop. The Samaritan, who in those days was a "nobody", helps the injured man to an inn, where he pays to have the man taken care of until he recovers. King goes on to describe why the first two religious leaders of the community couldn't or wouldn't stop to help. Maybe they had to be at an important event, maybe because of religious beliefs they couldn't touch an "unclean" person or maybe they were afraid that they too would be attacked. He challenges us that the question shouldn't be "What will happen to me, if I stop, the question should be what will happen to the man lying in the road if I don't stop?" That is the question that I want to ask myself when I don't feel I have done enough or that what we are doing does seem to make a difference quick enough in trying to end the social ills of poverty, homelessness, and personal violence.

That's the vision of ACTS. Our vision is a community where private citizens, businesses, government and the faith community work together to create resources to alleviate hunger, homelessness and personal violence of domestic abuse and suicide.

Martin Luther King, Jr. said that "our ultimate end must be the creation of the beloved community." He did not believe that this was a lofty utopian goal, but a very achievable goal that can be attained by a critical mass of people committed to and trained in the philosophy and methods of nonviolence. I believe that he is right. I have seen it work through my connection at ACTS.

I saw this recently, when we had to close the food pantry. It was the “beloved community” that came to restock the pantry so that now we are overflowing with food. They knew as King said, “whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial outside agitator idea.” It doesn’t just happen to someone else, it also affects us.

The ACTS’ mission addresses some part of each of the triple evils of poverty, racism and militarism that King stated hinders the creation of the Beloved Community. He said that “we have allowed the poor to become invisible, and we have become angry when they make their presence felt....Let us march on poverty until no American parent has to skip a meal so that their children may eat. March on poverty until no starved man walks the streets of our cities and towns in search of jobs that do not exist.”

It is true that we try to believe that social ills such as domestic violence and suicide don’t exist. As a society, we are very good at hiding these difficult issues. They are difficult issues, but we can’t hide. We have to bring it out in the open and teach the community that what we think are personal ills truly affect the whole “beloved community”. King says that “true compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar.” It is creating jobs and providing the dignity of work. He goes on to say that “we must return to the fact that a person participates in this society primarily as an economic entity. At rock bottom we are neither poets, athletes, nor artists; our existence is centered on the fact that we are consumers, because we first must eat and have shelter to live and it is a phenomenon against which I rebel, but it remains a fact that “consumption” of goods and services is the *raison d’être*

of the vast majority of Americans. When persons are for some reason or other excluded from the consumer circle, there is discontent and unrest.” .

There is truth to that as much as I also don't want to admit it. We like to see ourselves in a loftier position. I believe we saw some of that with the housing crisis, which led to our economic downturn. It has brought out to a greater degree the issue of homelessness. The principle of “housing first” is in line with King's thoughts on the basic needs of man for food and shelter. Before we try to deal with the issues that lead to homelessness, we need to provide the housing and then deal with the problems that led to the loss of housing. Let's feed the hungry first, then deal with the reasons of no food on the table whether that is unemployment or access to nutritious food.

Our ultimate goal is to address the reasons for poverty, domestic violence, suicide and homelessness. Here are a few examples on our efforts to alleviate these social ills. As I mentioned before, we do provide support through our emergency assistance office for immediate basic living expenses such as utility bills and our food pantry, but we know that the root of the problem is income. We will soon start our CNA training program in partnership with NOVA Community College. We hope to provide access to employment in the health field for people who might have been considered unemployable because they had no job skills or enough education. As King heard over and over in his experience, work and dignity are so closely linked.

Through our ACTS/Turning Points program, we provide a holistic domestic violence intervention/prevention program that addresses the whole family,

not just the victim or abuser. As we deal with individuals who are in the midst of domestic violence, we also need to educate the community on how they may be complicit in the violence by not bringing out to the light of day. We have created a Loss Team through our 24 hour crisis Helpline program, that surrounds families and friends whose loved one attempted or was successful in suicide. Suicide is one of the easiest ills to address. Talk about it, listen to someone. Talking about suicide does not make someone want to take their life. If they have already been thinking about it, talking and listening is a way to stop their thoughts of moving to action. And finally, through our housing program, we begin by providing immediate housing through our shelter, which can lead to our transitional housing program and ultimately to permanent housing. We are a drop in the bucket based on the need, but we continue to seek solutions in partnership with so many others working on the problem.

I have been inspired by reading the words of Martin Luther King, Jr. It is good that we have a day dedicated to him, because it does remind us that one person can make a difference. Not alone, but a reminder that we each have a part. He states in his autobiography that he was happy to be living when he did despite the problems of the times. It is a reminder to us that we each individually have to be engaged in some way whether that is in a smaller context of our home and work or the bigger context in large scale advocacy. I want to end with the following quote from Martin Luther King found in the last chapter of his autobiography entitled “Unfulfilled Dreams”, which I found reassuring as I continue in my work at ACTS and in the community.

“The struggle is always there. It gets discouraging sometimes. It gets very disenchanting sometimes. ...it seems that your head is going against a concrete wall. It seems to mean nothing. And so often as you set out to build the temple of peace you are left lonesome; you are left discouraged; you are left bewildered.

Well, that is the story of life. And the thing that makes me happy is that I can hear a voice crying through the vista of time, saying: ‘It may not come today or it may not come tomorrow, but it is well that it is within thine heart. It’s well that you are trying.’ You may not see it. The dream may not be fulfilled, but it’s just good that you have a desire to bring it into reality. It’s well that it’s in thine heart.”