

Building a Movement to Grow Our Souls

By Grace Lee Boggs
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I am delighted to be here this afternoon. Ever since I came to Detroit to live 50 years ago, I've wanted to visit this beautiful place. Now, finally, thanks to my old friend and Avalon Bakery co-owner Jackie Victor, I've made it. At the age of 89 going on 90. I am, as you can see, a bit wobbly on my feet. As I like to say, I have three pair of glasses, two hearing aids, very few teeth but, fortunately, most of my marbles.

I can't think of a better time to be speaking to a Bioneers gathering because whether Kerry or Bush wins in the upcoming election, our country urgently needs solution-oriented, locally-grounded visionaries like yourselves to patiently explain to other Americans that our defeat in Iraq is not only a disaster but an opportunity to redefine and rebuild our relationships with each other, to the Earth and to the rest of the world.

This is how I have arrived at this conviction.

Two weeks ago, over the October 1-3 weekend, I participated in a small gathering of about 20 diverse individuals from various Spirituality and Social Justice groups, brought together at the Fetzer Institute in Kalamazoo by the Institute for Democratic Renewal. The gathering began with a very loose agenda because the facilitators, my old friends Margo Adair and Bill Aal, of Tools for Change, were confident from their knowledge of the invitees and the crisis in which our country was engulfed that an agenda would emerge organically.

I wasn't involved in the planning and hadn't the vaguest notion what to expect. I didn't even know until a couple of days before the gathering that the conveners had included in the reading materials mailed out to participants two pieces by myself: An article entitled "The Beloved Community of Martin Luther King Jr." which appeared last spring in various magazines, and "Going Beyond Black and White," a speech I made back in 1998.

I also had no idea who would be there. To my delight and astonishment the first person I saw on my arrival Thursday evening was my old friend, Vincent Harding, who worked closely with Martin Luther King Jr. and SNCC in the South during the 1960s and in 1967 on King's historic Anti-Vietnam War speech at Riverside Church.

Vincent is the author of this little pamphlet *A Way of Faith, A Time for Courage*, and this little book, *Martin Luther King: The Inconvenient Hero*, which has gone through six printings since it was first published in 1966.

The next person who greeted me was John Maguire whom I had never met but who, I soon learned, had attended Crozier Theological Seminary with King in the 1950s and is now President Emeritus of Claremont College.

Among other participants whom I was also meeting for the first time were Shirley Strong,, the African-American executive director of Project Change; Kathy Wan Povi Sanchez, an extraordinary Native American scientist who has been active in the anti-nuclear movement; Kevin Ramirez of the Central Committee for Conscientious Objectors (who with Dan Edwards opened Sunday morning with a great rap); Carlos Rafael Alices Negros, who teaches at the Fannie Lou Hamer Freedom High School in the South Bronx; Claudia Castenada of the Women's Theological Center; and Dorsey Blake, Senior Pastor, Church for Fellowship of All People.

At lunch on Friday, John Maguire and I discovered that we shared with Vincent a profound belief in the timeliness of the ideas that MLK had been developing in the last two years of his life, especially his conviction that the only way to overcome the giant triplets of racism, militarism and materialism was by making a radical revolution in our values.

So we proposed that the gathering include a panel discussion by Vincent, John and myself. During this discussion which took place on Saturday morning Vincent voiced the disquiet that many of us have been feeling because Kerry, like Bush, believes that terrorism can be defeated by killing terrorists and is asking for support from American voters on his promise to be tougher and more effective in the killing.

After that, things just took off. Step by step participants arrived at the idea of developing a message of concern, tentatively entitled THESE ARE THE TIMES TO GROW OUR SOULS, to be ready within a few weeks so that it can be distributed widely after the election and especially at MLK birthday celebrations in January 2005.

The statement is still being finalized.. Basically it calls upon Americans of every walk of life and of all political persuasions to come together in formal and informal conversations in our families, neighborhoods, workplaces, churches, synagogues, temples, schools and universities, with our relatives, neighbors, co-workers, classmates and teachers, doctors and patients

- to explore the non-violent approach of Dr. Martin Luther King as an alternative to the use of military force and his projection of the Beloved Community in order to reverse the polarization between anti-war and pro-war Americans that threatens to be even more divisive and dangerous than the polarization between anti-Vietnam War and pro-Vietnam War protagonists.
- to explore ways by which we can grow our souls to keep pace with our technological development, especially transforming our relationships with one another, with the Earth, and with other peoples in the world.

The statement especially urges participants in these conversations to

- Listen patiently and respectfully to one another, especially those with whom we disagree, because our aim is not to win arguments but to create the beloved community and a country that we will all be proud to call our own.. We need to be very conscious, as radicals rarely are, that those with whom we disagree will not disappear off the face of the earth but will continue to be our neighbors, fellow workers, classmates, etc.
- Explore how to transform ourselves, our relationships with one another, to our institutions and to Mother Earth...
- Organize actions that do not assail opponents but rather demonstrate positive changes that will benefit the entire community.
- Celebrate and support our visionaries who give us music, dance, poetry, film, laughter, tears and new ways of seeing ourselves and our world
- Create places and events where people of different generations, backgrounds, beliefs and experiences can come together to share stories and hopes, developing new ways of thinking and being together
- Hold close to our hearts and minds the imagination, passion and energy of young people who have the greatest stake in the future.
- Read and probe the works of Dr. King, especially those in which he warns that our technological power has outrun our spiritual powers..
- Organize events for Martin Luther King Day in January 2005 that emphasize not only MLK's dreams of yesterday but his challenges for today.

Whatever the outcome of the November 2nd election, the work of healing our people and our country is beginning. By joining with those around us to explore the importance of MLK's ideas on Non-violence and the Beloved Community in our present crisis, we can work together to create the ways of living and being that will give birth to a new, more loving, more productive, and life-affirming country that all of us will be proud to call our own.

Our sense is that at this painful and dangerous moment in the continuing development of our country; there is not only a need but a hunger for this kind of dialogue in many very diverse individuals and groups throughout this country, and that therefore we have an extraordinary opportunity to help give birth to a great movement that ties together all the basic and interconnected issues now confronting us.

Over the last 60 years I have had the enormous privilege of participating in most of the great humanizing movements of the second half of the last century – labor, civil rights, black power, women’s, Asian American, environmental justice, antiwar. Each was a tremendously transformative experience, expanding my understanding of what it means to be an American and a human being, and challenging me to keep deepening my thinking about how to bring about radical social change.

However, I cannot recall any previous period when the issues were so basic, so interconnected and so demanding of everyone living in this country, regardless of race, ethnicity, class, gender, age or national origin.

What is going to motivate us to start caring for our biosphere instead of using our mastery of technology to increase the volume and speed at which we are making our planet uninhabitable for other species and eventually for ourselves?

How are we going to make our livings in an age when Hi-Tech and the export of jobs overseas have brought us to the point where the number of workers needed to produce goods and services is constantly diminishing? Where will we get the imagination, the courage and the determination to reconceptualize the meaning and purpose of Work in a society that is becoming increasingly jobless?

What is going to happen to cities like Detroit that were once the arsenal of democracy? Now that they’ve been abandoned by industry, are we just going to throw them away? Or can we rebuild, redefine and respirit them as models of 21st Century self-reliant, sustainable multicultural communities? Who is going to begin this new story?

How are we going to redefine Education so that 30-50% of inner city children do not drop out of school, thus ensuring that large numbers will end up in prison? Is it enough to call for “Education, not Incarceration”? Or does our topdown educational system, created a hundred years ago to prepare an immigrant population for factory work, bear a large part of the responsibility for the escalation in incarceration?

How are we going to build a 21st century America in which people of all races and ethnicities live together in harmony, and Euro-Americans in particular embrace their new role as one among many minorities constituting the new multi-ethnic majority?

And, especially since 9/11, how are we to achieve reconciliation with the two-thirds of the world that increasingly resents our economic, military and cultural domination? Can we accept their anger as a challenge rather than a threat? Out of our new vulnerability can we recognize that our safety now depends on our loving and caring for the peoples of the world as we love and care for our own families? Or can we conceive of security only in terms of the Patriot Act and exercising our formidable military power?

We live at a very dangerous time because these questions are no longer abstractions. Our lives, the lives of our children and future generations, and even the

survival of the planet depend on our willingness to transform ourselves into active planetary and global citizens who, as Martin Luther King Jr. put it, “develop an overriding loyalty to mankind as a whole in order to preserve the best in their individual society.”

But this time of great danger is also a time of great opportunity . Over the last year and a half, by meeting violence with violence, by resorting to military means to eliminate the threat of terrorism, we have ruined or ended the lives of thousands of our young people and tens of thousands of Iraqi children women and men, Yet we have only made the world more dangerous for ourselves, our children and everyone else. At the same time our inevitable defeat in Iraq is creating a situation here at home where those who have supported the administration’s war in Iraq are likely to seek scapegoats for their frustrations and anger, as the Germans did after World War, thus aiding and abetting the onset of Hitler and the Holocaust.

So it is not only idealism but realism that calls upon us to seize this opportunity to engage Americans in widespread and wide-ranging conversations to explore the ideas of Dr. King to help us redefine what it means to be an American in the 21st century.