

NOW IS THE TIME
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NOW IS THE TIME for some serious conversation about how to grow our souls.

As we say in the Call to the Beloved Community:

“Three years after 9/11 the wounds of people, inflicted upon one another and on our earth long before the Twin Towers fell, have clouded our minds and hardened our hearts. In the name of fighting terrorism we have made the world less safe. By meeting violence with ever-greater violence we have ended or ruined the lives of thousands of young people and tens of thousands of Iraqi children, women and men. Engulfed in a quagmire from which there seems to be no exit, we are a polarized people. The divide between rich and poor is greater than at any time in the past 60 years.”

That’s why won’t be talking tonight about King’s 1963 dream that “one day little black girls and boys will walk hand in hand with little white girls and boys as sisters and brothers.”

Instead I will be sharing what I’ve learned from studying the last three very difficult years of King’s life - from 1965 to 1968 - when he was struggling to come up with answers to the new challenges that had emerged from a decade of hard-fought but ultimately successful non-violent struggles and demonstrations, beginning with the year-long Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955-6 and culminating in the 50,000 strong march from Selma To Montgomery, Alabama, in the spring of 1965 that forced Congress to pass the Voting Rights Act..

On August 6, 1965 King was among the black and white leaders who joined President Johnson in celebrating the signing of the Voting Rights Act.

Less than a week later, on August 11, black youth in Watts, California, protesting the police killing of a speeding driver, exploded in an uprising in which 35 people died and thousands were arrested. When King flew to Watts on August 15, he discovered to his surprise that few black youth in Watts had even heard of him or his strategy of non-violence and that, despite the loss of lives, they were claiming victory because their violence had forced the authorities to acknowledge their existence.

The Watts uprising forced King to recognize how little attention he himself had paid to urban black youth. So in early 1966 he rented an apartment in Chicago and began to get a sense of how the anger which exploded in Watts was rooted in the poverty and

powerlessness which are the daily experience of black youth in urban ghettos. He also discovered the futility of trying to involve these dispossessed young people in the kinds of non-violent mass marches that had worked in the South. And they gave him a lot to think about when they demanded to know why they should be non-violent in Chicago when the U.S. government was employing such massive violence against poor peasants in Vietnam.

Soon thereafter, on the March through Mississippi in June 1966, King again found himself on the defensive when SNCC activists like Stokely Carmichael and Willie Ricks insisted that demanding Black Power by all means necessary was the only way to meet the needs of urban black youth who were being ignored by the power structure and the civil rights movement.

Meanwhile, King was also being criticized by both blacks and whites because of the opposition to the Vietnam War which he had voiced in the summer of 1965. NAACP leaders and supporters of the civil rights movement like Jackie Robinson and Ralph Bunche, concerned that opposition to the war would antagonize President Johnson, were saying, "Peace and civil rights don't mix. Negroes have no business getting involved in foreign policy issues. They should stick to the struggle against racism."

At the same time a backlash was developing in the South against the rights blacks had gained as a result of their struggles, J. Edgar Hoover and the FBI had embarked on a vicious campaign to destroy King, and his life was in danger every time he walked out the door.

Searching for theoretical and strategic solutions to these challenges, King was often depressed and close to the edge during this period. For example, after missing a flight for a speaking engagement, he told his wife, "I know why I missed my flight. I really don't want to go. I get tired of going and not having any answers to give people."

But King did not give up. Working 24 hour days, traveling hundreds of thousands of miles a year to make hundreds of speeches, he kept searching for answers which could be tested in practice. That is why it troubles me that so few Movement intellectuals and activists have paid serious attention to the ideas and strategies that King developed in this period. At the very least, they provide a starting point for grappling with the huge interconnected and seemingly intractable questions we now face.

For example,

- How do we make our livings in a society that is becoming increasingly jobless because of Hi-Tech and outsourcing?
- How do we rebuild our dying cities?
- How do we redefine education so that 30-50% of inner city children do not drop out of school, thus ensuring that large numbers of them will end up in prison?
- How do we get out of the quagmire in Iraq?
- How do we begin to reduce the widening gap between rich and poor in this country and between the global North and the global South?

Three works by King in 1967, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos Or Community?*; *Time To Break The Silence*; and *The Trumpet Of Conscience* read almost as if they had been written today.

Where Do We Go From Here, published in early 1967, begins with King's recognition that with Selma and the Voting Rights Act we have come to the end of the protest phase of the civil rights revolution and entered into a new phase which requires structural changes in the system in order to eliminate poverty and unemployment and close the gap between rich and poor in this country and around the world.

To bring about these changes, King explains, will require more than demands for Black Power which, although emotionally gratifying, are often more an expression of disappointment and despair than of the hope and vision necessary to mobilize people in struggle. Our challenge, King said, is to organize the strength and compelling power of poor people, white as well as black, as workers, consumers and voters, to make demands on the government for sweeping measures, e.g. a guaranteed annual income for everyone. We need to turn the ghetto into a vast school, to make every street corner into a forum, every houseworker and laborer into a demonstrator, a voter, a canvasser and a student.

However, to be successful in this organizing effort, we have to go beyond usual politics and undergo the kind of mental and spiritual re-evaluation that will enable us to recognize that *the richer we have become materially, the poorer we have become morally and spiritually*, so that we can begin working systematically to bridge the huge gulf between our scientific and our moral progress.

That means we must undergo a revolution of values. We must 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.

This revolution of values must take us beyond traditional capitalism and communism. Capitalism, he said, encourages cutthroat competition and selfish ambitions that inspire men to be more I-centered than thou-centered. Equally communism reduces men to a cog in the wheel of the state. Each represents a partial truth. Communism fails to see the truth in individualism; capitalism fails to realize that life is social. The good and just society is a socially conscious democracy which reconciles the truths of individualism and collectivism.

A few months later, in *Time To Break Silence*, his soul-stirring anti-war speech at Riverside Church on April 4, King expanded on what he meant by a revolution in values.

"The war in Vietnam, he said, "is but a symptom of a far deeper malady within the American spirit. We are on the wrong side of a world revolution because we refuse to give up the privileges and the pleasures that come from the immense profits of overseas investment."

We have come to value things more than people. Our technological development has outrun our spiritual development. We have lost our sense of community, of interconnection and participation.

In order to get on the right side of that revolution, he said, we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values.

“A true revolution of values,” he said, “will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life's highway. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar. It sees that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring.”

“A true revolution of values will soon look uneasily on the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth. With righteous indignation, it will look across the seas and see individual capitalists of the West investing huge sums of money in Asia, Africa and South America, only to take the profits out with no concern for the social betterment of the countries, and say: ‘This is not just.’ The Western arrogance of feeling that it has everything to teach others and nothing to learn from them is not just. A true revolution of values will lay hands on the world order and say of war: ‘This way of settling differences is not just.’ A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death.”

Then comes a paragraph in which by simply replacing the word “communism” with “terrorism,” King could be talking to us today.

“This kind of positive revolution of values is our best defense against communism. War is not the answer. Communism will never be defeated by the use of atomic bombs or nuclear weapons. We must not engage in a negative anti-communism, but rather in a positive thrust for democracy, realizing that our greatest defense against communism is to take offensive action in behalf of justice. We must with positive action seek to remove those conditions of poverty, insecurity and injustice which are the fertile soil in which the seed of communism grows and develops.”

That paragraph reminds me of a story about her 4 year old grandson that a woman told at a luncheon of the Detroit Women’s Federation shortly after 9/11. After watching the TV play and replay of the hijacked planes crashing into the World Trade Center, he asked, “Grandma, why do they hate us so much?”

Unfortunately few Americans, even among the most passionate anti-war demonstrators, ask ourselves this question. If we did, we would be talking more about the changes we have to make in our own lives, especially how we must begin living more simply so that others can simply live. We would also be urging grassroots Americans to learn from the many local groups in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America who are

struggling to create more self-reliant ways of living that can save their communities and the environment against the ravages of globalization.

The final work by King in this period that deserves careful attention is *The Trumpet of Conscience*, his November-December 1967 sermons in which King proposes ways to address the alienation which young people experience in today's world.

“This generation,” he says, “is engaged in a cold war not only with the earlier generation. It is not the familiar and normal hostility of the young groping for independence. It has a new quality of bitter antagonism and confused anger which suggests basic values are being contested.”

The source of this alienation is that our society has made material growth and technological advance an end in itself, robbing people of participation, so that human beings become smaller while their works become bigger.

The way to overcome this alienation, he said, is by changing our priorities. Instead of pursuing economic productivity, we need to expand our uniquely human powers, especially our Soul Power or our capacity for Agape which is the Love that is ready to go to any length to restore community.

This Love, King explains, is not some sentimental weakness. We can learn its practical meaning from the young people who joined the civil rights movement, putting middle class values of wealth and careers in second place, taking off their Brooks Brothers attire and putting on overalls to work in the isolated rural South because they felt the need for more direct ways of learning that would strengthen both society and themselves.

What we need now in our dying cities, King said, are ways to provide young people with similar opportunities to engage in self-transforming and structure-transforming direct action.

That is why we founded Detroit Summer thirteen years ago.

Just imagine how much safer and livelier our neighborhoods would be almost overnight if we reorganized education along the lines of Detroit Summer; if instead of trying to keep our children isolated in classrooms for 12 years and more, we engaged them in community-building activities with the same audacity with which the civil rights movement engaged them in desegregation activities 40 years ago: planting community gardens, recycling waste, organizing neighborhood arts and health festivals, rehabbing houses, painting public murals. By giving our children and young people a better reason to learn than just the individualistic one of getting a job or making more money, by encouraging them to exercise their Soul Power we would get their cognitive juices flowing. Learning would come from practice which has always been the best way to learn.

Instead of trying to bully young people to remain in classrooms organized to prepare them for middle class careers, we need to recognize that the reason why so many young people drop out from inner city schools is because they are voting with their feet against a system which sorts, tracks, tests, and rejects or certifies them like products of a factory. They are crying out for another kind of education that values them as human beings and gives them opportunities to exercise their Soul Power.

One of the main lessons I have learned from King's struggles in the last three years of his life is that Soul Power is not something otherworldly or mystical and that Love is not some sentimental weakness. Both are integral and indispensable aspects of the human experience, as important as and maybe even more important at this point than the one-dimensional, technical knowledge we get from Science. Studying the ideas and strategies that King developed between 1965 and 1968 can help us make the philosophical leap to the plateau where we can think and talk comfortably and naturally about our Spirituality and Soul Power and develop new ways to apply this power to the rebuilding of our communities and cities – instead of only thinking and talking about Power with the so-called realism of Machiavelli.

That is why our celebration of King's birthday in these times must not be just ceremonial. In a very immediate and practical sense we, as educators, parents, citizens and students, can use this occasion to help us address the crisis in our families, schools, neighborhoods and country. By adopting King's "person-oriented" approach, we will be able to recognize that our children and young people are at a time in their lives when they are asking questions of the world and need to be part of creating the answers. By encouraging them to exercise their Soul Power in our neighborhoods, as a natural and normal part of the school curriculum, we will be giving them opportunities to transform themselves and at the same time bring the neighbor back into the 'hood.'