

Catching up with Martin: The 'fierce urgency' of King's Vision for
Current and Future Leaders

Founder's Day/ODK Annual Induction
Washington & Lee University, Lexington, Virginia
January 17, 2008

On this very occasion 56 years ago, I was perched on the edge of my folding chair on the floor of Doremus Gymnasium waiting and wondering if my name would be called as an inductee of ODK, long odds since I was only a junior. When my name was announced, I became a candidate for champion of the standing broad jump as I leapt toward the platform beaming like a wild man. My smile was incongruous given the gravity of the times. Although the dominant script then was not, as today, focused so obsessively on narcissism, the pursuit of private wealth, and the aggressive, increasingly ritualized humiliation of the poor, it was bad, sobering, serious, somber: The Korean War, Washington corruption, and the miasmal blanket of McCarthyism covering the country, about which Dean Leyburn had just given us a 50-minute analysis and warning in his Founder's Day address. Contrasting what he called the seven foundational values of America, personified in Washington and in Lee – liberty, democracy, equality, justice, tolerance, humility, faith¹ – he talked about the gap between the vision of America and our sorry current state. He characterized McCarthyism as dangerous, demoralizing, and demonic and challenged the nation – and particularly this University as an academic community – to resist, yea, rise up and slay this beast.

I vividly remember the structure as well as the substance of that address. Since that Founder's Day was being celebrated on the very birthday of George Washington, he invoked Washington and Robert E. Lee as great figures to whom we might look for strength to resist the darker sides of national life and inspiration for an alternative vision that would help the nation throw off our torpor, turn the corner and embark on a new direction. He asserted that General Washington and President Lee personified the personal virtues that the way ahead demanded: Courage, fairness, integrity, a sense of community, a commitment to freedom, above all, truth-telling. He must have used the word 'vision' a dozen or more times in that address.

I intend to use Dean Leyburn's structure today, recalling again those virtues our founders embodied and adding a third person whose 79th birthday was day before yesterday and whose life we'll be celebrating throughout next week: Martin Luther King Jr. Including Martin is especially poignant to me since less than a year before that Founder's Day, 1952, my classmate Ruel Tyson and I had responded to the invitation for a weekend's exploration from a little theological seminary in Crozer, Pennsylvania. Once there, we were billeted with students, and I was assigned as his roommate for the weekend, a seminarian from Atlanta – three years my senior – M. L. King Jr. There began a friendship, a colleagueship that would last 17 years until his murder in April 1968. Friendship reinforces my conviction that we should today make Martin Luther King Jr. a member of our Founder's Day assembly, an honorary contemporary 'founder': Washington, Lee, and King.

If Washington's vision of national independence, a caring citizenry and a benevolent sovereignty was preeminently pertinent for the 18th century – and remains so today; if Lee's vision of personal honor, educational excellence and a restored land was preeminently pertinent for the 19th century – and remains so today; then Martin Luther King's vision of a transformed world composed of communities that are caring and compassionate, inclusive and collaborative, where individuals are made new and institutions restructured, the vision of a world he called 'beloved communities' (though enunciated 40+ years ago) is and remains preeminently pertinent as we make our way into and through the 21st century. We with privilege are called with a 'fierce urgency,' said King, "to speak for the weak, for the voiceless, for the victims of our nation, and for those

¹ This exact naming and order is to be found in Anne Marie Slaughter's *The Idea That is America* (Basic Books, 2007)

it calls ‘enemy,’ for nothing written or said can make these humans any less our brothers.” With King we add the virtues of justice, equity, fairness, and compassion.

None of these three luminaries was a saint, an icon, nor – in Martin’s case – simply a martyred hero. All were people who generated their distinctive, enduring visions out of struggle.

In late 1966 King was being criticized by both blacks and whites because of his opposition to the Vietnam War, which he had first 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 the challenges of his time, King was often depressed and close to the edge during this period. *But he did not give up.* Out of this churn, this crucible, emerged a vision that really provides a starting point for grappling with the huge interconnected and seemingly intractable questions he faced, foresaw, versions of which we now face.

For example,

1. How do we make our livings in a society that continues to become increasingly jobless because of hi-tech and outsourcing?
2. How do we rebuild our dying cities?
3. 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 deal with an America in which millions of jobs are outsourced or else badly degraded through the ‘temping’ of the US workforce, with stagnant or falling real wages and salaries over three decades for those in the middle (even as incomes and real wealth accumulation at the top soar to stratospheric heights)? What to do about an economy in which many fulltime workers either find themselves homeless or must rely on food stamps or food pantries to feed their families?²
4. How do we begin to reduce the widening gap – never wider – between rich and poor in this country and between the global North and the global South?
5. How do we get out of the quagmire of war – for him it was Viet Nam, for us, Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Middle East?
6. How are we going to be a 21st century world 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 multiethnic majority?

² Peter Laarman in *Reflections: Faith and Citizenship in Turbulent Times*, Vol. 94, Number 2, Page 55

7. Especially since 9/11, 2001 how are we to achieve reconciliation with the two-thirds of the world that increasingly resents – in many places outright hates – 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, torturing captives, unconstitutional surveillance, unconscionable interrogations and exercising our formidable military power?

In the last two-and-a-half years of his life, King most clearly enunciated the three cornerstones of his enduring, timely vision. I propose that we look briefly at each. As 1966 ended, King had recognized that we had 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 wrote, will require more than identity politics, 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 house worker 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-technological and our moral progress.

The first element in his vision was a call for us – all of us – to undergo a **revolution of values**. This is the first element in the new vision. 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 – the world’s three fundamental, seemingly intractable scourges, are incapable of being conquered.” This revolution of values must take us beyond the then current traditional isms. Capitalism, he said, (try using the term ‘globalization’ in place of capitalism and see if it does not work as well) encourages cutthroat competition, corporatization, and selfish ambitions that inspire people to be more I-centered than thou-centered. Equally important, communism (try using ‘terrorism’ and see if it doesn’t work) reduces people to cogs in wheels, victims to ideology, faceless enemies. Each represents a partial truth. “I have the audacity to believe if we radically changed our values,” King declared, “that all people everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality and freedom for their spirits.” That’s an enduring cornerstone in King’s vision. It’s not an ism, he said. It is the first conviction, the first step in a necessary **revolution of values**.

A few months ago Bill Moyers did a piece that so parallels and echoes Martin’s vision that I’ll offer an initial excerpt here and a couple later as examples of the pertinence of this slightly updated King. King declares the necessity of a **revolution of values**. Moyers calls King’s **revolution of values** the necessity of a **new story**.

“America needs more than an endless fare of polarizing, ever-more acrimonious debates. America needs a different story. It is a story that must begin with the reality of the anonymous, disquieting daily struggle of ordinary people, including the most marginalized and vulnerable Americans but also young workers and elders and parents, families and communities, searching for dignity and fairness against long odds in a cruel market world...the leaders and thinkers and activists who honestly tell that story and speak passionately of the moral and religious values it

puts in play will be the first political generation since the New Deal to win power back for the people.”³

The second necessary action, declared King in late 1967, is to **change our priorities** quite fundamentally. Instead of relentlessly pursuing economic productivity, personal acquisition, consumerism, 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. We have to **change our priorities**. “If we don’t,” King said, “We shall be dragged down the long, dark and shameful corridors of time reserved for those who possessed power without compassion, might without morality, and strength without sight.” From macho to **compassion**, from brutality to **morality**, from dominance to **vision**.

Here’s how Moyers expresses King’s point.

“We have to assert and live by new priorities. We keep pinning all our hopes on economic growth, which by its very nature is valueless and cannot alone provide answers to social and moral questions that arise in the face of resurgent crises. Take a very few – and quite modest – priorities as a starting point. America is ready for the change that would follow. One of our leading analysts of public opinion, Daniel Yankelovich, reports that a majority want social cohesion and common ground based on **pragmatism and compromise, patriotism and diversity**. But because of the great disparities in wealth, our ‘shining city on the hill’ has become a gated community whose privileged occupants, surrounded by a moat of money and protected by a political system seduced with cash into subservience, are removed from the common life of the country. The wreckage of this abdication by elites is all around us. Our preeminent current priority or value is the freedom to accumulate wealth without social or democratic responsibilities and the license to buy the political system right out from under everyone else, so that democracy no longer has the ability to hold capitalism accountable for the good of the whole. Remembering Plutarch’s warning that ‘an imbalance between rich and poor is the oldest and most fatal ailment of all republics,’ we need to declare 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.”

This way of stating how changing our priorities would look takes us directly into the third key element in King’s vision, the enduring centrality and necessity of **radically re-understood love**. “We can trust that this power can be action in us,” King said. “It is in our connectedness to each other and everything. Life springs from it. And it is inherent in us and in everything else.” This Love, King explains, is not some sentimental weakness. This love is political as well as personal. It is capable of constructing new networks and new relationships. It is a love **based on differences**. It generates hope. 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 Brother 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. (This sounds very much like the charter of the Shepherd Poverty Program.)

A fundamental key to King’s vision that emerges toward his death is that **Soul Power** and **Love** are both integral and indispensable aspects of the human experience, as important as and maybe even more important at this

³ These excerpts are from Bill Moyers’ piece, *For America’s Sake*, from the January 22, 2007, issue of *The Nation*. They reflect remarks made at a gathering on December 12, 2006, in New York of publishers, justice institute leaders, and activists.

point than the one-dimensional, technical knowledge we get from science. We need, he said, to make this philosophical leap to a place where we can think and talk comfortably and naturally about **Spirituality, Soul Power, and Love** 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.

King puts these three elements – ***a revolution in values, radically changing our priorities, the centrality of tough love*** – together in a way that leads him to declare: “No longer can we view radical social change as a change only in property relations or in transferring power from the top to the bottom. Henceforth, we must conceive of it as a process that transforms both ourselves and our institutions, that fuses politics with ethics and integrates ends and means.” This vision requires a recapitulation of how change occurs everywhere at all times in a web of innerconnectedness. As Margaret Wheatley puts it in *Leadership and Modern Science*, we need to replace thinking of change quantitatively in terms of masses and Newtonian physics and think instead organically and locally, in terms of webs and quantum physics.

“In a web, the potential impact of local actions bears no relationship to their size. When we choose to act locally, we may be wanting to influence the entire system. But we work where we are, with the system that we know, the one we can get our arms around. From a Newtonian perspective, our efforts often seem too small, and we doubt that our actions will make a difference. Or perhaps we hope that our small efforts will contribute incrementally to large-scale change. Step by step, system by system, we aspire to develop enough mass or force to alter the larger system. But a quantum view explains the success of small efforts quite differently. Acting locally allows us to be inside the movement and flow of the system, participating in all those complex events occurring simultaneously. We are more likely to be sensitive to the dynamics of this system, and thus more effective. However, changes in small places also affect the global system, not through incrementalism, but because every small system participates in an unbroken wholeness. Activities in one part of the whole create effects that appear in distant places. Because of these unseen connections, there is potential value in working anywhere in the system. We never know how our small activities will affect others through the invisible fabric of our connectedness. In this exquisitely connected world, it’s never a question of ‘critical mass.’ It’s always about ‘critical connections.’

In recent years, however, the degeneration of actual 20th century revolutions and the increasing pathology of globalization, global capitalism – its commodification of all aspects of our lives, its destruction of communities and of natural wealth in order to create paper wealth, its pushing the life-support systems of the planet to the point of collapse, and its systematic creation of an over-consuming Global North and an impoverished Global South – calls for a new kind of revolutionary movement. By the time of his death in 1968, King had provided a vision for it – one that we have yet to realize.

Dean Leyburn declared on Founder’s Day in 1952: “The way to honor Washington, the way to honor Lee, is to live their vision and to commit our lives to their vision.” The final message of Martin Luther King is that it is still not too late to begin living the vision. It simply will not die. It will not go away. That is a peculiar feature of truth. The fact that nearly 40 years after his assassination we continue to gather, drawn by the compelling power of that magnetic vision, bears witness to its enduring quality. The way to honor Martin Luther King is to live, to begin collectively to actualize, that vision, ***transforming our values, reordering our priorities, rooting our social activism in deep spirituality, living out the centrality of a world-encircling love***. Our greatest tribute to Dr. King would be to contribute to the making of the world he envisaged but did not live to see. That is surely a challenge to leaders young and old, leaders worldwide. It is surely a clear, firm vision to guide us. It is nothing less than a life’s calling.

How to do this? By making Martin Luther King's vision our own and sharing this story far and wide. This story is about love and justice. It is about the promise of a world where no one is left out. It is about compassion and companionship. It is about radical inclusiveness. It is about caring for the earth and each other.⁴ It is structural, it is institutional, it is global.

Bill Moyers once again says it superbly:

“Go now with this story and tell it on the mountains. From the rooftops, tell it. From your laptops, tell it. From the street corners and 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 at 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 schoolchildren. Tell it – for America's sake, for the world's sake, for God's sake.”

⁴ I am deeply indebted to Grace Lee Boggs, friend, conversation partner, and colleague with whom I've discussed these issues for years. Entire paragraphs of this presentation are Grace's, as well as mine.