

# Hope and Despair on King Day

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A HOLIDAY IN HONOR OF MARTIN LUTHER KING is a painful and bitter thing in these times of war and growing inequality. For some, King is a symbol of the nation's painful yet ultimately successful struggle to end segregation as public policy. For others, including a growing number of black Americans, King is a failed prophet whose movement for justice and equality has lost to the political heirs of those who were indifferent to racial oppression or fought to hold onto American apartheid.

One senses great despair about the future among black Americans. We are anxious for our kids, too many of whom are barred from a chance at a good life because we are too poor and too black to live in communities with good schools. We are poorer than our white counterparts because we were not given access to decent schools, and our kids will be forced to inherit our deficits in a viciously competitive global economic environment. Housing, health and safety are less available to us than our white counterparts because we are poorer than they are.

Some of our problems are, to be sure, made worse by our own self-destructive ways. We are sicker than other Americans because we have lousy eating habits and treat our bodies quite badly. We are less safe than we might be because we hurt and kill each other out of anger or spite. Too many of our well-off kids do not achieve in schools because they do not take the academic enterprise seriously. In these and other ways, we disgrace the memory of King and ourselves by not seizing the opportunities made possible by his work and ultimate sacrifice.

But our primary problem is that our country has turned its back on King's message of justice and equality. When black folks meet and talk politics these days, they lament the long "winter in America" that has reigned in the 25 years since Ronald Reagan came to office. The doors to good schools and hospitals remain closed to so many of us because conservatives resist real equal opportunity in the name of small

government and low taxes. We live in a time where good public education is a privilege for those who can buy into the right community, instead of a right for all kids—just as health care is a disappearing job benefit instead of a basic social good.

The conservatives who rule the country despise most blacks, which is not surprising given their forebears and their current public. But the liberals have also abandoned King by concluding that the fight for justice can only be waged when they run the government. The liberals forget King's most basic lesson: Justice is alive when we treat each other with great love, respect and care. Justice is a collective achievement of people committed to

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each other's well-being. Without that commitment, justice is nothing more than an election-day slogan or a pleasant, maybe desperate daydream.

Government is a limited tool for realizing real freedom and therefore justice. Too many liberals believe that income redistribution is the substance of justice and equality, not realizing that justice begins with solidarity—real intimacy and trust in daily life—so that all persons see themselves as harmed when any of their countrymen are threatened by fear, deprivation or violence. When the political tide turned against the liberals, too many gave up the fight for justice because they couldn't win elections, not understanding that the fight for justice is first about erasing the dividing lines that

keep us penned in our little ghettos. King, the radical Christian voice for social justice, shriveled to Martin Luther King, liberal Democratic mascot.

Taking King seriously means that our racial, gender, religious, ethnic or sexual identities are mere labels that hide us from each other. Barack Obama told us that we are all Americans, beyond our narrow labels or political concerns. He got King half right. But our labels do not matter just because we have more in common than we have in conflict. Martin Luther King reminds us of Gandhi's great but nearly forgotten lesson about the cycle of violence: domination and subordination, division and hierarchy, oppression and resistance are an endless circle of pain, war and death that lead to ever wider circles of suffering. Liberals who succumb to the allure of the search for the center of American politics forget that any acceptance of inequality, hierarchy or unfairness will only create the conditions for the next round of needless fighting and pain. There is no "center" in the fight for justice—either ours is a just society, or it is not. Defeat in the fight for justice is no shame, just as compromise with the force of injustice is a sin.

King's day is a sad day, in part because we know that the political forces that control the government are driven by deep animus toward black people and poor people. But King's day can be a great day if we remember that the battle for justice is far more than a contest for power or political advantage. The fight for justice is, in the end, a struggle to tear down the barriers that split us from each other, and from our better selves. Governmental power is always less important than the community of men and women who commit themselves to each other's well-being, and fight for each other's freedom. If we remember King's lessons about solidarity as the basis for justice, we will be ready to do battle with our conservative nemeses, despite their great wealth and numbers.

Marcellus Andrews is the author of *The Political Economy of Hope and Fear*. We are honored to reprint, with the kind permission of the author, this article which originally appeared on January 17, 2005 in TomPaine.com (<http://tompaine.com>).