



Where Do We (I) Go From Here?

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On Monday evening, January 21, 2008, the Interfaith Center for Racial Justice (ICRJ) will host its 21st Annual Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday Celebration of Macomb County. This event will once again be one of the largest gatherings in the metropolitan area to commemorate Dr. King, to remember his “dream” for America, and to draw inspiration from his work and words as we collectively and individually commit (or recommit) to building a better tomorrow for all—men and women, Black and White, Christian and Muslim, rich and poor, homosexual and heterosexual, young and old, and for all people struggling to live together peacefully.

The theme for this year’s MLK Celebration is “**Where Do We Go from Here?**” This theme springs from Dr. King’s speech of the same title given in August 1967 at the 11th Convention of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). His address was an “annual report” of sorts and much of what he asked and challenged of those in attendance, is as relevant today as it was then.

Consider that his speech followed a summer of racial disturbances, including the July 1967 events in the City of Detroit, which forced us to recognize the disparity existing in our country between Blacks and Whites. Or as the *Kerner Commission* concluded, “our society is moving toward two societies, one Black, and one White—separate and unequal.”

Now, today, ICRJ’s 21st MLK Celebration follows the 40th anniversary of the Detroit riots/civil disorder/rebellion that has caused our metropolitan region to reflect on our progress and failings to improve the quality of life for all of our citizens. Or as the editors of *The State of Black Michigan: 1967-2007* assert “40 years after the civil disorders of 1967, not only has the socioeconomic gap between Blacks and Whites persisted, but the gap has actually increased based on most indicators.” (Darden, Stokes, Thomas, editors, *The State of Black Michigan: 1927-2007*, Michigan State University Press, 2007, p. 11)

Further Dr. King’s 1967 SCLC speech was given while the United States of America’s military was immersed in a foreign war in Vietnam that increasingly confused and divided its people back home. And of course today the U.S. military is seemingly stuck in Iraq as we struggle to understand how to appropriately free ourselves from this conflict.

Also MLK’s address was delivered months prior to perhaps the most difficult year in American History (1968) that included his own death, the assassination of Bobby Kennedy, and the brutality of “police riots” in Chicago during the ’68 Democratic National Convention. And today many expect that the upcoming 2008 Presidential election year will likely mark significant



change in America.

1968 was also the “Year of Tigers” when the Detroit Tiger Baseball Team won the World Series in a victory that several pundits feel helped heal the city and region. Now today, only months before the start of the 2008 major league season, the Tigers possibly have the “best” team on paper where anything short of a World Series title will be considered a disappointment. Will their next world championship help bring together the most segregated metropolitan region in the country once again?

Four decades ago Dr. King began his SCLC speech by stating, “Now, in order to answer the question, ‘Where do we go from here?’ which is our theme, we must first honestly recognize where we are now.” Today, just before or at the 2008 MLK Celebration of Macomb County the Interfaith Center for Racial Justice, in its fortieth anniversary year, invites you to analyze where we are as a community, and where you are personally, in invoking a community of respect and justice.

In doing so let us try and picture Dr. King delivering this keynote address to us in 2008. What in his outline seems pertinent still today? How would the details and situations he shared be changed to reflect the start of ICRJ, or our current times? What would his report say to us about where we began and what is the truth now about Macomb?—about the tri-county area? Would his directives about where we are to go from here still ring true?

Let us begin this important exercise by first looking at what The Rev. Dr. King said by offering excerpts of his “Where Do We Go from Here?” Speech.

Of the good things in life, the Negro has approximately half those of whites. Of the bad things of life, he has twice those of whites. Thus half of all Negroes live in substandard housing. And Negroes have half the income of whites. When we view the negative experiences of life, the Negro has a double share. There are twice as many unemployed. The rate of infant mortality among Negroes is double that of whites and there are twice as many Negroes dying in Vietnam as whites in proportion to their size in the population.

In other spheres, the figures are equally alarming. In elementary schools, Negroes lag one to three years behind whites, and their segregated schools receive substantially less money per student than the white schools. One twentieth as many Negroes as whites attend college. Of employed Negroes, 75 percent hold menial jobs.

*This is where we are. **Where do we go from here? First, we must massively assert our dignity and worth. We must stand up amidst a system that still oppresses us and develop an unassailable and majestic sense of values. . . .***

Another basic challenge is to discover how to organize our strength in terms of economic and political power. . . . Now power properly understood is nothing but the ability to achieve purpose. It is the strength required to bring about social, political and economic change. Walter Reuther defined power one day. He said, “Power is the ability of a labor union like the U.A.W. to make the most powerful corporation in the world, General Motors, say ‘Yes’ when it wants to say ‘No.’ That’s power.”

*Now a lot of us our preachers, and all of us have our moral convictions and concerns, and so often have problems with power. There is nothing wrong with power if power is used correctly. . . . Now, we’ve got to get this thing right. What is needed is a realization that power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic. **Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love. And this is what we must see as we move on.***

*We must develop a program that will drive the nation to a guaranteed annual income. . . . We’ve come a long way in our understanding of human motivation and of the blind operation of our economic system. . . . **We also know that no matter how dynamically the economy develops and expands, it***





does not eliminate all poverty. . . .

We must create full employment or we must create incomes. . . . The dignity of the individual will flourish when the decisions concerning his life are in his own hands, when he has the means to seek self-improvement. . . .

And I say to you today, that if our nation can spend thirty-five billion dollars a year to fight an unjust, evil war in Vietnam, and twenty billion dollars to put a man on the moon, it can spend billions of dollars to put God's children on their own two feet right here on earth. . . .

Now, let me say briefly that we must reaffirm our commitment to nonviolence. I want to stress this. The futility of violence in the struggle for racial justice has been tragically etched in all the recent Negro riots. . . . There is certainly something painfully sad about a riot. . . .

This is no time for romantic illusions and empty philosophical debates about freedom. This is a time for action. . . . And so I say to you today that I still stand by nonviolence. . . . [I] am concerned about a better world. I'm concerned about justice. I'm concerned about brotherhood. I'm concerned about truth. And when one is concerned about these, he can never advocate violence. For through violence you may murder a murderer but you can't murder (violence). Through violence you may murder a liar but you can't establish truth. Through violence you may murder a hater, but you can't murder hate. Darkness cannot put out darkness. Only light can do that.

And I say to you, I have also decided to stick to love. For I know that love is ultimately the only answer to mankind's problems. . . . I'm not talking about emotional bosh when I talk about love, I'm talking about a strong, demanding love. And I have seen too much hate. . . . [A]nd I say to myself that hate is too great a burden to bear. I have decided to love. If you are seeking the highest good, I think you can find it through love. And the beautiful thing is that we are moving against wrong when we do it, because John was right, God is love. He who hates does not know God, but he who has love has the key that unlocks the door to the meaning of ultimate reality.

I want to say to you as I move to my conclusion, as we talk about "Where do we go from here," that we honestly face the fact the Movement must address itself to the question of restructuring the whole of

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American society. There are forty million poor people here. And one day we must ask the question, "Why are there forty million poor people in America?" . . . And I'm simply saying that more and more, we've got to begin to ask the question about the whole society. . . . It means that questions must be raised. You see, my friends, when you deal with this, you begin to ask the question, "Who owns the oil?" You begin to ask the question, "Who owns the iron ore?" . . . These are questions that must be asked. . . .

*What I am saying today is that we must go from this convention and say, "America, you must be born again!" So, I conclude by saying again today, that we have a task and let us go out with a "divine dissatisfaction." . . . Let us be dissatisfied until the tragic walls that separate the outer city of wealth and comfort and the inner city of poverty and despair shall be crushed by the battering rams of the forces of justice. . . . Let us be dissatisfied until those who live on the outskirts of hope are brought into the metropolis of daily security. . . . Let us be dissatisfied until the dark yesterdays of segregated schools will be transformed into bright tomorrows of quality, integrated education. **Let us be dissatisfied until integration is not seen as a problem but as an opportunity to participate in the beauty of diversity.** . . .*

Let us be dissatisfied until every state capitol houses a governor who will do justly, who will love mercy and who will walk humbly with his God. Let us be dissatisfied until from every city hall, justice will roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream. Let us be dissatisfied.

Friends, "Where do we go from here?" Forty years ago Dr. King challenged us to go forth with a "divine dissatisfaction." Dr. King's question, and his call to a divine dissatisfaction must be answered by each and everyone one of us. In this Presidential election year it is all too easy to identify the "we" in Dr. King's question with our country, a political party, the church, or some other institution. Each one of us needs to ask of our self, and for our self, "Where do I go from here?" What small step(s) am I willing to take in my life toward building the beloved community? In every faith tradition there is a spiritual practice of examining one's own conscience in striving to adhere to one's faith. In the process an individual reflects on how well they have lived their faith and in what ways they fall short. The following are some questions we might ask of ourselves.

How aware am I of the history and truths of faiths

other than my own? Have I read their sacred texts? Do I appreciate art and music from cultures that differ from mine? Do I participate in opportunities to learn about and engage with people of diverse traditions? Have I taken advantage of the opportunities to learn from and about different cultures and faith traditions offered in ICRJ's "Listen, Learn, & Live" program? If I am a parent do I share this larger world view with my children or unintentionally reinforce stereotypes? When was the last time I visited the African American Museum or the Holocaust Memorial Center? Do I hesitate to enjoy sports, theater and other cultural benefits because it might involve crossing Eight Mile?

Where do we go from here in an age of global warming? Do I recycle? Dial down the thermostat in winter and dial up in summer? Do I drive a vehicle that is more car than I need? As a citizen of the nation that consumes a disproportionate amount of the world's natural resources, what steps am I taking to consume less and preserve more?

Where do we go from here in an era of sweatshops and a global economy? Am I willing to pay a little more for fair trade coffee, tea and chocolate so that those who work the fields can receive a just wage? Does it bother me that the clothes I wear were, in all likelihood, made

in a sweatshop by someone being paid merely pennies a day for their labor? Do I make time to observe the practices of my faith? Do I spend time in prayer and in nature? Am I at the job constantly or do I decline some work to ensure spending time with my family? None of us can do everything, but all of us can do some things. As Dr. King concluded his speech:

"Let us realize the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice."

-Martin Luther King Jr.

*I must confess, my friends, the road ahead will not always be smooth. . . . Difficult and painful as it is, we must walk on in the day ahead with an audacious faith in the future. . . . [L]et us remember that there is a creative force in this universe, working to pull down the gigantic mountains of evil, a power that is able to make a way out of no way and transform dark yesterdays into bright tomorrows. **Let us realize the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice.***

To testify by words, actions, choices and lifestyle that the arc of the universe bends towards justice, "Where do we go from here?" "Where do I go from here?"

