

Notes from MLK's *Where do we go from here: Chaos or community?* and other sources

Please read these quotes and reflect on them in preparation for the third session, particularly how they might provide insights into how to meet the current challenges we face. The quotes are from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr's *Where do we go from here: Chaos or community* (1967) unless otherwise stated. [I've added the **emphases**.]

- **People are not the enemy:** "I've seen too much hate to want to hate, myself, and every time I see it, I say to myself, hate is too great a burden to bear. Somehow we must be able to stand up against our most bitter opponents and say: We shall match your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure suffering. We will meet your physical force with soul force. Do to us what you will and we will still love you.... But be assured that we'll wear you down by our capacity to suffer, and one day we will win our freedom. We will not only win freedom for ourselves; we will appeal to your heart and conscience that we will win you in the process, and our victory will be a double victory." (M.L. King, 'A Christmas Sermon on Peace,' Dec 24, 1967)
- **The beloved community:** "The Negro leader must stress the fact that the aim of the Negro should never be to defeat or humiliate the white man, but to win his friendship and understanding. We must make it clear that *it is injustice which we seek to defeat and not persons who may happen to be unjust*. We have before us the glorious opportunity to inject a new dimension of love into the veins of our civilization. Our motto must be, 'Freedom and justice through love.' Not through violence; not through hate; no not even through boycotts; but through love. As we struggle for freedom in America it may be necessary to boycott at times. But we must remember as we boycott that a boycott is not an end within itself; it is merely a means to awaken a sense of shame within the oppressor and challenge his false sense of superiority. *But the end is reconciliation; the end is redemption; the end is the creation of the beloved community*. It is this type of spirit and this type of love that can transform opposers into friends.

The type of love that I stress here is not *eros*, a sort of esthetic or romantic love; not *philia*, a sort of reciprocal love between personal friends; but it is *agape* which is understanding goodwill for all men. It is an overflowing love which seeks nothing in return. It is the love of God working in the lives of men. This is the love that may well be the salvation of our civilization." (King, 'The Role of the Church in Facing the Nation's Chief Moral Dilemma,' 25 April 1957)

- **Love and power:** "Power, properly understood, is the ability to achieve purpose. It is the strength required to bring about social, political or economic changes. In this sense power is not only desirable but necessary in order to implement the demands of love and justice. One of the greatest problems of history is that the concepts of love and power are usually contrasted as polar opposites. Love is identified with a resignation of power and power with a denial of love. It was this misinterpretation that caused Nietzsche, the philosopher of the 'will to power,' to reject the Christian concept of love. It was this same misinterpretation which induced Christian theologians to reject Nietzsche's philosophy of

the 'will to power' in the name of the Christian idea of love. *What is needed is a realization that power without love is reckless and abusive and that love without power is sentimental and anemic.* Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice. Justice at its best is love correcting everything that stands against love." (p37-38)

- **A revolution of hope and love:** "What was new about Mahatma Gandhi's movement in India was that he mounted a revolution on hope and love, hope and nonviolence. This same new emphasis characterized the civil rights movement in our country dating from the Montgomery bus boycott of 1956 to the Selma movement of 1965. We maintained the hope while transforming the hate of traditional revolutions into positive nonviolent power." (p45-46)
- **Nonviolence and love:** "... A fourth point that must be brought out concerning nonviolent resistance is that it avoids not only external physical violence but also internal violence of spirit. At the center of nonviolence stands the principle of love. In struggling for human dignity the oppressed people of the world must not allow themselves to become bitter or indulge in hate campaigns. To retaliate with hate and bitterness would do nothing but intensify the hate in the world. Along the way of life, someone must have sense enough and morality enough to cut off the chain of hate. This can be done only by projecting the ethics of love to the center of our lives."
- **Violence and nonviolence:** "The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy. Instead of diminishing evil, it multiplies it.... Through violence you may murder the hater, but you don't murder hate. In fact, violence merely increases hate... Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that."

The beauty of nonviolence is that in its own way and in its own time it seeks to break the chain reaction of evil. With a majestic sense of spiritual power, it seeks to elevate truth, beauty and goodness to the throne. Therefore I will continue to follow this method because I think it is the most practically sound and morally excellent way for the Negro to achieve freedom." (p64-65)

- **Transforming ourselves and society:** "Our most fruitful course is to stand firm, move forward nonviolently, accept disappointments and cling to hope. Our determined refusal not to be stopped will eventually open the door to fulfilment. By recognizing the necessity of suffering in a righteous cause, we may achieve our humanity's full stature. To guard ourselves from bitterness, we need the vision to see in this generation's ideals the opportunity to transfigure both ourselves and American society." (p48)
- **Slavery:** "My shame is for those who became so inhuman that they could inflict this torture on us... But we are also Americans. Abused and scorned though we may be, our destiny is tied up with the destiny of America." (p55)

- **Scientific progress and moral poverty:** "... today our very survival depends on our ability to stay awake, to adjust to new ideas, to remain vigilant and to face the challenge of change... Together we must learn to live together as brothers or together we will be forced to perish as fools.

We must work passionately and indefatigably to bridge the gulf between our scientific progress and our moral progress. One of the great problems of mankind is that we suffer from a poverty of the spirit which stands in glaring contrast to our scientific and technological abundance. *The richer we have become materially, the poorer we have become morally and spiritually...* Our problem today is that we have allowed the internal to become lost in the external... So much of modern life can be summarized in that suggestive phrase of Thoreau: 'Improved means to an unimproved end.' This is the serious predicament, the deep and haunting problem, confronting modern man. *Enlarged material powers spell enlarged peril if there is not proportionate growth of the soul...*

When scientific power outruns moral power, we end up with guided missiles and misguided men. When we foolishly minimize the internal of our lives and maximize the external, we sign the warrant for our own day of doom.' (p181-183)

- **Mutuality and interdependence:** "In the final analysis, the rich must not ignore the poor because both rich and poor are tied together. They entered the same mysterious gateway of human birth, into the same adventure of mortal life.

In a real sense, all life is interrelated. The agony of the poor impoverishes the rich; the betterment of the poor enriches the rich. We are inevitably our brother's keeper because we are our brother's brother. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly." (p191)

- **Bringing tension to the surface:** "Nonviolent coercion always brings tension to the surface. This tension, however, must not be seen as destructive. There is a kind of tension that is both healthy and necessary for growth. Society needs nonviolent gadflies to bring its tensions into the open and force its citizens to confront the ugliness of their prejudices and the tragedy of their racism." (p96)
- **King as strategist—The campaign in Birmingham, Alabama:** A key factor in the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was the violence—using dogs and fire hoses—by state forces against protestors, including children, calling for an end to segregation in Birmingham in 1963. As Jonathan Eig writes in his biography of King: "It sparked outrage and action like nothing before. It sent more newspaper and television reporters pouring into Birmingham. It also gave proof to something Bayard Rustin once said about King: 'Martin was not really an organizer... The organizers were [Birmingham police chief] Bull Connor, the dogs, the fire hoses.' Rustin didn't mention the children, but they changed the moral equation too." (Eig, *The Life of Martin Luther King*, 2023)
- **King's final years:** Following the historic changes that resulted from the civil rights movement from the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s, King came to realize that for the kind of

transformations that he sought for African Americans—and for all people—to be fully attainable, profound social and economic changes would be needed. This led him to shift his focus—and to argue for the movement's focus to shift—to 1) changing attitudes and oppressive practices in the North; 2) ending the war in Vietnam, which was diverting massive resources that could be used to improve lives at home; and 3) urging a massive War on Poverty and social and economic reforms that would allow everyone to live a dignified life with adequate education, nutrition, work, and health care.

Eig in his biography of King writes of the campaign for improved housing and other changes in Chicago in 1966, which produced fewer results than the campaigns in the South, and refers to an earlier time of crisis for King during the 1956 bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama, where King “heard the voice of God. ‘I choose to identify with the poor,’ he said. ‘I choose to give my life for the hungry... This is the way I am going. If it means suffering a little bit, I’m going that way. If it means sacrificing, I’m going that way. If it means dying for them, I’m going that way, because I heard a voice saying, ‘Do something for others.’” (Eig, p506)

- **King and ‘Black power’:** Increasingly from the mid-1960s, more militant Black activists called for ‘Black power’ and were more willing to use violence to bring about racial justice and social change. King continued to argue for nonviolence. He recognized the importance of Black pride and self-esteem, “But if ‘Black power’ meant using violence or advocating for separatism, he stood firmly against it, because ‘God is interested in the freedom of the whole human race, not just one part of it.’” (Eig, p510)
- **King’s opposition to the Vietnam War:** As American involvement in Vietnam deepened, particularly from the mid-1960s, King increasingly saw the war as wrong-headed and immoral. He spoke out against it more and more, despite the fact that many of his colleagues thought the movement’s focus should remain on civil rights and his stance put distance between King and President Johnson, who had pushed for passage of the landmark civil rights legislation of the 1960s.

Eig writes of King’s opposition to the war and his reasoning: “I was telling Andy [Young] tonight that at times you do things to satisfy your conscience and they may be altogether unrealistic or wrong tactically, but you feel better... I just know, on the war in Vietnam, I will get a lot of criticism and I know I can hurt SCLC [the Southern Christian Leadership Council, the civil rights organization that King headed]. But I feel better, and I think that is the most important thing.’ If he didn’t feel good about himself, he told Levinson [one of his key advisers], he would be no good to the SCLC or any other cause. His whole identity was wrapped up in his work and in his beliefs. There could be no moral compromises. ‘*I feel so deeply in my heart that we are so wrong in this country,*’ he explained, ‘*and the time has come for a real prophecy, and I am willing to go that road.*’” (Eig, p516)

- **War and peace:** “The *Washington Post* has calculated that we spend \$332,000 for each enemy we kill. It challenges the imagination to contemplate what lives we could

transform if we were to cease killing. The security we profess to seek in foreign adventures we will lose in our decaying cities. *The bombs in Vietnam explode at home; they destroy the hope and possibilities for a decent America.*” (p92)

- **Achievements of the Civil Rights Movement:** “The 1960 sit-ins desegregated lunch counters in more than 150 cities within a year. The 1961 Freedom Rides put an end to segregation in interstate travel. The 1956 bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama, ended segregation on the buses not only of that city but in practically every city of the South. The 1963 Birmingham movement and the climactic March on Washington won passage of the most powerful civil rights law of the century. The 1965 Selma movement brought enactment of the Voting Rights Law. Our nonviolent marches in Chicago last summer brought about a housing agreement which, if implemented, will be the strongest step toward open housing taken in any city in the nation. Most significant is the fact that this progress occurred with the minimum human sacrifice and loss of life. Fewer people have been killed in ten years of nonviolent demonstrations across the South than were killed in one night of rioting in Watts.” (p59-60)
- **James Baldwin’s letter to his nephew:** “The really terrible thing, old buddy, is that *you* must accept *them* [white people]. And I mean that very seriously. You must accept them and accept them with love. For these innocent people have no other hope. They are, in effect, still trapped in a history which they do not understand; and until they understand it, they cannot be released from it. Many of them indeed know better, but as you will discover, people find it very difficult to act on what they know. To act is to be committed and to be committed is to be in danger. In this case the danger in the minds and hearts of most white Americans is the loss of their identity.... But these men are your brothers, your lost younger brothers, and if the word ‘integration’ means anything, this is what it means, that we with love shall force our brothers to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it, for this is your home, my friend. Do not be driven from it. Great men have done great things here and will again and we can make America what America must become.” (Quoted by King in *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community*, p62-63)