

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. REFLECTION
MARTIN LUTHER KING HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION
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I am profoundly grateful for this opportunity to share a few reflections on Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., whose courageous voice was muted, but not silenced, on April 4, 1968, over forty years ago. I thank the Martin Luther King Commission for inviting me to speak today and I thank you for your warm welcome.

This coming Monday, our nation honors a great leader in the civil rights movement, a leader who captured our imaginations and our hearts as he strove to demolish the barriers of bigotry and the walls of oppression. But what makes him great? The researcher, Jim Collins, in his book, Good to Great, has given us some clues as to what makes a company great and he includes some ideas about leadership within that context. And while these insights are very helpful, I believe that there is something about a great leader that transcends scientific research, that goes beyond the observable. Greatness lies in the heart. And it is only by looking into the heart that we perceive greatness.

In the Old Testament, for example, King David is recognized by the Prophet Samuel only because the Lord tells his prophet, "Do not judge from his appearance or from his lofty stature...Not as man sees does God see, because man sees the appearance but the Lord looks into the heart." I suspect, with all due respect to Dr. King, that he

sometimes failed to give the appearance of a leader. Many of his biographers point out that he had a reluctance to take a leadership role and he frequently had doubts and misgivings about his decisions, especially when protestors were hurt or even killed. And yet, if we look into his heart, as God himself directs us, we see a genuine leader who overcame his human frailty and allowed God's grace to fashion for Himself a modern day prophet who would lead his people to the promised land of freedom where bigotry, hatred and violence have no standing. He was a great leader because he allowed grace to guide him as he trusted in Divine Providence. And Dr. King did lead us a long, long way. Indeed, in less than a week an African-American will stand on the steps of the Capital and be inaugurated as the forty-fourth President of the United States of America. In 221 years, our country has gone from a nation whose Constitution recognized Blacks as only 3/5ths human to one that has placed its hopes on Barack Obama, a young and intelligent U.S. Senator from Illinois. This is a huge and marvelous blow to racism and bigotry in our country and surely a monumental event that would make Martin Luther King, Jr., beam with pride and joy.

Another reason Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was a great leader is that he had courage of heart and was willing to take risks, leading people on a path less traveled and, as Robert Frost would have it, that has made all the difference! It is true that Dr. King became a great leader precisely because he had the courage to stand up to a cancer that was eating away at the moral fabric of our country, indeed, eroding the very principles upon which our country is based.

He realized that the architects of our Constitution envisioned a land where people would live together. He said that these founders “signed a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir.” His leadership grew from a burning desire to collect on that note because indeed, we are all created equal by a loving and gracious God. But it is the path that Dr. King chose that made all the difference in his leadership, a path not many take. What is that path?

In broadest terms, we have two basic ways of responding to a threat: fight or flight. These instincts are deep within the human race and we experience them all the time. The trouble is, neither of them is very effective in the long run. Fighting most often only escalates the original threat, making it more powerful or turning the fighter into the very thing being fought. A schoolyard brawl that begins with a bully’s shove and turns into a melee is a good example. Running away does not really solve the issue either. The threat remains and the bully can attack again.

But there is a third way and it is this way that Martin Luther King chose, the path of peaceful resistance. By standing up to the forces of malevolence, Martin Luther King showed his aggressors that if we live and move and have our being in the arms of the one in whose image we are created, we can live together in peace. His witness was a mirror that allowed his enemies to see their own actions in sharp contrast to the peace and reconciliation that he felt called to live.

A very good example of this “third way” is illustrated in an incident in the life of Bishop Desmond Tutu, the Anglican cleric. During the height of apartheid, he was walking down a Johannesburg sidewalk when a white man came toward him. As the two neared each other, the white gentleman shouted, “You better get off the sidewalk! I don’t make way for gorillas!” With a graceful bow and a gentle sidestep, Bishop Tutu moved off the sidewalk, gestured for the fellow to pass and said, “I do!” The bishop did not escalate the situation into more violence nor did he back down. Rather, he stood up to the threat, even with a bit of ironic humor, maintaining his dignity and challenging the fellow to rethink his narrow view.

This “third way” demands more courage, more tenacity, and more conviction than either of the other two alternatives. It is the way of a great leader, a leader like Martin Luther King. It is a way that causes people to think, to grow and to change. Recall Atticus Finch in Harper Lee’s To Kill a Mockingbird. When he was leaving Tom Robinson’s house, the Black worker accused of a crime he did not commit, Bob Ewell spit in his face, waiting for Atticus’ response. His children, Jem and Scout, were also waiting for his response. As you know, Atticus wiped the spittle off his face, stared long and hard into Ewell’s eyes, and walked around him. He took the path less traveled. He was a real leader who planted in his children and Tom’s children, an enduring example of strength in the midst of adversity, without succumbing to the violence of the perpetrator or allowing the perpetrator to go unchecked.

I believe that Dr. King embodies the principles of this “third way”, that is, peaceful resistance. But resistance alone is not going to carry the day. The leader who takes this path must also have the ability to chart a new course, to offer an alternative to the violence he or she proposes to eradicate. Dr. King did exactly this by offering to our country an unwavering commitment to the truth, an unshakeable determination to hope and a passion for unity. This Nobel Peace Prize recipient fought the terrorism inflicted on Black Americans with these weapons of truth, hope and unity.

Dr. King once said, “I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality. That is why right, temporarily defeated, is stronger than evil triumphant.” Dr. King held fast to the truth that we are all created equal. He embraced the revelation that we are all created in God’s image and therefore each unrepeatably human being is a precious gift to be affirmed and not denigrated.

Repeatedly, Dr. King gave voice to the hope deep within the hearts of many that we can overcome injustice and intolerance. In accepting his Nobel Peace Prize he said, “I refuse to accept the view that mankind is so tragically bound to the starless midnight of racism and war that the bright daybreak of peace and brotherhood can never become a reality.” He fought the good fight and had hope that God would lead him and us to the promised land of freedom, human dignity and racial equality.

Finally, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., believed in unity, a unity forged with the indomitable power of love and the passionate yearning for peace. He had a keen insight into the power of a United States. He believed strongly that all human beings are called to live together in peace, walking with God in the cool shade of the afternoon. Anything less distorts God's image found in each of us but celebrated in all of us, living together as one. Dr. King said it best: "I still believe that one day mankind will bow before the altars of God and be crowned triumphant over war and bloodshed...And the lion and the lamb shall lie down together..."

Martin Luther King allowed the truth to set him free. He was quick to forgive and ready to hope. He did much to make our country a better place, where peace and harmony could thrive. He brought us a long, long way. And although we have a long way to go, we are not defeated, not despondent. We are a people of hope, a hope enlivened by President-elect Obama in his historic journey to the White House. He has proven that Martin's dream is more than that – it is a vision of greater things to come, the first installments of which we are already living in these days of transition.

It is fitting that we pause to remember Martin Luther King, Jr., today, as we anticipate the inauguration next week. Ours is an arduous task as we seek to live the values that Martin Luther King espoused. Taking that third path of Bishop Desmond Tutu, we seek to fashion a country that embraces unity, harmony and peace.

While this task is daunting, there are ways for us to begin immediately. For example, this January 19th is the Martin Luther King, Jr., Day of Service. Based on his quote, "Everybody can be great because everybody can serve," we are inspired to strengthen our communities and achieve common goals through service. Last year, hundreds of thousands of volunteers in cities and towns across our nation participated in this Day of Service. What a great way to honor Dr. King, not by taking a day off but by making the 19th a day on, a day of service!

It is true that as a nation we are facing seemingly intractable problems caused by the economic crisis, poverty, prejudice, fear and violence. There are no facile answers to the complicated problems we all face. Quick sound bites do not make good answers. We must be a voice for the defenseless, a support to the marginalized, a beacon of hope for the stranger in our midst, particularly immigrants and refugees. Issues of education, health, commerce, social outreach, crime prevention, drug rehabilitation, mine safety and so many other social concerns fill our days with great challenges. I hope that today's commemoration of a great American leader will be a source of inspiration for all of us.

Martin Luther King would remind us that we are not alone; we have the light of grace, love for one another and the hope that is grounded in the sure and certain conviction that God will never abandon us. No doubt there will be setbacks along the way, just as

there were in Dr. King's life. He would always say, "I still believe that we shall overcome." May we also overcome in our desire to realize Martin's dream in this country and throughout the world.

Next Monday will be the official day that our nation honors Martin Luther King, Jr. How fitting that the very next day the sun will dawn on the face of an African-American about to place his hand on Abraham Lincoln's Bible and take the oath of office of the President of the United States. His voice will echo over the waters of the reflecting pool and reverberate down the corridors of time to mingle with the voice of Martin Luther King, Jr., who on August 28th, 1963, in that same place longed for that day "...When all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing ...'Free at last! Thank God almighty, we are free at last!'" Wednesday will follow, and so will hope.