

A TIME TO BREAK THE SILENCE - AGAIN: A REFLECTION ON THE 40TH ANNIVERSARY OF KING'S RIVERSIDE SPEECH

Ched Myers, March, 2007



Some of us who have already begun to break the silence of the night have found that the calling to speak is often a vocation of agony, but we must speak. We must speak with all the humility that is appropriate to our limited vision, but we must speak.

— Martin Luther King, Jr., April 4, 1967

Four decades ago Martin Luther King delivered his “Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break the Silence” speech at Riverside Church in New York City.¹ Not only was this his most consequential address (King was assassinated exactly one year later); I believe it represents the most significant public oration in U.S. history. In it King was prophetic in both senses of that word—speaking truth to power and anticipating the historical consequences of our collective choices. Indeed, his analysis remains disturbingly resonant today.

With others I have come to see this discourse as a sort of “hermeneutic key” for our faith and our politics. It was more than a bold critique of the Indochina War; it was a deep archaeology of public culture and identity—perhaps the culmination of King’s lifetime struggle “for the soul of America.” King connects the dots between what he called the “giant triplets” of racism, militarism and materialism, and then calls us to take back the world from those “who possess power without compassion, might without morality, and strength without sight.”

We should not be surprised that such clarity and vision would arise from the trenches of this country’s greatest popular movement for justice. Yet King could have chosen not to join his considerable moral authority to the peace movement, and thus perhaps have saved his own life. But neither his diagnosis of, nor his prescription for, the profound public pathologies he confronted would allow his conscience to keep silent. This essay attempts to summarize briefly the context and content of the Riverside speech, and closes with a reflection on what we can learn by revisiting its wisdom, with help from Audre Lorde. Sadly, history has vindicated King’s prophetic warnings of 1967. The future, on the other hand, may well depend upon our ability and willingness to embrace of what we might well refer to as Dr. King’s “call to discipleship.”



1. The text and audio excerpt can be found at www.drmartinlutherkingjr.com/beyondvietnam.htm, as well as many other places on the web.

I. Context

In many respects, the spring of 1967 could not have been a less opportune time for King to “jump the bounds” of his Civil Rights agenda and speak out against the escalating war in Viet Nam. On one hand, most of the country was still in the grips of conservative Cold War culture. Racial segregation was still the functional norm, despite the passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965, and other gains from Johnson’s “Great Society” legislation.² Indeed, the Civil Rights movement was in danger of stalling.



“Bloody Sunday,”
March 7, 1965:
Far left: King sets
out with Rabbi Abra-
ham Heschel and
other leaders on a
march from Selma to
Montgomery for vot-
ing rights. Left:
March is attacked by
State troopers and
sheriffs.

On the other hand, revolutionary ferment throughout the Third World was spawning libera-
tion movements abroad whose militant ideologies represented a real challenge to King’s
strategic nonviolence. On the home front, the Movement’s backbone — the Student Non-
violent Coordinating Committee — had fractured, with many of its best young leaders em-
bracing Black Power and openly questioning the Civil Rights establishment.³ At the same
time, the FBI’s Cointelpro (“Counter Intelligence Program”) had infiltrated the Movement,
and King was the target of constant surveillance, harassment and disinformation cam-
paigns.⁴

King was also deeply impacted by the urban uprisings during the summers of 1965 (Los
Angeles) and 1966 (Chicago, Brooklyn, Cleveland, and other cities). He refers to this in
some of the most powerful rhetoric of the Riverside speech:

As I have walked among the desperate, rejected and angry young men I have
told them that Molotov cocktails and rifles would not solve their problems. I
have tried to offer them my deepest compassion while maintaining my con-
viction that social change comes most meaningfully through nonviolent ac-
tion. But they asked—and rightly so—what about Vietnam? They asked if
our own nation wasn’t using massive doses of violence to solve its problems,
to bring about the changes it wanted. Their questions hit home, and I knew
that I could never again raise my voice against the violence of the oppressed
in the ghettos without having first spoken clearly to the greatest purveyor of
violence in the world today—my own government.

These experiences were pushing King deeper into his focus on economic disparity. He
launched a fair housing initiative in Chicago in 1965-66, began to strategize for the Poor
People’s Campaign, and 11 months later made his fateful choice to support the Memphis
sanitation worker’s strike.

2. It took the police riot in Selma to force the Johnson administration to move on voting legislation. Civil Rights
marchers crossing the Edmund Pettus Bridge were attacked by state troopers with nightsticks, tear gas and whips,
injuring 100. Johnson responded with a call for States to enforce the 15th Amendment, which led to Congressional
hearings; the resultant Voting Rights Act became law on August 6, 1965.

3. For example, the first week of July, 1966, the Congress of Racial Equality convention in Baltimore endorsed the
objective of Black Power and rejected the doctrine of nonviolence, while also calling for the withdrawal of U.S. forces
from Vietnam and draft resistance. The next week in Los Angeles the NAACP convention rejected Black Power as too
separatist.

4. C. McLaren & Brian Bolning write: “In a 1963 internal memo, [FBI] counterintelligence specialist Charles D. Bren-
nan stated that civil rights agitation represented a clear threat to “the established order” of the U.S. and that ‘King

Through all of this the U.S. military intervention in Indochina was escalating, and a vigorous anti-war movement was emerging.⁵ Clergy and Laymen Concerned about Vietnam had been founded in late 1965 by Protestant, Catholic and Jewish leaders—King would become its co-chair just a month after the Riverside event. Although the April 4th speech to CLCV is widely believed to be the first time King spoke out publicly against the war, King had in fact

formally announced his opposition to the Vietnam War during the Ninth Annual Convention of Southern Christian Leadership Conference in August 1965. King's call for negotiations with the National Liberation Front and an immediate halt to the bombings of North Vietnam drew criticism from government officials as well as his SCLC colleagues. Following this backlash, King was advised to remain quiet on the issue of Vietnam and focus on civil rights. Fearful of alienating President Lyndon Johnson, King continued for much of 1966 to approach the issue of Vietnam with some wariness and reticence. However, after Johnson announced plans to divert funds from the War on Poverty to Vietnam in December of 1966, King began to reassert his criticism of the War...

By January 1967, many of King's closest advisors, including [advisor Stanley] Levison, James Bevel, and his wife Coretta, urged him to direct more attention to Vietnam. In February, King delivered a speech entitled "The Casualties of the War in Vietnam." Addressing a panel of anti-war senators, King asserted that America's involvement in Vietnam had caused the public to forget about the civil rights movement. Despite the criticism directed at him for such remarks, King continued to campaign against the war, participating in an antiwar march in Chicago on March 26, 1967.⁶

These, then, were some of the forces swirling around King when he stepped into the pulpit on April 4, 1967. Like Jesus of Nazareth in the gospel story, he was tired, pressed in on every side, trying to navigate increasingly impossible political waters, surrounded by internal dissent, and the target of a governmental conspiracy to eliminate him. Yet even in this hardest of seasons, this disciple-prophet mustered the courage and conviction to speak the truth about his own country in a way no one had before — or has since.



King at Riverside; at left is Rabbi Heschel.

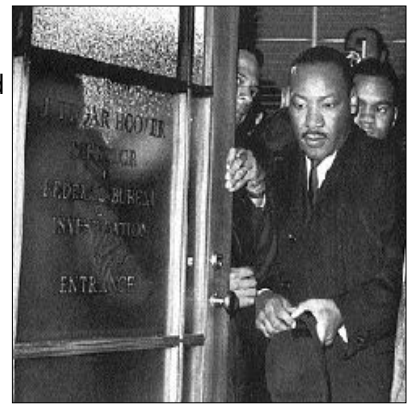
is growing in stature daily as the leader among leaders of the Negro movement.' COINTELPRO head William C. Sullivan responded in a letter:

"We must mark [King] now, if we have not before, as the most dangerous Negro in the future of this Nation from the standpoint of communism, the Negro, and national security . . . it may be unrealistic to limit [our actions against King] to legalistic proofs that would stand up in court or before Congressional Committees...' When it was announced in 1964 that King would receive a Nobel Peace Prize, the FBI grew desperate. Hoping to prevent King from accepting the award, the Bureau mailed him a package containing a tape of phone calls documenting King's extramarital affairs and an anonymous, threatening letter. In barely concealed language, King was told to commit suicide before the award ceremony or risk seeing his "filthy, abnormal fraudulent self" exposed to the nation. Fortunately, King ignored the FBI's advice..." At: www.stayfreemagazine.org/archives/19/fbi.html.

These sordid activities were later brought to light in the 1976 report of the Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities of the United States Senate, chaired by Sen. Frank Church. The report on King (www.icdc.com/~paulwolf/cointelpro/churchfinalreportII1b.htm) begins: "From December 1963 until his death in 1968, Martin Luther King, Jr. was the target of an intensive campaign by the Federal Bureau of Investigation to 'neutralize' him as an effective civil rights leader. In the words of the man in charge of the FBI's 'war' against Dr. King: 'No holds were barred. We have used [similar] techniques against Soviet agents...'"

5. In April of 1967 Operation Rolling Thunder, the high intensity bombing of North Vietnam that eventually delivered 643,000 tons of explosives, was two years old; 300 U.S. planes had been shot down.

6. The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute; see www.stanford.edu/group/King/about_king/encyclopedia/vietnam.htm



King leaving talks with FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover on Dec. 1, 1964.

II. Content

"Somehow this madness must cease... The great initiative in this war is ours. The initiative to stop it must be ours."

Breaking through public silences, Dr. King began, is a "vocation of agony." He understood deeply the layers of denial and domestication that characterize the American imperial consciousness. In the address he outlined five reasons for why he had come to oppose the war.

1. King first lamented that the Johnson administration's 'war on poverty' had been "broken and eviscerated as if it were some idle political plaything of a society gone mad on war, and I knew that America would never invest the necessary funds or energies in rehabilitation of its poor so long as adventures like Vietnam continued to draw [people] and skills and money like some demonic destructive suction tube. So I was increasingly compelled to see the war as an enemy of the poor and to attack it as such."
2. His second point named economic conscription: the poor had "to fight and to die in extra-ordinarily high proportions relative to the rest of the population. We were taking the black young men who had been crippled by our society and sending them eight thousand miles away to guarantee liberties in Southeast Asia which they had not found in southwest Georgia and East Harlem." King recognized the cruel irony that there were more options for poor people of color in the military than in civil society, yet the former was enforcing a racist foreign policy, thus "adding cynicism to the process of death."
3. The third reason, already noted, was that the war was teaching a new generation that violence solves conflicts. One can only imagine the flack King got for daring to name the U.S. as "the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today."
4. King next appealed to his own vocation—as a Civil Rights leader, as a Nobel Peace Prize winner, as disciple of Jesus and as child of God:

In 1957 when a group of us formed the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, we chose as our motto: "To save the soul of America"... If America's soul becomes totally poisoned, part of the autopsy must read Vietnam. It can never be saved so long as it destroys the deepest hopes of [people] the world over. So it is that those of us who are yet determined that "America will be" [Langston Hughes] are led down the path of protest and dissent, working for the health of our land.

5. Finally, King peered into the future of imperial adventurism:

I wish to go on now to say something even more disturbing. The war in Vietnam is but a symptom of a far deeper malady within the American spirit, and if we ignore this sobering reality we will find ourselves organizing clergy- and laymen-concerned committees for the next generation. They will be concerned about Guatemala and Peru. They will be concerned about Thailand and Cambodia. They will be concerned about Mozambique and South Africa. We will be marching for these and a dozen other names and attending rallies without end unless there is a significant and profound change in American life and policy.



A tired King at the United Nations a week after the Riverside speech; photo by Benedict Fernandez.

King added Colombia and Venezuela, completing a list of countries that have indeed all endured covert and/or over military intervention by the U.S. or its allies since 1967.

Each of these points remains relevant to the current U.S. war. There is a Clergy and Laity Concerned about Iraq (www.unitedforpeace.org/article.php?id=3145)-- bearing witness to King's tragic prescience. King sounded other notes that resonate today, such as his appeal for interfaith solidarity and his critique of technocracy. But the heart of his diagnosis is revealed in this famous and profound passage:

We must rapidly 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 are incapable of being conquered.

Here the prophet drew together the strands learned from more than a decade of hard struggle against American apartheid, structural poverty, and endemic violence, and insisted that it was all connected. And he made it clear that only the power of love, embodied in a nonviolent movement for justice and peace for everyone, would save us from our collective dehumanization.



King is shot on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, April 4, 1968.

King concluded the historic speech with an altar-call-like challenge to commitment:

Now let us begin. Now let us rededicate ourselves to the long and bitter -- but beautiful -- struggle for a new world. This is the calling of the [children] of God, and our [human family] waits eagerly for our response. Shall we say the odds are too great? Shall we tell them the struggle is too hard? Will our message be that the forces of American life militate against their arrival as full [people], and we send our deepest regrets? Or will there be another message, of longing, of hope, of solidarity with their yearnings, of commitment to their cause, whatever the cost?

In the midst of fragmentation, King called for unity of purpose; he connected all the dots; and he exhorted the Movement to settle for nothing less than the transformation of history. One year later, almost to the hour, he was gunned down in Memphis while campaigning on behalf of low wage workers. The government's ongoing conspiracy finally succeeded in silencing the greatest prophet in the history of our nation.⁷

7. In the Fall of 1999, the King family, long convinced that Martin's convicted assassin James Earl Ray did not act alone, brought a civil suit to the Circuit Court of Shelby County, TN, 30th Judicial District in Memphis, in order to discover the real facts of Martin's murder. The family statement on Dec 9th, 1999, in the wake of the jury's verdict, read in part:

1. We initially requested that a comprehensive investigation be conducted by a Truth and Reconciliation Commission, independent of the government, because we do not believe that, in such a politically-sensitive matter, the government is capable of investigating itself.
2. The type of independent investigation we sought was denied by the federal government. But in our view, it was carried out, in a Memphis courtroom, during a month-long trial by a jury of 12 American citizens who had no interest other than ascertaining the truth.
3. After hearing and reviewing the extensive testimony and evidence, which had never before been tested under oath in a court of law, it took the Memphis jury only 1½ hours to find that a conspiracy to kill Dr. King did exist. Most significantly, this conspiracy involved agents of the governments of the City of Memphis, the state of Tennessee and the United States of America. The overwhelming weight of the evidence also indicated that James Earl Ray was not the triggerman and, in fact, was an unknowing patsy.
4. We stand by that verdict and have no doubt that the truth about this terrible event has finally been revealed.

The story of this trial and its stunning verdict was virtually ignored in the U.S. press;. It is told however by William F. Pepper, *An Act of State: The Execution of Martin Luther King* (Verso, 2003). For complete trial transcripts see <http://thekingcenter.com/news/trial.html>.

III. Re-contextualization

Your silence will not protect you... What are the words you do not yet have? What do you need to say? What are the tyrannies you swallow day by day and attempt to make your own, until you will sicken and die of them, still in silence?

—Audrey Lorde, December 28, 1977



In the early days of the second Gulf War in 2003 Elaine and I were teaching in Memphis, and were struggling to find ways to break the silence that had descended on our citizenry (including the churches, especially in the deep South). King's Riverside speech was a powerful gift and tool I used repeatedly; it was far more effective to let this "national hero" frame issues that had suddenly become taboo in the "fog of war." The resonance was immediate—whether it engendered embrace (in African American congregations) or resistance (in most white congregations). The following year we used the text to engage the so-called "war on terrorism" in our Philadelphia Word and World School.

But at a deeper level, we need to revisit it because we have not yet learned the key integrative elements of Dr. King's catechism:

- q To understand militarism as the war of the rich against the poor;
- q To analyze foreign policy through lens of race; and
- q To understand that injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.

King believed that if racism, poverty and militarism are ultimately expressions of the same pathology, then popular movements of resistance and renewal must also "cross-train." Some of this happened between the 1940s and 60s: key Civil Rights activists (such as Bayard Rustin) were trained by pacifist organizations, for example, while the best antiwar activists came out of Civil Rights movement. Yet from the moment of King's assassination, peace and justice forces in the U.S. began a process of splintering that has yet to stop.

Today, after almost four decades of single-issue organizing, identity movements and culture wars, "progressive" social change work is highly balkanized—by ideology, by constituency, by issue, and/or by geography. Deep differences of race, class, gender, sexual orientation and social location have strained and fractured solidarity, often trumping disciplines of collaboration and cross-fertilization. We suffer from triplets of our own: professionalized specialization that doesn't see the big picture; mutual suspicion that competes for political space and resources; and practical segregation that prevents organic relationship building. Thus for example nuclear disarmament advocates and those struggling against gun violence usually work in different orbits, as do Central America solidarity activists and those dealing with the domestic crack epidemic; death penalty opponents and prisoners rights advocates; anti-globalization activists and living wage organizers; environmentalists and human rights workers; feminists and anti-racism trainers; LGBT activists and disability rights advocates, and so on.

More recently there have been a few signs of convergence. I would note three representative examples that I've had experience with:

- q Anti-globalization struggles occasionally bring workers and environment-alists together, and has animated the multi-polar World Social Forum;
- q Many faith-based living wage campaigns are serious about integrating immigrant rights and gender justice into their organizing;
- q The vision of "community unionism" promoted by the Southern Faith, Labor and Community Alliance draws together multiple strands of racial and economic justice.

And there are others. But they are still exceptions that prove the prevailing rule. Not enough contemporary peace and justice work exhibits the political or spiritual discipline, or the integrative analysis, that King embodied and called for. Consequently, our efforts amount to less than the sum of their parts—the opposite, in other words, of a Movement. Truth be told, the Neocons and the religious right have done far better at building a united front, and the political results are evident.

In his Riverside speech King was cautiously optimistic about the particular role of people of faith in movement-building:

We must rejoice as well, for surely this is the first time in our nation's history that a significant number of its religious leaders have chosen to move beyond the prophesying of smooth patriotism to the high grounds of a firm dissent based upon the mandates of conscience and the reading of history... Perhaps a new spirit is rising among us. If it is, let us trace its movement well and pray that our own inner being may be sensitive to its guidance, for we are deeply in need of a new way beyond the darkness that seems so close around us.

But that “new spirit” did not rise as King had hoped; instead, both the culture and the churches drifted steadily to the Right, and the activist minority became increasingly marginalized. Nor have our churches been of much help to activists trying to overcome the gulfs between them—which is not surprising, given our own continuing history of denominational fragmentation. Today the silences among the majority of North American Christians are deafening in the face of profoundly consequential matters like global warming, the deepening racialization and feminization of poverty, the arms trade, torture, the HIV pandemic, the prison-industrial complex, genetic engineering or the debt economy.

Our world is hostage more than ever to the “giant triplets” and their offspring (i.e. issues King could not foresee or did not address, such as environmental degradation, feminism, resurgent human trafficking or LGBT rights). The great temptation is to feel overwhelmed at the complexity of our public addictions and compulsions, to retreat into our private lives, to indulge in “compassion fatigue,” or to choose a narrow range of focus and screen out the rest.



It was precisely such strategies of denial or withdrawal that Audre Lorde (above), a Black lesbian feminist poet who knew a great deal about marginalization and invisibility, was attacking in her famous assertion that “Our silence will not protect us.” A decade after the Riverside speech Lorde gave a talk at the Modern Language Association in Chicago that powerfully echoed King’s call to the ‘vocation of agony’: “The transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self-revelation, and that always seems fraught with danger.”

That visibility which makes us most vulnerable is that which also is the source of our greatest strength. Because the machine will try to grind you into dust anyway, whether or not we speak. We can sit in our corners mute forever while our sisters and our selves are wasted, while our children are distorted and destroyed, while our earth is poisoned; we can sit in our safe corners mute as bottles, and we will still be no less afraid... We can learn to work and speak when we are afraid in the same way we have learned to work and speak when we are tired...⁸

8. The text of this talk can be found at www.transformationpublications.com/transformation_of_silence.html. For a biography of Lorde see www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/g_l/lorde/life.htm.

Lorde was one of the few activists in the years following King's death who intuitively understood and militantly embraced the exhortation to intersectional struggle. She challenged groups constantly to overcome fragmenting differences not by suppressing them, but by "doing our own work." "It is not difference which immobilizes us," she insisted, "but silence."

The Lorraine Motel, where King was gunned down, is now the National Civil Rights Museum, thanks to a protracted community struggle to commemorate that painful event. Directly under the balcony where "the dreamer" took his last breath is a memorial stone, into which is etched a quote from the story of Joseph in Genesis (below). Its challenge still haunts our nation like an unresolved chord: What will become of his dreams? "The choice is ours," King said in closing at Riverside. "And though we might prefer it otherwise, we must choose in this crucial moment of human history."

