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THE TRIUMPH IN CHALLENGE

DERRICK BELL*

Well, I don’t know what will happen now. We’ve got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn’t matter with me now. Because I’ve been to the mountaintop. And I don’t mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I’m not concerned about that now. I just want to do God’s will. And He’s allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I’ve looked over. And I’ve seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people will get to the promised land. And I’m happy tonight. I’m not worried about anything. I’m not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.¹

The oft-quoted excerpt from Dr. King’s last sermon is generally deemed a premonition of his tragic death less than twenty-four hours later.² And, so, it turned out to be. But, though delivered during a period of great depression, King’s words also represented a celebration of a life lived in the service of God—that is, in the service of other human beings.

It is significant that King’s service began when he accepted the urgent request of Montgomery activists, and agreed to lead the Montgomery Improvement Association. In that role, and later as head of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, he worked for the dignity of black people to vote, to attend public schools, and to use public facilities on a desegregated basis.

At the end of his life, he realized that the essential dignity of blacks and whites was work. Truly, in a capitalist society, work is the

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essential ingredient for freedom. Work provides the means to pay one’s bills. It is the measure of our place on the societal ladder, and it is the basis of our self-esteem.

Looking at the devastation in communities where the unemployment rate is over fifty percent, we can understand the full significance of what Dick Gregory said in seeming humor several years ago. “The Emancipation Proclamation,” Gregory observed, “was actually a massive, unemployment act for black people.”

Indeed, only the utter degradation of slavery or the worst aspects of the post-Reconstruction period condemned as many black people to lives of despair, desperation, and destruction as has decades of joblessness. The concomitants of poverty are many. Inevitably, though, they suggest the answer to the unhappy question Maya Angelou poses when she writes:

In these bloody days and frightful nights when an urban warrior can find no face more despicable than his own, no ammunition more deadly than self-hate and no target more deserving of his true aim than his brother, we must wonder how we came so late and lonely to this place.  

How indeed? Segregation condemned black people to the status of second-class citizens, but their contemporary exclusion from the job market, combined with the unremitting commercialism of daily life, has produced an equally invidious result. This exclusion has transformed potential into a frustration and rage so searing that it turns those who should be brothers into enemies, and those who should be enemies into unassailable beings who—for now—are envied and sometimes attacked for what they have, but—again, for now—are beyond the range of revenge or retaliation for what they and theirs have done.

The great challenge of the civil rights movement was to ring down the veil of racial segregation raised a century earlier at the insistence of working-class whites who wanted to maintain the myth developed during slavery that, despite working-class whites’ social subordination, they nonetheless were superior to blacks—blacks who, while no longer slaves, were far from free. Southern leaders ceded, initially with some reluctance, to white working-class demands for segregation as proof of their superior status and as claim to racial preference based on that status. Segregation was an expensive and morally indefensible separation, but it satisfied a great many working-class

whites who might otherwise question how, in a supposedly open society, they had so much less than some others who were also white.

The civil rights movement, taking advantage of America's post-World War II status as leader of the free world, and the relatively good economy that prevailed, mounted cases in the courts and protests—peaceful and not so peaceful—in the streets that made clear that the evil of segregation would be too costly to maintain. Yet, even in the midst of leading this monumental effort, Martin Luther King saw that segregation, for all of its ill effects, was not the evil. Rather, for King, segregation was only a manifestation of the real evil, racism—a racism already changing forms but with the same goal: to divide and alienate along racial lines those similarly subordinated as a means of maintaining the economic and political advantages held by well-off whites. King's efforts to move beyond the fight to end segregation and to encompass the problems of poverty and unjust wars, met stiff resistance both from comrades of color who thought it could not be done and whites who determined it would not be done.

Even so, Dr. King moved forward confronting those who were his sworn enemies and challenging those who should have been standing by his side. Among the latter was a group of ministers that had publicly condemned him as a trouble-maker creating disorder and lawlessness. The clergy's published statement called the nonviolent direct action crusade "unwise and untimely." They described King as an "outside agitator" who was not giving Birmingham's new, more moderate, but still segregationist leadership a chance.

While imprisoned in April 1963 for leading a demonstration for fair hiring practices in Birmingham, Alabama, King responded with his Letter from a Birmingham City Jail, a classic statement of the civil rights movement. In this missive, King answered his critics by expressing his own disappointment with the white church and its leadership. He mentioned individual church leaders who were exceptions, but reported that many ministers, priests and rabbis had been "outright opponents, refusing to understand the freedom movement and misrepresenting its leaders; all too many others have been more cautious than courageous and have remained silent behind the anesthetizing security of stained-glass windows." King then observed:

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5. Id.
6. Id. at 299.
In the midst of blatant injustices inflicted upon the Negro, I have watched white churches stand on the sideline and merely mouth pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities. In the midst of a mighty struggle to rid our nation of racial and economic injustice, I have heard many ministers say: "Those are social issues with which the gospel has no real concern," and I have watched so many churches commit themselves to a completely otherworldly religion which [makes] a strange distinction between body and soul, the sacred and the secular.  

King further urged the ministers who had criticized him to act: "Now is the time to make real the promise of democracy, and transform our pending national elegy into a creative psalm of brotherhood. Now is the time to lift our national policy from the quicksand of racial injustice to the solid rock of human dignity."  

Despite this stirring rhetoric, the criticism continued. Many viewed King's leadership of the civil rights movement as dangerous, subversive, and unpatriotic. And, when he decided to speak out publicly about the Vietnam War, not simply ministers, but government figures at the highest levels condemned his remarks. To a lesser degree, black leaders also distanced themselves from Martin Luther King's statements about the Vietnam War and the need to address economic injustice. Even King's closest advisers disagreed with his decision to take a stand against the war, worrying that it would undermine his credibility and alienate the president and important supporters of the civil rights movement. King answered his critics with his commitment. As to hostility to his outspoken opposition to the Vietnam War, King was neither surprised nor ultimately shaken.  

Knowing the reaction he could expect, King vacillated for a long period of time before denouncing the war. Ultimately, he decided to speak up, and later explained that he could not be silent about an "issue that is destroying the soul of our nation." To King, speaking out against the war in Vietnam, like his civil rights fight, was simply another cross he must bear: "The cross may mean the death of your popularity. It may mean the death of a foundation grant. It may cut down your budget a little, but you take up your cross, and just bear it. And that's the way I have decided to go."  

7. Id.
8. Id. at 296.
9. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., TO CHARTER OUR COURSE FOR THE FUTURE (May 22, 1967), quoted in GALLOW, supra note 2, at 564.
10. Id.
King increasingly found himself in what is the ultimate test of moral leadership: trying at great personal risk to save souls who do not wish to be saved. Civil rights advocates felt comfortable in treating racial discrimination by "bad white folks" as the enemy. They were fearful about expanding their vision to encompass the broader issues of capitalist exploitation at home and across the world. His enemies, for their part, both feared this outspoken black leader and resented his interference in international affairs or "white men's business." Alone and lonely, King stood his ground. He was the modern counterpart of the Old Testament Abraham. \(^{11}\) God had told Abraham that he would become the patriarch of a great and mighty nation. On the other hand, God was very upset about the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah, and confided in Abraham His plan to destroy both cities. Rather than nod a sad assent or even offer his humble approval of God's plan, Abraham dared to challenge God's condemnation. The Scripture tells us:

Then Abraham drew near, and said, "Wilt thou indeed destroy the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; wilt thou then destroy the place and not spare it for the fifty righteous who are in it? Far be it from thee to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from thee! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?"

And the Lord said, "If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will spare the whole place for their sake." Abraham answered, "Behold, I have taken upon myself to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes. Suppose five of the fifty righteous are lacking? Wilt thou destroy the whole city for lack of five?" And He said, "I will not destroy it if I find forty-five there." Again he spoke to Him, and said, "Suppose forty are found there." He answered, "For the sake of forty I will not do it." Then he said, "Oh let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak. Suppose thirty are found there." He answered, "I will not do it, if I find thirty there." He said, "Behold, I have taken upon myself to speak to the Lord. Suppose twenty are found there." He answered, "For the sake of twenty I will not destroy it." Then he said, "Oh let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak again but this once. Suppose ten are found there." He answered, "For the sake of ten I will not destroy it." And the Lord went his way, when he had

\(^{11}\) Genesis 18:20-33 (Revised Standard Version).
finished speaking to Abraham; and Abraham returned to his place.\textsuperscript{12}

Here, in this ancient story, is a model for our time. The need to challenge injustice even against the most powerful authority is an obligation that cannot be ignored because the risk is too great and the chances of success too small. King sought to negotiate redemption—not with God on behalf of the righteous in the doomed city of Sodom—but with the powers of privilege, position, and prejudice that have replaced God in modern life. From a political point of view, both Abraham and Dr. King acted on principle, but they were not the chosen representatives of those they sought to save. No one in Sodom elected Abraham to intercede on behalf of some of them and thereby, perhaps, save all. Had they known, they would have objected, disclaimed this man who sought to speak for them, and—as Abraham ultimately failed in his volunteered rescue mission—he, not God, would have been castigated by the lost citizens of Sodom even as their city fell crashing down on them.

King too felt the sting of criticism from those who felt that his principled stands were politically unwise—even dangerous. Indeed, King quite often felt that ultimate despair of the prophet who has come to know the truth, takes pains and risks to share that knowledge with the ignorant, and, for his troubles, is ignored when he is lucky, and scorned when he is not. In the last weeks of his life, King admitted to a Memphis audience during that final campaign to organize the city's refuse workers: "Sometimes I feel discouraged, having to live under the threat of death every day. Sometimes I feel discouraged, having to take so much abuse and criticism, sometimes from my own people. Sometimes I feel discouraged,"\textsuperscript{13} King said, but eventually he reported that the Holy Spirit would revive his soul.

Now King is gone, but today's challenges are quite like those King faced. For racism again masks real dangers that those whites who are most at risk confuse with their shaky, race-based status, and that those whites at the top are too consumed with crass greed to recognize. Most blacks feel the threat, but their cries are deemed self-serving and not worthy of serious concern.

The crisis, of course, is joblessness, and its dangers are hardly hidden. The facts of the danger are available almost daily on the business pages as corporations announce with pride rather than the more ap-

\textsuperscript{12} Id. 18:23-33.
\textsuperscript{13} MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., RALLY SPEECH TO STRIKING MEMPHIS SANITATION WORKERS (Mar. 18, 1968), quoted in Garrow, supra note 2, at 605.
propriate shame that they are laying off thousands of workers to cut costs—they say, but to enhance profits, they mean. The policies of “downsizing” so popular in business are made possible by technology, the export of thousands of jobs to third world countries, and the importation of uncounted multitudes of legal and illegal aliens. Productivity is rising, but at the sacrifice of millions of American jobs, while millions more are at risk.

Out-dated employment statistics do not reflect these losses because, according to some estimates, one-third of America's work force is now in temporary jobs, with low pay, no benefits, and no security. The great majority of individuals have not only experienced unprecedented job upheavals, but also an absolute twenty year decline in personal earnings.

Business leaders assure us that the new high-tech jobs will hire displaced workers—assuming those workers have ample skills and experience. But these new companies hire relatively few workers. For example, Intel, Microsoft, Apple Computer, and Genentech together employ a grand total of 62,500 people, only 500 more than Home Depot alone, a retail chain that offers mostly low-paid and part-time jobs. And Apple recently laid off several hundred of its employees.

The fact is that we are at the end of an era when work was society's sustaining force. Few in policy-making positions want to even seriously discuss, much less take the politically unpopular measures necessary to address the crisis. With his usual irreverent perception, Professor John Kenneth Galbraith points out: "A great many people and an even higher proportion of those who have political voice and vote, . . . find a recession quite comfortable, and certainly more so than the measures that do anything effective about it. This, however, no one dreams of saying."14

Secretary of Labor Robert Reich is fond of saying that America is now divided into the upper class, the lower class, and the anxious class. He has even pointed out the benefits of reviewing corporate subsidies during the current mania for cutting welfare benefits. No one in elective office seems interested in taking up the challenge. We need to recognize the continuing need for work and for equity, but there seem few in power willing to speak unpopular truths in order to put even these issues on the table for debate, much less face up to the hard, politically unpopular policies necessary to address them. Both Democrats and Republicans prefer the short-term political benefits of

cutting entitlements for the poor and minorities, as though what will surely further cripple our neediest will cure our economic condition.

Indeed, leaders of both parties have responded to our economic crisis by moving to the political right and promoting a growing antipathy toward this society’s traditional scapegoats: black people. Indeed, there is the sense—evidently one accepted by a substantial percentage of the populace—that joblessness in America and the growing gap in wealth and income between those at the top and the rest of the nation will be cured by taking strong action on crime, including increased coverage for the death penalty, welfare cuts in programs aimed at the poor, affirmative action, and immigration. Conservative politicians skillfully turn these code words into winning vote margins.

Black peoples’ concerns about these developments are two-fold. First, blacks are bearing the brunt of joblessness, either through the use of “last hired, first fired” downsizing policies or through actions of hard-to-prove, but no less damaging discrimination. Second, now as in past economic crises, black people are facing increasing racial hostility as a result of understandable but seriously misplaced white anxieties. Consider:

—When indentured labor could no longer supply the labor needs of Southern plantations in the seventeenth century, those able to purchase slaves cut deals with yeomen whites that led to the establishment of the slave system.

—When the framers of the Constitution bogged down over whether a new government created to recognize individual liberty should also recognize and protect slavery, they rejected the many petitions from blacks calling for an end to slavery, and decided that protecting the property of slave owners must have priority over black freedom.

—When an electoral dispute in 1876 threatened a new Civil War, the so-called Hayes-Tilden Compromise resolved the issue at the expense of the freedom and protection of the new black citizens who, under the agreement, were left to the far from tender mercies of white Southerners.

I can continue but you get my point—and our concern. Today, we are in a major economic crisis, one that can be turned back only if many of us are willing to rise to the challenge as Abraham and Martin Luther King were able to do. The economic reforms that we must acknowledge as essential before we can move toward them must come from individuals with the faith in commitment that distinguished Martin Luther King. His is a model that most blacks accept and that most whites need.
Despite the emphasis on his *I Have a Dream Speech*, we should remember that we have a day honoring Martin Luther King, Jr., not because he was greatly loved or respected during his life. He wasn't. He is not honored because he achieved his goals. He didn't. He was neither infallible, nor without faults. Like many of us who worked within the civil rights movement at that time, King recognized quite late the important role that race plays in maintaining the economic status quo. It continues to perform that role with all its attendant losses for some and its potential for disaster for us all.

King is remembered because he was willing to take risks for what he believed. He was willing to go down to defeat for a worthy cause. He recognized that victory in the spiritual sense was not dependent on the vagaries of winning and losing. True victory came in the struggle itself. Involvement was his bottom line.

A person should be judged, King reminded us, not by the color of his skin, but by the content of his character. That is still true, and yet the recognition of that truth is easily forgotten in these harsh economic times. All too many white people—and some black and Hispanic people—seek to ease their anxieties about work and status by attributing to the other race their burdens of class and caste. To counteract the politicians and radio talk show hosts who exploit these anxieties with lies about racial inadequacy as the means to misdirect fears about economic conditions and dangers, we need some people of color and a great many whites willing to model their lives on that of Martin Luther King, Jr.