

INTRODUCTION

Having shared a precious friendship with Martin King during the last ten years of his life, I was very pleased to learn that Beacon Press was returning to its important role as a publisher of his book-length works. Then, when I was asked to write the introduction for this new edition of King's fourth book, many powerful memories flooded my being. First and most important was my recollection of how determined Martin was to be fully and creatively engaged with the living history of his time, a history he did so much to help create but also a dangerous and tumultuous history that shaped and transformed his own amazingly brief yet momentous searching life.

From this position of radical engagement it would have been relatively easy for King, if he chose, to confine his published writing to telling the powerful stories of the experiences he shared almost daily with the magnificent band of women, men, and children who worked in the black-led Southern freedom movement, recounting how they struggled to transform themselves, their communities, this nation, and our world. Instead, going beyond the stories, King insisted on constantly raising and reflecting on the basic questions he posed in the first chapter of this work—"Where Are

We?” and in the overall title of the book itself, *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* (Always present, of course, were the deepest questions of all: Who are we? Who are we meant to be?)

These are the recognizable queries that mature human beings persistently pose to themselves—and to their communities—as they explore the way toward their best possibilities. Not surprisingly, such constant probing toward self-understanding was a central element of King’s practice when he was at his best.

Indeed, it was the urgent need for such self-examination and deep reflection on the new American world that he and the freedom movement helped create that literally drove King to wrestle publicly and boldly with the profound issues of this book. Ironically, it was almost immediately after the extraordinary success of the heroic Alabama voter-registration campaign—which led to the Selma-to-Montgomery march, and the follow-up congressional passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act—that King realized he had to confront a very difficult set of emerging American realities that demanded his best prophetic interpretation and his most creative proposals for action.

Perhaps the most immediate and symbolic energizing event came just days after President Lyndon Johnson signed the hard-won historic Voting Rights Act, when the black community of Watts, in Los Angeles, exploded in fire, frustration, and rage. When King and several of his coworkers rushed to Watts to engage some of the young men who were most deeply involved in the uprising, they heard the youth say, “We won.” Looking at the still smoldering embers of the local community, the visitors asked what *winning* meant, and one of the young men declared, “We won because we made them pay attention to us.”

Building on all of the deep resources of empathy and compassion that seemed so richly and naturally a part of his life, King appeared determined not only to pay attention but to insist that his organization and his nation focus themselves and their resources on dozens of poor, exploited black communities—and especially their desperate young men, whose broken lives were crying out for new, humane possibilities in the midst of the wealthiest nation in the world. Speaking later at a staff retreat of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, King expressed a conviction that had long been a crucial part of what he saw when he paid attention to the nation's poorest people. He said, "Something is wrong with the economic system of our nation. . . . Something is wrong with capitalism." Always careful (perhaps too careful) to announce that he was not a Marxist in any sense of the word, King told the staff he believed "there must be a better distribution of wealth, and maybe America must move toward a democratic socialism. . . ." This seemed a natural direction for someone whose ultimate societal goal was the achievement of a nonviolent "beloved community." But a major part of the white American community and its mass media seemed only able to condemn "Negro violence" and to justify a "white backlash" against the continuing attempts of the freedom movement to move northward toward a more perfect union. (King wisely indentified the fashionable "backlash" as a continuing expression of an antidemocratic white racism that was as old as the nation itself.)

Meanwhile, even before Watts, King and the SCLC staff had begun to explore creative ways in which they could expand their effort to develop a just and beloved national community by establishing projects in northern black urban neighborhoods. (The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, or SNCC, the other major Southern movement

organizing force, was involved in similar Northern explorations by the mid-1960s, but both organizations were hampered by severe financial difficulties.) Partly because of some earlier contacts with Chicago-based community organizers, King and SCLC decided to focus on that deeply segregated city as the center of their expansion into the anguish of the North. By the winter of 1966, SCLC staff members had begun organizing in Chicago. At that point King decided to try to spend at least three days a week actually living in one of the city's poorest black communities, a west-side area named Lawndale. From that vantage point, working (sometimes uncomfortably) with their Chicago colleagues, King and SCLC decided to concentrate their attention on a continuing struggle against the segregated, deteriorating, and educationally dysfunctional schools; the often dilapidated housing; and the disheartening lack of job opportunities.

This book must be read in the urgent context of King's difficult experiences in Watts and Chicago, which seemed more representative of the nation's deeper racial dilemma than were the Southern battlegrounds of Selma and Montgomery. For instance, Chicago was the setting for King's fierce reminders that "the economic plight of the masses of Negroes has worsened" since the beginnings of the Southern freedom movement, because slum conditions had worsened "and Negroes attend more thoroughly segregated schools than in 1954."

In the face of such hard facts, King insisted on pressing two other realities into the nation's conscience. One was his continuing plea for "a coalition of Negroes and liberal whites that will work to make both major parties truly responsive to the needs of the poor." At the same time he insisted that "we must not be oblivious to the fact that the larger economic

problems confronting the Negro community will only be solved by federal programs involving billions of dollars.”

This was the King of *Where Do We Go from Here*. Sparked by the young men of Watts, informed by the streets he walked in Chicago, inspired by the magnificently ordinary organizers and community members who faced white rage and fear-filled violence in the Windy City and its suburbs, King was constantly teaching, learning, urging, admonishing—reminding Americans not only of the powerful obstacles in our histories, our institutions, and our hearts, but also calling our attention to the amazing hope represented by Thomas Paine, one of the few really radical, grassroots-oriented “founding fathers,” who dared to proclaim, “We have the power to begin the world over again.” Insisting on claiming such revolutionary words, King readily grasped them for himself and for us all. Mixing all this with his undying commitment to the way of active nonviolence, King remained faithful to the call he had put forth at the end of the Selma-to-Montgomery march: “We must keep going.” (Always going, always carrying the costly testimony: “Occasionally in life one develops a conviction so precious and meaningful that he will stand on it till the end. That is what I have found in nonviolence.”)

Ironically enough, while King’s time in Chicago placed its indelible mark on both his questions and his relentless search for answers—for himself and for the rest of us—it was another Southern-based experience that pressed him to share some of his deepest convictions, hopes, and fears. Indeed, the recounting of his crucial participation in the June 1966 Mississippi March Against Fear (the “Meredith March”) provided King the opportunity he needed to offer some of his own powerful responses to the fear-tinged, media-driven

national debate about the rise and meaning of the call for Black Power and the spread of the urban black explosions inadequately called “riots.”

In addition to offering his own constantly expanding appreciation of the positive, healing elements of a black self-love, King continued to urge the African American community to refuse to let the path toward black affirmation lead into the self-defeating way of isolation and despair. “There is no solution for the Negro through isolation,” he wrote. Instead, encouraging black people to continue moving on toward our best possibilities (instead of copying white America’s worst habits—especially its racism, extreme materialism, and militarism), King declared that “our most fruitful course is to stand firm, move forward nonviolently, accept disappointment and cling to hope.” In that same frame of mind, King added, “To guard ourselves from bitterness we need the vision to see in this generation’s ordeals the opportunity to transfigure both ourselves and American society.” (Did he foresee the Obama opportunity? Will Obama really see King, paying attention? And what about us? Where do we go? The questions cannot be avoided.)

At the same time, King took the opportunity to speak to white allies whose support for the freedom movement had already diminished as the campaign moved on to address the harsh realities and structural challenges of the North. In that context, King called Black Power a cry of “disappointment with timid white moderates who feel that they can set the timetable for the Negro’s freedom.” With increasing regularity, that theme of black disappointment (that he surely shared) was also applied to the Johnson administration and its devastating war in Vietnam. Indeed, as the war expanded, drawing more and more American troops (mostly poor, working class, and people of color on the front lines),

as it endangered and destroyed the lives of hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese people, King's protesting, conscience-driven voice began to be heard with increasing vigor. And *Where Do We Go from Here* provided another opportunity to contrast the comparative timidity and lack of creativity of Johnson's cut-rate War on Poverty to the robust energy, imagination and billions of dollars dedicated to the Southeast Asian disaster. That was the setting in which King described the call for Black Power as an urgent scream of "disappointment with a federal administration that seems to be more concerned about winning an ill-considered war in Vietnam than about winning the war against poverty here at home."

Even as he spoke and wrote those words, King recognized the danger they carried. He knew that there were many black and white allies and supporters of his organization and of the larger freedom and justice movement who considered it unwise, unpatriotic, and unnecessarily provocative to combine the call for legal and economic rights at home with a profound questioning of the foreign policy of a federal government whose assistance was considered essential in the achievement of civil rights. (King knew as well that many of his sturdy financial contributors were having difficulty continuing to give support toward such unorthodox views—especially when they tended to expect black people to be superpatriots, in the most narrow definition of the word. And, of course, King also knew that Lyndon Johnson expected nothing less than utter fealty, in gratitude for his role as the "Civil Rights president.")

Interestingly enough, in the course of his insistent wrestling with the purpose and future direction of his own organization and of the larger movement, King used the pages of this book to press himself and his coworkers to move beyond a narrow, legalistic understanding of their work, to

open themselves to newer, deeper, less-travelled directions—especially as they faced the systemic, social, political, and economic issues that met them everywhere in the North.

For instance, toward the end of this work, as King envisioned for himself and others some aspects of a human response to the book's title question, he wrote, "So far we have had constitutional backing for most of our demands for change, and this has made our work easier, since we could be sure of legal support from the federal courts. Now we are approaching areas where the voice of the Constitution is not clear." King went on with his description of the new situation, saying, "We have left the realm of constitutional rights and we are entering the area of human rights." He continued: "The Constitution assured the right to vote, but there is no such assurance of the right to adequate housing, or the right to an adequate income. [Or, the right to high-quality education and health care?] And yet in a nation which has a gross national product of \$750 billion a year, it is morally right to insist that every person have a decent house, an adequate education and enough money to provide basic necessities for one's family." Here again he urged exploration of a "guaranteed annual income" for all who needed it.

For the many persons—whatever their color—who originally signed onto the freedom movement to assist in the quest for the Southern black right to vote, for equal access to public accommodations, and for minimally integrated schools, *this* King was out beyond their vision and their reach—and their control. For me, as I revisit *this* King and remember his last years of unrelenting struggle against what he called "the triple evils" of racism, materialism, and militarism, I see him on the nettlesome, uncharted path toward a more perfect union, a path that still challenges us all. I hear him preaching at his Ebenezer Church in Atlanta: "I choose to identify with

the underprivileged. I choose to identify with the poor. I choose to give my life for the hungry. . . . This is the way I'm 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 say, 'Do something for others.'"

And I rejoice to consider the strong possibility that *this* King, while paying attention, had opened the way for Barack Obama. So I pray and work that the best of King and the best of Obama might meet, both enriched, both made vulnerable and powerful by their attention to the cries of Chicago's poorest people, both opening to all of us the opportunity to stand with them—again and again, pressing them and ourselves to respond to our best angels.

Throughout this book, King continues to combine his various roles—as spirit-based, pro-democracy activist; thoughtful social analyst; loving, encouraging pastor who calls us to our best possibilities; and as justice-obsessed, biblically shaped, prophetic spokesperson for the poor. Such a melded identity allowed King to speak not only to white America and to the black poor, but to turn, unhesitatingly, as well to his sisters and brothers in the expanding black middle class. So he spoke with unflinching honesty and undeniable authenticity when he wrote, "It is time for the Negro middle class to rise up from its stool of indifference, to retreat from its flight into unreality and to bring its full resources—its heart, its mind and its checkbook—to the aid of the less fortunate brother [and sister]." (King, here, as in the entire book, unfortunately was a captive of the male gender preferences of his time—and of his church background. When I consider his capacity for growth, I like to believe that if he had been given another decade he would have discovered his own best possibilities there as elsewhere.)

His words to the black middle class provided an excellent opportunity for King to clarify again what he meant by America's constantly used and misused word "integration." He wrote, "Let us not think of our movement as one that seeks to integrate the Negro into all the existing values of American society." Instead, he urged, "Let us be those creative dissenters who will call our beloved nation to a higher destiny, to a new plateau of compassion, to a more noble expression of humanness."

In the light of King's unstintingly accurate critique of his "beloved nation," and his vision of our "higher destiny" as human beings, it was clear why he needed to believe in Tom Paine's radical vision of our capacity "to begin the world over again," moving toward "the final goal" of "genuine intergroup and interpersonal living." Indeed, he seemed deeply in sync with James Baldwin's urgent call to us to "realize ourselves" as an American family of many rich varieties. He was clearly attuned to Langston Hughes's readiness to "swear this oath" that "America will be." Indeed he often seemed the prescient older brother to poet June Jordan and her conviction that "we are the ones we've been waiting for" to transform this reluctant nation into its best possible self.

In fact, reading his words of hope again, I remembered Martin's elder sister-in-struggle, Fannie Lou Hamer, Mississippi's wise and courageous grassroots freedom movement leader who became a gift to us all. I recalled the story of her being questioned by a reporter at the historic 1964 Democratic National Convention and asked about her powerful challenge on behalf of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party to the convention's acceptance of segregated delegations. Did her vigorous antisegregation stand mean that "she was seeking equality with the white man?" the reporter

asked. “No,” Ms. Hamer firmly replied. “What would I look like fighting for equality with the white man? I don’t want to go down that low. I want the true democracy that’ll raise me *and* the white man up . . . raise America up.”

Using somewhat different language, this was the message that King fervently sought to convey to his nation, his people, his children. That was the ultimate answer to the question posed by his book’s title *Where Do We Go from Here*. To raise America up, that’s where.

So he was urgent about finding a way through the interstices of his horrendous traveling schedule, dealing with dozens of speaking commitments, both in the United States and overseas, calling and attending SCLC strategy sessions, tending to a constant set of internal and external crises in Chicago and Atlanta, always needing to be available for fund-raising gatherings, hurrying toward family rendezvous. Moving through all of that, toward the end of 1966, he pressed himself to finish the manuscript. (Actually, King had been working on it, in many forms, ever since he moved to Chicago in January of that year, often sharing his developing, searching thinking with Clarence Jones, Stanley Levison, Bayard Rustin, and Andrew Young—his most consistent political and literary advisors. Sometimes he shared sections of the emerging manuscript at staff retreats.)

One final step on the way to completion involved what was originally planned as a four-week escape to Jamaica, in January 1967. Carrying several suitcases of notes and other materials, King traveled with his assistant, Bernard Lee, and his impressively competent and committed secretary, Dora McDonald. Coretta also joined him on several occasions during the Jamaica retreat, where he was freed of the telephone and its demands. So he was free to pay even deeper atten-

tion, free to continue to wrestle with the amazingly complex systems of devastation and constraint that were faced by poor people in America.

He was also free to speak with loving candor and seething anger to his “white brothers and sisters” who refused to recognize their own deep personal and structural involvement in the causes of the urban rebellions and the call for Black Power. Out of that freedom emerged King’s most direct word to white Americans: “Negroes hold only one key to the double lock of peaceful change. The other is in the hands of the white community.”

Before the book was finally published in June 1967, King had clearly decided to follow his conscience and his commitment to the poor when, on April 4, in New York’s Riverside Church, he raised his voice in an unambiguous, powerful call for America to end its destructive, colonialist-style participation in the Vietnam War. (I am grateful that Martin asked me to prepare the first draft of that statement for him.)

Then, not long after *Where Do We Go from Here* appeared, its beleaguered and determined author began to announce the somewhat vague plans that SCLC was preparing to lead a major campaign of civil disobedience the following spring in Washington, D.C.—a Poor People’s Campaign. The plans were to bring thousands of poor Americans to the nation’s capital to demand that the War on Poverty receive the energy, funding, and attention that should be withdrawn from the war in Southeast Asia. Significantly, the Poor People of the campaign were meant to include not only African Americans, but whites, Latinos, and Native Americans as well.

For King it was obvious that his answer to the book’s subtitle was very clear: a deeply integrated, loving community rather than segregated chaos; hope rather than despair—raising up America and making the world over. While on

his committed journey in that humane direction, King was invited to turn his commitment to the poor into a very concrete collaboration with hundreds of exploited, mistreated garbage workers in Memphis, Tennessee. The first paperback version of this book was published shortly after his assassination in the consciously chosen company of the poor.

When the late Coretta King wrote her brief and thoughtful preface to the original, post-assassination Beacon paperback she closed with these words: “The glowing spirit and the sharp insights of Martin Luther King, Jr., are embodied in this book. The solutions he offered can still save our society from self-destruction. I hope that it will be seen as a testament, and that the grief that followed his death will be transmitted to a universal determination to realize the economic and social justice for which he so willingly gave his life.”

VINCENT HARDING