



Institute for Family & Child Well-Being

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Reflecting on the King Holiday: Will We Be Caught Sleeping Through a Great Revolution?

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Greetings, and thank you for reading this latest issue of our ongoing analysis and commentary publication, *Perspectives on Our Work*.

I would like to take this time to reflect on the recent holiday celebrating the life and legacy of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.. The Monday holiday is a day that I have used for many years now as an opportunity for reflection, contemplation, and more recently, a periodic reassessment of how I use my time, skills and talents to help make this world a better place for children and families today, and the generations of children that have yet to be born.

I began this ritual when I was in high school, and have continued annually in one form or another. I am even more proud to do this now with my children as they continue to grow and become evermore inquisitive about what daddy is doing and listening to.

As is my routine, I began this year's holiday listening to some of the morning radio and television shows to get a sense of what the "popular coverage" of the King Holiday would offer. As is increasingly the case, I was greatly disappointed at the public discourse on the meaning and contemporary implications of Dr. King's life, words, work and legacy. The public and popular discourse gets more disappointing every year. This is unfortunate because so much of what people, particularly children, in this country come to know about history and contemporary society is learned via some audio or visual medium (e.g. radio and television).

After listening to some of the morning coverage of the King Holiday, I then used the remainder of the

day, off and on, listening to some of the major speeches that Dr. King delivered during his lifetime. In recent years I have found myself listening to speeches and sermons delivered during the last year of Dr. King's very short life, especially those delivered during 1968... the last several months of his life.

One of the speeches that I listened to today was a sermon Dr. King delivered on March 31, 1968 at the Washington National Cathedral in Washington, DC. This sermon is popularly referred to as "Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution." In this sermon Dr. King addressed a broad range of issues, including persistent hunger and poverty, the idea of affirmative action and the "bootstrap" analysis of African American progress, as well as a critical analysis of this nation's greatest contra-

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dition of that day... the Vietnam War as contrasted with the domestic challenges of the United States during and leading up to the year 1968.

The theme that ran through this sermon, as with many of Dr. King's sermons, was the critical and active role each and every one of us must play in making this a country that is compassionate, equitable and morally just. Dr. King was clear that this was and continues to be both a moral as well as a practical necessity if we desire a world and nation that is safe and healthy for our children, families and communities. Given the increasingly hostile climate in this nation's domestic and foreign affairs the consequences of inaction or *even ineffective action* could be a society that continues to slide towards chaos and "potential annihilation." While this sermon spoke of American society at-large

and the relationship of the African American community to it, the analysis is just as relevant to the state of affairs *within* the African American community.

While listening and reflecting I found myself drawing parallels between the words Dr. King spoke during this sermon and the present-day challenges we face in this society in general, and more specifically the dynamics we continue to struggle with in the work of child welfare and human services.

Much of the discussion about the challenges of the current child welfare field centers around the specific practices professionals are engaged in on a day-to-day basis. I don't think this is completely off base, but I think the underlying issues in child welfare are much deeper than the specific practices professionals engage in. I believe the underlying challenges facing child welfare and human services more broadly in this country are rooted in the fundamental values of this society and the underlying assumptions about the value and utility of support for certain children, families and communities relative to others. These values and assumptions are largely shaped by this country's legacy of *structural, institutional and individual racism*.

As Dr. King so eloquently pointed out, African American families and communities are and always have been undervalued and scorned in this society. There continues to be very little value assigned to the life experiences of African American families and children by this nation and its institutions, including government. Thus, little value is often seen in providing supports and resources to help change the real conditions and circumstances that so many of our families and communities are forced to endure. It remains our

challenge to turn this reality on its ugly head, and provide the supports necessary to develop, strengthen and celebrate our children, families and communities.

I would also like to highlight yet another one of the critical messages shared by Dr. King in the sermon mentioned above and so many other sermons he delivered, increasingly so in the later period of his life. We must recall Dr. King's critical assessment of the involvement of white people in the struggle for racial equity and justice in this country. White people in this society must ask themselves if they are truly committed to the cause of racial equity and justice, and how they "show up" in this enduring struggle.

It is my opinion that there is a role for truly committed anti-racist "allies" that are indeed willing to "wave the flag" and speak truth to power. These flags, however, do not need to be waved by whites only while standing side by side (or in the pulpits on Sunday mornings) in the African American community. This commitment, dedication and courage is needed in the boardrooms, courtrooms, media outlets as well as political and financial institutions... especially when we are not there to hear and offer congratulatory praise.

We need to see more examples... exemplars... of the courage demonstrated by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.. Every one of us has an opportunity to speak our truth to power, but it won't happen by simply dreaming about it. Let us all affirm the real legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. by recommitting ourselves to the noble work of healing families and communities. The promise of a better tomorrow begins with us. - OAM

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Note to Our Readers: One reason we publish this essay series, *Perspectives on Our Work*, is that we wish to create and participate in an ongoing national dialogue about the major challenges facing African American families and communities, especially those challenges related to the African American experience with this nation's child welfare and juvenile justice systems. Please share your reflections on this and other essays with us via email. You may send your comments to us via email at the address provided above. If you are interested, we will consider posting your comments and reflections on our website. Please join this national dialogue about our families and children... about our future. We thank you for your continued support of this most important work.