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Reflection on Economic Justice
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The night before Martin was assassinated he spoke of going to the mountain top and seeing The Promised Land. In a premonitory way, he wondered out loud if he would get there, but he seemed powerfully convinced WE would surely get there.

You might well ask: 'Are we there yet?'

Seriously, do you suppose where we find ourselves and our world right now is what he had in mind? No, I don't think so, either.

From what I recall of that period of my youth, and still more from what I have read and learned since, I believe he envisioned America would come to live up to its best ideals. That we, as a people and a nation, would live actively for peace, would be dedicated to economic justice for all, would truly embody racial equality, would have a genuine participatory democracy, and that we would fully and fairly share a nonviolent co-existence with all peoples and nations on Earth.

But I also believe that he knew that such possibilities could only come about with persistent, widespread, and ongoing struggle. That freedom and justice movements, here and elsewhere, would have to continue to wage nonviolent resistance to the status quo for such promises to be made real.

In my remarks today I implore you to consider The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. not as a hero, nor as an icon for whom we should praise and celebrate. If only for now, see Martin for the dangerous and militant man that he was. He was murdered because he was threatening, not because he was hopeful.

Speaking to an assembly of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in 1967, he took brief stock of a decade of change in the South and concluded this:

"In assault after assault, we caused the sagging walls of segregation to come tumbling down. During this era the entire edifice of segregation was profoundly

shaken... We made our government write new laws to alter some of the cruelest injustices that affected us..." (Where Do We Go From Here?)

The ability to travel and sleep in motels; to go to a library and check out books; to drink from any water fountain; to sit and eat at, not just clean the tables of a restaurant, these were some of the simple yet profound changes in African-American's daily life. And their achieving a real opportunity to vote was a first step toward greater political democracy for all of us.

These are the facts of school books, and that is all that some of you know. For others here, these are memories of a very oppressive and violent time, which includes 'strange fruit' hanging from Poplar trees, and a perverse and pervasive belief in white superiority which fouled the minds of entire generations, including one's own family members.

If you were born before Martin was shot down on April 4th, 1968, AND you have direct experience with any of this madness, please stand for a moment, if you are willing and able. For those of you born later, for whom Martin is only historical, please look at these folks standing among you - neighbors and strangers, family and friends. For them, Martin was a contemporary, more or less real, someone they heard, watched, maybe walked with; maybe they disagreed with him, maybe even reviled him, as many did. Believe it or not, they, too, may have been dangerous, joining 'assault after assault.' You may want to come to know their stories.

[Please, you may sit down again, and thank you.]

To that same assemblage gathered in August of 1967, Martin also said this: "Now another basic challenge is to discover how to organize our strength in to economic and political power... the problem of transforming [economic injustice], therefore, is a problem of power, a confrontation between the forces of power demanding change and the forces of power dedicated to preserving the status quo." (Where Do We Go From Here?)

He went on to layout a nonviolent strategy that included constructive programs for economic development in several metropolitan areas, but one that also built-in direct social and economic intervention to force local power structures "to capitulate" to the movement.

Citizenship Education programs were to cultivate the changes individuals and community organizations could make, "upon which all social change must ultimately rest" he thought. Training for literacy, consumer education, planned parenthood, and health counseling were provided to the poor. Operation Breadbasket addressed

housing concerns like rehabilitating buildings, organizing tenant unions, and creating home ownership bills. Other economic targets were financial institutions whose priorities needed redirecting in order to benefit African-American businesses, from newspapers to contractors. The movement had long had a national agenda to promote job creation, a reduced work week, full employment, and a living wage or a guaranteed annual income. And whenever deemed necessary, the nonviolent power of protest marches and economic boycotts were deployed to force social, economic and political change. (Where Do We Go From Here?)

Given all these demands and all the confrontations that ensued, Martin and the movement were begrudgingly tolerated. Actually, some elites stood to benefit from the movement's objectives and they actively joined in undermining the institutional pillars that supported economic segregation throughout the country.

But then Martin got really dangerous; and none too few in the movement thought so, too. He came out against the Vietnam war. He also made his stand with anti-colonial revolutions. He effectively announced his global citizenship with 'the brotherhood of man.'

He had declared the following: "I am convinced that if we are to get on the right side of the world revolution, we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin... the shift from a thing-oriented society to a person-oriented society. When machines and computers, [dare I add cell phones?] profit motives and property rights, are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered.

A true revolution of values will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies... True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring." (Beyond Vietnam)

Please note that he did not say reform. Redistribution was on his mind; transformative justice was his vision.

From that day forward, he was dangerous to owning classes of people in all nations.

From that day forward, he threatened governments to remove the protections that buffered private wealth and control over the economy so that economic democracy, not just political democracy might be achieved and shared by all.

From that day forward, he had exactly one year to live.

Forty-two years later and The Promised Land seems very far away. Instead we are amidst a worldwide "Great Recession." During a time of global climate disruption.

Here are some facts and figures drawn from reports by United for a Fair Economy nearby in Boston. (Bankers, Brokers, Bubbles and Bailouts, Oct. 2009; State of the Dream 2010: Drained, Jan. 2010)

Since 2007, more than 7 million jobs have been lost. None too few in this city. Almost 15 million people are receiving unemployment benefits; for none too few of us in this room. As of last month, 16.2% of African Americans were unemployed, 12.9% of Latinos, and 9% of Whites. Workers laid off in an economic downturn can take up to 20 years to replace their lost earnings. Blacks and Latinos are 2.9 and 2.7 times as likely, respectively, to live in poverty than Whites. Blacks have 10 cents of net wealth for every dollar of white net worth, and Latinos have 12 cents. Pension values for state and local education workers have lost as much as 35% of their value. Foreclosures exceed 3.2 million; housing shelters are spilling over into motels. Homeland security, indeed.

The root causes for all this are complex and subject to great debate, of course. One sketch has forces of power successfully attacking organized labor, wages, and entitlements from the Great Society and the War on Poverty - some of Martin's objectives - eventually resulting in a transfer of wealth to the top, concentrations not seen since 1928, with stagnating wages for the vast majority of U.S. citizens.

Some of you will recognize in this picture the Reagan Revolution; Bush 1's New World Order; Bush 2's Ownership Society; as well as Clinton's Washington Consensus.

This is not the redistribution Martin had in mind. "A true revolution of values will soon look uneasily on the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth." (Beyond Vietnam) Be careful what you vote for, in every election, at every level.

Now consider these facts and figures from the National Priorities Project. We are approaching \$1 Trillion in total war costs for Iraq and Afghanistan. That is just under one-third of the 2010 U.S. federal budget. President Obama's surge of 30,000 troops for Afghanistan will amount to at least \$30 Billion. Each soldier will cost \$1 million to deploy and sustain. That amounts to \$57,000 a minute for each taxpayer. In 2010, total Afghanistan War spending since November 2001 will exceed \$325 billion, which [equals](#) the combined annual military spending of Great Britain, China, France, Japan, Germany, Russia, and Saudi Arabia. If we had never launched an invasion of Afghanistan or stayed on fighting all these years, those war

costs, evenly distributed in this country, would have meant a \$2,298.80 dividend per U.S. taxpayer.

To quote the report: "On the other hand, given the woeful inadequacy of [our] "safety net," we might have chosen to direct the \$30 billion in surge expenditures toward raising the average individual monthly Food Stamp allotment by \$70 for the next year; that's roughly an additional trip to the grocery store, every month, for 36 million people. [6 million people live on only food stamps.] Alternatively, we could have dedicated that \$30 billion to job creation. According to a [recent report](#) issued by the Political Economy Research Institute, that sum could generate a whopping 537,810 construction jobs, 541,080 positions in healthcare, fund 742,740 teachers or employ 831,390 mass transit workers. On the domestic front, \$30 billion could double the funding (at [2010 levels](#)) for the Children's Health Insurance Program and the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program." (J. Comerford, National Priorities Project)

"A true revolution of values will lay hand on the world order and say of war, "This way of settling differences is not just... A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death." (Beyond Vietnam)

On the international affairs front, this year we will spend \$37.5 Billion for development and humanitarian assistance. That is only 20% more than the cost of the military surge.

"A true revolution of values... will look across the seas and see individual capitalists of the West investing huge sums of money in Asia, Africa, and South America, only to take the profits out with no concern for the social betterment of the countries, and say, "This is not just." It will look at our alliance with the landed gentry of South America and say, "This is not just." (Beyond Vietnam)

As painful as it may be, please consider Haiti's catastrophe in light of this view. An analysis of Haiti's history and current place in the world order can be debated, but there ought to be no doubt that the calamity they face now was in large measure socially constructed over many decades by multinational economic and political interests in profit making, not in genuine human and social development.

When you consider how you can help, do not forget Martin's call that we help strengthen the power of those local forces who will struggle for change against those forces who will maneuver for a return to the status quo. On this point my colleague at Tufts, Tim Wise (email), of the Global Development and Environment Inst., suggests that we support agencies that build local capacities and institutions;

that we direct our money to those agencies there before the earthquake, and not the new ambulance-chasers; that we support privately funded rather than government funded initiatives; support partnerships of nongovernmental organizations in order to sustain long-term commitments; and think beyond the immediate crisis and help fuel local movements for deepening social, economic and political change there.

Let me begin to wrap up by noting again Martin's interest in restructuring the edifice of our political economy. We all know, as did he, that reform is the art of daily political processes. But he called for Americans to organize a nonviolent revolution against "our system of economic injustice and military destructiveness..." "so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make" their journey in life, as he put it. (Beyond Vietnam, and Stride Toward Freedom)

Consider what reforming not restructuring, health care may soon beget: 25 million more people the insurance industry can count as customers. People who can then be denied or limited treatments, their care managed so as to maintain a desired rate of profit. Hundreds of millions of dollars are being spent by health industry interests - pharmaceuticals, insurance companies, hospitals and doctors' associations - to prevent anything close to a single-payer, universal health care system. Thanks to my friend Prof. Barry Gan at St. Bonaventure for this summation; (email)

Dare we further adjust to that injustice? (Beyond Vietnam)

Consider what taxing the largest banks that received our stimulus money, or taxing the bonuses for their top-tier employees will beget: perhaps the retrieval of enough money to break even, but it will not put people back into their lost homes, it will not return them to their former jobs, and it will not return their health insurance. It certainly will not change the fact that CEOs make 300 times more income than their average worker (Bankers, Brokers, Bubbles and Bailouts, Oct. 2009; State of the Dream 2010: Drained, Jan. 2010) Instead, we will debate an acceptable size for the certainly permanent 'jobless recovery' and a suitable definition of what 'full employment' means.

Dare we further adjust to that injustice? (Beyond Vietnam)

Consider what reforming our energy policies may beget: a system that pays the polluters for polluting the atmosphere; that gives them rights to the air; that aims to integrate us into a smart grid which, for all its new efficiencies, will still add more carbon, still rip resources from Earth; that promises green jobs and a green economy, but not equity, not a living wage, not redistribution of wealth within

nations, and surely not from Global North to Global South. Nor will that system do anything to address, much less eliminate the climate injustices that befell New Orleans in 2005, nor much of Europe in 2003, nor of Chicago in 1996, both of which suffered deadly heat waves; the social autopsy of all these catastrophes revealed most victims were people of color, the poor, the disabled, the elderly, and women.

Dare we further adjust to that injustice? (Beyond Vietnam)

Forty-two years later and here we are considering Martin and the movement for our times. For some of us, whether community organizers, elected officials, teachers or workers, this is simply another day in a long walk to freedom and justice. Perhaps for some of you it might awaken a deliberate first step among the movements that helped usher in what you take for granted now. But true for all of us is that getting to The Promised Land will still require struggles ahead. If you are not already involved with organizations dedicated to the tasks of community development and reordering our priorities, what are you hesitating for?

Now let me ask everyone born after Martin was murdered to stand. There is absolutely no doubt that some of you thirty- and twenty-somethings not only know of what I speak today, but are also taking strides toward freedom and justice. For you still younger people, whether you know it or not, you will have to struggle for peace and justice in your life. You stand among allies in your generation, and are surrounded by still others in an older generation.

From this day forward, may we all stand with Martin and the freedom movements.