

Dulling Down Dr. King's Message

In life, Martin Luther King Jr. was often demeaned for his radical vision of peace and justice and not just by crude racists and warmongers but by well-spoken members of the elite. Then, in death, King became a national icon but with his sharpest criticisms dulled down or forgotten, writes Gary G. Kohls.

By Gary G. Kohls

Where did Martin Luther King draw his courage to risk martyrdom for the cause of black liberation, to keep on going despite the daily death threats against him and his family? King was motivated by his unshakable faith in the practicality of the non-violent gospel ethics of Jesus of Nazareth, teachings that had also inspired a multitude of similarly silenced courageous and embattled prophets.

Those prophets include such inspirations as Hindu Mohandas Gandhi of India and Russian Leo Tolstoy, both anti-imperialist and anti-war activists. But such whistle-blowers always get marginalized, demonized or disappeared by the Principalities and Powers.

Those shadowy-elite One Percenter groups are usually very adept at censoring out, via their media empires, the unwanted truths that hinder the agendas of state, corporate and even church elites, most or all of whom utilize the violence of racism, militarism, poverty, brain-washing, fear, ignorance and suspicion to keep the increasingly impoverished and brain-washed masses under control.

The anti-Vietnam war stance of King, when combined with his leadership efforts demanding the liberation of blacks, minorities and poor people, was so intolerable to the powers-that-be that he and his radical left-wing message had to be eliminated.

The suspicion that King's gospel-based nonviolent message has been effectively scrubbed from our consciousness a view widely held in the Christian faith-based peace-and-justice movement was reinforced for me a few years back when my wife came back from a trip that included Atlanta's King Center and all I got out of the trip was an official tee shirt that had printed on it the "seven steps to social change."

That tee shirt was the most radical one available at the center, and it totally ignored King's oft-repeated message about the ethics of Jesus. Any non-religious social justice advocate could have authored the quote. Clearly something is going on behind the scenes to silence the real voice of the prophet.

As black poet Carl Wendell Hines wrote:

Now that he is safely dead let us praise him

build monuments to his glory

sing hosannas to his name.

Dead men make such convenient heroes:

They cannot rise to challenge the images

we would fashion from their lives.

And besides, it is easier to build monuments

than to make a better world.

So, in support of the assertions above, I submit some quotes from King's writings. Most of them won't even get honorable mention in the media reports about this Monday's National Holiday celebrations "honoring" King. We can only hope that some of the events will talk about King's and Jesus's disappearing truths about Christian nonviolence, the reality that is perhaps the last and only hope for real peace on earth.

"We have power, a power that cannot be found in bullets and guns, but we have power. It is a power as old as the insights of Jesus of Nazareth and as modern as the techniques of Mahatma Gandhi. ... The Christian doctrine of love operating through the Gandhian method of nonviolence is one of the most potent weapons available."

"Evil may so shape events that Caesar may occupy a palace and Christ a cross, but one day that same Christ will rise up and split history into AD and BC so that even the life of Caesar must be dated by His name ... God is more fundamental than sin or evil. Good Friday must give way to Easter Sunday."

"I have traveled the length and breadth of Alabama, Mississippi and all the other southern states. I have looked at her beautiful churches with their lofty spires pointing heavenward. I have beheld the impressive outlay of her massive religious education buildings. Over and over again I have found myself asking: 'What kind of people worship here? Who is their God?'"

"The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state. It must be the guide and the critic of the state, and never its tool. If the church does not recapture its prophetic zeal, it will become an irrelevant social club without moral or

spiritual authority.”

“In recent months several people have said to me: ‘Since violence is the new cry, isn’t there a danger you will lose touch with the people and be out of step with the times if you don’t change your views on nonviolence?’ My answer is always the same. 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.

“I have decided I am going to do battle for my philosophy. You ought to believe something in life, believe that thing so fervently that you will stand up with it until the end of your days. I can’t believe that God wants us to hate. I am tired of violence. What kind of nation is it that applauds nonviolence whenever Negroes face white people in the streets of the United States but applauds violence and burning and death when these same Negroes are sent to the fields of Vietnam?”

“A time comes when silence is betrayal but the calling to speak is often a vocation of agony.”

“A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death.”

“We must pursue peaceful ends by peaceful means. Many people cry, ‘Peace, Peace’ but they refuse to do the things that make for peace. ... The stage of history is replete with the chants and choruses of the conquerors of old who came killing in pursuit of peace.”

“We shall match your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure suffering. We will meet your physical force with soul force. Do to us what you will; we will still love you. We cannot in conscience obey your unjust laws. Non-cooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as cooperation with good.”

“We must pursue peaceful ends by peaceful means. I’m committed to nonviolence absolutely, I am just not going to kill anybody, whether it’s in Vietnam or here at home. ... If nonviolent protest fails this summer, I will continue to preach and teach it. ... I plan to stand by nonviolence (because) only a refusal to hate or kill can put an end to the chain of violence in the world and lead toward community where people live together without fear.”

“Violence and nonviolence agree that suffering can be a very powerful social force. But there is a difference. Violence says suffering can be a powerful social force by inflicting it on somebody else, so this is what we do in war. ... The nonviolent say that suffering becomes a powerful social force when you

willingly accept the violence on yourself, so that self-suffering stands at the center of the nonviolent movement. ...

"There is no easy way to create a world where people can live together ... but if such a world is created ... it will be accomplished by persons who have the language to put an end to suffering by willingly suffering themselves rather than inflicting suffering on others. ... Unearned suffering is redemptive."

"Those who adhere to or follow the philosophy of nonviolence must follow a consistent principle of non-injury. They must consistently refuse to inflict injury upon another."

"Humanity is waiting for something other than blind imitation of the past. ... If we want truly to advance a step further, if we want to turn over a new leaf and really set a new man afoot, we must begin to turn humanity away from the long and desolate night of violence. May it not be that the new person that the world needs is the nonviolent person. ... A dark, desperate, sin-sick world waits for this new kind of person, this new kind of power."

"I am in eternal opposition to poverty, racism and militarism and committed to nonviolence absolutely."

"What is the summum bonum of life? I think I have discovered the highest good. It is love. This principle stands at the center of the cosmos. As John says, 'God is love.' He who loves is a participant in the being of God. He who hates does not know God."

"There is no graded scale of essential worth (among people); there is no divine right of another. Every human being has etched in his or her personality the indelible stamp of the Creator. Every person must be respected because God loves him or her. The worth of an individual does not lie in the measure of his intellect, his racial origin or his social position. Human worth lies in relatedness to God. An individual has value because he or she has value to God."

"The greatest purveyor of violence in the world today is my own government."

"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 men the world over."

"War is not the answer. We still have a choice today; nonviolent coexistence or violent co-annihilation. We must move past indecision to action. We must find new ways to speak for peace and justice throughout the developing world a world that borders on our doors. If we do not act we shall surely be dragged down the long dark and shameful corridors of time reserved for those who possess power

without compassion, might without morality and strength without sight.”

“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 sons (and daughters) of God, and our brothers (and sisters) wait eagerly for our response.”

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