



Prez Release

We Shall Overcome...Together January 2006

I was asked by the *Springfield News Leader* to write an opinion column for Sunday, January 15 for the Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday. I am sending you that essay as the January *Prez Release*. This essay reflects a journey I am on. I am, by no means, as far along the road as I'd like to be, but I'm making progress.

The federal holiday in honor of the birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. has been viewed from a variety of vantage points since its creation by Congressional action in 1983. My experience of observing Dr. King is as a white baby-boomer who watched the civil rights struggles through TV images emanating from Birmingham and Selma that seemed a world away. My high school in Chicago had 6000 students and was thoroughly integrated, yet I had no idea the depth to which our nation was divided, nor the fullest meaning of the struggle for justice that Dr. King so ardently waged.

The Civil Rights movement has been too often forgotten by black and white Americans alike, yet the continuing persistence of racial tension in our nation is obvious. The uprising in LA following the 1992 Rodney King decision; or the perspectives on the OJ Simpson trial that followed racial lines; or the stark face of black poverty following Hurricane Katrina, all point to the need for Americans to give new life to "the Dream" Dr. King plead for.

Honest evaluation of King will reveal, as with most great American leaders, feet of clay and complexities that went beyond the soaring rhetoric heard at the Lincoln Memorial or Mason Temple. Nevertheless, the advocacy for the basic dignities of life that consumed him must never be dismissed. King's last days were spent in Memphis on behalf of black garbage men. The poignant words "I AM A MAN" that adorned those garbage workers' signs haunt me, as I realize how much my life was different simply because of the color of my skin. The appalling divide that existed between black and white was a millstone around our nation's neck that needed removal and King personifies the just struggle to do so.

Central to Christianity is the concept of reconciliation: the result of the redemptive activity of Jesus Christ that bridged humanity's separation from God. St. Paul's clear words compel me to live out reconciliation on a day-to-day basis in the concreteness of human relationships (II Corinthians 5:17-20.) I still have a long journey, but Dr. King walked that path before I did and, while his work broke the back of segregation, his efforts also helped this white preacher realize that my reconciliation with God meant little if it didn't reconcile me to my black neighbor.

It would be easy to be discouraged and angry about continued racial divisiveness in this nation. Dr King observed, "*There is so much frustration in the world because we have relied on gods rather than God. These transitory gods are not able to save us ... only God is able.*" These words reveal the heart of a man who knew that the tragedies of this world had an antidote and I am a grateful American who is reminded of a life that pressed the limits of something close to the heart of God called reconciliation.

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Seminary Day

March 17, 2006

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