

“Re-Segregating America?”

It's been said that Martin marched because Rosa sat, and that Barack ran because Martin marched. President Obama has more than once acknowledged his debt to the man who, more than any other single individual, helped put him into office. Gone are the decorative china plates that adorned the Oval Office during the Bush administration. In their place on the bookshelf rests a framed program from the 1963 March on Washington where Dr. King delivered his famous "I Have A Dream" speech. And in one of his first acts upon occupying the White House, Mister Obama returned a bust of Winston Churchill to the British people to replace it with a sculpted head of the civil rights leader. In a telling measure of how far the country has come, that bronze bust of King was last on display in the White House Library when Bill Clinton borrowed it from the Smithsonian in the year 2000. And that, believe it or not, was the very first time that the image of any African American had ever been exhibited in a public space in the White House since the day John and Abigail Adams moved into the residence over two centuries ago! So a black man's occupancy there as Chief Executive is little short of a miracle, and his inauguration a scant twelve months ago felt more like a moral redemption than like a partisan political victory. Post election surveys showed that far more Americans remembered voting for Obama than actually cast a Democratic ballot. For nearly everyone, whatever their party, experienced a moment of elation that November.

We've come a ways since Selma, when TV images of Alabama state troopers beating non-violent protesters with billy clubs led to the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and the enfranchisement of millions who never had a voice before. And in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech last month, President Obama referred to the sacrifices of an earlier generation. "As someone who stands here as a direct consequence of Dr. King's life's work," Mister Obama told the audience in Oslo, "I am living testimony to the moral force of non-violence. I know there is nothing weak - nothing passive - nothing naïve - in the creed and lives of Gandhi and King." He recalled Dr. King's own words upon accepting the same award years before, that "violence never brings permanent peace. It solves no social problem: it merely creates new and more complicated ones." Surely the President's homage to King's legacy was real.

Yet then, Obama began to distance himself from that legacy by noting that "as the head of state sworn to protect and defend my nation," he had to face real threats from abroad. "For make no mistake," the President declared, "evil does exist in the world," a curious observation, as though Martin Luther King Jr. hadn't quite noticed the existence of malevolence around him or fully faced up to the destructive and demonic dimensions of human history.

But King knew about evil. Over the course of his career, he was stabbed with a knife and had his home was bombed twice, once with his wife and daughter inside. He was thrown into jail in Albany, Georgia, thrown into jail in Birmingham, Alabama, and wiretapped by the FBI who tried to blackmail him into committing suicide. Martin Luther King Jr. received death threats almost daily and was hit on the head by a brick hurled at him during a march in Chicago. He was spat on and had crosses burned on his lawn. Indeed, Martin Luther King had encounters with the kind of thugs and villains that our current President can only imagine. And it was precisely his deep analysis of evil, with its twisted capacity to distort the personality and deform the soul, that enabled King to battle hatred and violence without becoming vengeful or violent in the process.

One suspects that it's the President who hasn't been tested or wrestled with such dark forces, who tends rather to assume the best about human nature. In his 2006 book *The Audacity of*

Hope, Obama said that he personally had been mostly insulated from the "bumps and bruises" that beset many other African American men, although he had suffered his share of what he called petty slights: "security guards tailing me as I shop in department stores, white couples who toss me their car keys as I stand outside a restaurant waiting for the valet, police cars pulling me over for no apparent reason." Perhaps that relatively sheltered background accounts for his reaction last summer when the Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates was arrested by a white police officer in his Cambridge home on suspicion of burglary. After initially accusing the cop of behaving stupidly, Obama tried to defuse the situation by inviting everyone over to the White House for a friendly beer. Whether the issue happens to be racial profiling or health care reform, his guiding instinct seems to be that, deep down, most people want to do the right thing. If only they can be cajoled to sit down across the table from each other, sweet reason and dialogue can surely overcome whatever misunderstandings or ill feelings might have arisen. Bipartisanship, compromise, and cooperation are the watchwords for this kind of dewey-eyed idealism. Can we all sing Kum-ba-yah?

Hopefully Obama is more realistic than that, and there are reasons to believe that he might be. The conservative *New York Times* columnist David Brooks, for example, has recently written about Obama's intellectual debt to Reinhold Niebuhr, one of the more influential religious thinkers of the last century and the founder of a tough-minded doctrine that he called "Christian realism."

I read Niebuhr back in college and he certainly had an impact on me. He was born in Missouri in 1892 and after attending Yale Divinity School went to pastor a Lutheran church in Detroit, where Henry Ford was union-busting on his assembly lines, and where large numbers of African Americans from the South had started migrating to work in the plants. A northern, industrial city gave him a perfect laboratory for the study of social conflict—the push-and-shove between capital and labor, between blacks and whites. And Niebuhr concluded that this simmering conflict was not going to be resolved or adjudicated through sharing a Budweiser or appeals to mutual goodwill. These were fundamental antagonisms that could only be resolved through some form of power struggle.

Because every society is based on power, he said. The concentration of power in the political sphere enables a certain amount of law and order to prevail. The concentration of power in the economic domain enables factories to function. The concentration of firepower in the military enables the nation to defend itself against foreign enemies. But power also corrupts, by its very nature, Niebuhr cautioned. It corrupts even good people, because all of us are egoists to some degree, not quite as fair or even-handed or impartial in our judgments as we imagine ourselves to be. Our loyalties to our own family and tribe are always stronger than our sense of duty to the outsider and stranger. And so, whoever happens to be in charge, the very forces that enable the country to defend itself are inevitably turned to warlike ends. The creation of vast economic wealth for some leads to poverty for others. The same powers of government that insure domestic tranquility have a tendency to produce totalitarianism and tyranny. Thus Niebuhr's philosophy was marked by irony, by paradox, by a sense of inescapable tragedy where human motives are never entirely pure or disinterested and where the very best of intentions always carry an undercoating of naked self-interest.

Niebuhr was a complex thinker and "Christian Realism" had a profound influence on Martin Luther King. To appreciate just how profound, let me read you a passage. This is what Reinhold Niebuhr wrote in a book called *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, which was published

in 1932, when the future civil rights leader was only three years old, and when the Montgomery bus boycott was still a quarter century in the future:

"It is hopeless for the Negro to expect complete emancipation from the menial social and economic position into which the white man has forced him merely trusting in the moral sense of the white race." Appeals to fair play or brotherhood or Christian charity wouldn't suffice, in other words. Such tactics hadn't worked in the past and they never would. Pressure would have to be applied to force whites to give up their privileges.

"On the other hand," Neibuhr continued, *"any effort at violent revolution on the part of the Negro will accentuate the animosities and prejudices of his oppressors. Since they outnumber him hopelessly, any appeal to arms must result in a terrible social catastrophe."* Watts and Newark and other cities that burned in riots in the 60's proved the truth of that prediction.

But Niebuhr then goes on: *"The technique of non-violence will not eliminate all these perils. But it will reduce them. It will, if persisted in with the same patience and discipline attained by Mr. Gandhi and his followers, achieve a degree of justice which neither pure moral suasion nor violence could gain. Boycotts against banks which discriminate against Negroes in granting credit, against stores which refuse to employ Negroes while serving Negro trade, and against public service corporations which practice racial discrimination, would undoubtedly be met with some measure of success ... One waits for such a campaign with all the more reason and hope because the peculiar spiritual gifts of the Negro endow him with the capacity to conduct it successfully."*

You can bet that Martin read that passage when he was in seminary, and perhaps Mr. Obama has read it, too. According to David Brooks, he was interviewing the candidate on the electoral trail back in 2007, both of them tired of talking about the horse race when out of the blue, Brooks asked if he had ever read Reinhold Neibuhr. According to the columnist, Obama's weary tone suddenly changed. "I love him. He's one of my favorite philosophers."

So Brooks asked, What do you take away from him?

"I take away," Obama answered in a rush of words, "the compelling idea that there's serious evil in the world, and hardship and pain. And we should be humble and modest in our belief we can eliminate those things. But we shouldn't use that as an excuse for cynicism and inaction. I take away ... the sense we have to make these efforts knowing they are hard"

Those are lessons that I hope the President has taken to heart. Because the moral quandaries facing our world demand leadership that is both clear-eyed and compassionate. Afghanistan is in danger of turning into Obama's Vietnam, a war that both King and Neibuhr denounced. But the challenges here at home are equally difficult, particularly regarding civil rights.

For despite the euphoria of last year's election, racial justice remains an elusive goal for our country. A report released by the UCLA Civil Rights Project just a few days before the President's inauguration warned that school segregation is on the rise, with black and Latino students more likely to be isolated from their white peers in the classroom than at any time since the dawn of the civil rights movement. Young black men living in the United States today are more likely to go to jail than to go to college, while here in Vermont there are ten times as many people of color behind bars as might be explained from their numbers in the state's population. Compared to whites, blacks have double the infant mortality rate, double the risk of stroke, twice the rate of diabetes, and are twice as likely to be uninsured. And when it comes

to money, the net wealth of black households amounts to just ten cents for every dollar owned by whites.

These are systemic problems, which go beyond the elimination of personal bigotry. They are symptoms of a dilemma that Neibuhr knew well: upstanding, conscientious, enlightened individuals who would never use the "N" word tolerating class and economic structures that perpetuate savage inequalities. Or as King put it, "It's not the bad people I can't forgive, but the good people who do nothing." Redressing institutional racism demands more than learning how to mix at a party or operate in an office with people of diverse ethnicities. It also requires a redistribution of power and money and resources, at the very time the Supreme Court is dismantling affirmative action programs and declaring even voluntary school de-segregation plans to be unconstitutional.

Whether we call ourselves Christian or not, I think we need to be realists, in the manner of Neibuhr and King. For while the President campaigned on a promise of "Change You Can Believe In," we need to realize that genuine change always requires struggle, beginning with the struggle to reform ourselves but not ending there. Those with a vested interest in the status quo have never given away anything of value without a contest and they never will. The question is, what kind of change do we believe in, and are we willing to fight for it and sacrifice for it, as earlier generation did? Whether American continues to progress toward a brighter day of justice and opportunity or backslides into the shadows of yesteryear depends less on who's in the White House or whose head is on the bookshelf than having hard heads about the tasks ahead.