

New Beginnings: Building a Community of Hope
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This country had never seen anything like it---on November 4th, the requisite number of like-minded Americans came together to dramatically change the direction of this nation. Leading up to that momentous day, some, like me, were cautiously optimistic that the votes were there; some who hadn't been to church or temple or the mosque in years, prayed their hearts out for Americans to do the right thing, and some folks entered voting booths for the very first time. It was really something, wasn't it?

After eight years of the Bush regime's arrogance, hypocrisy, and aggression, there is only one thing to say, when tomorrow rolls around---it's the same thing I said when I retired last week---free at last, free at last, thank god, almighty, we're free at last! If ever a time to recommit our energies to peace and justice, it is now.

Tomorrow, January 20th, marks new beginnings; tomorrow we commence re-building a country, and, against insane odds, rebuilding a world of peace. So much rests on the shoulders of our 44th president---the crumbling global economy, wars (10, at last count), the threat of terrorism, and the old reliables----racism, sexism, homophobia, poverty, ya da ya da.

Today, we celebrate the 80th birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr. The journey that led to the establishment of this day as a national holiday was almost as improbable a journey as that of Barack Obama's to the White House.

After King's assassination in 1968, United States Representative John Conyers (D-Michigan) introduced a bill in Congress to make King's birthday a national holiday. It took 11 years for the bill to come to a vote in the U.S. House of Representatives-- in 1979. However, it fell five votes short of the number needed for passage. Two of the main arguments made by opponents were that a paid holiday for federal employees would be too expensive, and that a holiday to honor a private citizen would be contrary to longstanding tradition, since King had never held public office.

Later, The King Center in Atlanta turned to support from corporate America and from the general public. The success of this strategy was cemented when, in 1980, Stevie Wonder released the single "Happy Birthday" to popularize the campaign. Six million signatures were collected for a petition to Congress to pass the law. This was "the largest petition in favor of an issue in U.S. history."

But as we know, change does not come easily. Senator Jesse Helms, bless his heart, led opposition to the bill and questioned whether King was important enough to receive such an honor. He also criticized King's opposition to the Vietnam War and accused him of espousing "action-oriented Marxism".

But reason prevailed, and at the White House Rose Garden on November 2, 1983, President Ronald Reagan, bless his heart, signed a bill creating a federal holiday to honor King, after Congress passed it with an overwhelming veto-proof majority. The King holiday was observed for the first time on January 20, 1986, some 18 years after its introduction.

End of story? Not exactly. There was reluctance of some individual states to recognize the federal holiday. New Hampshire, for one, and Arizona, led by John McCain, bless his heart, refused to observe the day throughout the 1990's. And South Carolina, the last state to recognize the day as a paid holiday for all state employees, held out until the year 2000.

It was not until 2006, 23 years after it was signed into law, that this holiday was recognized by all 50 states. And even after that, there were holdouts. While all of the states finally observed the holiday, some just couldn't bring themselves to name the day after King.

In Utah, the holiday was known as "Human Rights Day" until the year 2000 when the Utah State Legislature voted to change the name of the holiday to Martin Luther King, Jr. Day.

In Virginia, it was known as Lee-Jackson-King Day, a holiday which simultaneously celebrated the lives of Confederate Army generals and a civil rights icon. Go figure. In 2000, Virginia finally got it right and renamed it Martin Luther King Day.

So, we know that those things which seem impossible, which strike us as unalterable, can be altered. That being said, our next challenge is one that will take all of our collective strength, intellect, and goodwill to alter. It is the challenge of religion. Religious zealots, religious fanatics, religious extremists ----be they Christians, Muslims, Jews---those on the fringes of their respective religious faiths, deliberately or not, divide us. Case in point, the passage of proposition 8 which resulted in keeping those of us who are gay relegated to the status of second-class citizens, denied the basic and fundamental right to marry. The passage of this ban was due, in large measure, to the rallying cry of religious folks who, in the name of God, preached intolerance and hate.

Dr. King and Coretta Scott King, no doubt would have cringed to hear the hateful tirades hurled at those of my ilk by church-going folks during the proposition 8 campaign. After all, it was Coretta Scott King who courageously said, "I still hear people say that I should not be talking about the rights of lesbian and gay people and I should stick to the issue of racial justice. But I hasten to remind them that Martin Luther King, Jr. said 'injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.' I appeal to everyone who believes in Martin Luther King Jr.'s dream to make room at the table of brother-and-sisterhood for lesbian and gay people."

And it isn't just the gay agenda that is under siege. Wars are being waged in the name of religion. Hindus and Muslims are attacking one another in India and Pakistan; Muslims and Jews are killing each other in the Middle East; Muslims and Christians are fighting in Darfur, Nigeria, the Congo, and Indonesia; Mr. Bin Laden and his followers have declared jihad on all who do not subscribe to their Islamic tenets. And, lest we forget, women, world-wide, remain the targets of discrimination and oppression from just about every religion. All of this fighting and hate and intolerance, in the name of God.

This gathering tonight is one convened by the Interfaith Community. Interfaith means a coming together of individuals of many religious faiths and beliefs. We've all come together this evening, because of our various faiths, not in spite of them. It is possible, you see, for us to sit here together with a shared vision for peace and justice. Why? Because, to your credit, you are not threatened by others whose religious beliefs differ from yours. It is this respect for one another's beliefs that distinguishes you from the fundamentalists and extremists whose tunnel vision limits them, sadly, to an Intra-faith world, "intra" meaning closed and within. These intra-faith groups take pride in their exclusivity. Their feelings of self-worth rise in direct proportion to their disdain for and intolerance of the beliefs of others.

I have tried, as many of you surely have, to reason with those on the religious fringes. Being trained as a lawyer, and with almost two decades of judicial experience, I'm pretty good with words, and yet I've gotten nowhere with these folks. When I was in Israel in 1991, I tried to have a rational discussion with Israeli settlers about the plight of the Palestinians. I was shouted down with cries of "God gave us this land!" When I reasoned with Palestinians about the plight of Jews seeking a safe haven in the aftermath of the Holocaust, I was shouted down with cries of "God gave us this land!" When, in South Africa, during apartheid, I tried to reason with Afrikaners that people of color in their country deserved to be treated as equals, I was told, with guns pointed in my face, that God had decreed that Blacks were inferior and could never be their equals.

That same refrain was heard repeatedly during the Civil Rights struggle in this country. To this day, fringe groups declare that the Bible ascribes to African Americans the status of lesser beings, who find ourselves in the good company of other lesser beings---Mexicans, Asians, Jews, women, and gays. The writer Anne Lamott described perfectly the theology of these religious extremists when she wrote, "you can safely assume that you've created god in your own image when it turns out that god hates all the same people you do."

Reason in the face of religious bigotry is impotent. So, what is to be done? What is it that we of the interfaith community can do?

The answer, I believe, is simple to conceptualize, but sometimes difficult to actualize. The answer? ---be heroic. Being heroic means having the courage to take a stand, to speak out, when you are terrified, when you are scared about what others may say. Heroes are the women, girls, men, and boys who when they are tremendously afraid are still willing to go forward.

To be heroic, you don't need to shed blood. Heroines and heroes don't need loud confrontations. Some of the most heroic acts are quiet demonstrations of what is right in the face of groups whose actions are definitely wrong. One of the world's quietest and bravest heroines was Rosa Parks, who quietly sat where no black person had sat before. She was terrified, yet went forward and in her wake, the civil rights movement led by Dr. King took off.

Another quiet hero was King Christian the Tenth of Denmark. The king was appalled when the Nazis invaded his country during world war two. The Nazis ordered all of the Jews of Denmark to wear yellow stars on their clothing so that they could be readily identified and then killed.

Quietly, King Christian put a yellow star on his clothing. Soon thereafter, all the people of Denmark put yellow stars on their clothing. The result was total confusion for the Nazis. Unable to distinguish Jews from non-Jews, the Nazis, totally frustrated, gave up their effort to kill the Jews of Denmark. King Christian the Tenth saved the lives of thousands of people. What he did and what Ms. Parks did was without fanfare or bluster. Each performed life-saving acts of heroism.

I must warn you, though, that being heroic can be a risky business. By standing up for others, you risk being ostracized or shunned by people, some of whom you thought were your friends, even members of your own congregations. But you see, being willing to take a stand in the face of great pressure to remain silent is what makes ordinary people, extraordinary. It's what transforms us into heroic individuals.

So, as we move into this new era of optimism and hope, be heroic. Speak out against religious bigotry; take a stand for peace and justice; sit in the front of the bus; wear those yellow stars; if each and everyone of you promised to commit one act of heroism every day, no matter how small, no matter how quiet, you will transform this nation and this world.

It was in April, 1967, at Stanford University, that Dr. King gave a groundbreaking sermon which he called "The Other America." In that speech, he said this:

"It may well be that we will have to repent, in this generation, not merely for the vitriolic words of the bad people, and the violent actions of the bad people, but for the appalling silence and indifference of the good people, who sit around and say, 'wait on time.'"

"Somewhere we must come to see that social progress never rolls in on the wheels of inevitability. It comes through the tireless efforts and persistent work of dedicated individuals. And without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the primitive forces of social stagnation. So we must help time. We must realize that the time is always ripe to do right."

Thank you, my interfaith community, for your heroism and thank you for always taking the time to do right. Si, se puede. Yes, we can.