

50 Years Hence. In truth, it's been 46 years since Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated. The 50 years comes from the fact that this past summer was the 50th anniversary of President Johnson's War On Poverty. The combination of MLK's birthday and the long-past end to the War on Poverty, made me start to think about where we are, now some 50 years later.

Oh, those were tumultuous times. After Martin was assassinated, there were riots all over the country. The Black Power movement was underway. My parents didn't like my Afro and couldn't understand my commitment to the Black Power movement. Mine was not the only family in turmoil about how to act and react to the issues of the day. White families I knew were also in turmoil, often based on different generational perspectives and experiences.

Then like now, many people pointed to how much things had changed; how much progress had been made. While others pointed to life on the ground, the real world reality of disparate treatment, injustice and racism. Perhaps the adage "the more things change, the more they stay the same" is real. It's true, things have changed. There has been significant progress. And there can be no doubt, the real world reality for many remains disparate treatment, injustice and racism.

Martin Luther King Jr. was and is an icon. It's shocking that a black man, in the 60's could have such a powerful affect on the entire nation. Apparently, much of the establishment thought so too. J. Edgar Hoover, was fixated on him, with FBI agents tracking his every move, attempting to infiltrate his inner circle, tapping his phones and waging a war of disinformation.

Some 40 years later, we were shocked to find another black man emerge to have a powerful affect on the entire nation. I, probably like most, never thought a black man could get elected President in my lifetime. The first black President of the United States *was* elected, also to the disdain of much of the establishment.

By tying him, by association, to his minister, they tried to paint him as a radical, angry, America-hating black man. Large numbers of people, some intelligent, well-educated pillars in society sought to brand him illegitimate by claiming he was a Muslim and not born here. I don't think it's a coincidence that congress has ground the government into dysfunction on his watch.

The War on Poverty was initiated by President Lyndon Johnson in 1964. At the time, there was a poverty rate of about 19%, down from some 22.5% five years earlier. During that same timeframe, the Social Security Act created Medicare and Medicaid in 1965. 1964 brought the Food Stamps Act and the Economic Opportunity Act. The Office of Economic Opportunity, the agency created to implement the Act and the War On Poverty, created Vista (volunteers in service to America), Job Corps, Head Start, Legal Services and the Community Action Program, CAP.

Working for CAP was the first job I ever knew my mother to have. She worked for them for several years and became Associate Director for the CAP in Schenectady when I was in my teens. These were big-time programs that helped a tremendous number of people.

Largely based on Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal of the mid 30's, the Great Society Johnson envisioned was intended to reduce poverty by an expanded role of government in education and health care. Sound familiar?

I'm going to read an extended quote of Martin Luther King that I believe speaks a fundamental truth that continues to apply today. It comes from a 1967 speech he gave at Riverside Church in New York. In this speech, which in some circles heightened the hatred of him, he made the link between the war in Viet Nam and the War on Poverty.

"There is at the outset a very obvious and almost facile connection between the war in Vietnam and the struggle I, and others, have been waging in America. A few years ago there was a shining moment in that struggle. It seemed as if there was a real promise of hope for the poor -- both black and white -- through the poverty program. There were experiments, hopes, new beginnings. Then came the buildup in Vietnam and I watched the program broken and eviscerated as if it were some idle political plaything of a society gone mad on war, and I knew that America would never invest the necessary funds or energies in rehabilitation of its poor so long as adventures like Vietnam continued to draw men and skills and money like some demonic destructive suction tube. So I was increasingly compelled to see the war as an enemy of the poor and to attack it as such.

Perhaps the more tragic recognition of reality took place when it became clear to me that the war was doing far more than devastating the hopes of the poor at home."

He goes on to say: "you may not know it, my friends, but it is estimated that we spend \$500,000 to kill each enemy soldier, while we spend only fifty-three dollars for each person classified as poor, and much of that fifty-three dollars goes for salaries to people that are not poor. So I was increasingly compelled to see the war as an enemy of the poor..."

His foretelling proved correct. In 1973, Nixon dismantled the Office of Economic Opportunity and spread many of the programs to other governmental entities. Much of white America became increasingly disturbed by the belief that the "We" were footing the bill for the "Them".

This headset continued to grow and fester and eventually laid the groundwork for the end of any notion of the Great Society. In 1996, President Bill Clinton, of all people, signed into law the **Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act**. He said at the time, this is the end of "welfare as we know it."

This perverse title of a law very much reminds me of laws being passed now days. Laws that require medical clinics that perform abortions to operate under the same standards as a hospital---for the safety of its women patients—even though there is scant evidence of medical safety issues. Laws with names indicating they are educating women in their right to make informed consent decisions, by requiring doctors to invade women's bodies with ultra sound equipment. Then and now....

We've recently seen a shocking number of voter identification laws passed that make it harder for poor, elderly, minorities and college students to cast a vote. We and the courts are told these laws are designed to safeguard against voter fraud. But there is essentially no evidence of the type of voter fraud they're breaking their necks to protect against.

These laws eliminate or significantly reduce early voting and Sunday voting, often popular with blacks and the working class who may work two or more jobs and have their work schedules dictated. They often require one to prove citizenship by showing a birth certificate or passport or state issued picture id.

If you are poor, and or move a lot, you may not have a good record keeping system. If you can't afford a car, you may have very little need for a passport. Those who are elderly may not have been born in a hospital and have no birth certificate. The cost to the individual to implement these laws seem to significantly outweigh the benefit to the state in stopping unidentified fraud.

While many of these laws or portions of the laws have been allowed to stand, a number of them have been stayed by the courts or found to be unconstitutional. Texas, Pennsylvania, Georgia, Kansas, Arizona and others have all had courts stop the implementation of such laws. Then and now...

Martin Luther King was not a hero just for Black America. He stood on the side of all the poor and disenfranchised. He understood that how we treat the least of us has a moral and social impact on all of us. He understood that the way we treat the least of us, at some point, is the way we will treat the most of us.

I fear the most of us are being pulled into being the oppressed, the disenfranchised. When banks are allowed to defraud their customers and investors because the government lacks the willingness to regulate and be a real watchdog, all of society is demeaned. When corporations are allowed to pollute our drinking water because no one is holding them accountable for good business practices, we all are put in danger.

When congress is unwilling to extend unemployment benefits in times of high unemployment, we become a less moral country. And when the NSA can collect and store all of our telephone and computer use information, we are all made less free.

Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* tells us its only the oppressed who know oppression sufficiently well to teach society how not to oppress. This theory I think was proven by the non-violence of the civil rights movement that Martin helped lead. It was the non-violent reaction of those treated most vilely, most violently...and have it seen on nationwide television, that turned the tide of segregation in this country.

It was that ugliness, in people's living rooms that pulled much of white America into the civil rights movement. That's what prompted many to join the movement and to actively work on the side of the oppressed. Non-violence in the face of violence is what Freire would call a 'radical position'. And he tells us that a radical position is what's required if we are to work in solidarity with the oppressed, the demeaned, the disenfranchised.

I'll end with a quote from Freire. He tells us one can only be in solidarity with the oppressed "when [one] stops regarding the oppressed as an abstract category and sees them as persons who have been unjustly dealt with, deprived of their voice, cheated in the sale of their labor—when [one] stops making pious, sentimental and individualistic gestures and risks an act of love. True solidarity is found only in the plentitude of this act of love..."

May we have a plentitude of love.