

Due to a number of events in the news lately, I've been reminded of an advertisement for a cell phone company. It was catchy, simple and to the point. The guy on the TV screen moved around and from place to place asking, "Can you hear me now?" "Can you hear me now?"

It seems there are a number of people or groups running around the world these days asking the same question: "can you hear me now?" "Can you hear me now?" Can you hear me now?"

Most recently and with a great deal of news coverage, there were a small number of, assumedly, Muslims who shot and killed a small number of people in France who refused to heed the request ( more a demand actually) that the image of the prophet Mohamed not be published. Let me be clear, the act of shooting and killing people, murdering people, I find gross and alarming. It's not something I support or defend.

At the same time, publishing the image of the prophet Mohamed, knowing that it would deeply offend a particular group of people, I find arrogant, an unnecessary and uncaring extravagance. The cartoon artists, the media and much of public opinion has claimed the right to free speech and therefore the right to publish what it knew in advance was deeply offensive to some. The artists and the public both know that free speech has limitations, it is not an unfettered right. Yet, they claim free speech gives them the right to knowingly, grievously offend.

In this country, the common statement that identifies limits to free speech is "you can't yell fire in a movie theatre". We also know, that in this country you can be sued for defamation of character. In other words, not all of my words fall under the protection of "free speech". In France, the same is true. I don't know French laws, but I've read they have laws against anti-Semitic statements and behaviors. People have been punished for violating those prohibitions. That means, in France, there are identifiable limits to free speech.

Why, should there be protections for the feelings, wants, needs of Jews in France, while there is not equal protection for Muslim sensitivities? It does not strike me as unreasonable or untenable, that a group of people want that particular religious belief to be accommodated. While the world may well, and perhaps should, be horrified by such murder, those people seem to be yelling at the top of their lungs, "this is unacceptable--can you hear me now?" Based on the overwhelming response of the French and much of the western world, the answer apparently, is no, we do not hear you.

With the wealth gap in the United States greater than it has been since the gilded age, there has been a clamoring for the distribution of wealth to be better managed. There has been concern, particularly on the liberal end of the political spectrum for the need to better meet the needs of the dwindling middle class and the poor.

Those concerns have largely gone unheeded. Those concerns appeared not to be heard. Out of that backdrop arose the Occupy Movement. People went into the streets, they camped out in highly visible places in efforts to have their concerns heard and addressed. They were asking the same question: "Can you hear me now?"

The governmental apparatus responded with a certain amount of force, police were used to break up the gatherings, people were arrested, camps were broken down. In large measure, the occupy movement was destroyed. That mode of communication, that channel was broken. The data appears to support the conclusion the answer is "no, we do not hear you!"

There has been a government report substantiating that parts of our governmental structure has engaged in torture. Parts of American officialdom have

violated established international norms. They violated our own espoused moral codes. And no-one has been held accountable, as best I can tell. We as a nation have said to all who care to listen, "we do not hear you!"

The finance industry, through devious means at a minimum, illegal means more likely, came shockingly close to literally destroying our economy and doing tremendous damage to the world economy. Some five or six years later, neither the American nor the western world's economies have fully recovered. No one has gone to jail. Those in the finance industry are doing exceedingly well, thank you very much! They clearly have not heard the cries of the everyday folks and our government has not held them accountable to ensure they listen.

Our government and the American people have a long history of being deaf to the question "can you hear me now?" In largest measure, the answer seems to be yes only on television and in the commercials.

Some fifty years ago, Martin Luther King Jr. seemed to understand that reality very clearly. The everyday lives of those who were then referred to as colored, at least in polite company, was rather retched. Colored people were relegated to menial work with low pay, if they could find work. They were obligated to lower their eyes when engaging their so-called superiors, that is to say, anyone who was white, no matter their social status. Colored people were relegated to the back of the bus. They had few if any voting rights. Colored people could be killed with little or no accountability.

I saw the movie Selma a few days ago. It was riveting. It wasn't the best movie I've ever seen but it was riveting, and painful. It provided a vivid experience of life in the south during the early sixties. I urge to see it. There is a very real difference between a fuzzy recollection of those times and reliving it. That movie puts you there, in that place and time.

Martin's birthday was a few days ago, had he lived, he would have been 86. The 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Bloody Sunday is March 7<sup>th</sup> this year. On that fateful day, colored people, peaceably protesting by marching across the Edmund Pettus bridge were brutalized by people in police uniforms. Sanctioned and paid by the government.

The cries for justice and equality were not heard that day. Not only were they not heard, they were drowned out by the harrowing sound of horse's hooves and batons striking bone. Hence the name, Bloody Sunday.

In that movie, and in current reality for People of Color, poor people and especially black people in today's America, I hear Martin calling to us from the grave. "Can you hear me now?" "Please hear me...can you hear me now?"

He calls to us from Cleveland where a twelve year old boy with a toy gun in a public park was shot dead within two seconds of the arrival of a police car. He calls to us from Staten Island where the crime of selling individual cigarettes is of such significance that a man is killed while being subdued by a handful of police officers.

He calls to us from Ferguson, where walking down the middle of the street can lead to being shot and killed by a police officer with little or no accountability. He calls to us from jail cells around the country, where with three strikes and you're out, stealing a loaf of bread can get you a life sentence.

Martin was a brilliant change-agent tactician and insisted on being heard. He well understood that the normative answer to the question, "can you hear me now?" was "no", and not only "no", but, we don't really care! Martin set about getting people to hear and care.

His calculation was to get the ugliness and brutality of race relations into peoples' living rooms. He understood that most white people and most people with the power to make a difference, had an arms length, or further, relationship with the plight of black people's reality.

Like Gandhi before him, he understood that a peaceful, non-violent response to violence was a powerful vehicle for change. Martin orchestrated a peaceful march across that same Edmund Pettus Bridge, an intentional march into the face of bigotry, hate and oppression. He ensured that cameras would carry the truth of reality into the living rooms of all America.

His calculation proved correct. His courage is almost beyond comprehension. He knew the dangers of the waters into which he waded. He knew full well he might not get to the mountaintop with us. But he accepted it as his cross to bear in order to be of service, not only to colored people, but equity and justice and what America claimed to be.

He repeatedly asked if we were truly willing to be the America we laid claim to. He challenged us to truly live into our espoused values and beliefs. He earned his Nobel Peace Prize.

Today's die-ins, are straight out of Martin's playbook. People peacefully, non-violently laying in the streets of America, in efforts to bring their call for justice and equity into the cars and living rooms of America and the world. People saying as loudly as they are able: "can you hear me now?"

In Los Angeles, people are asking, "can hear me now?". In Boston, in Philadelphia, in Cleveland and many, many communities across the nation, people are insisting on being heard.

In cities across America, in upscale restaurants, there are occurrences of what's known on social media, as "Blackbrunches". That's a planned event where, generally, black people invade upscale restaurants announcing that black lives matter. These events are intentionally designed to interrupt the status quo, so that their message can be heard in the lived experience of white America.

The reality of life in America for poor people and people of color, especially those of African American decent must be better known and understood for the sake of what America stands for, what America represents itself to be and believe.

Public schools across America are predominately comprised of poor people. Literally, the majority of students in our public schools are poor. American cities are more segregated by race than they were when Martin confronted the nation. There is greater income inequality than perhaps ever before in our history. America, with only six percent of the world's population has twenty five percent of the world's imprisoned people.

There is something going on in this country that is unhealthy for the nation. There is something going on that disproportionately advantages the wealthy while disadvantaging the middle and lower economic classes. There is something going on that leads many to conclude this country behaves as if black lives do not matter.

As Martin said in the reading we heard, A Network of Mutuality, “there are some things in our social system to which all of us ought to be maladjusted”. Let us open our ears, turn on our hearing aides if necessary so that we can hear what is being told to us as a nation.

Quoting Martin again, we must “hew out of the mountain of despair, a stone of hope”. We need to listen, pay attention and act. We as a nation need to begin to answer with a resounding yes, the question: “Can you hear me now?” Can you hear me now?” “Can you hear me now?”

These messages, these calls to moral action need to be heard.