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2008 Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Celebration Remarks

I'm honored to share in your day of celebration of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s life and vision. Two thousand eight is a very important King anniversary for me personally and, I believe for our nation and world. It marks the 40th anniversary of his Poor People's Campaign which challenged our nation to end the poverty afflicting millions of Americans of all races and to confront the entrenched triple evils of racism, excessive materialism (poverty) and militarism that threaten our nation and world. The Poor People's Campaign gave birth to CDF's parent organization and I had the privilege of serving as SCLC's congressional liaison and general counsel. I remained in Washington to follow up on its demands and to begin sowing and nurturing the seeds for the next movement you and I must help build to put the social, economic and human rights – health care, decent jobs with living wages, quality early childhood development and education beneath the political and civil rights for which Dr. King and so many others sacrificed and died. I believed then and now that children are the metaphor for this next transforming movement whose time is now.

In 1968, in his last Sunday sermon at Washington National Cathedral, Dr. King retold the parable of the rich man Dives and the poor man Lazarus and reminded us that "a man went to hell because he didn't see the poor. His name was Dives. He was a rich man. And there was a man by the name of Lazarus who was a poor man, but not only was he poor, he was sick...But he managed to get to the gate of Dives every day, wanting just to have the crumbs that would fall from his table. And Dives did nothing about it. Dives went to hell. Dives didn't go to hell because he was rich," Dr. King said, but because "Dives didn't realize that his wealth was his opportunity to bridge the gulf that separated him from his brother, Lazarus...He never really saw him. He went to hell because he allowed his brother to become invisible and sought to be a conscientious objector in the war against poverty. And this could happen to America, the richest nation in the world," he warned. "There is nothing new about poverty. What is new is that we now have the techniques and the resources to get rid of poverty. The real question is whether we have the will!"

That is still the real question you and I must answer and demand our nation answer in this nation and world defining year when 36.5 million Americans still live in

poverty including 13 million children, a majority in working families, and 47 million people in America lack health insurance, including 9.4 million children, 90% of whom live in working families. Every year we choose to let 13 million children live in poverty costs our nation over \$500 billion in foregone productivity.

The day after Dr. King was shot, I went out into the riot torn Washington, D.C. streets and into schools in those neighborhoods scorched by flames to talk to children. I went to tell them not to loot and raid so that they would not get arrested and ruin their futures. A young Black boy about twelve or thirteen years old looked squarely at me and said, "Lady, what future? I ain't got no future. I ain't got nothing to lose."

I've spent 40 years and will spend the rest of my life trying to prove him wrong. As the Children's Defense Fund celebrates its 35th anniversary this year – and the 40th anniversary of our parent organization the Washington Research Project – I had no idea how hard it would be. For this boy saw and spoke the plain truth for himself and millions like him in our money rich, militarily powerful, but morally anemic, race, gender, and income stratified society. Despite great progress over the past forty years, so much peril remains to snuff out the hopes and dreams and lives of millions of children like him.

America's Cradle to Prison Pipeline[®] crisis about which CDF recently issued a deeply disturbing report, threatens to turn back the clock of racial and social progress unless the nation opens its eyes and ears and hearts and sees and hears and responds to the cries of our children trapped at the dangerous intersection of poverty and race. We must act together with urgency to reset our nation's moral compass. Dr. King believed "our only hope...lies in our ability to recapture the revolutionary spirit [of America] and go out into a sometimes hostile world declaring eternal hostility to poverty, racism, and militarism."

We must act upon his warnings if our children and future and founding principles are to be saved but too many Americans would rather celebrate than follow Dr. King. Many have enshrined Dr. King the dreamer and ignored Dr. King the disturber of all unjust peace" theologian Vincent Harding says. Many celebrate King the orator but ignore his words and warnings about the need for reordering the misguided values and priorities he believed will be the seeds of America's downfall. Many remember King the vocal opponent of violence but not the King who called for massive nonviolent civil disobedience to challenge the stockpiling of weapons of death and the wars they fuel and the excessive materialism of the greedy which deprive the needy of the basic necessities of life. And many of us trivialize or sanitize Dr. King's words and would much rather build a monument, name a street or school after him than to build the new nation and world he called for. And many freeze him in his eloquent dream of 1963 and ignore the nightmares and struggles that followed - the deaths of the 4 young girls in the Birmingham church; the deaths of 3 young people and others during Mississippi's

Freedom Summer; the cries for Black power; the horrible violations of his human rights by the FBI; the growing violence in southern and northern cities; and the Vietnam war which stole the hopes and lives of our poor here at home and in that poor country. His greatness lay in his willingness to struggle to hear and see the truth; to not give into fear, uncertainty and despair; to continue to grow and to never lose hope, despite every discouragement from his government and even his closest friends and advisers. He opened his heart to the cries of the bitter urban youth he did not know and moved to Chicago for a spell to be present to them. And he resisted those who sought to compartmentalize or segregate his concern for social justice and peace. Amidst huge criticism for his opposition of the Vietnam War by Whites and Blacks alike, he correctly asserted that “nothing in the commandments he believed in set any national boundaries around the neighbors he was called to love.” Black people told him to be quiet lest he anger the Johnson White House; White people told him to be quiet because he was not an expert on foreign policy. And contributors deserted him as he spoke out not only for an end to the war but for a fairer distribution of our country’s vast resources between the rich and the poor. Why was he pushing the nation to do more on the tail of the greatest civil rights strides ever made and challenging a President who had declared a war on poverty? Because he saw that our nation’s ills went far deeper and that fundamental structural changes had to be made.

Today Dr. King would be so proud that Tiger Woods reigns on the golf circuit and Oprah on television; that Deval Patrick is Governor of Massachusetts, and Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton are the two leading Democratic contenders for the presidency of the U.S.. He would be delighted that there are thousands of Black elected officials across the land, and that Black and Brown leaders now dot the corridors of power in many sectors. But he would be appalled that a Black boy born in 2001 has a 1 in 3 chance of going to prison in his lifetime and a Latino boy a 1 in 6 chance; that all these years after Brown a majority of minority children are in racially segregated and unequal schools; that 87% of Black, 83% of Latino and 58% of White 4th graders cannot read at grade level; and that only 7% of Black, 12% of Latino and 37% of White 8th graders perform at grade level in math. He would be outraged that 580,000 Black males are serving sentences in state and federal prisons while fewer than 40,000 Black males earn a bachelor’s degree each year. And he would be challenging us to root out the still glaring and subtle racial disparities in all our child serving systems and major institutions in American life that reflect the continued vibrancy of racism in our society. For example, Black youths are almost 5 times as likely and Latino youths are about twice as likely to be incarcerated as White youths for comparable drug offenses.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the great protestant theologian who died opposing Hitler’s holocaust, believed that the test of the morality of a society is how it treats its children.

We flunk Bonhoeffer’s test every hour of every day in America where a child is

- abused or neglected every 36 seconds;
- born into poverty every 36 seconds;
- born without health insurance every 41 seconds; and
- is killed by a firearm about every 3 hours, almost 8 a day.

Dr. King would be appalled and call for an end to the relentless violent war of American against American that has taken the lives of over 1.1 million Americans since his and Robert Kennedy's lives were snuffed out by guns in 1968, including over 101,000 children for whom gun death statistics were not collected until 1979. What is it going to take for you and me to stand up and build a movement to stop the senseless deaths of children and adults from gunfire and poverty and denied health care and neglect and abuse and the indifference and inaction in a society deadened by affluenza and the unjust structures and budget priorities that support and enable it?

We are living in a time of unbearable dissonance between promise and performance; between good politics and good policy; between professed and practiced family values; between racial creed and racial deed; between calls for community and rampant individualism and greed; and between our capacity to prevent and alleviate human deprivation and disease and our political and spiritual will to do so.

Something is awry when the net worth of the world's 942 richest people (all billionaires) exceeds the combined income of the poorest 25 percent – or 1.6 billion people—of the world's population who live in the 66 countries with the lowest GDP, and when the income gap between the top and bottom 20 percent of the world's population has risen from 30-fold to over 70-fold in the last generation.

Something is awry when, in the United States, over 1.7 million families lived on less income than was received last year by one private equity firm executive; when the gap between rich and poor is at its highest level ever recorded; when the average CEO of a large company makes more in a day than the average worker makes in a whole year; when the number of children in poverty has increased by 2 million since 2000 and the number of children without health insurance by more than 1 million over the past 2 years and our political leaders contend we cannot afford to provide all 9 million uninsured children health coverage for 5 years at \$70 billion but can afford to continue to give tax cuts to the top 1 percent of richest Americans which will cost us more than \$76 billion in lost revenues this year alone.

The facts about child poverty, neglect and abuse and denied health care are not acts of God, they are our choices as men and women, leaders and citizens. They can and must be changed. But it requires speaking truth to power as Dr. King did on behalf of the poor, the young, the widow, the orphan and the stranger who cannot speak for

themselves. And it requires our examining and changing our values as a society and the measure of our success.

We are living at an incredibly perilous and promising moment in history. Few human beings are blessed to experience the beginning of a new century and millennium. How will we say thanks for the life, earth, nations, and children of God has entrusted to our care? What legacies, principles, values, and deeds will we stand for and send to the future through our children to their children and to a spiritually confused, balkanized, and violent world desperately hungering for moral leadership and community?

How will progress be measured over the next thousand years if we survive them? By the kill power and number of weapons of destruction we can produce and traffic at home and abroad, or by our willingness to shrink, indeed destroy, the prison of violence constructed in the name of peace and security? Will we be remembered in this beginning of the 21st century and third millennium by how many material things we can manufacture, advertise, sell, and consume, or by our rediscovery of more lasting, non-material measures of success—a new Dow Jones for the purpose and quality of life in our families, neighborhoods, cities, national, and world communities? Will we be remembered by how rapidly technology and corporate merger mania and greed can render human beings obsolete or by our struggle to find a better balance between corporate profits and corporate caring for children, families, communities, and the environment? Will we be remembered by how much a few at the top can get at the expense of the many at the bottom and in the middle, or by our struggle for a concept of enough for all? Will we be remembered by the glitz, style, and banality of too much of our culture and in our electronic global village and shopping arcade or by the substance of our efforts to rekindle an ethic of caring, community, and justice in a world driven too much by money, technology, and weaponry?

The answers lie in the values we stand for and in the actions we take today. What an opportunity for good or evil we personally and collectively hold in our hands as parents, citizens, religious, education, business community, and political leaders, and as citizens in the titular world leader in this post Cold War and post-industrial era.

A thousand years ago the United States was not even a dream. Copernicus and Galileo had not told us the earth was round or revolved around the sun. Gutenberg's Bible had not been printed, Wycliffe had not translated it into English, and Martin Luther has not tacked his theses on the church door. The Magna Carta did not exist, Chaucer's and Shakespeare's tales had not been spun, and Bach's, Beethoven's, and Mozart's miraculous music had not been created to inspire, soothe, and heal our spirits. European serfs struggled in bondage while many African and Asian empires flourished in independence. Native Americans peopled America, free of slavery's blight, and Hitler's

holocaust had yet to show the depths human evil can reach when good women and men remain silent or indifferent.

A hundred or thousand years from now, will civilization remain and humankind survive? Will America's dream be alive, be remembered, and be worth remembering? Will the United States be a blip or a beacon in history? Can our founding principle that all men - and women and children - are created equal and are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights withstand the test of time, the tempests of politics, and become deed and not just creed for EVERY child and human being? Is America's dream big enough for every second child who is female, every fifth child who is poor, every sixth child who is Black, every seventh child who is Latino, and every eighth child who is mentally or physically challenged? Is our world's dream big enough for all of the children God has sent "with messages that God is not yet discouraged of man" as Indian philosopher Rabindranath Tagore believed.

Can our children become the healing agents of our national and world transformation and future spiritual and economic salvation? A Methodist minister Edmond McDonald wrote that when God wants an important thing done in this world or a wrong righted, HE goes about it in a very singular way. He doesn't release thunderbolts or stir up earthquakes. God simply has a tiny baby born, perhaps of a very humble home, perhaps of a very humble mother. And she puts it in the baby's mind, and then—God waits. The great events of this world are not battles and elections and earthquakes and thunderbolts. The great events are babies, for each child comes with the message that God is not yet discouraged with humanity, but is still expecting goodwill to become incarnate in each human life. And so God produced a Gandhi and a Mandela and a Harriet Tubman, an Eleanor Roosevelt, and a Martin Luther King, Jr. and each of use to guide the earth towards peace and justice rather than conflict.

I believe that protecting today's children—tomorrow's Mandelas, Mother Therasas, Wangaris and Kings—is the moral and common sense litmus test of our humanity in a world where millions of child lives are ravaged by the wars, neglect, abuse, and racial, ethnic, religious, and class divisions of adults.

How, then, can you and I pick up the torch of the last Civil Rights Movement and build the next transforming movement to unify a world torn by poverty, racism and war?

The first step is to read, heed and follow Dr. King. The great Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, introducing Dr. King to a Rabbinical Assembly shortly before he was assassinated, said: “Martin Luther King, Jr. is a voice, a vision, and a way. I call upon every Jew to hearken to his voice, to share his vision, to follow his way. The whole future of America will depend on the impact and influence of Dr. King.” I would add world.

Second: we must assign ourselves personally right now to be a voice for justice for children and the poor in these scary and turbulent times of war and terrorism and greed and economic uncertainty. A lot of people are waiting for Dr. King to come back or for another Dr. King to appear and save us. He’s not coming back – we’re it. Some people think that if we just elect a new President and Congress, everything will be solved. Not so. A caring President and a more enlightened Congress will make a difference but they won’t make the transforming changes our nation and world needs if we don’t build the movement to push them. It took the Civil Rights Movement to make John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson and Congress respond. Wendell Phillips, the abolitionist, fervently condemned slavery in the 1840s as a “moral outrage” when his cause seemed hopeless. A friend asked him after a speech, “Wendell, why are you so on fire?” Phillips replied: “I am on fire because I have mountains of ice before me to melt.” The great Quaker leader John Woolman did not wait for Abraham Lincoln, the Civil War, or the Emancipation Proclamation to speak and act against slavery. He traveled by horseback to home after home of individual Quakers to discuss the incompatibility of slavery with Quaker principles and urged them to stop being slave owners. Harriet Tubman didn’t wait for President Lincoln and the Civil War either. She ran away from slavery and returned again and again to deliver others on her underground railroad from slavery to freedom. You and I must do the right thing for children—right now—and insist our leaders do so - whatever the risk. And each of us must vote, organize, and inform ourselves about how well our leaders are protecting children and hold them accountable. Visit CDF’s website for our annual nonpartisan Congressional voting record and for our 2008-2009 child policy agenda. And each of us must get out of our comfort zones and organizational silos to challenge the deeply entrenched special interests that resist change whether on health care for children or the quality education every child needs to succeed.

It is hard to believe that, today, in the wealthiest nation in the world, our President has vetoed a child health bill that would have met – inadequately – the health coverage needs of only about 3.5 million of the 9.4 million uninsured children. We must do better in 2009 and cover *all* children and pregnant women. A lot of people contend it’s unrealistic for the Children’s Defense Fund to seek \$70 billion over 5 years to enact the All Healthy Children Act (S 1564/H.R. 1688). They say our nation cannot afford it. I say nonsense. This increased annual phased in investment of \$14.8 billion in covering our children and pregnant women is equivalent to less than two months of what we

spent in Iraq last year or less than 3 months of the tax cuts to the top 1% of richest taxpayers.

In March 2009 when the Congress and President act again to reauthorize the SCHIP program, I hope you will join with CDF in demanding that every child and pregnant mother gets comprehensive coverage immediately. A child is born only once and has only one childhood. S/he cannot wait for us to take long overdue action on health coverage for all. And if you believe as I do that every child's life has equal value and that God did not make two classes of children, then lift your voice and vote – and challenge any political leader of any party who says we can't cover *all* children.

CDF will release its child policy agenda shortly calling for an end to child poverty in this nation by 2015 with an end to the extreme poverty affecting 5.6 million children by 2010. We know how to do it and cannot afford not to do it. Every year we keep 13 million children poor costs our nation \$500 billion in foregone productivity leading economists and policy analysts report. Can we afford to end child poverty? Of course we can: Every poor child could be lifted out of poverty for less than 5 months of the Iraq war spending last year and less than 9 months of the tax cuts for the top 1% of richest taxpayers. What do you think is more important to the future of America: more tax cuts for our richest Americans or hope and basic necessities for 13 million children, a majority in working families?

We do not have a money problem in America; we have a profound values and priorities problem. Imagine the kind of nation and world we could build if we became more people rather than profit and property centered as Dr. King urged and really invested in rather than just talked about peace and not war. The Congressional Research Service says the Iraq war will cost us over \$600 billion by the end of 2008. The Bush tax cuts which began in 2001 will cost us about \$2 trillion over 10 years – or much more if extended. With this money, we could save the lives of millions of people on our earth and replace the terrors of poverty and war with hope and health care and clean water and education for all God's children in our global family.

Third: we must, as Dr. King urged, “live by conviction rather than conformity. Ultimately, he said, a genuine leader is not a searcher for consensus but a molder of consensus. “If every Negro in the U.S. turns to violence, I will choose to be that one lone voice preaching that this is the wrong way,” he said. In his letter from a Birmingham jail he described two kinds of leaders: thermometer leaders and thermostat leaders. Thermometer leaders stick their fingers in the air, test the political temperature and conform; thermostat leaders change and set the temperature. We need more thermostat leaders in every institution in our nation, especially in our faith and education institutions, to stand up for justice. Dr. King said, “if today's church does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authenticity, forfeit

the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the 20th century.”

Fourth: we must, like him, understand the difference between charity and justice and that the demand of all great faiths and our professed democratic principles of fair opportunity is justice. Dr. King said, “We have moved into an era where we are called upon to raise certain basic questions about the whole society. We are still called upon to give aid to the beggar who finds himself in misery and agony on life’s highway. But one day, we must ask the question of whether an edifice which produces beggars must not be changed.”

We must never give in to despair or give up. We must keep moving. I first heard and was inspired by Dr. King in Sisters Chapel at my alma mater Spelman College in 1960. He told us to always keep moving: “If you cannot fly, drive; if you cannot drive, run; if you cannot run, walk; if you cannot walk, crawl. But keep moving. Keep moving” forward. And fight with all our might those who seek to move us backwards.

Keep working and struggling – no matter what. When Dr. King’s dear friend and mine, Vincent Harding, spoke to Denver children at an MLK Day assembly, he alluded to Dr. King’s awareness that he could be killed at any time. Afterwards a boy asked him, ‘If Dr. King knew he could be killed at any time, why didn’t he just back off? Why didn’t he just chill out for a while?’ While Vince was pondering his answer, a Latina girl, unhesitatingly responded: ‘What do you mean chill out? Dr. King *couldn’t* chill out. He had work to do.’” Yes he did and so do we if the triple evils of racism, poverty, and militarism he sacrificed and died to open our eyes to are to be overcome.

Finally, we must keep Dr. King’s vision of a new world and beloved community for all our children before us.

One day, he said, youngsters will learn words they will not understand.

Children from India will ask:

What is hunger?

Children from Alabama will ask:

What is racial segregation?

Children from Hiroshima will ask:

What is the atomic bomb?

Children at school will ask:

What is war?

You will answer them:
Those words are not used any more
Like stage coaches, galleys or slavery
Words no longer meaningful.

That is why they have been removed from dictionaries.

Let me end with a prayer.

I Care and I Am Willing to Serve and Stand for Children

Lord I cannot preach like Martin Luther King, Jr.
or turn a poetic phrase like Maya Angelou
but I care and am willing to serve and to stand up for children.

I do not have Fred Shuttlesworth's and Harriet
Tubman's courage or Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt's political skills
but I care and am willing to serve and raise my voice with others for children.

I cannot sing like Fannie Lou Hamer
or organize like Ella Baker and Bayard Rustin
but I care and am willing to serve.

I am not holy like Archbishop Tutu,
forgiving like Mandela, or disciplined like Gandhi
but I care and am willing to serve and sacrifice to build our children a better future.

I am not brilliant like Dr. W.E.B. Du Bois or
Elizabeth Cady Stanton, or as eloquent as
Sojourner Truth and Booker T. Washington
but I care and am willing to serve and use the talents I do have to keep children safe.

I have not Mother Teresa's saintliness,
Dorothy Day's love or Cesar Chavez's
gentle tough spirit
but I care and am willing to serve and make a difference for children.

God it is not as easy as it used to be
to frame an issue and forge a solution
*but I care and am willing to serve and to keep struggling until we find the way to build the 21st
century movement for children.*

My mind and body are not so swift as in youth

and my energy comes in spurts
but I care and am willing to serve and to vote for my grandchildren.

I'm so young
nobody will listen
I'm not sure what to say or do
but I care and am willing to serve.

I can't see or hear well
speak good English, stutter sometimes, am afraid of criticism
and get real scared standing up before others
but I care and am willing to serve.

Lord, use me as Thou will to save Thy children today and tomorrow and to build a
nation and world where no child is left behind and everyone feels welcome.