

## **A Letter to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.**

Over the past weekend, I joined countless Americans in celebrating the life and legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He dreamed of an America where all children can realize their God given potential and of a nation and world where poverty is eradicated and relegated to a museum or exhibit – something that used to exist centuries and decades ago but that no longer blights our land and earth. He dreamed of a day where excessive individualism and materialism give way to a beloved community of all God’s children; where exorbitantly costly militarism and wars that steal food and shelter and education and health care and hope from millions at home and around the world will no longer exist; and where racism and other “isms” that divide God’s children – one from another – will be banished.

In a recent book, I wrote Dr. King a letter which I share here because his dream is at great risk today. The gap between rich and poor is at the highest ever recorded level. The bailouts of bankers run roughshod over the desperate needs of babies. Corporate interests trump children’s health and education. Mothers are relegated to second place behind missiles.

Our nation’s moral compass desperately needs resetting as Dr. King’s prophetic warnings urged us over four decades ago. Too many of us celebrate his dream but sanitize or ignore his call on each and all of us to sacrifice and to stand up for justice.

In 2010, I hope we will *follow* Dr. King and launch a campaign to abolish poverty and the hunger, homelessness and hopelessness it spawns in the richest nation on earth and around the world. Let us begin today by abolishing child poverty.

Marian Wright Edelman

## **A Letter to Dr. King**

*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. —Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel introducing Dr. King to a Rabbinical Assembly March 25, 1968*

*We have assembled here...to give thanks to God that He gave to America, at this moment in history, Martin Luther King Jr.... and said to him: Martin Luther, speak to America about war and peace; about social justice and racial discrimination; about its obligation to the poor; and about nonviolence as a way of perfecting social change in a world of brutality and war. —Morehouse College President Benjamin E. Mays’s eulogy of April 9, 1968*

Although you have been gone forty years, you are with me every day. We have made much but far from enough progress in overcoming the tenacious national demons of racism, poverty, materialism, and militarism you repeatedly warned could destroy America and all of God’s creation. So I wanted to write you a letter on what we have done and still have to do to realize your and America’s dream. What a privilege it was to know, work with, and learn from you in the struggle to end racial segregation, discrimination, and poverty in our land.

Just as many Old and New Testament prophets in the Bible were rejected, scorned, and dishonored in their own land in their times, so were you by many when you walked among us. Now that you are dead, many Americans remember you warmly but have sanitized and trivialized your message and life. They remember Dr. King the great orator but not Dr. King the disturber of unjust peace. They applaud the Dr. King who opposed violence but not the Dr. King who called for massive nonviolent demonstrations to end war and poverty in our national and world house. They applaud your great 1963 "I Have a Dream" speech but ignore the promissory note still bouncing at America's bank of justice, waiting to be cashed by millions of poor and minority citizens. And they forget your repeated nightmares: the deaths of the four little girls in the Birmingham church and of three young civil rights workers in Mississippi's Freedom Summer and others across the South; the cries for Black Power begun during James Meredith's March Against Fear that you and others completed after he was shot; the growing violence in urban ghettos in southern and northern cities; the horrible, relentless violations of your human rights by FBI director J. Edgar Hoover; the storm of criticism that greeted your opposition to the Vietnam War, which you saw was stealing the hopes and lives of the poor at home and in that poor country; the outbreak of violence in a Memphis march you led in support of garbage workers; and the resistance to your call for a Poor People's Campaign to end the poverty then afflicting 25.4 million Americans, including 11 million children. We now have 36.5 million poor Americans including 13 million children although our gross domestic product (GDP) is three times larger than in 1968. And the gap between rich and poor in the United States is the highest ever recorded and higher than in every other wealthy industrialized nation.

But you struggled on as the civil rights leadership splintered, as white Americans tired of black demands, and as the country became preoccupied with Vietnam. I marveled every night during the long Meredith March from Memphis to Jackson at your patient discussions with Stokely Carmichael and Willie Ricks and other SNCC leaders who wanted to exclude whites from the movement and push you to endorse all necessary means for change, including violence. You listened as they vented their justified frustrations about the slow pace of racial progress and you tried to reason with them, repudiating their proposed "Black Power" slogan and strategies without repudiating them. You taught me and others of your followers how to parse out the good from the not so good, and to always seek common ground. And when you had no immediate solution you gave others the courtesy of a respectful hearing.

In the years between Montgomery and Memphis, you listened, learned, grew, and spoke the truth about what you discerned, and resisted those who sought to ghettoize your concern for social justice and peace. After your opposition to the Vietnam War provoked a firestorm of criticism by whites, blacks, friends, and foes, you correctly asserted that "nothing in the commandments you believed in set any national boundaries around the neighbors you were called to love." Black people told you to be quiet, not anger President Johnson and jeopardize his support for civil rights and antipoverty efforts. White people told you to be quiet because you were not an expert on foreign policy, as if black leaders and citizens had no stake in a war tearing our nation apart and taking disproportionate numbers of black children's lives, forgetting it was the "experts" that got us into this ill-fated war in the first place. Some contributors deserted you as you called not only for an end to the Vietnam War but for a fairer distribution of our country's vast resources between the rich and the poor. Why, they asked, were you pushing the nation to do more on the tail of the greatest civil rights strides ever and challenging a president who already had declared a

war on poverty? You understood that our nation's ills went deeper and that our military budget of \$80 billion and our Office of Economic Opportunity budget of less than \$2 billion in 1968 to eliminate poverty was an unfair match.

Thanks to the tireless leadership of Coretta King and others over many years, our nation celebrates an official federal holiday in your honor every January. You are the only nonpresident so honored and the only person of color in our history. And after numerous stops and starts, plans to construct a memorial to you on our National Mall are moving closer to reality. It will be the first such memorial honoring not a president or war hero, but you—our citizen prophet of nonviolence and man of God who believed we *could* come together to build a beloved community. I am very proud that we Americans have come together to honor and celebrate you. I would be even prouder—and more sanguine about our future—if we committed to *following* you.

I caught a glimpse of your beloved community on the very beautiful morning of September 11, 2001, a day that changed America forever. It began gloriously for me in your hometown of Atlanta. I was attending the first Interfaith Alliance breakfast with several hundred Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Baha'i, Buddhist, Hindu, and political and community leaders of every color, to affirm our joint responsibility to ensure a safe and fit nation and world for all of God's children. I was moved to tears as the Harmony Children's Choir, who looked like a little United Nations, sang the anthem of our civil rights movement, "We Shall Overcome," more sweetly and convincingly than I had ever heard.

This taste of heaven on earth was shattered by hate and hell on earth as your close colleague and friend Andrew Young, who became Atlanta's mayor and United Nations ambassador after you died, met me at the door with the news of the terrorists' planes crashing into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon and of the unknown whereabouts of President Bush. I gasped aloud in horror at the world spinning out of control so suddenly, and experienced for the first time on our American mainland the terrors of war up close as many other nations already had experienced. Gone forever was our false sense of security and invulnerability that our military and economic might and political rhetoric had embedded in our collective psyches. My deepest initial fear was about the reaction of our leaders and the chance of a catastrophic third world war with nuclear weapons.

An irresistible urge to visit your grave site seized me. I wanted to tell you what had happened and to share the loving, hopeful vision of the morning darkened by the despair and death at the hands of faceless people whose names I did not know. Your prophetic warnings raced around my mind like the ticker tape at Rockefeller Center: "Our choice is no longer between violence and nonviolence but between nonviolence and nonexistence." I wondered what God was trying to teach us through this unspeakable tragedy. Could it be a chance to bring us closer to our world neighbors, or would it push us further apart? Surely the extraordinary courage, generosity, and sacrifice of so many trapped in or near the World Trade Center renewed our belief in human beings. One survivor of the twin towers attack said: "If you had seen what it was like in that stairway, you'd be proud. There was no gender, no race, no religion. It was everyone, unequivocally, helping each other." It was another unforgettable glimpse of your beloved community that terrible day in the very epicenter of catastrophe. Imagine what the world could

become if we realized and practiced what this survivor felt, and what you repeatedly urged, in less catastrophic times?

I sat at your King Center grave site for a good spell, grateful to be near you, and then walked slowly up Auburn Avenue past Ebenezer Baptist Church, where you were ordained and preached with Daddy King. I wandered over to the front of your former Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) office, where we had discussed launching a Poor People's Campaign on a warm August day in 1967 to make visible the intolerable poverty of millions of white, black, brown, Asian, and Native American citizens denied a seat at America's table of plenty. We both knew that civil rights without economic rights did not add up to justice. As a civil rights lawyer in Mississippi, I knew my job was not finished when I won a school desegregation or public accommodation case and the next day my plaintiffs were thrown off their plantations, lost their jobs, had no way to feed their children, were shot at and their children harassed. I had to help them find a way to eat, a place to sleep, and protection for their children in hostile school environments if freedom was to be more than a hollow word. You knew that angry urban youths needed jobs, not sermons or scolding, and that hope with meat on its bones—jobs and education—was the only way to allay violence.

As you greeted me alone in your very modest office you appeared depressed, as you often were during the last two years of your life. I told you I'd just visited Robert Kennedy that morning at his Hickory Hill home in Virginia. I shared with him my deep frustration with the snail's pace in getting federal help to the hungry poor of the Mississippi Delta following his visit there in April 1967 when he had seen the empty cupboards of families with *no* income. When I told him I was stopping in Atlanta to see you on my way home to Jackson, he told me to tell you to "bring the poor to Washington." Your eyes and face lit up when I conveyed Robert Kennedy's message. You called me an angel and made a commitment on the spot to the idea and told Coretta that evening. She wrote, "He came home that night radiating his old enthusiasm and he said 'This is really it' ... and I could see his excitement for the plan.... 'We should get people from all the poverty areas, from the South and from the North, people who don't have jobs or resources....It must not be just black people, it must be all poor people.' ...He realized that such a program would be a great change for the movement, which had always focused on Negro rights. Such a powerful coalition could really shake the established order and bring about needed structural changes to provide a better life for the poor."

Still in a somewhat surreal trance, I went across town to the chapel at Morehouse College, your alma mater, to read your words inscribed on your statue out front. Here is what you said:

*Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly.*

*The richer we have become materially, the poorer we have become morally and spiritually. We have learned to fly the air like birds and swim the sea like fish, but we have not learned the simple art of living together as brothers.*

*Nonviolence is a powerful and just weapon. It is a weapon unique in history, which cuts without wounding and enables the man who wields it. It is a sword that heals.*

*If we are to have peace on earth, our loyalties must become ecumenical rather than sectional. Our loyalties must transcend our race, our tribe, our class, and our nation; and this means we must develop a world perspective. No individual can live alone; no nation can live alone, and as long as we try, the more we are going to have war in this world. Now the judgment of God is upon us, and we must either learn to live together as brothers or we are all going to perish together as fools.*

I read your words aloud in my mind to the faceless terrorists and to our own leaders. I thought about your retelling of the story of the poor, sick beggar Lazarus and the rich man Dives in your last Sunday sermon at the Washington National Cathedral as you urged support for the Poor People's Campaign, and warned America that, like Dives, our wealth could be either our salvation or our downfall. And I remembered that you called your mother right before your death to give her your next Sunday sermon title: "Why America May Go to Hell." I also remembered your unflinching call at the Riverside Church for "a true revolution of values that will lay hands on the world order and say of war: This way of settling differences is not just....This business of burning human beings with napalm, of filling our nation's homes with orphans and widows, of injecting poisonous drugs of hate into the veins of people normally humane, of sending men home from dark and bloody battlefields physically handicapped and psychologically deranged, cannot be reconciled with wisdom, justice and love. A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defenses than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death....We must with positive action seek to remove those conditions of poverty, insecurity and injustice which are the fertile soil in which the seed of communism grows and develops," and in my mind I substituted the word *terrorism* for *communism*.

Your words strengthened my resolve to carry on your struggle to build the beloved community amid outer turmoil. That noble, necessary, and hard but achievable vision beckons us today more than ever in a world teetering on the brink of nuclear suicide and spiritual insanity desperately hungering for moral leadership. Our leaders continue to talk about peace while spending trillions preparing for and waging war. Poverty, hunger, and sickness still ravish the bodies, minds, and spirits of millions of children in our materially rich but morally stunted nation and world. Countless children have been deprived of childhood's innocence, trust, and hopefulness wondering whether they will grow up in developing countries, in our inner-city war zones, and suburban enclaves where a seventeen-year-old asks: "How are we supposed to start our lives with death looking over our shoulders?" After 9/11, a ten-year-old from Connecticut said: "I'll never trust the sky again."

The *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* has moved its Doomsday Clock back and forth since 1968, when it was set at seven minutes before midnight. Today it stands at five minutes to midnight as more nations possess nuclear weapons with the scary possibility they could fall into the hands of rogue nations and terrorists. Equally disturbing is the grim reality that the United States and Russia, despite the thaw in relationship, still maintain more than ten thousand nuclear warheads poised to kill every person in our two countries in a few minutes. Rhetoric about producing more "effective" nuclear weapons makes not a sliver of sense. How could we stop the world spiraling out of control if any nation dared unleash a nuclear weapon ever again to win any war for any reason? Who are the maniacs who even consider putting a nuclear option on the table in today's world? Have they forgotten that "the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof and all they that dwell therein"? Who made them God?

Martin, how did we reach this insane place? Is this any way to thank our Creator for the life and Earth lent us in trust for all generations to come? Is the cloud of potential destruction of human life the legacy we want to bequeath to our children and grandchildren? Has our scientific technology simply enabled us to go backward faster? How do we extricate our children and grandchildren from this nuclear prison? As the world's leader in military expenditures and exports and nuclear capability, can America become the leader in nuclear disarmament, rather than nuclear armament, and pull us back from the edge of human extinction? National nuclear supremacy or winning a war with nuclear weapons mean nothing in a nonexistent world!

I don't want my children and grandchildren growing up under this shadow of man's ultimate evil hand. Nor do I want any child anywhere in our world being unable to grow up, or growing up embittered, because unused weapons of any kind are robbing them of food, health care, education, clean water, jobs, and the respect and protection owed them as children of God. I want to leave future generations a world of friends not enemies.

Thankfully, former vice president Al Gore has become our environmental Paul Revere warning the world about the dangers of global warming and the degradation of Mother Earth. Although our nation constitutes 5 percent of the world's population, we consume more than a quarter of the world's energy, and our eyes are still opening too slowly to the folly of engaging in more wars to support our addictions to oil and consumption and we are failing to adequately develop alternative and safer sources of energy. Sadly, your warnings about the dangers of excessive materialism and militarism are going largely unheeded. Since you died with the Vietnam War raging, we have been engaged in ten military actions, including the current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and have spent more than \$16 trillion on the military.

You warned not only about militarism but about the dangers of poverty and greed—both obscenely rampant today. The net worth of the world's 946 billionaires, most Americans, exceeds the combined gross domestic product of 138 countries with a combined population of nearly 2 billion people. How can we achieve a stable world when so few have so much and so many have so little? You said something was wrong with capitalism as it is practiced in the United States. Recently released IRS data on America's four hundred highest income taxpayers in 2005 confirmed just how right you were. *The Wall Street Journal* and the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities analyses report the income of these few skyrocketed between 1992 and 2005 to an average adjusted gross income of \$214 million and combined income of almost \$86 billion. But after capital gains tax cuts in 1997 and 2003, they saw a drop in their taxes of \$25 million per filer in 2005 or a total of \$10 billion in tax reductions! This staggering one-year tax cut to just these four hundred richest Americans could have provided more than 7 million uninsured children health coverage for a year, which Congress and President Bush said we could not afford. The Associated Press reported that one American earned \$5.13 billion in compensation and stock in 2007. That's \$427 million a month; \$99 million a week; \$14 million a day; \$585,600 an hour! He made more in an hour than twelve elementary school teachers make in a year. In 2006, one oil company executive earned \$322 million, equivalent to the average annual salaries of more than 12,400 preschool teachers (\$25,900).

Incredibly, many of the richest and most powerful among us still don't seem to recognize that enough is enough as our economy hovers on the edge of recession and as millions more children

have fallen into poverty and lost health insurance.

In 2005 Hurricane Katrina ripped away the thin false veil of shared prosperity and revealed the pervasive poverty suffered by hundreds of thousands of families in Louisiana and Mississippi. They were left behind as the water washed away the poorly constructed levees of New Orleans because they had no way out. Ill-prepared city, state, and federal governments responded with incredible incompetence and indifference, although many Americans poured their hearts out to help. Yet three years later, tens of thousands of Katrina's children and other survivors are still waiting for their government to rescue them from homelessness, unspeakable poverty, dysfunctional public schools and health and mental health systems, and post-traumatic stress disorders. And while the suffering of the poor persists and is growing not only in Louisiana and Mississippi but all across America with increasing food insecurity, credit card bankruptcies, and home and job losses, many of our leaders want to make the obscene tax cuts for the top 1 percent permanent and even falsely call their expiration a tax increase. Who in the world taught such reckless disregard for the common good? Why do we Americans tolerate public and private sector leaders who engage in such overreaching?

If our nation's riches were shared more fairly among all Americans, and the rich got richer at a slower rate through a fairer tax structure and fewer government subsidies for powerful special interests and individuals and more tax relief and subsidies for low- and moderate-income families, millions of children could escape poverty and get the basic necessities they need now to grow up to be healthy and educated adults.

I hope a critical mass of citizens and political leaders in both parties will stand up and demand that the massive tax cuts for at least the top 1 percent of the richest Americans will be allowed to expire, insist on closing huge corporate loopholes that result in gigantic companies reporting tens of billions of profits paying no taxes, and stop rewarding corporations with tax breaks for sending jobs abroad.

What we have experienced over the last eight years, is nothing less than an ideological and economic coup d'etat. While America slept, and those who should and could speak up remained silent, a majority of our political leaders, in both parties, with the acquiescence of most of America's media, stood by as our president and congressional leaders robbed the public purse through profligate tax cuts for people and special interests who did not need them; wiped out our budget surplus and dug us further into debt, averaging more than \$17,000 per person, with the majority of the burden falling on our children; mortgaged our nation to competitor nations like China to pay our mounting bills; and entered two costly wars with no end in sight.

The greatest sin of these ill-conceived tax cuts and wars, each of which costs trillions of dollars, is that they have stolen from our children and the poor, not just in our own nation but in the world, where we had the opportunity to invest in their lives and show them an America that cares. Why can't the greedy find a way to ensure a minimal safety net for human beings while earning generous, rather than grossly excessive profits? You repeatedly told us that we will preempt violence only by replacing despair with hope. Hope is food and shelter and work and education and health care. Nothing short of a massive, nonviolent, cross-racial and cross-income movement to remove from office and leadership people who have taken from the weak to give to the

powerful will be able to curb the runaway hubris of a few risking the physical and economic survival and security of all of us.

Where are the voices like yours calling for common and moral sense today? Where are the leaders and citizens willing to struggle together to stem the out of control militarism, private-sector greed, and materialism that still drives us, to close the unprecedented gap between rich and poor, and to end the poverty and downward mobility of large numbers of our children? I'm confident that if you were here today you would say ending poverty is the top domestic and world concern facing us and would be calling for another Poor People's Campaign.

Eradicating child poverty as a down payment on ending poverty for all will enable millions of children left behind to enter life on a more even playing field and reach the first base of life in first grade ready to learn, rather than already pronounced failures, if we invest in cost-effective health, quality early childhood and parent supports for them. They will be able to make it to the second base in life if all schools provide all our children a quality education. We cannot wait another minute to correct the *massive* failure of our current largely segregated and still unequal public education system in which 85 percent of low-income public school eighth graders cannot read or do math at grade level. Since children spend only 17 percent of their time in school and 83 percent out of school over the course of a year, investing in high-quality after school and summer enrichment programs and utilizing summer feeding programs to stave off hunger will help more children get to third base. Young people need to see and believe they can reach home plate if they stay in school and that a decent job and a chance to go to college are real. And the playing field our children grow up on must be cleared of the guns, drugs, and cultural pollution that kill and lead so many astray. We must fill the ballpark's bleachers with positive adult cheerleaders—parents; teachers; neighbors; and religious, community, political, and cultural leaders—beckoning and cheering them on to success, and comforting and sticking with them when they strike out or lose games along the way. And we need to make sure they have skilled coaches and ample baseballs and bats to help them play the game of life well and win.

In some deep hidden crevice of my heart, your assassination seemed almost inevitable. Nonetheless, when it happened April 4, I—like millions of others—was devastated and completely overcome with a profound sense of personal and collective loss.

The violence you tried to prevent all your life erupted in riots of rage and despair in inner cities all over America, including Washington, D.C. Robert Kennedy, campaigning for president in Indianapolis, hearing of your slaying, immediately went to speak to inner-city black citizens, reminding them that a white man's gun had taken his brother's life and that "what we need in the United States is not violence; what we need in the United States is not hatred; what we need in the United States is not violence or lawlessness; but love and wisdom and compassion toward one another, and a feeling of justice toward those who still suffer within our country, whether they be white or they be black....Let us dedicate ourselves to what the Greeks wrote so many years ago: 'to tame the savageness of man and make gentle the life of this world.'"

You always called riots "the language of the unheard," and now our voice of conscience—your voice—was silenced. Eleven days later Robert Kennedy spoke movingly again about the "senseless menace of violence." "No one—no matter where he lives or what he does—can be

certain who will suffer from some senseless bloodshed. And yet it goes on and on and on in this country of ours.” Two months later, on June 6, my birthday, he died from an assassin’s bullet in Los Angeles after winning the California Democratic primary.

Our country did not listen to either of you. Since your assassinations in 1968, *more than 1.2 million* men, women, and children have been killed by firearms and another 750,000 have died violently by other means in our nation’s relentless undeclared civil war. This death toll of nearly 2 million human beings in our nation is nearly four times the number of American battle deaths reported in all the wars of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Most shamefully, since 1979, more than 104,000 American children and teens have been killed. This equals 4,177 classrooms of twenty-five children and is over twice the combined American battle casualty toll in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan of 51,130 as of April 5, 2008. Another 500,000 children and teens have been wounded. CDF’s most recent annual child gun violence report found 3,006 children died from gunfire in 2005—eight a day; fifty-eight a week. We’ve made progress: It was sixteen a day when we began our anti-gun violence campaign after many black youth told us they did not think they would live to adulthood. Every four days, we lose as many children from gunfire as died in the massacre of 32 people at Virginia Tech in April 2007. And it goes on and on.

Where are the books and media coverage of our chronic internal war that has no end in sight? Where is everyone? Why don’t we care? Why don’t we say STOP! Why don’t we speak up and organize more effectively to break the National Rifle Association (NRA) lock on national gun policy, which ignores the overwhelming majority of citizens’ desire for commonsense gun control?

The day after your assassination in 1968, I went out into the riot-torn streets of Washington, D.C., and into schools in neighborhoods scorched by flames to talk to children. I told them not to be violent or 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 me squarely in the eyes and said, “Lady, what future? I ain’t got no future. I ain’t got nothing to lose.” I’ve spent the four decades since you left us, and will spend the rest of my life, trying to prove him wrong in our powerful and wealthy nation. *I had no idea how hard it would be.* For this child saw and spoke the plain truth for himself and millions like him in our economically and militarily powerful but spiritually anemic society.

I am *so* worried that the racial progress of the last half century that you and countless others sacrificed to achieve is imperiled by increasing incarceration, which is creating a new American apartheid. States are spending on average almost three times as much per prisoner as per public school pupil and in some states the increase in prison spending exceeds the increase in higher education spending. America has become the world’s leading jailer, with one in a hundred Americans behind bars and 7.2 million people in prison, jail, on parole, or on probation. Political, community, faith, black, and Latino leaders in every sector must mobilize to stop the growing and racially inequitable incarceration of our parents and children, a majority for nonviolent offenses. The Pew Center on the States reports that one in nine black men and one in thirty-six Hispanic men aged twenty to thirty-four are serving time and that black men are twelve

times as likely as white men to be imprisoned for drug offenses despite almost equal rates of illegal drug use. Prisons are becoming big business.

This imprisonment of America is an all-hands-on-deck crisis if we are to reroute our children from the prison pipeline to healthy adulthood by reweaving the fabric of family and community and demanding just public policies and practices focused on prevention and early intervention rather than punishment as a first resort. We so miss your strong voice and are saddened that many leaders of color don't take any better care of poor children and youth than white leaders who neglect them. Many of the cities and counties with the largest numbers of poor children being fed into the prison pipeline have mayors and supervisors of color. Many of the school districts where poor children are being provided an abysmal education and are being subjected to inappropriate zero tolerance school discipline policies have superintendents and school board members of color. We need servant leaders of all colors—not self-serving leaders—if we are to build strong communities and save our children and future.

### Great Racial Progress and Hope amid Continuing Peril in America

In a nation-defining election year, we are reaching toward a more united America. Our centuries-old impenetrable glass ceilings of race and gender have been pierced and America's political DNA has stretched to mirror the more than half of our human race that is female and the two-thirds that is nonwhite with an African-American and a woman as leading contenders for the Democratic nomination for president in 2008. We have not seen the youth so politically engaged since 1968.

There is much other racial progress to report in addition to the momentous victory of Barack Obama as the Democratic standard-bearer for president. In 1968, there were fewer than 1,500 Black elected officials; today there are more than 9,500, including 43 members of the Congressional Black Caucus; 14 Black mayors of cities with populations over 50,000; and 43 Black and 6 Latino statewide elected officials. Thurgood Marshall was our first Black U.S. Supreme Court Justice and Clarence Thomas is our second (a symbol rather than a vessel of progress, a too prevalent occurrence over the last decades, as many talented blacks donned the cloaks of leaders espousing militaristic policies and those that increase the racial and income divides). Seven Blacks and 4 Latinos head Fortune 500 companies. In 2008, two Blacks serve in the president's cabinet and fourteen Black astronauts have explored space. Seven Blacks have been awarded Nobel Prizes and countless others excel in literature, economics, science, and in striving for a more peaceful world. In 2006, Black purchasing power was almost \$650 billion—four times that of 1968, equivalent to the combined GDP of Israel, Egypt, Hungary, New Zealand, Singapore, and Vietnam and more than the GDP of Sweden, Switzerland, and Belgium. Thousands of young people of color attend college and have become doctors, dentists, lawyers, and judges. When I went to practice law in Mississippi in 1964, there were only four Black lawyers for 900,000 Black citizens and the three who took civil rights cases had never gone to law school. Today, there are more than four hundred and two of my former law clerks who served as Mississippi Supreme Court Justices are now senior partners in leading Jackson law firms.

These major strides by a significant minority of people of color—and women—into the corridors of power and mainstream American society have not extended to millions of poor Blacks, Latinos, Native Americans, and Whites who are increasingly being left behind in our rich nation. Not only are there still two Americas there are two black Americas with a significant minority doing well but a majority treading water or living near or in poverty, even extreme poverty. Many of our children will not do as well as their parents' generation. This is particularly true for African Americans where nearly a third will do less well than their parents.

The drain of successful Black role models from previously segregated communities has robbed many Black children and youth of a sense of the possible and a positive vision of the future.

The Black community must reclaim our traditional values of family, community, and self-help, regain and share with all our children—and with all in America—the spiritual legacy of the Black struggle for justice, and catalyze and mount a powerful crusade to save all our children, joining with our Latino brothers and sisters and all people who share your goals of a beloved community. We must train a critical mass of young servant-leaders to take up your torch—armed with nonviolence and the skills needed to build the twenty-first-century movement in much more complex terrain and galvanize the dormant but powerful voices of women of all races. The faith community must remember the God they profess to serve and stop being cultural puppets. And we must continue to struggle against the resegregation of American society by race, income, gender, and incarceration that undermine the realization of a united nation blessed with a rich diversity of people. Integration, as you believed, does not mean losing who you are; it is sharing who you are, forging mutually respectful and equal relationships with others.

You blessed America with your rich faith, spiritual traditions, and prophetic preaching. You gave us your deep and abiding love and lifelong commitment to nonviolence. You shared your moral clarity and courageous truth telling. You left us your unrelenting commitment to justice for the poor and every one of God's children. You showed us the way through your example and call for massive nonviolent action in the service of justice and peace. And you gave us your life.

*Thank you.* We will carry on.

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