

Dr. King's final refusal to give up

John Dear | Jan. 15, 2008 On the Road to Peace

In the months before Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated, as he planned the "Poor People's Campaign" and spoke out against the U.S. war in Vietnam, he plunged into despair. He spent his last birthday, 40 years ago this week, in staff meetings, trying to convince them why they had to bring disenfranchised, low-income people to Washington, D.C. and shut it down.

"After we get there," he said, "we'll call the peace movement in, and try to close down the Pentagon. I don't know what Jesus had as his demands other than 'Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand.' My demand is 'Repent, America.' We live in a sick, neurotic nation, but this campaign is based upon hope. Hope," he concluded, "is the final refusal to give up."

The final refusal to give up. As we begin this difficult election year, with its news of war, torture, genocide, global warming, starvation, nuclear weapons, civil rights violations, corrupt politicians, corporate greed, and media propaganda, we need to dig deep for that same hope -- the hope that touches the edge of despair, the hope of Jesus on the cross, the hope of Dr. King on the road to Memphis and D.C. -- the hope that refuses to give up.

"In all the previous times I'd met him," Michael Harrington remembered, "King was an extremely ebullient, relaxed even exuberant man, very warm, funny, good-humored ? a nice man to be around. But at that meeting [in New York, a few months before his death], I felt that a lot of that had left him, and that the tactical situation had put him in an almost despairing mood."

Each year I take time to meditate on the life and teachings of Dr. King, and this year, I've been pondering his struggle with hope and despair. I think true hope -- the hope of Jesus on the cross, the hope that springs only from rock bottom hopelessness -- comes when we dare resist the worst evils the world can muster, ultimately, the power of death itself. So true hope touches the edge of despair but refuses to give in, knowing that life has the slight edge, that death does not get the last word, that resurrection, with all its glorious social, economic and political implications, will win out.

To be authentic, hope has to be costly, not cheap, to paraphrase Bonhoeffer; just as faith, love and nonviolence need to be costly, not cheap. King bore a costly hope, the hope that dared see beyond racism, poverty, the Vietnam war, nuclear weapons, even the American empire, beyond to the coming of God's reign of nonviolence here on earth.

"I refuse to give in," King said as he stared down the warmaking White House, "to the politics of despair."

I think King held hope and despair in tension, like every great saint and martyr. "I refuse to accept the cynical notion that nation after nation must spiral down a militaristic stairway into the hell of nuclear destruction," he said when he received the Nobel peace prize in Oslo in 1964. "I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality."

"I have the audacity to believe that peoples everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality and freedom for their spirits. I believe that one day humankind will bow before the altars of God and be crowned triumphant over war and bloodshed, and nonviolent redemptive goodwill will proclaim the rule of the land."

While he pursued the politics of visionary hope, at the same time, King was a realist. He knew that unless we organize steadfast movements for nonviolent social change, unless we resist the structures of war and systemic injustice, we are "doomed."

The night before he was assassinated on April 3, 1968, King repeated his warning: "It is no longer a choice between violence and nonviolence. It's nonviolence or nonexistence." Unless we strive together to fulfill our noble calling to become a nonviolent humanity, King concluded, we are "doomed" to our own violent self-destruction, to nuclear self-annihilation.

I've been trying to figure out how King walked that tight-rope of hope over the great chasm of despair that engulfs our country and the world. I keep returning to that last speech in Memphis where he boldly proclaimed that we could be the first people in history to lead humanity back from the brink of global annihilation, and not only that, lead humanity forward toward a new world free of war, poverty, racism, sexism, violence, and nuclear weapons, toward a new culture of nonviolence.

It's the most exciting time to be alive in all of history, he declared. "I'm just happy that God has allowed me to live in this period, to see what is unfolding," he told the crowd.

What a positive way of seeing life! He took the long haul view of reality, that is, a biblical view, and placed himself and ourselves within the context of salvation history: we get to play a part in God's unfolding of a new world of nonviolence. That was why King remained hopeful. He saw his life and our world from God's perspective, and so, he knew all would be well, that the outcome lay in God's hands.

Do hopeful things

"If we want to be hopeful, we have to do hopeful things," Daniel Berrigan says. I wish more of us could reclaim Dr. King's visionary nonviolence, his politics of hope, and do hopeful things with our lives to hasten the coming of new cultures of nonviolence, to end the wars on Iraq and Afghanistan, starvation and poverty, U.S. imperialism and the nuclear threat, environmental destruction and global warming, and reach out to humanity with nonviolent love, justice and peace.

I think that's the great challenge before us: to keep at it, not to give up, to keep working for radical social change, to learn that final lesson of Dr. King. We need to reflect on what gives us hope, to ponder our culture's functional despair, and choose again and again to "refuse to give up," to be hopeful despite the evidence, to believe in truth and resurrection, trust the God of peace, do our part in salvation history, join the campaigns for the disarmament of the world and leave the outcome in God's hands.

In that way, our lives, like Dr. King's, might bear the good fruit of peace and justice which Jesus urged. For in the end, King's refusal to give up made all the difference--when you look at it from God's perspective. He pursued those uphill campaigns, against the advice of everyone around him, and gave his life for that vision of a new nonviolent world. "Unless a grain of wheat falls and dies," Jesus said, "it cannot bear fruit." Dr. King was faithful, and then he fell and died, and his life continues to bear enormous fruit. His light still shines. His witness will live for eternity. He will inspire countless millions for generations to come, inspiring hope upon hope upon ever new hope.

The best way then to remember and celebrate our brother Martin Luther King Jr. is to carry on the struggle to end our country's wars and injustices, and refuse, like him, to give up.

John will be sentenced next week in Federal Court in Albuquerque, NM, on Jan. 24th for taking a stand against the U.S. war on Iraq. If he is not in prison, he will lead a special Lenten retreat on Feb. 22-24, "The Passion, Death & Resurrection of the Nonviolent Jesus," in Pennsylvania at www.kirkridge.org [1]. The new DVD, "The Narrow Path," featuring his teachings on Gospel nonviolence, is available from www.sandamianofoundation.org [2]. To attend one of his speaking events, or to host him later this fall for a reading from his forthcoming autobiography, see: www.johndear.org [3].

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