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Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Expansive Dream
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Guest Commentator

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Many people working for justice today stand on the shoulders of Martin Luther King, Jr., but I believe King's vision of justice is often gravely limited and misunderstood. Too many people thought then, and continue to think, that King's statements regarding justice were only about race and the African-American community. We fail to see how King's vision of inclusion and community is far wider than we might have once imagined.

For King, justice was more than a racial issue, more than a legal or moral issue. Justice was a human issue. And this was evident in King's passionate concern about a wide range of concerns: "The revolution for human rights is opening up unhealthy areas in American life and permitting a new and wholesome healing to take place," King once told a racially-mixed audience. "Eventually the civil rights movement will have contributed infinitely more to the nation than the eradication of racial injustice."

Moral leadership played a profound role in the justice work that King did. He argued that true moral leadership must involve itself in the situations of all who are damned, disinherited, disrespected, and dispossessed, and moral leadership must be part of a participatory government that is feverishly working to dismantle the existing discriminatory laws that truncate full participation in the fight to advance democracy. And surely part of our job in keeping King's dream alive is also to work to dismantle discriminatory laws and dehumanizing structures.

But if King were among us today, he would say that it is not enough just to look outside ourselves to see the places where society is broken. It is not enough to talk about institutions and workplaces that fracture and separate people based on race, religion, gender, and sexual orientation. We must also look at the ways that we ourselves manifest these bigotries, how we are the very ones who uphold and are part of these institutions and workplaces.

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Often, we find that these institutions and workplaces are broken, dysfunctional, and wounded in the very same ways that we are. The structures we have created are mirrors not of who we want to be, but of who we really are.

King would remind each of us that we cannot heal the world if we have not healed ourselves. So perhaps the greatest task, and the most difficult work we must do in light of King's teachings, is to heal ourselves. And this work must be done in relationship with our justice work in the world.

In *The Old Man and the Sea*, Ernest Hemingway said that the world breaks us all, but some of us grow strong in those broken places. King's teachings invite us to grow strong in our broken places – not only to mend the sin-sick world in which we live, but also to mend the sin-sick world that we carry around within us. And we can only do that if we are willing to look both inward and outward, healing ourselves of the bigotry, biases, and the demons that chip away at our efforts to work toward justice in this world. And our differences have been used to divide us instead of unite us, so consequently we reside in a society where human brokenness, human isolation and human betrayal are played out everyday.

I know that the struggle against racism that King talked about is only legitimate if I am also fighting anti-Semitism, homophobia, sexism, classism – not only out in the world but also in myself. Otherwise, I am creating an ongoing cycle of abuse that goes on unexamined and unaccounted for.

We are foolish if we think we can heal the world and not ourselves. And we delude ourselves if we think that King was only talking about the woundedness of institutional racism, and not the personal wounds we all carry as human beings.

Ironically, our culture of woundedness and victimization has bonded us together in brokenness. The sharing of worlds to depict and honor our pain has created a new language of intimacy, a bonding ritual that allows us to talk across and among our pains. In exploring our common wounds, we sometimes feel more able to find the trust and the understanding that eludes us as "healthy" people.

When we bond in these unhealthy ways we miss opportunities in ourselves for moral leadership, and to work collaboratively with others to effect change in seemingly small ways that eventually lead to big outcomes.

Both Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King Jr. were leaders in the Montgomery bus boycott in challenging Alabama's Jim Crow laws. Both were working together for a desired outcome, and they could not have done it without each other.

Had Rosa Parks not sat down by refusing her seat to a white man that day on the bus in December 1955, King could not have stood up, which catapulted the civil rights movement.

Each year, I mark the Martin Luther King holiday by reexamining myself in light of King's teachings. And in so doing, I try to uncover not only the ways in which the world breaks me, but also how it breaks other people that keeps us fractured instead of united toward a common goal – a multicultural democracy.

I believe that when we use our gifts in the service of others as King has taught us, we then shift the paradigm of personal brokenness to personal healing. We also shift the paradigm of looking for moral leadership from outside of ourselves to within ourselves; thus, realizing we are not only the agents of change in society, but also the moral leader we have been looking for.

Our job, therefore, in keeping King's dream alive is to remember that our longing for social justice is also inextricably tied to our longing for personal healing.

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