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The Content of Our Character

Have We Abandoned Dr. King's Vision?

By TAMAR JACOBY

Fifteen years after President Reagan signed it into law, today's holiday in honor of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. is observed not only by the federal government but also, after some struggle, by all 50 states and even this year, for the first time, by the stock exchanges. In its way, this is a triumph—for the dignity of blacks and the future of race relations. But it is also a bit of a charade. It's not that we don't believe in Dr. King, exactly. Many of us still honor the ideas he stood for. But America is not pursuing his vision anymore. In fact, many of our most deeply held notions about race contradict it. Whether we know it or not, most of us are followers of Dr. King's rival, Malcolm X.

Politicians of all kinds and colors like to claim Dr. King for their own—to argue that if he were alive, he would be supporting their cause and heaping scorn on their rivals. Yet what Dr. King stood for is fairly straightforward and clear to most Americans. In the beginning, as much as anything, the Southern struggle was about black dignity. "We are not asking for an end to segregation," Dr. King said in Montgomery, Ala., in 1955. "All we are asking for is justice and fair treatment in riding the buses." But then, as his thinking crystallized and the movement gained force, a new goal emerged: integration. "This is a revolution to get in," he told an interviewer, and he wasn't talking just about physical desegregation.

Common Heritage

Whatever he thought about counting people by color, Dr. King hoped, as every schoolchild knows, that the nation would eventually get past that. His was a vision based on an unquestioned sense of a common American heritage—political, moral and cultural—and it went beyond opportunity or even equality. Real integration, Dr. King struggled to explain, is a matter of "inner attitudes and genuine person-to-person relations": a "beloved community" in which all men would "treat other men as thou" and all would assume that their fates were ultimately linked to each other's.

This is not the vision America is pursuing today. "It's a black thing, you wouldn't understand," the T-shirts say, and few of us question the underlying assumption. Most of us, black and white, now believe that blacks are somehow fundamentally different, that they are at least as African as they are American, that their culture is not the way they think and learn is unique to them. We aim at best for peaceful coexistence, and few people of either race expect to get over their mistrust of the other.

If anything, in the name of diversity we have institutionalized the edgy standoffishness we inherited from an era when mingling was prohibited. It's not just that our laws now enshrine racial categories or that our institutions make us conscious of them on a daily basis. Far more radical and insidious is the new national credo we are forging—a credo based on honoring what makes us different from each other more than we honor what we have in common.

The emphasis on difference crops up in all kinds of ways, some more obvious than others. Corporate diversity training, campus theme houses and racially gerrymandered congressional districts all declare themselves more or less openly. But most of us are so used to thinking in racial shorthand that much of the time we hardly notice. Why, when colleges and corporations reach out to minorities, do they do so in the name of diversity, and not inclusion? Why should Michael Jordan or Jackie Robinson necessarily make better a role model for black teenagers than, say, Bill Bradley or Cal Ripken Jr.? The point, after all—what the kids are supposedly aspiring to—is the athlete's skill and character, not his skin color.

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Why do we think that minority police officers can do a better job in inner-city neighborhoods? Why do we believe that big-city newspapers should send black and Hispanic reporters to poor enclaves? Why, for that matter, do we assume that black children will thrill to the memory of Dr. King in a different way than white kids? Many of our assumptions are correct, of course: As things stand today, black role models do have more appeal for young blacks, and black crime witnesses are more likely to talk to black policemen—but only because all of us, black and

white, have adopted an implicitly color-coded view of the way the world works.

Where does the vision that is now driving race relations come from? Ultimately from Malcolm X, by way of the Black Power movement and the liberal conventional wisdom enshrined in the 1968 Kerner Commission report. That skin color equals identity, that America is inherently racist, that black rage is legitimate and that only good can come of expressing it: All of these notions came into the way we think about race by way of Malcolm X.

Even at the end of his life, when he began to rethink his most famous teaching—that "the white man is the devil"—Mal-

colm maintained that blacks were fundamentally different from whites and that they would never find dignity except by glorying in this difference. He encouraged followers to measure their sense of self by their willingness to question and defy the white world, to see forgiveness and even compromise as "selling out" and to nourish a permanent sense of racial grievance.

Americans are notoriously bad at choices: We want to have it all—and see no reason, in this big, rich country, why that should not be possible. Why a little bit of Malcolm and some King. Can't we have diversity and a sense of common heritage? To a degree, we can. No one who understands what Malcolm X and King can quarrel with each other's pride. At home, on the weekend, in family and the neighborhood. Jews with Jews, Italians Italian—and there is no son blacks should be any different. Does this cultural richness necessarily dermine our common civic sense any more than it did in earlier decades, when managed somehow to find a balance between ethnicity and patriotism.

But what we have now is not balance. The teachings of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King are not complementary. They can't nurse a permanent sense of grace and forgive each other, too. If race identity is what shapes our lives, we never learn to think of each other as brothers. And as long as we try to pretend these two contradictory views are content, we will be paralyzed by confusion.

Concrete Questions

This isn't an abstract issue, or a quaint historical one. It's about the values that guide us and make us who we are; and until we make up our minds about Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, we will not resolve the debate about affirmative action or end the culture wars or settle a practical course for healing the ghetto of these concrete policy questions. More are rooted in a much more fundamental quarrel about what it means to be American—about just what place diversity holds in our national credo. Is it all so compassionate? Or is it one good among many, something we want to honor but know when to cede for the sake of larger ideals that hold us together?

If you spend any time today thinking about Dr. King, don't just pay lip service to his name or his color. Think about what he really stood for. Do you believe in it now? And if you do, can't you see that not the way we're heading?

Ms. Jacoby is author of "Someone Else's House: America's Unfinished Struggle for Integration," to be published by Free Press in June.



Martin Luther King Jr.

cacy of defiance for defiance's sake. And Dr. King's anger at injustice was swallowed up by Malcolm X's glorification of a deeper kind of rage—the generalized and by definition unappeasable anger that he saw as the touchstone of black identity.

In fact, Dr. King preached just the opposite: forgiveness and faith in America's fundamental decency. But his positive vision didn't catch on in the ghetto or among

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