

**TURNING POINT:
THE UNFINISHED LEGACY OF MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.**

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Isn't it wonderful that the celebration of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday is taking place on the day before the inauguration of America's first African-American president? King would have turned eighty years old this year. I wonder what he would have thought about this momentous turning point in American history. As more than two million Americans stream into Washington to witness the inauguration of Barack Obama, I am reminded of the hundreds of thousands of hopeful Americans who poured into Washington, DC in August 1963 to hear King deliver his unforgettable "I Have a Dream" speech, when he voiced his hope that his children "will one day live in a nation where they will **not** be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character." Finally, that part of his dream has been realized—at least at the level of presidential politics.

We are indeed at a turning point in American history. Even though the events of the coming week mark a singular **point** in our history, let me emphasize that what we are experiencing at the present is a "turning **period**," an extended time of dramatic change. In their book *The Fourth Turning* William Strauss and Neil Howe, the authors of a series based on the concept of generational cycles in history, predicted that sometime around the year 2005, America would enter what they call a Fourth Turning, a period of crisis when the old order collapses and must be replaced by a new order. Writing in 1997—years before 9/11 and the financial implosion of 2008, Strauss and Howe predicted that the ingredients of this crisis would likely include:

Financial distress – the collapse of financial markets and institutions, rising unemployment and personal bankruptcy, and the incurrence of massive government debt.

Ecological distress – including "atmospheric damage, energy or water shortages, and new diseases."

Military distress – "with war against terrorists or foreign regimes equipped with weapons of mass destruction." [Strauss & Howe, *The Fourth Turning*, p. 277]

According to Strauss and Howe, the last two Turnings of this type in American history were the Great Depression and before that the Civil War. These two great crisis periods also produced two of our greatest presidents: Abraham Lincoln and Franklin Delano Roosevelt, whose personal courage and leadership style carried our nation through some of its darkest days. "After the Fourth Turning arrives," they say, "a Lincoln-like leader will be more likely to seek office, and a Lincoln-like leader could be exactly what America needs, wants, and gets." [p. 309] Isn't it interesting that Barack Obama has been compared to Lincoln by others and seems eager himself to promote that idea by retracing Lincoln's route from Illinois to Washington for his inauguration?

Now I am not offering the work of Strauss and Howe as a modern-day counterpart of the famous medieval prophet Nostradamus. Some of their dire warnings have not been realized (at least not yet) or, like other prophecies, their predictions are so broad that they can't be disconfirmed by actual events. Nevertheless, I do find their generational model very helpful in understanding our current crisis and what it will take for us to get through it.

America has indeed entered a new crisis period—a turning point—when we must face squarely both the follies of our previous ways and the opportunities for changing them. As he assumes the presidency, Barack Obama not only embodies Martin Luther King's dream of an America that relies on character rather than color, but he also inherits the **unfinished legacy** of King's broader vision of a more just America. Dr. King is the godfather of the transformation we must now undertake as a nation. Like many other heroes of history, Martin Luther King is too often portrayed as a one-dimensional character—as the champion of racial equality. In fact, his agenda was much broader and bolder than many Americans realize today when we celebrate his life. His vision of a more just American society rings even more true today. However, the causes to which he was committed were deeply controversial, even among his own followers. In many of them he was considered to have failed during his lifetime.

What would Martin Luther King have to say about our present situation? What would be the issues that might engage his commitment? A turning point by definition involves both an **end and a beginning**. One of the words that we hear frequently these days is **bankruptcy**. A declaration of bankruptcy marks both the failure of past behavior and a commitment to changed behavior in the future—an end and a new beginning. What is bankrupt in our current society, and what would Martin Luther King offer as a new course of action for our leaders, based on the values that he espoused during his all-too-brief lifetime? Let me juxtapose his words and deeds with the challenges we are currently facing.

On the issue of **world peace**, King said “We must evolve for all human conflict a method which rejects revenge, aggression, and retaliation. The foundation for such a method is love. Before it is too late, we must narrow the gaping chasm between our proclamations of peace and our lowly deeds which precipitate and perpetuate war.” [*Singing the Living Tradition*, # 584] Against the advice of many of his supporters, King spoke out forcefully against the war in Vietnam, arguing that it not only violated international laws, but also diverted resources from the War on Poverty in America. Compare King's opposition to the U.S. invasion of Vietnam with Barack Obama's courageous but then unpopular opposition to the invasion of Iraq.

What is now bankrupt and must change? The current conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip provides another tragic example of what King was talking about. So far more than 1,000 Palestinians have been killed—hundreds of them innocent children—while the Israelis have suffered fewer than twenty deaths. In spite of the massive disproportion between Palestinian and Israeli losses, the United States continues to justify the right of the Israelis to “defend themselves” against Palestinian attacks. Hopefully, the Obama administration will develop a more balanced policy that will lead to a lasting peace and the establishment of two nations in that troubled region. Without such a changed direction, the United States will enjoy little credibility among the Arab nations. On the back of today's order

of service, you will find two websites where you can register your concern and offer your assistance to the innocent victims of this latest violence.

On the issue of **economic justice**: The final campaign of Martin Luther King's life was on behalf of trash collectors in Memphis, Tennessee. These "sanitation workers" had no insurance or death benefits, their pay was not enough to support their families, and the city refused to recognize their union. When two workers were crushed to death accidentally, the city offered their widows \$500 each. That was the last straw. The Memphis sanitation workers decided to go on strike, adopting as their slogan, "I AM A MAN." They invited King to come to Memphis in support of their struggle for economic justice. Once again, many of King's supporters urged him to not get involved in this local issue. But he persisted. "Yes, they had jobs. But they could not support their families. And they did not have dignity. In the public eye, they were invisible. He insisted. And it cost him his life." [John Parker Manwell, "The Kingdom of Greatness," *Quest*, Jan. 2009, p. 3]

What is bankrupt and must now change? The idea that our ultimate goal in life is to accumulate personal wealth and live in comfort at the expense of the "less fortunate" is no longer morally defensible. The recent collapse of a financial system based on this principle has revealed that free-market competition for profit and gain is not a self-regulating system, but instead a system that rewards exploitation and downright cheating. Shame on the Securities and Exchange Commission, who ignored the warning signs that the principles of fair competition were being violated. Shame as well on the careless investors and homebuyers who were eager to exploit the system to their personal advantage. In place of this unregulated system of greed and corruption, there must evolve a system of government oversight and private restraint against abuse.

On the issue of **multiracial cooperation**: In the months before he was assassinated, Martin Luther King was planning a Poor People's March on Washington. "The march would bring together all the poor and oppressed of our nation, including Native Americans, Appalachian Whites, and the urban poor, whatever their ethnicity." [Manwell, p. 4] The idea of the Poor People's March was opposed by many of King's supporters, and occurring as it did after his death, it was widely regarded as a failure. **What is bankrupt and must now change?** The present economic recession transcends the boundaries of race and class. Feeding more of our taxpayer dollars (actually the massive debt we will pass along to our children and grandchildren) into the hands of those who have already demonstrated their irresponsibility seems foolish.

If Martin Luther King, Jr. was alive today, I imagine that he would be both deeply pleased and deeply concerned. Our nation has come a long way in the area of racial equality, but we have not come along so well in the areas of economic equality and our moral standing in the world community. Let us hope that in the coming years we will make real progress in these areas. In closing my sermon, let me invite you into a shared reading based on the words of Martin Luther King, Jr. It is # 584 in the hymnbook, which we will read responsively.

[At the end of the reading] Today let us celebrate the life and teachings of Martin Luther King, Jr. Let us also commit ourselves to the unfinished legacy for which he lived.