



**REREADING KING:
CORRECTING REVISION & REDUCTIVE INTERPRETATIONS OF HIS DREAM**

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Each year throughout this country and around the world, many people who fight for freedom, struggle for justice, strive for power over their destiny and daily lives and pursue the work of peace, turn to the life and lessons of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. for insight and inspiration. Often people focus on King's "I Have A Dream Speech" without adequate study or understanding of the rich and enduring meaning and message of this vision of human hope, struggle and eventual victory. But it is important for us as a people to study his life and lessons well for they are an important contribution to our conception of ourselves and our mission, as defined both by the Husia and Mary McLeod Bethune, "to remake the world" which is a guiding principle of our social justice tradition.

King begins the Dream Speech with a focus on freedom, expressing happiness to be a part of the historic March on Washington in August 1963. He is concerned with the unrealized promise and presence of freedom and notes that 100 years after the Emancipation Proclamation which promised freedom and the end of injustice, Black people were still unfree and treated unjustly. He points out how the African American "lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity". Then as now, there was a prosperous middle class which still did not on the whole have the wealth and power of Whites. And King says, he and others went to Washington "to dramatize this shameful condition" of poverty.

Continuing, King refers to the founding documents of U.S. society as words which represented "a promissory note to which every American was heir". It was a promise

that all persons would be guaranteed the "unalienable Rights of Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness". For him, "it is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note insofar as her citizens of color are concerned". Indeed, King says, "instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given (Black) people a bad check, a check which has come back marked 'insufficient funds' ". But he states that we, as a people, "refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt", that justice can't be achieved, opportunities opened up, and the riches of freedom become the shared wealth and way of everyone.

King is not willing to accept excuses or delays in meeting the sacred obligation "to make real the promises of democracy". He states that the historical March is designed "to remind America of the urgency of now", and to avoid gradualist approaches to securing racial justice. He uses racial justice here to stress the racial character of justice, the difference in power and privilege, status and wealth between Black people and Whites and the need to correct the imbalance and injustice. Moreover, he refuses to call a halt to confrontational struggle in hope that he can negotiate his way to freedom. Thus, he tells the country, "There will be neither rest nor tranquility in America until the (African American) is granted his (full) citizenship rights" and "the whirlwinds of revolt will continue to shake the foundations of our nation until the bright day of justice emerges". This stance contrasts vividly with the so-called new negotiators who consider struggle passé; demonstrations too confrontational and petition and dependence on the good

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will of the powerful as the new Black politics.

Furthermore, King tells us we must never allow ourselves to be satisfied with less than what we are due, i.e., freedom, justice and equality: freedom from “unspeakable horrors of police brutality”; segregation in its various forms; deprivation of selfhood and dignity; political exclusion and alienation; and freedom to live good and meaningful lives.

Then, King turns to draw the outlines of his dream for America as a just and good society. However, King does not equate his dream with the American dream, but simply says his dream “...is deeply rooted in the American dream”. Indeed, I would argue his is a wider dream, anchored in the ancient African ethical imperative to respect the sacredness and dignity of the human person and bring good in the world.

Although he uses and appeals to the popular conception of the “American dream”, he is clearly aware he must incorporate and transcend it at the same time. For the American dream in its real and realized form, as opposed to its literary form, is deeply rooted in an oppressive regime of racial oppression and injustice, and King was in active opposition to it.

In fact, King does not, as is being done now, praise America for a political maturity it hasn’t achieved, a level of freedom it has not reached and a quality of justice it has not yet established. On the contrary, he intellectually and actively challenges America to recognize its failure to perform and deliver and to correct its errant and oppressive ways

in this country and the world. It is also important to note King’s dream is not a fantasy, product of sleep or a mental pathway to escape. Rather, it is a vision of a just and good society and world and at the same time a call to work and struggle to achieve it.

King’s dream or vision calls explicitly and implicitly for life conditions that at a minimum must inform a just and good society. These are: the equality and equal rights of all humans; the brotherhood (and by extension sisterhood) of humans; conditions of freedom and justice; evaluation by the content of one’s character not by the color of one’s skin; children free from the burdens of racism and interacting in brotherhood and sisterhood; and the emergence and reign of right and righteousness in the world.

He also lets us know, as the Black Freedom Movement used to say, “freedom ain’ free”. It requires, he says, faith, hope, unity, work, prayer, struggle, sacrifice and steadfastness, but especially a deep rooted faith (Imani). Thus, he says, “with this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing we will be free one day”. King ends with a homage to freedom, calling for it to ring and take root everywhere for everyone, from Harlem to Haiti, Alabama to Africa, New Orleans to all of Native America, Los Angeles to Latin America and Asia, and Pittsburg to Palestine. Only then, he says, will we be able to join hands, sing and say in the tradition of our ancestors, “Free at last! Thank God Almighty, free at last!”

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