

# 2024 MLK Day Open Letter: “New Phase of the Struggle”

WHY ABOLISHING IMPOVERISHMENT IS CENTRAL TO BOTH THE  
CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT AND TO OUR NATION’S SURVIVAL  
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Martin Luther King's birthday is, and always has been, for me, an important day; even before it was a federal holiday. Among other things, I was one of the many people who worked to organize the first MLK Day of Service in Northern California 30 years ago in 1994, the same year that civil rights icon Congressman John Lewis and others proposed the concept of a day of service as a federal bill.

But today, I want to touch on a topic we don't readily associate with the holiday or with Martin; that of entrenched, intergenerational, systemic poverty – why I believe that abolishing it is absolutely vital to our nation's future and how my own journey led me here. This feels all the more important given Martin's focus in the final years of his life and what, at the time of his death, he was in Memphis fighting for. What follows is a story with five parts: 1. *The Power of We*, 2. *An Unwavering Through-line*, 3. *The Machine*, 4. *Why We Can't Wait*, and 5. *A New Underground Railroad*, followed by a conclusion.

## Part I: The Power of We

My own story began in Birmingham, Alabama. I was born at the height of the American Civil Rights movement, sandwiched between the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act. The home where I lived with my grandparents was walking distance from the Birmingham Jail where Martin penned his famous letter, and Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. My family members marched, and my mother, 13 at the time, along with two of her siblings, were arrested. All the above means that my social education regarding what was at stake in the Civil Rights movement began essentially at birth. From early childhood, I've been drawn to the movement, and I've wanted to understand the spirit of a cause that could, say, lead to the removal of the "white" and "colored" signs that were still over many water fountains in my boyhood. But even when the signs were removed, the two water fountains stood side-by-side, one higher and the other lower; vestiges of another time.

Then, there was the suffering. My grandparents had very little but enough to largely shield me from the effects of impoverishment. Later, I came to understand poverty in a whole new way when I went to live with my young mother, her husband, and my four younger siblings. I describe particulars of that life in detail in *Me and Mary*, so I won't do that here. But the point is that our life of struggle wasn't the exception; it was the rule. This was the mid-70s, a full decade after the Birmingham Crusade. We lived in government housing along with hundreds of other kids who all struggled to make it through the summer without the free lunches they got during the school year. The mortality rate, even among infants, was twice as high in neighborhoods like these. Parents worked minimum wage jobs, but everything from the markets that sold baby formula to auto insurers charged them more.

As for me, I was ten when I got my first taste of advocacy. I gathered 500 signatures on lined notepaper to petition the City to provide lunches in the summer to the same kids who would have gotten free lunch during the school year, and I got to help James Graves, a young, charismatic African American minister who'd just moved his family to Birmingham, launch something almost unheard of at the time – an intentionally interracial congregation. Then, two years later, thanks to Sister Rose, an Anglo woman I met while canvassing on behalf of Richard Arrington's bid to become Birmingham's first African American mayor, I ended up, instead of knocking on doors, speaking in several historically white churches – engagements Sister Rose herself booked for me.

Then, she drove me and introduced me (often saying, "Have I got a treat for you!") before planting herself front and center to let me know I wasn't alone, and after I was done, accompanying me on piano because she'd insisted I close with a song. She did everything in her power to ensure that I was successful and would be well received. And I was, with applause and handshakes, with smiles and pats on the back. My message

was simple – Dr. Arrington was the only candidate running who'd made it his mission to help us become a Birmingham for all Birminghamians – a place where we all could thrive.

This is exactly what we need to become today; an America for all Americans. And while I'm under no illusion that any of my above efforts were the tipping point in any of these situations, what they did do is instill within me an awareness of the power of "we", and of what we could accomplish together. They reinforced my belief in us Americans as a people, and that change is indeed possible.

## Part II: An Unwavering Through-line

This same belief was one that so many were, understandably, having difficulty holding on to in Martin's day. In *This Land Is Your Land*, I describe how months before the fateful shot on April 4, 1968, that felled him as he stood on the balcony of Memphis' Lorraine Motel, the movement had already been languishing. People were growing increasingly doubtful that their many sacrifices had made any difference and discouraged that their lives were no better years after the passage of those historic civil rights acts than they'd been before them. They were also dealing with a significant degree of backlash; where the in-power group punishes the oppressed group for every step of progress towards parity (whether material or symbolic) that they take. As a result, life for the majority of African Americans was effectively worse.

By 1967, Martin was being ridiculed and vilified by the very people he'd galvanized. Many, even in his own organization, simply couldn't follow the train of thought that led him from Negro rights to protesting the Vietnam War to confronting poverty on behalf of all people in the world; not just the American Negro. For Martin, however, there was an unwavering through-line, clearly and resolutely based on what he declared America's Three Great Evils; the evil of racism, the evil of poverty, and the evil of war. In a May 10, 1967 address, he would state:

*"There can be no gainsaying of the fact that racism is still alive all over America. Racial injustice is still the Negro's burden and America's shame. And we must face the hard fact that many Americans would like to have a nation which is a democracy for white Americans but simultaneously a dictatorship over black Americans. Now there are those who are trying to say now that the civil rights movement is dead. I submit to you that it is more alive today than ever before.*

*What they fail to realize is that we are now in a transition period. We are moving into a new phase of the struggle. For well now twelve years, the struggle was basically a struggle to end legal segregation. In a sense, it was a struggle for decency. We will not forget the Freedom Rides of sixty one, and the Birmingham Movement of sixty three, a movement which literally subpoenaed the conscience of a large segment of the nation to appear before the judgement seat of morality on the whole question of civil rights.*

*We will not forget Selma, when by the thousands we marched from that city to Montgomery to dramatize the fact that Negroes did not have the right to vote. These were marvelous movements. But that period is over now. The new phase is a struggle for genuine equality... on all levels, and this will be a much more difficult struggle. You see, the gains in the first period, or the first era of struggle, were obtained from the power structure at bargain rates; it didn't cost the nation anything to integrate lunch counters. It didn't cost the nation anything to integrate hotels and motels. It didn't cost the nation a penny to guarantee the right to vote. Now we are in a period where it will cost the nation billions of dollars to get rid of poverty, to get rid of slums, to make quality integrated education a reality. This is where we are now."*

This same "new phase of the struggle" remains unfinished work today. And this work, ending both poverty and the economic processes that perpetuate it, might be the most important thing we can do if we want to be, as President Lincoln said, a nation that can endure.

### Part III: The Machine

But at the same time, none of this is new. The issue of economic liberation has been at the heart of every American freedom movement from the Revolution to the abolition of slavery to the Civil Rights era itself. And though each effort moved us forward, the underlying system of economic impairment, benefitting some of us by harming the rest of us, hasn't slowed. This, becoming a nation that can endure, is an unfinished mission; one that's now in our generation's hands, and the finishing of it has never been more critical. That's because the economic system we've inherited is increasingly incompatible with the society we're inevitably becoming. And in a democracy, especially one where the have-nots are the majority, the only viable future for any of us is one that works for all of us.

One of my frequent meditations is on our inescapable network of mutuality, our single garment of destiny, and how the individual choices we make today shape our collective fate. As such, my hope for us is that we'll be able to look back on this present era the same way my relatives and their generation look back with pride that they'd marched in Birmingham, and from Selma to Montgomery, and sacrificed to attend the historic March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. That they sparked a revolution. Because we're not just the beneficiaries of those who came before us; we get to be benefactors to those who come after.

But the spirit of the work goes back much further. Take Abolition. We get that the movement led to the emancipation of 4 million people who had no rights and who were eligible to be owned, bought and sold. But as significant as the outlawing of slavery was, even today, far too much of the accompanying work remains undone. Because, while people were now free to leave the plantation, they had nowhere to go nor the means to make for themselves a life. The Chinese mine workers who survived the 1885 Rock Springs, Wyoming, massacre and who found themselves in a similar situation described their experience this way:

*We never thought that the subjects of a nation entitled by treaty to the rights and privileges of the most favored nation could, in a country so highly civilized like this, so unexpectedly suffer the cruelty and wrong of being unjustly put to death, or of being wounded and left without the means of cure, or being abandoned to poverty, hunger, and cold, and without the means to betake themselves elsewhere.*

This could easily have been said about the plight of the formerly enslaved. Granted, poverty itself has been a factor in our country (and indeed, most every country) essentially from the beginning. But what came after slavery's demise was something altogether different: a structured set of protocols, a machine, even. One that ran on impoverishment. The same formulas for commoditizing human labor and ingenuity that were refined during slavery weren't abandoned when it was abolished. They simply took on different forms, with one exploitative system being replaced by another. For instance, agriculturally, slave labor was replaced, first, by sharecropping and prison labor, then, by migrant workers. Edward R. Murrow, in a 1960 documentary titled *Harvest of Shame*, about those who pick the food for the people of "the best-fed nation on earth", described a Florida farmer who said, "We used to own our slaves; now we just rent them."

### Part IV: Why We Can't Wait

And this kind of impoverishment persists. Some years ago, I visited my sister Josie in Atlanta, the most recent of three siblings, all younger than me, to die, and who all died of illnesses that correlate highly with poverty. On that visit, I took her to the store to buy her some groceries, and her question was, "How much should I spend?" I replied, "How about \$80?" She looked shocked, then said, "How about \$40?" She proceeded to calculate, on the fly, every single item that went into that cart, along with tax, so that she wouldn't go over that amount. Whereas I often leave the store not even knowing how much I actually paid. I simply insert my card, enter my PIN, and leave. Yet, somehow, the world considers me a better money manager.

Josie's problem wasn't discipline or so-called "financial literacy." It was financial sufficiency - no matter how much she stretched what little she had, it would never be enough. The money she made from two nearly full-time, low-wage jobs – neither of which came with health insurance – would never allow her to pay everything on time. This, of course, meant late fees and credit score dings, which made it tougher for her to make ends meet the next month, or qualify for anything that required a credit score – including renting an apartment. That's why this, the abolishment of impoverishment, is both the successor of the Abolitionism movement and the next phase of the Civil Rights struggle. But it's about more than the unfinished work of the past. Getting this right is how we as a nation secure for ourselves a future.

In 1964, Martin, along with significant help from Bayard Rustin, my personal hero, and who originally introduced Martin to Gandhian tactics, wrote *Why We Can't Wait*, the manifesto written specifically about the 1963 Birmingham Campaign, with the *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* as its centerpiece. But neither Martin nor Bayard had any idea how radically society itself, which is always in flux, would change in just fifty years. Back then, white-identifying Americans constituted nearly 90% of the population. But as we now know, that's no longer true. Generation Alpha, which marks births occurring starting in 2012, is truly a new beginning - the first non-majority generation in American history.

Today, every child in America who is 12 years old or younger is part of this brave new world. And the rest of us have until that cohort reaches full adulthood to have transitioned to an economic system that allows all of Generation Alpha and subsequent cohorts to thrive. But as we also know, that's not the economy we currently have. Our legacy system, largely an automated process, is built to run off the consumption of our society's minorities. But by 2045, just two decades from now, we'll be a nation where everyone fits that category. It's our sacred duty to bequeath to those who'll come after us, a vital and vibrant society, one that's aligned with the diverse, multicultural people we'll soon be. That's why our generation, not unlike the one to which Martin was speaking, simply cannot wait.

## Part V: A New Underground Railroad

And me? Since those early days in Birmingham, it seems I've been searching for my role in this story – how I do my small part to help move us forward. That path led me here, to this place and time. But it was the people I met along the way, starting with those in my hometown, many of whom identified as white, who taught me an indispensable lesson – this isn't work anyone does alone. But together, ordinary people really can transform our nation, turning it into a land, as Woody Guthrie sang, made for both you and me.

But getting to a better place begins with grasping the problem – seeing the system behind the symptoms. Think of it this way: if economic impairment is a machine, then we can build on the work of those who came before us, creating practical tools that both help people escape poverty and allow each of us to be part of changing the way that machine works. The 60s saw the nullification of segregationist and discriminatory laws. And while the gravity of that legislation can't be overstated, it was still only the first step. Those practices had, for nearly a century, been allowed to flower in the cracks and crevices of American society. The only way to truly expunge them would have been by marshaling the millions of Americans who'd rallied behind the big changes to now tackle the myriad little ones.

Likewise with poverty. Finishing the work the Abolitionists began means getting personal and practical – leveraging individual economic power to change how our economy works. For instance, each of us can opt to patronize companies that treat the poor fairly and avoid those that don't. We can resist the use of FINOPs (fair-in-name-only processes) like credit scores, which, like with Josie, penalize them simply for being born into an impossible situation. And we can infuse the companies we work for and own with economic consciousness – rooting out all ways they enrich some of us by exploiting the rest of us.

My experiences living in the South, the Northeast, the Midwest and along the West Coast have shown me a lot about who we Americans are; how, despite our detours and setbacks, we, by and large, are even more committed to forming a more perfect union than the 250,000 who convened on the Washington Mall in 1963 and the millions who watched the speeches on TV. Though it's taken us time, we'd eventually discover that this vision of us as a better people, the one Martin described that day, was never just his dream, but our own.

Today, though we don't call it such, Americans are increasingly engaging in activism that can best be thought of as a new version of the Underground Railroad, one that's doing for people trying to escape poverty what the original did for those escaping slavery. This burgeoning movement, not unlike the original, has national reach and is inclusive of anyone, without regard to ancestry, religion, politics, age, sexuality, gender or economic means – anyone who wants to be part of it. But it needs even more of us, in the same way, in the 1960s, we joined with California farmworkers to boycott growers, or in the 1860s, hid fugitive slaves in our barns. Every act is another segment of track on the Railroad, another life saved or person given a future. Or, in civil rights terms, it's another donation of bail money for those arrested, another driver for the Montgomery bus boycott, or another determined step across the Edmund Pettus Bridge. It's how we change a nation.

### The Mountaintop

All of which leads me back to Martin, to MLK Day, and to the work that remains unfinished, but whose outcome is far from uncertain. In his final sermon, the night before he was killed, Martin would describe the movement's experience in Birmingham:

*We aren't going to let any mace stop us. We are masters in our nonviolent movement in disarming police forces; they don't know what to do, I've seen them so often. I remember in Birmingham, Alabama, when we were in that majestic struggle there, we would move out of the 16th Street Baptist Church day after day; by the hundreds, we would move out. And Bull Connor would tell them to send the dogs forth and they did come; but we just went before the dogs singing, "Ain't gonna let nobody turn me round" ... And then we would be thrown in the paddy wagons, and sometimes we were stacked in there like sardines in a can.*

*"And they would throw us in, and old Bull would say, "Take them off," and they did; and we would just go in the paddy wagon singing, "We Shall Overcome." And every now and then we'd get in the jail, and we'd see the jailers looking through the windows being moved by our prayers, and being moved by our words and our songs. And there was a power there which Bull Connor couldn't adjust to; and so we ended up transforming Bull into a steer, and we won our struggle in Birmingham.*

He would conclude that sermon with these words; so full of foreshadowing:

*Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land.*

That unfailing faith that we, as a people, really will get there is, for me, the heart of this work. It's what draws me to it, and just as the thousands from around the country who descended on little-known Selma in support of freedom revealed America's heart then, there are so many more of us who are willing to do so now. Often, I reflect on how fortunate I am to have gotten to live my small piece of the American story at such a critical juncture. And simply by accident of birth, our generation has a dual responsibility. We're called to not only further the work that those like Martin and so many others who came before us started, but to hand off to those who will come after, a world where they can not only thrive but give their best in return.

Happy MLK Day. May we keep the dream alive.