

***“The Fierce Urgency of NOW”* Russell Delman February 1, 2017**  
**(Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., “March on Washington”, 1963)**

Having Martin Luther King, Jr.’s birthday celebration, the same week as Donald Trump’s inauguration was a head spinner and a wake-up call. The contrast between these two men could not be greater. As MLK says in another context when speaking about human values and the tenuous morality in the western world, during his fight for social justice: ***“when scientific power outruns moral power, we end up with guided missiles and misguided men”***. (“The World House”, 1967) As with so many of his sentences, this seems as pertinent today as in his time.

The electric and soaring oratory of Dr. King has been filling me with fortitude for many weeks. As his language is so powerful and evocative, this writing is constructed around a few of MLK’s dynamic phrases. When he speaks of “the beloved community”, “the world house”, the human family” or “the world-wide neighborhood”, I feel the encapsulating web of interconnectivity that is so central for our thriving and, even surviving, together on this small planet. As he says, ***“together we must learn to live as brothers or together we will be forced to perish as fools”*** (“The World House”, 1967).

On the day of the inauguration, I was delivering a talk in Bend, Oregon to begin a weekend seminar. The words that had been so uplifting for me became guidance for my teachings. Both a healing balm and a stimulant for action, his words inspired the whole group in powerful ways.

***“The Fierce Urgency of Now”*** resonated deeply in the bones. Here is a man whose core message was centered on Love and Freedom, igniting the deep marrow with words like “fierce” and “urgency”, bringing even more poignancy to NOW than most of us had formally felt. My life and teaching focuses on the centrality of “awareness in the present moment” for the prospering of both love and freedom. Early in my life journey, I saw that our capacity for presence in this moment was the key for overcoming our self-limiting, fear-based habits of survival.

Still, we cannot allow the **primacy** of NOW to negate the **necessity** of standing up for our collective future. With the great privilege of awareness comes an inherent responsibility. A moral imperative asks us to take action

upon seeing an injustice in our “world-wide neighborhood”. I am moved by MLK’s statement, first in 1954 then again in his 1964 Nobel acceptance speech: **“never confuse the ‘isness’ of an old order with the ‘oughtness’ of a new order”**. We must work with the challenge of both: 1) deeply honoring THIS living moment with our devoted presence as we also 2) direct our intentions and actions toward the destiny of our potentialities.

From a Zen point of view, THIS moment always has a sense of urgency, yet it is usually enfolded within qualities of equanimity, spaciousness and restful repose. Adding the evocative “fierce” to the immediacy of “urgent” and “now”, brings a kind of “hair on fire” feeling. I am still sorting out the specific actions that this urgency demands. There is something about MLK’s perceptions that are speaking directly to us now.

In a 1964 address to the European Baptist Assembly in Amsterdam, he wrote these prescient words, speaking at the time of conservative Republican Presidential candidate, Barry Goldwater:

***“But in spite of the masses who gather each Sunday, there is the constant deterioration of community and family life and the corruption of our national life as evidenced by the popularity of a presidential candidate who promises to return the nation to a world of the past, where there will be no taxes, foreign aid, no social security, and no problems that can’t be solved by nuclear power. And the very people who are making this candidate so popular are the people who fill our churches in the Midwestern and southern states”***.

How staggering is that paragraph 53 years later! Our attention is being called forth to profoundly question, how did we get here. By all measures, the issues of injustice that MLK focused on have made significant progress yet there is so far to go. The battle between fear and love as OUR dominant operating principle is just as raw, perilous and pronounced!

To see this as an “us vs. them” conversation is to miss the deeper message. The people alluded to in the quote above, indeed all people, have deep wounds, needs and confusion. Our task is to stand up, with both dignified power and love, for the genuine needs of all. To emphasize love for all and our inherent interconnectivity is NOT to water down our potency or our commitment to social change and justice.

***“We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality.  
Tied together in a single garment of destiny”  
 (“Letter from the Birmingham Jail”, 1963)***

We are all in this together. No aspect of our “network of mutuality”, whether human, animal or the earth itself, can be exiled from our love. We can and will disagree about strategy and effective means. The greatest challenge is to stand FOR Love, Life and Liberty without casting out those who see life differently. We need what MLK called in 1954, our *“divine discontent”*, without living in anger. Though our anger can be helpful to mobilize action, protectiveness and courage, it becomes very destructive when eaten as a steady diet.

***“Some years ago a famous novelist died. Among his papers was found a list of suggested plots for future stories, the most prominently underscored being this one: ‘A widely separated family inherits a house in which they have to live together’. This is the great new problem of mankind. We have inherited a large house, a great ‘world house’, in which we have to live together – black and white, Easterner and Westerner, Gentile and Jew, Catholic and Protestant, Muslim and Hindu – a family unduly separated in ideas, culture and interest, who, because we can never again live apart, must learn somehow to live with each other in peace”.***  
**(“The World House” 1967)**

For me, MLK is a model for strength, dignity and love - NOT cowering in the face of violent hatred, yet also NOT reacting in kind. I have a long way to go on this path and, everyday, I am working to grow my inner strength, grounded-ness and presence, as I also grow my capacity for unconditional love. I see my own fears and conditioned biases. This learning is a daily investigation of my thoughts, feelings, actions and internalized systems of oppression, directed toward others or toward myself. Sometimes this appears as a fleeting thought of superiority and sometimes as a self-judgment of inadequacy. All instances of “casting out” need to be interrogated with kindness and diligence.

We are living in a powerful international moment. In the “fierce urgency of now”, there is an opening in our individual and collective consciousness. Similar to 1964, with the Civil Rights movement, Vietnam and the women’s movement, we are in a rare moment of transformational possibility for the awakening of (our) humanity.

*“Darkness can not drive out darkness, only Light can do that  
Hatred can not drive out hatred, only Love can do that”*  
**(“Strength to Love”, 1963)**