

The Content of Our Character: Still a Dream
Stanford Memorial Church, 22 January 2006
The Rev. J. Glenn Murray

On a hot Wednesday afternoon—for Catholics, the feast of a son of Africa, Augustine of Hippo—the twenty-eight of August 1963 to be exact, the Rev. Dr Martin Luther King, Jr, standing in the twilight of the fading afternoon and in the shadow of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC, proclaimed to these United States and for all the world to hear that he had a dream.

That was an afternoon to remember.

On the that very evening, the Rev. William Whatley¹ notes, that not a few in these United States were faced with a set of questions that they dared not articulate aloud, but expressed nonetheless. What do you do about a black man and his dreams? What do you do with a black man who dares to articulate his dreams and aspirations? What do you do to a black man who dreams about equality and a reversal of the whole social and political order—who talks about exalting valleys, leveling hills, and straightening out the crooked places? What kind of response do you make to him and to his dreams?

The response was not unlike the brothers of Joseph of whom we just heard: “Let us destroy the dreamer. We will destroy him by discrediting him,” they cried. And tried they did. They tried to discredit him with his family, spreading gossip and lies about his personal and moral life. They tried to discredit him with his own, the African American community, by telling us that he was stealing incalculable sums of money and turning in fraudulent income tax returns. They tried to discredit him with whites of every stripe by calling him a Communist. They knew that there were always some who would believe any kind of lie, tale, rumor, or superstition that could be circulate about any black. So they tried to destroy the dream by destroying the dreamer’s credibility. Then they would see what would become of his dream.

But what happens to a dream deferred? The great black poet Langston Hughes once asked:

What happens to a dream deferred?
Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun
Or fester like a sore and then run
Does it stink like rotten meat
Or crust and sugar over like a syrupy sweet
Does it sink like a heavy load
Or does it explode?

What happens to a dream deferred? If it is a God-given dream, not unlike Joseph’s, it neither dries up or festers. It neither crusts over or sinks. It lives. Every God-given vision has its appointed time and will not be denied. Joseph ruled well over his brothers and gave wise counsel to the Pharaoh in Egypt. King himself said:

Yes, I am personally the victim of deferred dreams, of blasted hopes, but in spite of that I close today saying I still have a dream, because you know you can’t give up on life. If you lose hope, somehow you lose that vitality that keeps life moving, you lose that courage to be, that quality that helps you to go on in spite of it all. And so today I still have a dream.

A part of the dream, oft-forgotten, must this day be repeated. Dr King dreamed that we— any and all of us, would be judged not by the color of our skin, but the content of

our character. Our character. When we come to die, regrettable, but inevitable, it is only our character that we will be able to take with us. It is what he took with him to stand before the one who lives in unapproachable light and be judged. It is that character that we remember this day. It was a character that led him to see truth, to listen to those in pain, to break the silence and “speak for the weak, the voiceless, for victims of our nation and those it calls our enemies, for no document from human hands can make humans any less our brothers and sisters,” said he.² It was his character that led him to act. And his actions not only won civil rights for his sisters and brothers but pricked the conscience of a nation and the world to consider the human rights of every child of God regardless of race, language, or way of life.

The dream could not be deferred. In him it lived. In us, it lives still. Our being here today is not simply to remember a man, but to remember that the dream lives. Not only does it live, it is being fulfilled. Perfectly fulfilled? No, my momma didn’t raise no fool. But the dream lives still. In a simple conversation around the kitchen table or after a long class day, when a hardened, narrow-minded blinded bigot might come to see that women and men, whites and Blacks, Hispanics, Latinos, Asians, and Native-Americans—that that lazy nigger, that arrogant slant, that no good white, that job-stealing spic, that faggot, bitch, dweeb or geek—are heirs to the one and same reign of God—that equal opportunity, housing, a warm bed, a nourishing meal, and safety are their birth right in God, then in that conversation the blind see, and dream lives and is nearer completion.

When you smile, or give a person a word that will get her through or a song that will lift him up, then you are raising the emotionally dead to psychological life and dream lives and is nearer completion. (Demonstration of modeling then and now) When some among us see the truth of the situation, for example, that allowed so many of our impoverished African-American brothers and sisters to be so severely victimized by Katrina this past fall, and evoked in us images to transform our thinking about race and poverty, challenging our own complacency, passivity, and hypocrisy, then the dream lives and is nearer fulfillment. When others among us speak out, at this august institution, in their workplaces for those—usually the little people—who are in any way victimized and diminished by injustice or hatred or even careless neglect; when they take an interest in those who marginalized by economic class, by gender, by sexual orientation, then the dream lives and is nearer fulfillment. When we begin to think about the companies we support with our shopping dollars, paying their workers a just wage and providing them with healthcare; when we begin to think about how we exercise that most precious right we have in our democracy, our vote, voting for candidates whose policies uphold the dignity of every human being, then the dream lives and is truly being fulfilled.³

The dream still lives. The content of our character continues to be judged. For what we have accomplished wisely and well, we need only be grateful. For what yet remains unfinished, we need to remember and pray:

If I can help somebody as I pass along,
If I can cheer somebody with a word or a song,
If I can show somebody he’s trav’ling wrong,
Then my living shall not be in vain.⁴

May our living not be in vain, but judged by the content of our character that the world may know in our time an end to violence and war, the embrace of justice

and peace, the spreading of well-being, health and wholeness —today and for endless ages to come!

NOTES

1. See William D. Whatley, *Sermons on Special Days* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1987), p. 90-96.

<aoldb://mail/write/template.htm#_ednref2>2. See Martin Luther King, Jr "A Time to Break Silence"

<aoldb://mail/write/template.htm#_ednref3>3. See Christopher J. M. Devron, SJ, "The Prophet Within," A Homily given on Sunday January 15, 2006 at the Church of St. Joseph in Harlem, NY.

<aoldb://mail/write/template.htm#_ednref4>4. Alma Bazel Androzzo, *If I Can Help Somebody* (New York: Boosey and Hawkes, 1957).