

King's Dream Trapped in a 'Black Box'

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Monday, January 17, 0

MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. is the most revolutionary of America's ``official" national icons. He is also the most marginalized. His enduringly timely message has been sanitized and ghettoized, above all, by confining it within a ``black box."

Every January, I expose my college students to some of King's increasingly radical thought, beyond the

``Dream" snippet, which is all that most of them have heard. And I ask them to write about whether they think his message is still relevant. Some say yes; others think he is dated, for a variety of reasons. But on one thing most agree: they see him as a ``black" leader, whose message is directed to African Americans.

It seems to me that this ghettoizing of King within a ``black box" is a clear indication that we have not come to terms with King, nor the movement he represented. And that we have not freed ourselves from the mental slavery of racialism.

I say racialism because King (and many other spokespersons we are accustomed to think of as black, such as Frederick Douglass and Bob Marley) believed that the problems of racism could not be solved with the language of race. And that people of all colors perpetuated the bad habit of believing that we can peg someone's mind set, or their community, just by their skin color.

King's dream was both moral and political. Peace could not be achieved without social justice. His vision transcended racial matters. As he said after Malcolm X's assassination, ``we as a society have not learned to disagree without being violently disagreeable." In the international arena, when he won the 1964 Nobel Peace Prize, King argued that ``the crucial political and moral question of our time was ``the need to overcome oppression and violence without resorting to violence and oppression."

That is surely a challenge with global relevance. But in a North American context, this ``moral question" could be paraphrased as ``the need to overcome racism without resorting to racialism." Frederick Douglass once described racism as ``diseased imagination." If it could not be cured, it could be contained by presenting a more attractive alternative. King, like Douglass, believed that this could only come about by developing forms of identity and community that went beyond ``race." In a 1960 speech called ``The Rising Tide of Racial Consciousness," King called racial discrimination a ``cancerous disease." Yet more racialism was clearly not the answer, in his view. While pride in one's heritage was a foundation of mental health, basing this pride solely on ``race" was counterproductive. ``This is an age in which (we are) forced to compete with people of all races and nationalities," King observed. ``We cannot aim merely to be good Negro teachers, good Negro doctors, etc. We must set out to do a good job irrespective of race," he stressed.

In an era in which affirmative action has been seen less as a historically necessary corrective, and more as a



birthright, many have given up on that ideal.

``"Color blindness" has become the ideology of conservatives. For progressives, there is the widely shared notion that following King's vision means being naive, or assimilating: giving up, or downplaying, one's cultural heritage.

But this was not what King said. He merely argued that we should at least aim for an ideology other than racialism as what was most important in the way we defined ourselves, and other human beings. That in the final analysis, we should at least try to make the content of our character more important than the color of our skin. If we are not willing to affirm that as a horizon worth moving toward, then what are we willing to affirm?

Many have decided that color has always been more important than character, and always will be. They have embraced a racialism rooted in white supremacist thought. ``"No justice, no peace," a binary slogan of our times, often voices a rejection of the very possibility of common standards. Rather than a ``rainbow coalition," we have ``whites" versus ``people of color." Those such as King who spoke across such divisions are put into racial boxes, where those outside that box can safely ignore their message.

King's enduring legacy is that neither justice nor peace can be achieved without multiethnic coalitions. Only in this context can we imagine the possibility of the Psalmist's words:

``Justice and peace kiss each other Truth shall sprout up from the earth And justice will look down from the heavens."

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This article appeared on page **A - 23** of the San Francisco Chronicle

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